


2017

Withstand or succumb: Christian universities and the implications of Obergefell v. Hodges

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WITHSTAND OR SUCCUMB: CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES
AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF OBERGEFELL V. HODGES

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Graduate School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

in the field of Higher Education Administration

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
May 2017

Abstract

Most Christian universities support a traditional view of human sexuality. It is uncertain if they can survive with their religious identity intact, given the rapid increase in societal acceptance of same-sex marriage. The 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision legalizing same-sex marriage increases pressure to be more affirming. Thirty-four presidents at universities in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) participated in a survey, and twelve were interviewed to explore their perceptions regarding that pressure and potential responses. The study was framed by institutional isomorphism theory, and data were analyzed using basic qualitative research methods. The results show that coercive isomorphism is the strongest mechanism, with current pressure to conform emanating from state and federal government. Regional variance is considerable as institutions in the South report little pressure while those in blue states like California report strong local pressure. It is experienced in actual or implied threats to remove student access to state and federal financial aid and eliminate tax-exempt status at universities that discriminate based on sexual orientation. Liberal voices within the Church, accrediting agencies, LGBT advocacy groups, and changing student values are other sources of pressure. Universities seek compromise solutions but are prepared to mount a legal challenge based on the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. They are not prepared to deal with changing student values, the strongest long-term source of pressure. To withstand pressure to conform, Christian universities must craft a unified response; find alternative sources of funding; engage and educate their boards; and find a way to assure young people that it is possible to be kind and loving while holding non-affirming policies related to same-sex marriage.

Keywords: Christian universities, same-sex marriage, religious freedom, institutional isomorphism, basic qualitative research

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lynda Beltz, Kristal Clemons, and Sue Rattin for serving on my thesis committee. I am especially grateful to Lynda for her humor, wit, and unorthodoxy as much as her wisdom and guidance. Special thanks to Sue for her critical and rapid feedback, excellent suggestions, attention to detail, and encouragement.

I appreciate my colleagues who spent time listening to me talk about my research: Jonathan, who also served as my peer reviewer, my brother David, Houston, Amber, and especially Steve, who endured almost daily updates. Their questions and comments were of tremendous value. I am grateful to my president, John Bowling, for his help in recruiting participants and his valuable advice. I am also very thankful for the support from my boss, Carol.

Thanks, Lisa, for being my accountability partner for the last year. Your turn soon!

Many thanks to my participants for taking time to speak with me so openly and for your dedication to Christian higher education. Special thanks to “Davis,” who almost persuaded me to rename my dissertation, and to “James,” for praying for me at the end of our interview.

Most importantly, thanks to my family. To my sons, Colin, Sean, and Mark, thanks for being quiet every Saturday morning and pretending to be interested. Linda, my wife and best friend, you’ve put up with so much over the last three years—thanks for listening to me go on and on and for your constant support and encouragement. I love you more!

Finally, I thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us always to speak the truth in love.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since Harvard University was founded in 1636, Christian universities have been an important part of the landscape of higher education in the United States. Indeed, Harvard's original purpose was "to advance learning...dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches" (*New Englands first fruits*, 1643, p. 12). The earliest American colleges, Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale, were established by Protestant churches, and originally almost all institutions, including public universities, were explicitly Christian in their worldview. Today, however, most colleges and universities are secular, and even church-related universities are predominantly secular in their viewpoint. Over the last four centuries, shifts in societal values and corresponding changes to public policy have dramatically reduced the once predominant place of the Christian university. Roman Catholic institutions were introduced as part of the wider Christian landscape, but their centralized authority and common mission distinguishes them from Protestant institutions. For this study, therefore, Christian universities are defined as religious institutions from Protestant traditions attempting to integrate faith and reason while holding fast to a Christian worldview. These institutions, whose values were once the mainstay of American higher education, are increasingly conforming to secular ideals.

Higher education in the United States now encompasses a wide variety of institutions: from community colleges to highly selective private liberal arts colleges, from large state universities to proprietary institutions, and from comprehensive institutions to national universities. Within the private sector, colleges are secular, religiously-affiliated, or faith-based. Yet within, and even across these broad categories, there is also a great deal of similarity and standardization. Regional accreditors and state and federal authorities mandate that universities comply with specific practices and policies. Students and parents also have expectations

regarding the higher education experience. Universities seek to meet these common expectations yet also want to be seen as distinctive in their own right. For Christian universities, that distinctiveness is often rooted in their religious traditions and values. However, many Christian universities find themselves at odds with the norms and values of wider society and face external pressure as they seek to preserve their religious identity (Arthur, 2006, 2008; Benne, 2001; Mixon, Lyon, & Beaty, 2004; Nussbaum & Chang, 2013; Tveit et al., 2015; Warner, 2013).

Christian universities encounter the same challenges all higher education institutions confront: rising costs; increased competition; shrinking state and federal funding; and increased scrutiny from the federal government, accrediting agencies, and the public at large. However, Christian universities are also challenged to maintain their unique religious identity in an increasingly pluralistic world (Adrian, 2003; Ream & Glanzer, 2013; Swezey & Ross, 2012), a world in which other colleges are changing their identity to accommodate their perception of changes in students and in societal expectations. They must balance the expectations of their church-related stakeholders with the values of the higher education community (Dosen, 2012; Moser, 2014) and national public policy interests (Hotchkiss, 2012; Rine & Guthrie, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

An important question Christian universities wrestle with today is how to respond to the rapid change in societal views regarding sexual orientation (Patterson, 2005; Pérez, 2013; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). As recently as thirty years ago, the Supreme Court upheld a Georgia sodomy law (*Bowers v. Hardwick*, 1986), but last decade reversed itself (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003), and in 2015 ruled to legalize same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Yet, until 2015, most of the then 121 members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) had policies refusing to hire individuals in same-sex relationships. The CCCU is

composed of institutions that are Christ-centered and grounded in the traditional arts and sciences, with an expectation that all faculty and administrators are Christians. These institutions represent a minority viewpoint within higher education with their ties to evangelical Christianity.

In July 2015, two members, Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) and Goshen College (GC), announced their decision to hire individuals in same-sex marriages. Their presidents both stressed inclusivity as a primary motivation, with the president of EMU observing, “A lot has changed. There’s no question that the change has been towards inclusion in society in general” (Jaschik, 2015, para. 9). The CCCU began a deliberative process to consider the membership status of EMU and GC; however, two other institutions, Union University and Oklahoma Wesleyan University (OKWU), left the organization in protest the next month. Dr. Everett Piper, president of OKWU, remarked on the apparent ambivalence of the CCCU, which knew several months ahead of time that EMU and GC were considering a change in policy. He stated that the “CCCU’s strategy of engaging in prolonged discussion indicates an unwillingness to defend the Biblical definition of marriage, and in doing so CCCU has not adequately represented Oklahoma Wesleyan and our legal interests” (Oklahoma Wesleyan University, 2015). The following month EMU and GC voluntarily withdrew from the CCCU, but the organization noted a serious divide in member presidents’ attitudes as to whether EMU and GC should remain as full or affiliate members, observing that 20% of member institutions’ presidents supported leaving them as full members, but 25% did not want them to have any status; the remaining presidents fell somewhere in between (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2015).

Because of their religious convictions, almost all Christian universities refuse to hire employees or admit students who are in same-sex relationships (Wolff & Himes, 2010). The recent *Obergefell* decision legalizing same-sex marriage indicates that those convictions are not

shared by the majority of the public. The Supreme Court acknowledged that judicial opinions on the issue are informed by the “societal discussion of same-sex marriage and its meaning that has occurred over the past decades” (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015, p. 2605). Therefore, it seems likely that public opinion is increasingly opposed to the stance taken at Christian universities. How these universities maintain their religious principles relative to sexual orientation is therefore a timely lens through which to view the interaction of external pressures.

Consideration of the Legal Environment

The courts, particularly the Supreme Court, are perhaps the most influential players in shaping how public policy affects Christian universities, and indeed all religious educational institutions. Their interpretation of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments of the Constitution, is the final word in how laws related to religious liberty are enforced. The Bill was crafted specifically to limit the government’s ability to infringe on individual liberty and was ratified by the states in 1791. The two most significant constitutional protections related to religious freedom are found in the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Const. amend. I)

The first provision, known as the Establishment Clause, prohibits state-sponsored religious activity and the second, the Free Exercise Clause, protects an individual’s right to practice religion without state interference. It is important to note that “state” includes all levels of government. The Supreme Court held in *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940) that under the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Free Exercise Clause applies to state and local

government in addition to the federal government. Although religious institutions are not explicitly granted freedom by the First Amendment, the practice of religion is a community event and therefore rights must extend to a collective group (Brownstein, 2013).

Religious universities have long benefited from the First Amendment's Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses. The state is not permitted to sponsor religion and it is obligated to allow its citizens to practice their religious beliefs without interference. As a result, the Supreme Court and the lower courts have generally shown great deference to religious institutions. In *Carroll College v. NLRB* (2009), for example, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) required the college to enter into collective bargaining, arguing that the United Presbyterian Church had little to no direct control over Carroll's actions. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit held that the clear affiliation with a religious institution was enough to vacate the NLRB's jurisdiction. In giving its opinion, the Court cited *NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago* (1979), noting that even "the process of inquiry leading to findings and conclusion" can impinge on First Amendment freedoms (p. 504). *McEnroy v. St. Meinrad School of Theology* (1999) demonstrates how state courts rely on the guidance of the Supreme Court. In *McEnroy*, a seminary professor was terminated for publicly disagreeing with the teachings of Pope John Paul II regarding the ordination of women. The faculty handbook provided the Archabbot authority under canon law to remove professors found seriously deficient, and he terminated McEnroy for her public opposition. The Indiana Court of Appeals referenced the Supreme Court's position that civil courts should refrain from interfering in church doctrine and practice. They held that resolving her complaint would require significant inquiry into church law, and therefore excessive entanglement. See also *Alicea v. New Brunswick Theological Seminary* (1992) in which a New Jersey trial court refused to exercise jurisdiction over what it saw as a doctrinal disagreement.

There are limits to that traditional deference, however, and the Supreme Court has ruled that compelling national policy interests supersede a religious university's beliefs (*Bob Jones Univ. v. United States*, 1983). In *Bob Jones*, the Court held that the public interest in ending racial discrimination trumped the university's sincere religious belief that interracial marriage should be prohibited. As the interests of the majority shift, future Court rulings may extend social policy in a way that erodes the extent of protection religious universities have under the Free Exercise Clause. That clause is intended to protect the expression of religious activity, but if national policy changes because of public opinion, the ability of religious organizations to exercise or act out their religious beliefs in practical terms may be curtailed.

Although there are aspects of the law common to all higher education institutions, religious freedom affects the various sectors differently. Public institutions face the challenge of accommodating the Free Exercise rights of individuals while not violating the Establishment Clause's prohibition on state sponsorship of religion. For Christian universities, the challenge is to defend their Free Exercise rights as they contend with government agencies pursuing national policy interests and the legislators crafting those policies. The role of the courts, particularly the Supreme Court, is in the interpretation of congressional intent relative to First Amendment protections. The court seeks to maintain a balance between the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses (Brownstein, 2010; Heise & Sisk, 2012), but the two have come into regular conflict over the years. In *Colorado Christian Univ. v. Weaver* (2008) the state of Colorado gave scholarships to students unless they attended institutions that were considered pervasively sectarian. When Colorado Christian sued, the district court granted summary judgment for the state on the basis of an earlier Supreme Court decision in *Locke v. Davey* (2004), which allowed discrimination against religion as long as there was no hostility towards religious beliefs. On

appeal, however, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit found that the state's provision "expressly discriminates *among* religions" (*Colorado Christian Univ. v Weaver*, 2008, p. 1256, emphasis in original) by determining which institutions were pervasively sectarian. This fine point is an example of the difficulty the lower courts face; it also illustrates the challenges faced by universities who must make determinations about the legality of their own policies.

EEOC v. Mississippi College (1980) provides a similar example, but one in which the decision was not in favor of the college. Originally, a U.S. District Court denied a request from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce a subpoena requesting information from the college pursuant to a charge of sexual discrimination. The district court denied the request for enforcement, in part because it feared excessive entanglement under the Establishment Clause and that granting the request would violate the Free Exercise clause. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals vacated the order, holding that applying Title VII to a religious college would not violate either clause, finding that religious institutions are allowed to discriminate for religious reasons only.

In its attempt to deal with the conflict between the two clauses, the Supreme Court has developed various tests to determine if one or the other clause is violated. However, it does not always provide clear definitions for specific elements of those tests, resulting in ambiguity for lower courts (Heise & Sisk, 2012; Schwarzschild, 2014). In *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), for example, Chief Justice Burger concluded in his majority opinion: "Under our system the choice has been made that government is to be entirely excluded from the area of religious instruction and churches excluded from the affairs of government...while some involvement and entanglement are inevitable, lines must be drawn" (p. 625). In drawing those lines, the Court put forward a three-part test to determine if the Establishment Clause is violated: (a) the state's

action must have an underlying secular purpose, (b) its main effect must be to neither advance nor inhibit religion, and (c) it must not create excessive entanglement with religion. The court did not clearly define, however, what constitutes excessive entanglement as distinct from Berger's description of some inevitable entanglement.

In general, the courts prefer not to get entangled in church business, but are willing to review cases if it feels neither clause is implicated. When the Supreme Court does become involved, it has not always been consistent in its decisions (Kavey, 2003; Mott, 1985), increasing ambiguity. The Court is also heavily influenced by public policy interests. It looks to prevailing public opinion as well as the actions of the executive and legislative branches of government when making decisions (*Curay-Cramer v. Ursuline Academy*, 2006; Devins, 2000). Therefore, the decisions of the Court reflect shifts in societal values.

Limits on religious freedom. The Courts do allow some discrimination on the basis of religion: for example, seminaries are allowed to fire faculty who do not adhere to church doctrine (*McEnroy v. St. Meinrad School of Theology*, 1999), academic freedom can be curtailed at religious institutions (Gordon, 2003), and so on. However, religious universities generally are still required to be in compliance with government regulations if they wish to participate in public programs. Two cases from the early 1980s provide a clear illustration of how sex and racial discrimination laws affect religious universities' ability to participate in federal financial aid programs and to comply with Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines on eligibility for tax-exempt status.

Grove City College. Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in educational programs receiving any federal financial assistance. Grove City College refused to sign an Assurance of Compliance under Title IX, arguing that since it did not

receive direct assistance from the federal government it was not subject to the guidelines. Grove City did not argue that it should be allowed to discriminate on the basis of sex but that the federal government had no legal basis to enforce its compliance. Although it did not receive direct aid, a number of their students were eligible for Basic Educational Opportunity Grants, now known as Pell Grants, made directly to students. The Department of Education concluded that the college was therefore receiving federal assistance and subject to federal regulation and obtained an administrative order to terminate assistance. The college sued in federal court and the case ultimately went to the Supreme Court (*Grove City College v. Bell*, 1984). The Court found that Congress was aware that student assistance would benefit colleges and universities and intended its assistance to supplement an institution's own financial aid efforts. Federal assistance, even if received indirectly, obligated the institution to be in compliance with the provisions of Title IX. The opinion issued by the *Grove City* Court stated: "Congress is free to attach reasonable and unambiguous conditions to federal financial assistance that educational institutions are not obligated to accept" (p. 575). This adds weight to Kavey's (2003) argument that the state can require religious recipients to adhere to specific standards.

Bob Jones University. The year before *Grove City*, the Supreme Court made another decision limiting discriminatory practices. Grove City College essentially objected to what it perceived as governmental intrusion, however, in *Bob Jones Univ. v. United States* (1983), the university was practicing racial discrimination. The university's admission policy denied admittance to students who were part of an interracial marriage or who advocated interracial marriage. The Court noted that the University's sponsors were genuine in their belief that the Bible forbids interracial marriage.

Under IRS guidelines, a charitable organization must demonstrate that its activity is not in opposition to public policy. Prior to 1970, the IRS considered private schools tax-exempt regardless of their admission practices. In 1970 a revised policy on discrimination was put in place. Tax-exempt organizations operated exclusively for religious, charitable, or educational purposes were subject to the requirement that their purpose was not illegal or contrary to public policy. The Court noted that over the previous 25 years “every pronouncement of this Court and myriad Acts of Congress and Executive Orders attest a firm national policy to prohibit racial segregation and discrimination in *public* education” (p. 593, emphasis added). The Court held that because there was a national policy to discourage racial discrimination in education, a *private* school that does not have a racially nondiscriminatory policy for admission cannot be charitable. The *Bob Jones* decision therefore provides an excellent example of how the law is contextualized within a societal framework (Devins, 2000).

The Court discussed the implications to the Free Exercise Clause, making two statements that seem to be at odds with one another. The first statement suggests that the clause should be held inviolate: “This Court has long held the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to be an absolute prohibition against governmental regulation of religious beliefs” (p. 603). However, in the next paragraph, the Court observes: “On occasion this Court has found certain governmental interests so compelling as to allow even regulations prohibiting religiously based conduct.” The case highlights the importance of legislative and executive action in establishing government interest. This plays an important factor in Supreme Court rulings above and beyond legal precedent. *Curay-Cramer v. Ursuline Academy* (2006) further establishes the importance of Congress’ intent. In the case a teacher was fired by her Catholic school employer after signing a pro-choice advertisement in a local newspaper. She argued that she was protected under Title VII

of the Civil Rights Act. The U.S. Appellate Court for the Third Circuit held, in part, that resolving the case would obligate the trial court to determine the comparative severity of doctrinal violations. The Court found that “Congress has not manifested an affirmative intention to apply the statute to a religious employer in the face of such constitutional difficulties” (p.142). Intention matters.

Although almost 30 years elapsed between *Brown v. Board of Higher Education* (1954) and the *Bob Jones* decision in 1983, eventually the national interest in preventing racial discrimination overruled the university’s religious convictions regarding interracial marriage, and it lost its tax-exempt status. Given substantial public interest, it is reasonable to conclude that the Court would again be willing to supersede the Free Exercise Clause at private educational institutions. It is quite plausible that Christian universities may be forced to choose between changing their practices or forfeiting tax exempt status or eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs. The *Grove City* decision may actually be more significant to Christian universities than *Bob Jones* because of their dependence on access to federal financial aid.

Beyond legislation and executive orders, there is also evidence that political ideology plays a role in how the judiciary makes its rulings, particularly in cases involving the Establishment Clause (Heise & Sisk, 2013; Kritzer & Richards, 2003). This is true at both the Supreme Court and the lower courts. The political ideology of future judicial appointees is therefore likely to contribute to future decisions implicating the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses. Also wielding significant influence are accreditors who not only ensure compliance with federal regulations, but come with their own beliefs and assumptions that may conflict with that of the university being evaluated (Gordon, 2003; Henck, 2011; Laycock, 1993). Accrediting

agencies are the way colleges and universities self-regulate themselves to demonstrate academic quality and financial viability to one another, federal and state governments, and the public.

This brief analysis leads to the conclusion that the Free Exercise Clause, although strongly protected by the courts, is vulnerable to considerations of public policy. Religious pluralism is a strongly valued tradition in America, as is the freedom to practice one's religion without state interference. These values, however, do not necessarily take precedence over other values such as tolerance, freedom of speech, civil rights, and personal choice, which are prevalent in current American society.

Implications for Christian Universities

Their reliance on public funding (Geiger, 1992), particularly access to federal and state grants and financial aid programs, places Christian universities in a precarious position as they are essentially at the mercy of all three branches of government. Freedom to exercise one's individual or collective religion (Brownstein, 2013) is protected by the First Amendment. Historically, the Supreme Court has strongly supported religious freedom within higher education but as its decisions in *Bob Jones* and *Grove City* illustrate, there are limits, especially when national interests are implicated, such as ending discrimination on the basis of gender or race. Congress has shown similar support for religious freedom; for example, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993) limits the ability of the federal government to hinder a person's ability to practice their religious beliefs. However, even in this Act confirming religious freedom, Congress included an exception. It states in section 2000bb-1 that the government may limit free exercise if it "(1) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest."

In recent years, there have been several legislative and judicial actions affecting religious universities, particularly Catholic and evangelical Protestant universities. These rulings also impact fundamental Christian universities such as Bob Jones University and Pensacola Christian College, as well as Bible colleges whose primary purpose is to train individuals for a life of ministry. Two of the more well-known include the Affordable Care Act in 2010, which contained provisions regarding birth control, and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) legalizing same-sex marriage. The decision in *Obergefell* contributes to the previously noted ongoing internal challenge facing CCCU member institutions. As Congress considers these and future laws, the question as to what constitutes “compelling governmental interest” is compelling in its own right.

Purpose of the Research

Senior administrators at Christian universities must make sense of these legal questions within the context of an institutional identity that is framed by the academy, accreditors, the church, students, alumni, faculty and staff, the board, the local community, state and federal authorities, and society in general. In particular, just as *Brown v. Board of Higher Education* eventually led to the *Bob Jones* decision, it seems inevitable that the ruling in *Obergefell* will lead to a similar decision regarding discrimination against sexual orientation. The Supreme Court determined in *Obergefell* that individuals in a same-sex relationship have a right to a legal marriage; how long before Congress determines that ending discrimination against those in same-sex relationships is in the national interest? Given this socio-legal environment, this is clearly a time of great uncertainty for Christian universities.

Universities, like all institutions, are composed of rational people. As these individuals deal with uncertainty, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that institutions increasingly look alike

as they conform to standards and expectations. Their theory, known as institutional isomorphism, suggests that external pressures from a variety of sources, including regulators, other institutions, and professional associations, steadily push organizations to resemble one another. Over time, the majority of American colleges and universities originally founded as Christian institutions have become essentially secular in nature (Adrian, 2003; Benne, 2001). The purpose of the research is to explore how isomorphic forces continue to interact and shape perspectives at Christian universities in the wake of *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional isomorphism offers a lens through which to view how Christian universities are affected by environmental forces relative to the *Obergefell* decision and, more specifically, how those forces create homogenization. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that within established fields there are three mechanisms that explain the increasing similarity of organizations: coercive, mimetic, and normative forces. Coercive forces describe the influence of the state and society exerting both direct and indirect pressure to conform. Mimetic forces are prevalent when dealing with uncertainty and as organizations seek legitimacy by copying established leaders within the field. Finally, normative pressure derives from increased professionalization and is particularly evident in organizations employing highly specialized individuals. These various forces constrain an organization's ability to change its "formal structure, organizational culture, and goals, program, or mission" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149) and tend to produce uniformity within an organizational field.

Christian universities are part of the well-established organizational field of higher education, which manifests high levels of dependency on the state and regulatory agencies and relies heavily on professional employees. These traits, along with an often uncertain and

ambiguous environment, create a field which causes structural isomorphism (Leiter, 2013). The coercive, mimetic, and isomorphic forces provide a specific typology that can be used to explore how Christian universities experience pressure to resemble the rest of the field.

Coercive forces are at work as universities are required to comply with governmental regulations in order to be considered tax exempt and Title IV eligible. The broader legal environment is also a major factor, as are societal mores. Accrediting agencies act as regulators, requiring assurance that universities are meeting their standards. For many Christian universities another form of coercion comes through their denominational ties. In many cases, most or even all the members of the university's board may be associated with the church. In other cases, the affiliated church may provide financial support. Even universities not affiliated with a denomination depend on private donors to fund their endowment and annual fundraising efforts. As at any university, major donors carry their own expectations, trusting, in some cases requiring, that universities will use their gifts consistent with their wishes (Hodson, 2010). Mimetic forces are likely to be especially evident in light of the uncertain legal environment. The theory suggests that universities are apt to mimic organizations seen as particularly legitimate or successful. It is also common in higher education to copy "best practices" and conduct benchmarking exercises. Finally, universities employ highly trained and specialized individuals, therefore normative pressures are an important consideration. Due to the focus on the *Obergefell* ruling, the study emphasizes the role of coercive forces.

Justification for the Research

There are several valuable reasons to conduct this study, including divergent views on human sexuality in society and within Christian universities, recent public pressure to be more tolerant, and limited research. First, beliefs and opinions related to human sexuality are among

the most polarizing in society, as demonstrated by the Supreme Court's split decision to legalize same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). As previously noted, this polarization is also emerging within the CCCU. Christian universities are facing choices in this area that will affect them for years to come. Should they retain their traditional values and teaching in their policies and practices and risk declining enrollment, decreased access to federal funding, and loss of tax-exempt status? Should they change their policies and practices and risk their relationship with their denomination and further open the door to secularization and a loss of their religious identity?

A recent news story also highlights the need for additional research in this area. The city of Salem, Massachusetts terminated a contract with Gordon College, a member of the CCCU, to manage a local historic building in response to public controversy regarding their stance on homosexuality (Gryboski, 2015). More importantly, the same story reported that Gordon's accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, required the college to submit a report to the agency regarding its practices. In 2016, a bill was introduced in California by state senator Ricardo Lara to hold private universities to the same standards as public colleges regarding anti-discrimination laws. It would open the way for students in same-sex relationships to sue religious colleges for discrimination (McGreevy, 2016a). Ultimately the bill was amended simply to require disclosure of religious exemptions, however, Lara indicated he is considering additional legislation, including reinstatement of the provisions that were dropped in the amended bill (McGreevy, 2016b) These stories demonstrate the serious consequences and scrutiny Christian universities are likely to experience more frequently in the near future.

From a scholarly perspective, there has been some research on attitudes towards sexual orientation within Christian higher education, focused primarily on students' attitudes and

experiences (Wolff & Himes, 2010; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009). Although there is some discussion of the implication of recent court decisions in the literature, there is minimal research regarding how Christian universities are preparing for their survival with their religious identity intact. Given the recent decision in *Obergefell*, there has not been time for empirical research into how Christian universities are thinking about the long-term implications of the decision.

Research Audience

This study speaks primarily to senior administrators at Christian universities and those at other religious institutions who face external pressures, but also has relevance for a wider public audience, particularly those who value religious freedom. The focus of the research is on rational rather than moral reasoning. The issue is not whether same-sex marriage and related issues are right or wrong but how the external environment affects the decisions Christian universities make regarding those issues. One primary desired outcome is that those who participate in this study will become more aware of their own perspectives regarding external pressures generally and sexual orientation more particularly. Interviewing presidents at Christian universities may help them make sense of their own environment. The research also adds to the scholarly literature in organization studies, especially new institutionalism, which is concerned with interactions between institutions and society. This study uses institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to help explore how Christian universities interact with their environment.

Significance Statement

The changing socio-legal climate creates a number of potential challenges for religious universities and has implications for society at large, the survival of religious universities as they

currently exist, and student choice. In marked contrast to other countries, the U.S. system of post-secondary education is characterized by its decentralized approach to higher education. There is a tremendous amount of diversity across the various sectors of higher education: Some institutions focus on teaching and others on research; community colleges serve the needs of the local population, while research universities attract students from around the world. Religious universities offer students an opportunity to earn a recognized degree within the context of a specialized mission, one in which faith is fully compatible with reason. They contribute to the rich variety in American higher education.

The limits of judicial deference at religious universities have implications that extend beyond the *Bob Jones* decision. Almost all private universities participate in federal financial aid programs, gaining access to federal grants (Pell Grants, for example), subsidized federal loans, and other financial aid monies; religious universities are no exception. A random sample of 20 CCCU institutions showed that 46% of first-time, full-time students received an average of \$4,480 in federal grants and 72% received an average of \$6,259 in federal loans in 2013-14 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). For an institution that admits 500 students, that results in over one million dollars in grant money and over 2.2 million dollars in loans, just for freshmen. More importantly, these monies enable students to attend who otherwise would be unable to do so. In *Grove City*, the Supreme Court held that federal assistance given to students obligated the receiving institution to be in compliance with federal regulations. Therefore, future regulatory changes, if in conflict with a university's religious tenets, may put the university in a position where it must choose between its religious convictions and its tax-exempt status or eligibility to receive federal and state financial aid.

Such a choice has implications for the landscape of higher education in the United States. Writing about religious rights, Gedicks (1989) argues, “the inexorable expansion of modern American government at every level places increasing pressure on religious groups to compromise their beliefs and values to conform to government policies” (p. 101). If a religious university conforms to (potential) new regulations, it not only jeopardizes its relationship with its constituents, it also becomes more like other private universities and a thread is removed from the tapestry of higher education. Alternatively, refusal to conform places long-term survival in doubt, particularly for tuition-driven universities with limited endowment resources. Institutions affiliated with a particular religious order or denomination may damage their relationship with that group. Student choice would also be impacted, as there would obviously be less likelihood that students could find a university with religious convictions congruent with their own. However, if the university refuses, many students, particularly low income students, may be unable to attend. Students from a low socioeconomic status background already have limited access to private higher education (Perna, 2006) and the loss of federal grants and loans would certainly further limit their access. Because the implications are so broad, more research is needed into this area; specifically, exploration into how religious universities are likely to respond to a changing socio-legal environment.

The research benefits other scholarly researchers in the field, helps to improve practice, and further informs policymakers. It benefits those engaged in scholarly work by providing a deeper understanding of how senior administrators at religious universities perceive the issue and the extent to which they are aware of the implications of the changing climate. The results of this research may also generate new questions regarding the relationship between law and religion in the United States. This study further adds to the literature on organization studies in its

application of institutional isomorphism, a seminal theory within new institutionalism. The theory has been widely applied to a variety of organizational fields since 1983, including higher education, but only a few empirical studies relate to Christian higher education (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009; Tam & Hasmath, 2015; Taylor, 2015).

The study is relevant for practitioners at Christian and other religious institutions. The institution where I am employed is a conservative Christian university, and administrators are well aware of the changing socio-legal climate. Research into how other religious universities are approaching these issues is of practical value locally as the institution is beginning to grapple with its response to potential changes in public policy. In addition to local benefit, the research topic is of use to administrators at other religious universities and schools as it is vital that they be aware of the legal environment in which they operate (Kaplan & Lee, 2014). As discussed, future regulatory changes, if in conflict with a university's religious tenets, may put the university in a position where it must choose between its religious convictions and its tax-exempt status and eligibility to receive federal and state financial aid. This study helps to inform administrators at religious institutions of these possible outcomes. It may encourage religious institutions to be proactive in considering their response to those outcomes.

Finally, the research also helps policymakers by helping them to understand the complex issues at stake. If the government acts to pressure religious universities to implement social policy held by the majority, the effect will be to curtail religious pluralism (Gedicks, 1989). When creating new legislation or crafting regulations those in the executive and legislative branches of government need to be aware that not accommodating religious beliefs has far-reaching consequences. This research also informs groups such as the CCCU, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and similar consortia as well as religious advocacy groups.

Combined, the implications for scholars, religious universities, students, and policymakers makes exploring Christian universities' response to *Obergefell v. Hodges* an important subject for research.

Research Questions

The research topic is religious identity and public policy in Christian higher education, and the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how isomorphic forces are interacting and shaping perspectives at Christian universities subsequent to *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).

Policies related to sexual orientation serve as the focal point, given the issue's current relevance to leaders at Christian universities. The research is guided by the following three questions:

- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe isomorphic forces relative to their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their institution's response to these forces?

Summary

Christian universities face an uncertain future as they seek to maintain their unique religious identity. Their traditional view of marriage as between one man and one woman is at odds with the law of the land and the majority of public opinion. Despite long-standing privileges under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, it is probable that Congress eventually will decide to limit those privileges relative to same-sex marriage and that the Supreme Court will uphold that decision. As a result, Christian universities with policies that permit sexual relationships only in the context of a heterosexual marriage face increasing

pressure to conform to the rest of higher education. That pressure is not limited to governmental agents, but many other individuals and agencies as well.

This study employs basic qualitative research methods to explore how presidents perceive that pressure and how their respective universities are considering their response to it. One goal of this approach was that they gain a deeper understanding of how environmental pressures influence their institutions and that they discover new ways to avoid homogenization. It also updates administrators at Christian universities and other religious institutions regarding external pressures and current thinking about the issue of same-sex marriage. For the scholarly audience, the research illuminates how isomorphic forces shape higher education, particularly Christian universities. Christian universities are a small but valuable part of the landscape of higher education and is important to learn how they plan to maintain their unique identity.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Christian universities struggle to maintain their unique religious identity while combating significant pressure from the state, other agencies, and society. These external pressures create an isomorphic effect as universities conform to societal expectations, and over the years many religious universities have converted into essentially secular institutions. Changing views on same-sex marriage present a current challenge for the over 100 Christian universities whose religious convictions run counter to this socio-cultural shift. This is highlighted in the recent *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) decision legalizing same-sex marriage. During oral arguments, Justice Alito reminded the Solicitor General of the United States, Donald Verrilli, Jr., of the ruling in *Bob Jones Univ. v. United States* (1983) that a college could not claim tax-exempt status if it opposed interracial marriage. He asked Verrilli if the same standard should apply to a university with policies opposed to same-sex marriage. In his response, Verrilli stated, “It is going to be an issue.” Christian universities are aware that the decisions they make in response to this issue could fundamentally alter their identity. The purpose of the research is to explore how isomorphic forces interact to shape perspectives at Christian universities following the *Obergefell* decision.

Three distinct strands frame this review of the relevant literature for the study. They include (a) the history and role of Christian universities within the U.S., including the impact of secularization and their ongoing struggle to maintain a distinct religious identity; (b) empirical studies regarding sexual orientation conducted at religious universities; and (c) the role of institutional isomorphism within higher education. As any university strives for legitimacy, it faces environmental pressure to conform to the organizational field of higher education. However, each is also a distinct organization composed of diverse individuals, and therefore the

concept of agency as a mitigating factor is also considered. The review concludes with a brief summary tying the various strands of the literature together.

Defining the Christian University

A brief definition of the term Christian university was provided in Chapter 1 but it is useful to elaborate here, as it is often confused with the term church-affiliated. The first attempt to classify church-related institutions was embedded in the Danforth Commission's report on church-sponsored higher education in the United States, produced by the American Council on Education (Pattillo & Mackenzie, 1966). The largest category is composed of church-related institutions such as Harvard, Duke, or Chicago that retain only a historical connection to their original denomination (Garrison, 2010). The remaining three broad categories of religious institutions are (a) non-affirming institutions, those with a formal connection to a denomination but who pay little notice to religion; (b) defenders of the faith, a smaller group of primarily fundamental colleges closely tied to their denomination and perceived as opposed to current intellectual thinking; and (c) free Christian colleges, the smallest group, who attempt to integrate faith and learning while holding tight to Christianity (Adrian, 2003).

More recently, (Benne, 2001) provided an updated taxonomy as part of his study of six church-affiliated institutions. He identified four types of church-related institutions: orthodox, critical mass, intentionally pluralist, and accidentally pluralist. The orthodox type requires all adults to ascribe to a particular belief statement to ensure that a Christian worldview permeates the institution. The second type requires that a critical mass from the specific religious tradition make up the various campus constituencies but does not require every member to participate or believe in a Christian tradition. These first two are guided by a Christian vision and are substantively different from the pluralist institutions that are guided by postmodernism, have an

Enlightenment mentality, or are focused on professional goals (Glanzer, Carpenter, & Lantinga, 2010).

This study is interested primarily in those institutions at the intersection of Pattillo and Manning's free Christian college and Benne's orthodox and critical mass types. The emphasis is on institutions seeking to integrate faith and reason, which Arthur (2008) argues should be seen as complementary rather than incompatible. Although Roman Catholic institutions are part of the wider Christian landscape, they have a centralized authority and common mission and are often viewed separately from Protestant institutions. Therefore, for the purpose of this review, Christian universities are defined as religious colleges and universities from Protestant traditions attempting to integrate faith and reason while holding fast to Christianity. These universities should not be conflated with the several hundred seminaries and small Bible colleges, most of which are either nationally accredited or non-accredited and whose primary purpose is to train clergy and prepare missionaries.

History and Role of Christian Universities in the United States

Writing about American higher education more than half a century ago, the historian Richard Storr noted the importance of historical inquiry: "History does not merely remind us of contingency and mutability. It also serves to rid us of the naïve idea that our times are entirely different from other areas" (1950, p. 16). I begin by placing Christian higher education within its historical context, from the earliest days of Western higher education until the present time.

Historical Overview

The earliest medieval universities in Bologna (founded circa 1090) and Paris (circa 1150) were essentially arms of the church. In those days there was tension between the two as universities sought for truth as well as the freedom to carry out that search (Adrian, 2003).

Although the church expected the universities to follow their religious dictates, the idea of an autonomous institution developed as early as the Renaissance and has lasted through today (Perkin, 2007). Over the ensuing centuries universities continued to adapt and evolve. During the Reformation, Protestant traditions established universities that depended on the Bible as the foundation for the educational experience (Adrian, 2003). The earliest American colleges—Harvard in Massachusetts, William and Mary in Virginia, and Yale in Connecticut—were all established by Protestant churches, although tied to civil government (Geiger, 1992). All three were founded to train ministers and help build a Christian civilization (Adrian, 2003). Princeton, Chicago, and Duke are additional examples of early universities that emerged from Protestant denominations. Although all of these national universities are widely recognized for their academic excellence, their religious identity eroded over time and is now essentially an afterthought (Marsden, 1994; Mixon et al., 2004).

The Enlightenment played a major role in this erosion and continues to challenge traditional Christian thought with its emphasis on skepticism, focus on intellectual rather than Christian thought, and stress on science over religion (Adrian, 2003; Geiger, 1992; Perkin, 2007). Simultaneously, the concept of the German research university was taking root in the U.S., emphasizing scholarship and research over teaching and service (Moser, 2014). Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, universities, especially liberal Protestant institutions, slowly began to disentangle themselves from their Christian foundations (Marsden, 1994). Christianity gradually shifted to seminaries and religion departments as religion became an area of study rather than a guiding principle of higher education (Adrian, 2003; Eisenmann, 1999). In contrast, Catholic universities held on to their strong religious identity longer, but by the mid-20th century they too began a steady drift towards secularization (Dosen, 2012).

These intellectual movements did not occur in isolation; many legislative and judicial actions have made a significant impact on the development of U.S. higher education as well. I highlight three that shaped the landscape of higher education in major ways. First is the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819). The state of New Hampshire seized control of Dartmouth, a private institution, and attempted to place it under state control. The Court held that the original contract between the King George III and the trustees could not be set aside by the state. The lasting result was that any individual or group, whether church, civil body, or other organization, could create a college and offer an education for anyone willing to pay (Perkin, 2007). The second was the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act by Congress in 1862, which required states to use the proceeds from the federal land grant to establish practical training in agriculture and the mechanical arts. The Act's emphasis on utilitarian education fundamentally altered higher education in America (Adrian, 2003; Geiger, 1992; Perkin, 2007). The third notable action was also legislative: The passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944 transformed higher education as access to an affordable college education expanded. The resulting dramatic increase in enrollment at religious universities created a significant strain on institutions who had to house students and obtain more faculty (Dosen, 2012). Private universities survived the tremendous growth in the public sector of higher education through increasing specialization and accessing federal financial aid programs (Geiger, 1992).

Funding Christian higher education. The increasing reliance on federal aid on the part of private universities post-World War II was also an outcome of the decrease in direct church support that religious universities have experienced since the late 19th century. Ironically, during the 19th century there was populist resistance to the public funding of state colleges and universities, and denominational colleges often led the charge in campaigns against this use of

tax revenue (Gelber, 2011). However, the need for resources eventually led colleges away from the denominations who were interested in the spiritual development of students but unable to provide financial support (Geiger, 1992). Dependence on tuition to fund operations resulted in universities becoming more responsive to student interests (Taylor, 2015) and more reliant on access to federal and state funding.

In recent years, an increased emphasis on tuition discounting, the practice of giving students a percentage off the “sticker price” in order to grow and/or maintain enrollment, has resulted in additional pressure. A study on tuition discounting in 2015 found that the amount of institutional aid reached record highs, with first-year full-time students receiving 49% in grants (National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2016). The study found that universities are increasingly pulling money out of their endowment to fund institutional grants and growth in net revenue is slowing. As a result, private universities may have to divert monies intended for deferred maintenance, increasing salaries, and/or quality initiatives. This is especially true for Christian universities, who have a lower endowment-to-operating budget ratio than their secular peers, as well as lower net revenue per full-time equivalent student (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Fiscal health continues to plague religiously affiliated universities who make up the majority of the 114 schools warned by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009 for failing the financial responsibility test (Henck, 2011).

Institutions’ increasing dependence on tuition revenue (Taylor, 2015) resulted in student satisfaction becoming an important goal for administrators who need to meet enrollment goals. Complicating matters is the long-term fallout of the social unrest on college campuses across the United States during the 1960s. Religious universities were not exempt, and formerly tractable

students began calling for social and curricular reforms (Dosen, 2012). The balance of power began to shift from university officials to the collective student body.

Secularization of Higher Education

The role of religion has also shifted dramatically in American higher education. Despite its foundation on Judeo-Christian principles, higher education in the Western world is no longer tethered to those values (Arthur, 2008). The early colleges were “characterized by a dual fidelity to the pursuit of knowledge and the development of persons of faith and moral character” (Henck, 2011, p. 202). By 1945, however, a Harvard report on general education dismissed attempts to integrate faith and learning and argued that the unifying purpose of the university was the idea of the dignity of man (Adrian, 2003). This replacement of religious with secular values is a long-term trend according to Arthur (2008), who asks if it is inevitable that religious institutions’ commitment to their original values will be eroded. He concludes that the answer may lie with their denominational sponsor or faith tradition: “It may be that religiously affiliated colleges and universities are merely reflecting the quality and depth of religion found in the sponsoring religious body” (p. 201).

There are other more pragmatic reasons behind increased secularization. Many religious institutions adopt secular practices under the guise of professionalization, emphasizing qualities like scholarship and teaching over the religious dimension (Arthur, 2008). Several other causes of “cultural slippage” are suggested by Dosen (2012): (a) “the sweet siren song of federal support” (p. 39) following the enrollment growth resulting from the G.I. bill, (b) the concomitant flood of faculty unfamiliar with the university’s religious values, and (c) because institutions have mimicked secular universities perceived as high quality. The last factor continues to challenge Christian universities today. They struggle with maintaining a strong religious identity

while building an academic reputation for quality, fearing that in the process they “will succumb to the forces of secularization that eviscerated the religious identity of other institutions” (Swezey & Ross, 2012, p. 95).

Secularization provides a convenient answer for Christian universities who wish to improve their academic reputation and feel they are being hindered by “the rising stigma of religious emphases and terminology” (Warner, 2013, p. 349). For many years scholars have argued that increased prestige can come only at the expense of religious identity and retaining their convictions means “they must accept academic mediocrity and dwell in the backwaters of academic culture” (Mixon et al., 2004, p. 401). Although secularization theory offers an explanation for much of the trajectory of religious higher education, an empirical study found that the need to secularize was not required to maintain or pursue a strong academic reputation (Mixon et al., 2004). However, Swezey and Ross (2012) argue there is a perception that “explicitly religious universities are de facto inferior in reputation to secular institutions” (p. 94).

Despite these challenges, globally the number of religious institutions is increasing as is growing enrollment (Arthur, 2008; Glanzer et al., 2010). Much of the growth in Christian higher education has occurred in what Glanzer et al. (2010) refer to as the Global South, including Africa and Latin America. This is despite the fact that Western intellectuals and social scientists have been arguing that religion is coming to an end for the last three centuries (Berger, 1967; Stark, 1999). Church membership has grown in the U.S. since 1850 and the number of scientists who believe in a God who answers prayer remained around 40% from 1914–1996 (Stark, 1999). Although religion is very much a part of the public sphere both nationally and globally, Warner (2013) argues that rationalistic individualism has marginalized its authority. He suggests that cultural forces in the Western world are heading towards secularization. Similarly, Peter Berger

(1967), one of the early and strongest proponents of secularization theory, predicted that the process of secularization was inevitable. However, several years ago he wrote that the theory “that modernity necessarily brings about a decline of religion...has been empirically falsified” (Berger, 2012, p. 313). Further, he argues that the scholars behind secularization theory, including himself, confused “secularity with plurality” (p. 313). In other words, it is not that religion is in decline; rather, religion has become a matter of individual choice. Religion, therefore, is apparently alive and well; however, increased religious pluralism challenges not only Christian universities, but the Christian faith as well, which is now one among many others (Adrian, 2003). This climate of religious pluralism highlights the pressure Christian universities feel as they deal with internal and external constituencies.

Struggling with Religious Identity

Christian universities must balance their identity as religious institutions with their identity as academic institutions. Dosen (2012) argues that both Protestant and Catholic universities need to pay attention to three elements to maintain their religious identity: (a) the identity must extend beyond the theology department and the university’s ministry staff; (b) they must recognize that all religious institutions are capable of wandering from their foundations; and (c) their curriculum must intentionally integrate faith and knowledge.

There is no one way for faith-based institutions to consider questions to consider their identity and mission: Some institutions minimize their identity as religious institutions in order to appear more attractive to prospective faculty and students, others emphasize their religious character for the same reason (Arthur, 2008). Christian universities can capitalize on their religious identity, stressing the spiritual dimension of campus life as a way to create their own distinct identity (Taylor, 2015).

Just as secular institutions take ideological positions, Arthur (2008) contends that religious institutions should be just as open in articulating their values, observing, “It must have something to say to the modern world that only it can articulate” (p. 201). These values must go beyond the generic values of service, ethics, social justice, leadership, or values found in the majority of university mission statements. Engaging in evangelistic efforts (Dosen, 2012) is another aspect of remaining true to religious identity.

It is not unusual for institutions to inhabit multiple organizational fields, and Taylor (2015) writes that Christian universities inhabit two well-established fields: religion and higher education. He argues that in order to obtain resources from both areas they must “craft identities that are plausible in two different settings” (p. 208). The challenge remains in finding equilibrium between the two: (a) how to be open to dialogue and new ideas while remaining true to traditional values, and (b) how to balance the need to change with the times while maintaining core principles assumed to be eternal. On the one hand it is important to listen to new voices and allow long-held beliefs to be challenged; however, when individuals who oppose those beliefs are permitted to become part of the organization, over time their influence will naturally make an impact as they are involved in hiring, creating policy, and curriculum design. Tveit et al. (2015) describe a Dutch college that deliberately moved from a “strict, conservative Christian profile toward that of a Christian institution with a broader perspective” (p. 293) in order to fulfill their mission to be socially relevant. They describe how some participants in the study wanted the institution to move even further away from its religious moorings to increase openness. No doubt this will make the university even more accessible to those who share many of their values without necessarily sharing their beliefs. However, if the institution continues on this trajectory,

at a certain point it will become a “church-related” college with a historic religious affiliation; its Christian identity will diminish and eventually fade away.

Control and Influence in Christian Higher Education

Board. The board or other source of formal authority is ultimately responsible for maintaining or revising an institution’s distinctive identity. Catholic universities historically were typically not under the authority of the local bishop, and received little direct support from the church; as a result, they remained independent of the clergy, with the exception of pedagogical issues related to faith and morality (Dosen, 2012). Universities in the Protestant tradition often experience more pressure from their religious groups, but like their Catholic peers typically receive only limited direct financial support (Ringenberg, 2006; Taylor, 2015).

Additionally, the board plays a vital role not only in the religious commitment of the university, but also in achieving other strategic goals tied to its mission, including issues related to diversity (Nussbaum & Chang, 2013). Pérez (2013) concurs that board members are a key factor in creating and maintaining diversity initiatives, and argues that institutions must begin by diversifying their board. Many private universities do have a heterogeneous board, often including trustees with deep pockets. However, moving from boards closely tied to the clergy to more mixed groups can create problems for a university’s religious identity (Dosen, 2012). Although a less homogeneous group provides a diversity of thought and experience, the close tie to the church’s theological framework can be weakened.

Federal and state government. One need only look to efforts made by both the administrations of the two past presidents of the United States to see that the government is increasingly interested in accountability, affordability, accessibility, and quality (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Federal

regulators are increasingly not only willing, but downright eager to insert themselves into the inner workings of higher education. This is done in the name of accountability, and given the vast sums of money made available through Title IV programs, the expectation that institutions use these economic resources wisely is perfectly reasonable. The increased regulation, however, creates a significant challenge for smaller institutions, descriptive of the majority of Christian universities. These smaller institutions bear a disproportionate burden as they attempt to meet federal mandates, which, given the majority of students at Christian universities who access Title IV funds, are not optional (Rine & Guthrie, 2016).

These mandates are not limited to the federal government. In Illinois, for example, the state recently mandated that any undergraduate post-secondary institution with students receiving state aid must participate in the Illinois Longitudinal Data System (P-20 Longitudinal Data System Act, 2009). The intent of the Act is to provide the state with data for analysis of school effectiveness at all levels. Universities must submit almost 100 unique data elements for each student who enrolls, for each term attended, and over 40 unique data elements for every completer during an academic year. For smaller institutions with small, or even non-existent, offices of institutional research, complying with this law is a significant burden.

Academic marketplace. Turning back to the history of higher education, the impact of the G.I. bill placed tremendous strain on religious universities as they dealt with rapid growth in enrollment. Finding qualified faculty from the religious community was especially challenging (Dosen, 2012), requiring universities to hire faculty who were potentially less committed to their religious position. Christian and other religious universities face unique challenges such as their right to determine standards for employment that include both belief and practice (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). The statements of belief and institutional lifestyle expectations that employees

typically must espouse (Taylor, 2015) also limit the pool of available scholars from which Christian universities can hire. These expectations typically include limiting sexual activity to a heterosexual marriage, prohibiting the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, and maintaining dress code and appearance expectations. This creates a challenge for institutions who seek to raise their academic profile (Swezey & Ross, 2012). Hiring a professor with a Ph.D. in Nursing or Engineering can be challenging for any small private institution with limited financial resources without the additional expectations of faith and lifestyle.

Other stakeholders. Christian universities are held accountable by both higher education and religious worlds, both of which have “well-articulated values, expectations, and ways of operation, with each claiming its unique role in influencing administration and academics” (Henck, 2011, p. 196). These universities are expected to demonstrate excellence in both areas, summed up in their commitment to integrate faith and learning. Relevant stakeholders are not limited to the government and accreditors. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, alumni at Christian universities, often focused on business, encouraged a middle-of-the-road Protestantism rather than maintaining denominational ties (Geiger, 1992). These pressures raise questions as to who is best positioned to lead: insiders from the church or school or new leaders identified from the outside (Henck, 2011). Insiders are more likely to perpetuate traditions and values, but outsiders bring new ideas that can energize and revitalize. In addition, in the case of board members, strategic recruitment can add to the endowment in meaningful ways. To help answer the many questions related to governance, governmental action, changing social climate, and preserving missional identity, a number of Christian universities came together to form a professional association.

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities: History and Role

The increasing intrusion of the government into private, and especially Christian, higher education was one of the primary factors in the creation of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Its origins began in 1971, when the Christian College Consortium was founded to encourage cooperation among ten evangelical colleges, “in part to address the financial, enrollment, and identity issues that many were facing” (Patterson, 2005, p. 42). Original criteria for membership included fiscal health and a commitment to the integration of faith and learning; the organization also wanted to maintain distance from the Christian fundamentalist movement’s (Patterson, 2005) tendency to reject any diversity of religious thought. As higher education was becoming more at-risk for state control (Perkin, 2007) and more dependent on federal monies (Geiger, 1992), the founders feared that a major court decision related to the separation of church and state could negatively impact religious universities. Believing that their size made lobbying impractical, a subsidiary association originally called the Christian College Association was established in 1976 to guard against governmental coercion at faith-based institutions (Patterson, 2005). The institutions that make up the organization recognize the Bible as the basis for religious authority (Adrian, 2003). Member institutions tend to be comprehensive universities or baccalaureate colleges with a relatively flat hierarchical structure (Cejda, Bush, & Rewey, 2002). This model closely resembles the first universities established in the U.S., and for scholars like Ernest Boyer who emphasize the importance of teaching, represents “a historic connection to the roots of American higher education” (Moser, 2014).

Recent trends. The association has grown as its leadership sought to achieve a critical mass to effect change in Washington D.C. but has maintained a commitment that universities

must be Christ-centered (Patterson, 2005). After leaving its parent organization in 1982, the organization continued to separate itself from the Christian right but did allow some fundamental institutions to join, recognizing that it cannot set its criteria for membership too narrowly or it will lose its effectiveness as an interest group (Patterson, 2005). In recent years CCCU schools have seen significant enrollment growth and are increasingly respected in the academy while maintaining their commitment to the integration of faith and learning (Adrian, 2003; Henck, 2011). As individuals, evangelical academics are also making strides in gaining respect for their scholarly work (Berger, 2012). Beyond increasing academic prestige, the CCCU places significant emphasis on increasing diversity at member institutions, yet it has proven difficult to codify diversity within their respective institutional missions (Pérez, 2013).

Diversity initiatives. “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation’” (Mark 16:15 English Standard Version). Christian universities have a clear mandate from their highest authority to reach out to all; no one is to be excluded. They are also reminded in Psalm 146:7-8 that the Lord is one “who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.” This certainly is reminiscent of language promoting social justice. It is not surprising, therefore, that Christian universities often include statements about diversity and social justice in their mission statements. However, this view is not embraced by all within the Christian university community, which can sometimes see attempts to diversify as a harbinger of secularization (Pérez, 2013).

Growth in minority student populations at Christian universities has been significant but continues to lag behind that at secular private institutions (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Increasing

accessibility through financial aid, flexible admission standards, and low cost is one way to create more opportunities for students to engage with others from diverse backgrounds. In general, Christian universities have held net tuition low relative to the rest of the higher education marketplace, therefore their students typically have less debt, increasing affordability (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Increased affordability is one way to improve access to higher education, contributing to diversification efforts. Pell grant recipients have also been on the rise at Christian universities, growing at a faster rate than their secular peers from 29% to 44% over a five-year period (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Although providing opportunities to low-income students contributes to accessibility, it underscores their increasing dependence on access to federal funding.

Framing the question of what diversity means is a challenge for Christian universities, however, as they seek to balance “the tension, and oftentimes conflict, between the academy and the church” (Nussbaum & Chang, 2013, p. 8). Many Christian universities define diversity in a way that explicitly excludes sexual orientation and in some cases religious or even denominational heterogeneity (Pérez, 2013). It is defined primarily through the perspective of gender, racial and ethnic, and socioeconomic differences.

A current challenge for CCCU institutions is the issue of homosexuality. In 2001 the council crafted a thoughtful statement on homosexual practice that “faithfully reflects an orthodox Christian consensus on a controversial moral question” (Patterson, 2005, p. 53). However, in 2015 two members of the CCCU announced their decision to hire individuals in same-sex marriages; they later voluntarily withdrew from membership, but not before two other members left the organization in protest (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2015). In its statement, the CCCU also noted a serious divide in member presidents’ attitudes regarding

whether the two institutions should remain as full or affiliate members. With the recent Supreme Court decision regarding the legalization of same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), the issue is poised to create a major rift in the organization. The research participants were selected from CCCU institutions because the topic is both timely and relevant for them as they make decisions about their future stance on the issue.

Summary: The Role of Christian Universities in Higher Education

The history of higher education is one of constant change, from its founding through to the present day. It tells a story of the pursuit and dissemination of truth and of the tension between the academy and those in power, whether religious or political (Adrian, 2003; Perkin, 2007). For most universities today, that tension is seen primarily between the academy and the state. Religious universities, however, are caught between both church and state as they seek to meet the expectations of both. In addition, they must meet the expectations of their peers through accreditation visits (Henck, 2011) as well as their alumni, students, parents, communities, and other stakeholders.

Universities have experienced constant change as societal values and norms have shifted over the centuries. The Protestant Reformation resulted in a shift of power from the Roman Catholic Church to the state vis-à-vis higher education, and universities had to adjust (Adrian, 2003; Geiger, 1992; Perkin, 2007). The Enlightenment brought new change as reason, natural laws, and scientific explanations became more valued than faith and theology (Adrian, 2003; Eisenmann, 1999; Geiger, 1992). The Industrial Revolution's focus on utilitarianism, echoed in the Morrill Act in the United States in the Civil War era, emphasized the value of professional preparation, which continues to shape the environment (Adrian, 2003; Geiger, 1992; Perkin, 2007). Increased access to higher education, bolstered in the U.S. by the G.I. Bill (Dosen, 2012),

has created a more diverse student population with a variety of needs and expectations (Perkin, 2007). Christian universities have coped with these changes through increased reliance on state and federal sources of funding and through increased dependence on tuition rather than church support (Geiger, 1992).

Although religious universities are not in decline globally (Glanzer et al., 2010), the role of Christian universities in America has changed dramatically. From the early universities founded primarily to train ministers, today the environment is much more diverse: public universities and community colleges; private, secular universities; and for-profit institutions all compete alongside church-affiliated private universities. Within the last category, the majority of church-affiliated institutions are no longer characterized as Christian universities (Benne, 2001; Glanzer et al., 2010; Marsden, 1994), reflecting a wider societal shift. The secularization of higher education has been a long-term process (Arthur, 2008), and was accelerated in the 20th century by the impacts of the G.I. bill and social unrest (Dosen, 2012). Although religious experience is still an important aspect of life for many Americans (Berger, 2012), the effects of religious pluralism are beginning to marginalize Christianity (Adrian, 2003; Patterson, 2005).

Within this environment, Christian universities are making choices to either emphasize or minimize their religious identity (Arthur, 2008; Taylor, 2015). The pursuit of academic prestige causes many institutions to mimic secular institutions (Dosen, 2012; Swezey & Ross, 2012; Warner, 2013) although there is some evidence this can be achieved without secularization (Benne, 2001; Mixon et al., 2004). Christian universities seek to maintain a foothold in both the academic and religious worlds but struggle to find their balance (Taylor, 2015). Although they receive little in the way of direct financial support, there is a great deal of pressure from religious sponsors (Ringenberg, 2006; Taylor, 2015). Correspondingly, societal shifts, governmental

action, alumni expectations, and the expectations of the higher education community exert their own forms of pressure (Geiger, 1992; Rine & Guthrie, 2016; Swezey & Ross, 2012; Taylor, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). All of this comes together to create an environment in which the expectations of many external actors are not aligned with the religious values of the university (Henck, 2011). To guard against government coercion and far-reaching judicial decisions, Christian universities banded together to form the CCCU to protect their political interests. However, the precise impact of the CCCU on legislation or judicial decision making is difficult to assess.

The CCCU is also deeply interested in promoting diversity initiatives within its member institutions (Patterson, 2005; Pérez, 2013; Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Although there has been significant expansion in ethnic and especially socioeconomic diversity, Christian universities continue to trail behind secular institutions (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Because some in the evangelical movement view the push to diversify as cultural relativism, a number of institutions struggle to frame the issue (Pérez, 2013). The increasing demands for inclusiveness for LGBT individuals in the secular world and in liberal religious traditions further complicates the situation for Christian universities. The issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage has already created a conflict within the CCCU, and conservative religious institutions face tremendous uncertainty as they look to the future.

Given the competitive nature of higher education, it is reasonable to conclude that most students in Christian universities enroll because they wished to attend a religious university. Members of the CCCU enroll almost a half million (CCCU Profile, 2015) of the roughly 20 million students attending colleges and universities in America (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Christian universities are not only central historically but continue as a valued

strand in the tapestry of American higher education. They play a small but indispensable role in the United States by offering students an alternative to secular education, increasing the heterogeneity of higher education, and contributing a perspective on society that is increasingly in opposition to the mainstream, an attribute long-valued in American culture and tradition.

The effects of secularization and religious pluralism, along with the varied expectations of the church, the academy, and the state create a unique set of challenges for Christian universities. Berger (2012) claims that it is possible for individuals to maintain footholds in both the secular and religious worlds, exercising their faith in one context while acting as rational individuals within society. It may be more complicated for organizations to sustain this balancing act. The challenge for Christian universities is whether they too can continue to maintain a balance between both worlds as the forces of secularization and religious pluralism continue to exert pressure to conform.

In recent years, Christian universities have been attempting this balancing act related to homosexuality. They are caught between sociocultural shifts and the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality. In the next section, the literature on religious universities and sexual orientation is examined to see how this impacts their campuses.

Religious Universities and Sexual Orientation

Although a substantial body of literature has emerged regarding the intersection of sexual orientation and post-secondary education, comparatively few empirical studies have been conducted at Christian universities. The search parameters were therefore extended to include studies at other faith-based institutions such as Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and more liberal Protestant universities such as those affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The heading of this section is therefore intentional in its reference to religious

universities as opposed to Christian universities as previously defined. With a few exceptions, most of these studies focus on attitudes towards or experiences of sexual minority students at religious institutions.

This review looks at religious institutions as a group; however, the importance of denominational ties must be stressed. Although faculty at CCCU institutions describe themselves in generic terms as Christians, they emphasize that denominational affiliation affects their institutions in a variety of ways (Rine, Glanzer, & Davignon, 2013). Each denomination has its own unique views on sexuality that frame the institutional perspective and position (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). However, the predominant view about sexuality is that Christians should not engage in sexual activity until in a heterosexual marriage (Williams, DeFazio, & Goins, 2013).

Despite that predominant view, evangelical Christians should not be viewed as a homogenous group. Although Christian universities and their parent denominations have many values in common, the individuals who make up those organizations have differing perspectives on many issues. Empirical studies, however, provide a general sense of the current state of affairs at religious universities. The following sections discuss campus climate as perceived by different audiences, the person-behavior distinction, institutional tensions, and the importance of the college experience in the formation of religious and sexual identities.

Campus Climate

The climate at religious universities regarding homosexuality remains ambiguous as institutions struggle to find the balance between respecting the individual and enforcing their policies. Even at an ELCA university, a member of one of the more liberal Protestant denominations that includes institutions like California Lutheran and Pacific Lutheran, the campus climate towards gays and lesbians was one of ambivalence, although gay employees

described ELCA as “more accepting” (Bryant & Craft, 2010). In general, however, gay and lesbian students at religious universities find the prevailing attitude towards homosexuality to be negative, a perception confirmed by heterosexual students.

Perceptions of gay and lesbian students. Eighty-four percent of students at CCCU institutions who experience same-sex attraction (SSA) perceive the campus view on homosexuality to be generally negative or negative, and 96% perceive the campus view of homosexual behavior to be generally negative or negative (Yarhouse et al., 2009). This critical distinction between person and behavior is discussed in more depth later. A more recent study confirms that SSA students believe religious institutions generally perceive them in a negative light and provide few resources to support them (Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse, & Lastoria, 2013). SSA students do not identify faculty and staff at CCCU institutions as a primary source of this negativity, rather it results from student behavior, particularly verbal comments (Yarhouse et al., 2009). The authors note, however, that these findings are similar to results at secular campuses. Derogatory remarks made by students rarely occur a faculty or staff member is present (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

More recently, Watson (2015) conducted an exploratory qualitative study of 15 SSA students and alumni from CCCU institutions who reported experiencing microaggression—subtle, unthinking actions that have the effect of putting down another—related to sexual orientation. This activity was also notably more prevalent among students than faculty or staff (Watson, 2015). She further found that environmental factors such as unspoken rules and attitudes, pressure to conform or change, and preferential view of heterosexuality contribute to these microaggressive actions.

Negative verbal comments and these microaggressive behaviors have a serious impact on SSA students. Sexual minority students at non-affirming religious institutions who experience bullying reported higher levels of depression (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016); this is particularly troubling in light of the fact that 37% of the students in this study reported bullying compared to 27% of all students nationally (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010, as cited in Wolff et al., 2016). In contrast, the Watson (2015) study of microaggressive behavior found that, while such behavior was present, bullying and physical aggression were the least mentioned type of experience.

Interestingly, sexual minorities who are evangelical or attend evangelical institutions do not report higher levels of depression and social anxiety than those at other religious institutions (Wolff et al., 2016). They posit that these students' religious beliefs are likely aligned with the institution and along with Yarhouse et al. (2009) suggest that "religion may offer a substantial amount of comfort and source of community to many sexual minority (SM) individuals who find incongruence with their sexual orientation and their faith" (Wolff et al., 2016, p. 209). Many students at CCCU institutions who experience SSA do not identify as gay or lesbian and indeed seem to appreciate the accountability they find in the religious environment (Yarhouse et al., 2009). In other words, for many of these students practicing a gay or lesbian lifestyle would be contrary to their values. The standards of behavior that are enforced help them to be accountable to their own belief system.

Perceptions of heterosexual students. A study at a private evangelical Christian university in California found that students held significantly negative views on issues related to issues such as same-sex marriage, adoption by gay parents, and similar items (Wolff, Himes, Miller Kwon, & Bollinger, 2012). It is important to note that although the analysis is relatively

recent, it is based on data collected more than a decade ago and is unlikely to reflect current attitudes accurately. A study comparing student views on homosexuality between those enrolled in a conservative Seventh-Day Adventist university to other private and public institutions found that students at the Adventist university had a much larger negative attitude (LaFave, Helm, & Gomez, 2014). The study found a strong correlation between religious fundamentalism and these attitudes. Similar to other studies (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007; Wolff et al., 2012), there was little gender difference in student perceptions of homosexuality.

There is strong evidence of a generational shift in attitudes, as there are marked differences between the views of evangelical Christian students and their older counterparts. A majority of young evangelicals favor some legal recognition for same-sex couples, 24% favoring marriage and 32% civil unions, while only 10% of older evangelicals favor same-sex marriage (Chamberlain, 2009). In a study regarding denominational identity conducted at 16 CCCU institutions, 19% of students responded that their beliefs were more liberal than their institution's parent denomination, 56% were the same, and 16% held more conservative views (Davignon, Glanzer, & Rine, 2013). On the issue of premarital sex, 11% were more liberal, 71% the same, and 12% more conservative. There is, therefore, a higher degree of congruence between student and denomination on the question of premarital sex than on same-sex marriage. Attitudes of students at Christian universities toward same-sex marriage appear to be more closely tied to affective response (primarily emotions) than any other factor, including the official view of one's church (Wolff et al., 2012). The authors suggest that "moral intuitions" may be more important than religious dogma or biblical understanding (p. 216).

Perceptions of faculty and staff. Faculty at religious institutions are also not monolithic in their beliefs but are more likely than students to be accepting. Over one-third of faculty at

CCCU institutions believe gays and lesbians should be allowed membership in a Christian church, with one in five strongly agreeing (Joeckel & Chesnes, 2009). The same study also found that the majority were still opposed, with two in five strongly opposed. A study of faculty perceptions of denominational identity conducted at 37 CCCU institutions found that 25% had beliefs that were more liberal than their institution's parent denomination, 64% were the same, and 9% more conservative (Rine et al., 2013).

In her research on student affairs professionals, Scibetta (2016) found that participants struggled to balance their institution's position on homosexuality with their desire to develop positive relationships with LGBTQ students. Some staff felt isolated and unsafe due to opinions that differed from the official institutional position. These studies suggest that although the majority of faculty and staff hold similar or more conservative views on homosexuality than the affiliated denomination, there is a significant minority who are more open.

Person-Behavior Distinction

As noted earlier, the Yarhouse et al. (2009) study found that although 96% of SSA students at CCCU institutions perceived the campus view on homosexual *behavior* to be negative, 84% percent perceived the campus view on *homosexuality* to be negative. This highlights what is known as the person-behavior distinction. There is a differentiation between the individual and the actions of that individual. This has often been oversimplified as "love the sinner, hate the sin." An analysis of various studies of students at evangelical universities also found that students make distinctions between celibate and sexually active lesbians and gays (Wolff et al., 2012). The authors argue this demonstrates higher levels of tolerance for those who experience SSA as distinct from those who identify as gay or lesbian.

The person-behavior distinction is sometimes explicitly defined by denominations, creating a situation in which one's identity as a gay or lesbian is accepted although homosexual acts are condemned. Universities affiliated with such denominations are likely to reflect similar values (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). Results from the Rosik et al. (2007) study confirm that sexual behavior is more relevant than sexual orientation, with some students capable of making "a meaningful distinction between the value of homosexual persons and the value of their sexual behavior" (p.16). Students at religious universities who experience SSA also make a distinction between identity and behavior. Although acknowledging their attraction to members of the same sex, they see chastity as something that is achievable (Stratton et al., 2013).

Knowing a person. A phenomenon related to the person-behavior distinction is the effect of having personal knowledge of someone who is gay or lesbian: This relationship has an ameliorating effect on negative attitudes towards homosexuality. While 84% of SSA students at CCCU institutions perceived the campus view of homosexuality as negative, 74% indicated that the campus view of someone who identified as homosexual was negative (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Confirming this finding, the Wolff et al. (2012) study of students at an evangelical university found that students who had a gay or lesbian relative, friend, or other social contact had more positive attitudes towards issues like same-sex marriage. However, because students at Christian universities often come from religious backgrounds and denominations with conservative views, they are less likely to know an openly gay or lesbian individual (Wolff et al., 2012).

This may be changing as gay and lesbian students at Christian universities have open conversations on their campuses. More than half of the sexual minority students in a recent study reported having a conversation about their sexuality with a faculty member or classmate, with more than two-thirds speaking with a roommate (Wolff et al., 2016). The participants in

Watson's (2015) study describe "pockets of safety," referring to trustworthy faculty, staff, and students who encouraged and accepted them. When it comes to dealing with an actual person rather than an abstract idea, individuals appear less likely to hold to a negative view.

Religious and Sexual Identities

The development of one's sexual identity does not happen in a moment of time or in isolation but over time and within a sociocultural framework (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Late adolescence and early adulthood, the time of life for a traditional college student, is a critical time in the formation of that identity. A study at one Christian university found that students' views on sexuality changed through their college experience (Williams et al., 2013). The study found significant differences between the views of freshmen and seniors, with 80% of the freshmen embracing abstinence prior to marriage compared to 48% of seniors. Although this study focused on sexuality in general rather than same-sex relationships, the authors claim that "there is a transition that occurs between what [students] personally believe rather than what they have been taught to believe" (p. 555). It is reasonable to conclude that this transition occurs for students who experience SSA as well as for students who are attracted to the opposite sex.

The development of sexual identity is paralleled with religious identity, particularly for students who choose a religious institution. A study of over 2,300 students at 19 Christian universities found that "sexual minorities on Christian campuses are a unique blend of persons for whom sexuality and religiosity/spirituality are two very prominent interacting and multi-level variables" (Stratton et al., 2013, p. 4). In interviews with gay and lesbian students at Christian universities, Wentz and Wessel (2011) discovered the students had no expectation they would claim that identity when they first enrolled. Instead they came to understand that identity during their time at college. These students all came from Christian backgrounds and their religious

identity developed alongside their sexual identity. Although the development process for sexual identity and religious identity is concurrent, they are “complex but apparently separate constructs” (Stratton et al., 2013, p. 18).

Most of the students at CCCU institutions who experience SSA value “conventional religious teaching on sexuality and sexual behavior” (Yarhouse et al., 2009, p. 111). These students do not want to abandon their religious identity to pursue an identity as a sexual minority. Students at religious institutions who experience SSA rarely publicly identify as homosexual, although some do privately (Stratton et al., 2013). The authors also note that these students rarely engage in same-sex behavior or have same-sex relationships and do not perceive themselves as gay in spite of their same-sex attraction. They go on to observe, however, that students with higher levels of SSA are significantly less conservative and generally have lower levels of intrinsic religiosity (Stratton et al., 2013).

Students at secular institutions are encouraged to explore their identity as sexual beings, which is in opposition to CCCU institutions that explicitly prohibit homosexual behavior (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). However, that prohibition may actually benefit some SSA students at Christian universities who are described as “sincere strugglers,” descriptive of those who hold conservative views, but struggle to hold to those views in practice (Stratton et al., 2013).

Institutional Tensions

As discussed, the views of students, faculty, and staff are not always aligned with that of the institution. The views of each constituent group shape an institution, in addition to its official position. Individual perspectives on homosexuality, therefore, strongly influence the overall climate. Bryant and Craft (2010) suggest that “individual versions of Christianity” (p. 417) lead some to advocate for inclusionary practices, while others hold to the position that homosexuality

is sinful. Claiming there is often a tension between institutional and individual worldviews, Joeckel and Chesnes (2009) argue that “political and theological homogeneity” at CCCU institutions “pressures into silence those who do not tow the institution’s party line” (p. 123). Some student affairs professionals report their belief that their universities silence attempts to offer an alternative approach to issues of human sexuality (Scibetta, 2016).

One approach to navigating these tensions is compromise. A study of three liberal arts colleges, two Roman Catholic and one mainstream Protestant, found that those attempting to form gay-straight alliances were more successful when they worked “*with* rather than *against* the religious values” of the institution (McEntarfer, 2011, p. 317, emphasis in original). However, these alliances had to accept restrictions, primarily related to public expression, imposed by administrators.

Religious universities also face a challenge with their religious identity. They seek to balance student needs with the often strong views of denominational stakeholders (Watson, 2015). These views represent the historic attitude prevalent in CCCU institutions regarding homosexuality, but on the other hand “American higher education’s commitment to holistic growth and development” (Wentz & Wessel, 2011, p. 2) creates a very real challenge for those with responsibility for student development. When an employee’s personal beliefs are at odds with the institution this can also be a source of tension. In a recent study, this disconnect was so great for some mid-career student affairs professionals that it “brought into question their own Christian identity” (Scibetta, 2016, p. 117).

The increasing emphasis on the importance of diversity creates another tension. A number of religious universities do not include sexual orientation or religious beliefs in their definition of diversity (Pérez, 2013). Students at some religious institutions argue that if

institutions want to increase diversity they cannot limit it to discussions of race and ethnicity (McEntarfer, 2011). Diversity for many students is more broadly defined.

Summary: Christian Universities and Sexual Orientation

The challenge for Christian universities is to create an environment where SSA students are welcomed but where moral codes regarding homosexual behavior are enforced (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Stratton et al. (2013) contend that Christian universities can preserve their religious beliefs while providing a supportive environment for students who are still developing their sexual identity. However, their ability to provide a supportive environment is hampered by the prevailing negative climate towards homosexuality (LaFave et al., 2014; Stratton et al., 2013; Watson, 2015; Wolff et al., 2012; Wolff et al., 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009). This negativity manifests itself primarily in the form of verbal (Yarhouse et al., 2009) and nonverbal microaggressive behaviors (Watson, 2015) and is associated with somewhat higher incidents of bullying than at other universities (Wolff et al., 2016). The literature does not suggest that physical aggression towards gay and lesbian students is prevalent at religious universities, despite this prevalent negative climate.

Negative attitudes at religious universities show little gender difference (LaFave et al., 2014; Rosik et al., 2007; Wolff et al., 2012) in contrast to national studies where men are generally more negative than women (Eagly, Diekman, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Koenig, 2004). Given the lack of gender difference in negativity, as well as a lack of racial difference (Wolff et al., 2012), it is evident other factors are involved. The source of this negativity seems to primarily derive from religious beliefs regarding homosexuality, particularly homosexual behavior (LaFave et al., 2014; Yarhouse et al., 2009) as well as what Wolff et al. (2012) describe

as “moral intuitions” (p. 216). Of course, negative attitudes towards homosexuality are also found at secular universities (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Those contributing to a negative environment are primarily other students, not faculty and staff (Watson, 2015; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Indeed, one in four faculty in the CCCU hold a more liberal view of same-sex marriage than their university’s parent denomination, reflecting substantial variance in personal beliefs (Rine et al., 2013). These conflicting attitudes are confirmed by Joeckel and Chesnes (2009) who found that although one-third of faculty at CCCU institutions approve practicing gays and lesbians becoming members of a Christian church, the majority remain opposed, with 40% strongly opposed. The question Joeckel and Chesnes (2009) asked was related to *practicing* homosexuals, and given the distinction many CCCU institutions make between person and behavior (Wentz & Wessel, 2011), it is highly likely that there would be much more openness to individuals who *identify* as gay or lesbian becoming members of a church.

Religious universities, along with their faculty and students, make clear distinctions between identifying as gay or lesbian and practicing a homosexual lifestyle (Wolff et al., 2012; Yarhouse et al., 2009). This emerges in a striking way in the Yarhouse et al. (2009) study: Although 96% of SSA students at CCCU institutions viewed the campus attitude towards homosexual activity as negative, the percentage drops to 84% regarding homosexuality, and down to 74% when the question is about a person who identifies as homosexual. Becoming acquainted with a gay or lesbian results in a less negative attitude towards issues like same-sex marriage (Wolff et al., 2012). Although 74% is still a high percentage, as SSA students have conversations with faculty and campus peers (Watson, 2015; Wolff et al., 2016) that number seems poised to decline. But it is not an easy process: Students who develop relationships with a

gay or lesbian classmate have to reconcile their personal knowledge of that individual with beliefs they have developed over their lifetime. However, as these relationships develop, it can ease tensions and “create a more tolerant, respectful society among groups with differing opinions and beliefs” (Wolff et al., 2012, p. 220).

At the same time, it is important to remember that many SSA students at religious institutions hold the same religious beliefs towards homosexuality as their heterosexual peers (Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff et al., 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Stratton et al. (2013) argue that the traditional outsider view of sexual minority students at Christian colleges as “in denial, or terribly repressed” (p. 20) is incorrect. They suggest, rather, that these students are typically conservative, with values and beliefs that align with “the teachings and behavioral expectations at many Christian colleges” (p. 20). As Christian universities seek to support SSA students, they should not assume that incoming students have reached a stage in their personal development where they have reached a complete understanding of their sexual identity (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). They should also recognize that students who experience SSA are not necessarily the same as more outspoken gay and lesbian individuals who take on a more active advocacy role demanding change (Stratton et al., 2013). These students are not necessarily “advocating for doctrinal or policy change at faith-based institutions, but they do appear to need a place to make sense of a traditional Christian sexual ethic for their own lived experience” (Stratton et al., 2013, p. 21). Striking a balance between affirming denominational positions while supporting the individual student as they are dealing with these identity issues remains a major challenge for Christian universities.

Religious institutions may do a good job articulating their position and policy but are sometimes unclear on application, creating uncertainty for both students and employees

(Scibetta, 2016). Similarly, Watson (2015) observes that her “responders’ frequent lamentations about vague policies indicate that such ambiguities often create confusion and may even limit the resources available for students who experience same-sex attraction” (p. 97). This ambiguity highlights some of the tensions that exist between the official position of the church and individual views of students, faculty, and staff (Bryant & Craft, 2010; Joeckel & Chesnes, 2009).

Religious conservatives. Religious identity can also be a challenge for conservative students at more liberal institutions. A study at an ELCA institution revealed that conservative students felt targeted by the more liberal mainstream population on campus (Bryant & Craft, 2010). Although conservative students were seen as a source of divisiveness by many, in turn they perceived a disconnect between the liberal principles of tolerance and their experience of intolerance of their more conservative views. Evangelical students also feel uneasy at most secular institutions where the predominant culture is strikingly different from their conservative viewpoints (Bryant, 2005). This creates particular challenges with social integration, and conservative students need a place in which they too are comfortable.

As the perception on the morality of homosexual activity in society at large continues to shift, it is possible that religious conservatives may become the last group that holds consistent negative beliefs related to homosexual individuals (Rosik et al., 2007). Although advocates for the LGBT community may decry this stance, conservative Christian students, including those who experience SSA, desire to be part of a community that shares their religious convictions. It remains to be seen how long Christian universities can withstand the prevailing sociocultural shifts in order to provide that community.

The pressure to conform to widely accepted standards and beliefs can be difficult to resist. In the following strand, the effect of environmental pressure as a homogenizing force within higher education is explored.

Institutional Isomorphism and Higher Education

Institutional theory explains “the powerful capacity of the environment to promote the similarity of structures and practices across organizations” (Bastedo, 2007, p. 300). Higher education is an extremely institutionalized field (Milem, Berger, & Dey, 2000) in which universities must respond to external pressure to survive (Bastedo, 2007; Zha, 2009). This section examines the development of the theory and the role of institutional isomorphism within the organizational field of higher education with special attention to its three mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative forces—and their interactions. A dominant debate within institutional theory is whether external forces or organizational agency drive organizational behavior and decision making (Heugens & Lander, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). The strand therefore concludes with the role of agency relative to institutional isomorphism.

Development of Institutional Isomorphism Theory

Institutional isomorphism was developed within the context of new institutionalism, a branch of organization studies that recognizes that organizations are shaped, in part, by institutional forces and the “rules, beliefs, and conventions” of the wider social and political environment (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 975). Among the seminal scholars of new institutionalism are Meyer and Rowan (1977), who claimed that institutional rules function as myth in modern society as rational organizations become increasingly complex. Elaborate formal structures help organizations increase efficiency; when combined with increased conformity to myths this results in increased chance of survival. In an empirical study, Zucker (1977) argued

that once social knowledge is institutionalized, it is accepted as a fact that can be transmitted to others within the organization. She found that for cultural persistence the degree of institutionalization was directly related to: (a) the degree of generational uniformity as “facts” are transmitted from one generation to the next, (b) the degree of maintenance of the culture, and (c) the degree of resistance to cultural change. Powell and DiMaggio, the developers of institutional isomorphism theory, are also considered seminal scholars within new institutionalism, along with Scott (1987, 1995) and March and Olsen (1984).

DiMaggio and Powell wrote “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields” (1983) in response to the argument of early sociologist Max Weber that bureaucracy was the manifestation of the rationalist spirit which had become an “iron cage” for humanity. They do not take exception to Weber’s concept but argue that his position that the competitive marketplace is its primary cause is no longer valid. They suggest that as organizational fields emerge and become structured the result is homogenization of the institutions within a field (citing Giddens, 1979). An organizational field is defined as a group of organizations in a recognized area that are: (a) connected, whether formally or informally, and (b) structurally equivalent, that is, have a similar position in a network. It includes all the institutions that make up an organization’s environment, including competitors, suppliers, consumers, and regulators. As organizations are structured into a field through competition, the state, and the professions, forces emerge which cause homogenization within that field.

The authors describe this homogenization process as isomorphism, in which organizations that share an environment are constrained to resemble one another. They posit two distinct forms of isomorphism, competitive and institutional, and argue the first, developed by

Hannan and Freeman (1977), is relevant in open and competitive markets. The institutional form is relevant when organizations are also competing for “political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p. 150). The authors note that the value of the theory is tied to its predictive utility. They offer 12 hypotheses for empirical testing, divided into organizational-level predictors and field-level predictors. Within each level the first two hypotheses are linked to coercive isomorphism, the second pair to mimetic, and last pair to normative (see Appendix A for a full list of the hypotheses).

Counterarguments. The authors note the typology is analytic in nature and there could be overlap from an empirical perspective (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Other challenges include difficulty in separating institutional and competitive isomorphism, both conceptually and empirically, and overemphasizing environmental influence at the expense of organizational agency (Karlsson, 2008). Mizruchi and Fein (1999) conducted an in-depth review of 26 articles from journals in sociology and organizational studies in which the theory was applied. They found a strong tendency amongst researchers to give disproportionate weight to mimetic pressure, when the other pressures may have offered a viable alternative. Acknowledging that no theory is perfect, it is helpful to view these counterargument as warnings rather than refutations. It is important to be aware of the potential overlap of the categories and of internal factors that may emerge in addition to environmental factors. Similarly, no assumptions should be made that mimetic forces are more apt to be involved than others; indeed, the following analysis of contemporary scholarship demonstrates that sometimes one factor emerges as more powerful than another.

Institutional isomorphism is distinct from competitive isomorphism, which is found in organizational fields when there is an open and competitive market (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Competitive isomorphism is increasing within U.S. higher education as institutions determine the best way to respond to competing external demands (Scott & Biag, 2016). It is often difficult to distinguish between competitive and institutional isomorphism (Heugens & Lander, 2009). For example, universities may mimic other successful institutions not only to seek legitimacy but also to acquire market advantage (Gardner & Veliz, 2014). The focus of this section is on the institutional form of isomorphism in which organizations seek legitimacy; however, it is important to bear in mind that competitive forces concomitantly generate isomorphic pressure.

The Search for Legitimacy

Institutional isomorphism recognizes that institutions compete “for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Universities are pressured to conform to models accepted as legitimate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Biag, 2016). A meta-analysis of quantitative studies found strong evidence that isomorphism has a legitimizing effect (Heugens & Lander, 2009). Norms govern what is considered acceptable (Blanco Ramírez, 2015), and as universities seek legitimacy, they often rely on symbolic compliance with norms as they respond to multiple environments (Bastedo, 2007). Universities use artifacts like mission statements as symbols to demonstrate to accreditors and others that they understand the rules and traditions (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Ward, 2015). Institutions dependent on external organizations create structural components to ceremonially recognize the exchange relationship (Tolbert, 1985).

Ironically, universities already perceived as highly legitimate are shielded from the isomorphic forces of the market as Hearn and Belasco (2015) demonstrated in their study of the decline of humanities degrees. They found that older and more selective colleges were less likely to experience a decline. This is in decided contrast to many tuition-dependent baccalaureate

colleges who have experienced mission creep and become comprehensive universities (Jaquette, 2013). Such institutions seek legitimacy by changing from a college to a university in “an attempt to gain prestige” (Morphew, 2002, p. 221); colleges already seen as prestigious did not need to adopt the symbolic title of university.

Others within the broader organizational field experience similar pressure. Professional associations face pressure to conform as research and scholarship agendas are strictly defined by editors and others who determine what is legitimate (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). Faculty face normative pressure from their professional associations as they conform to disciplinary expectations, strive for higher status, and seek promotion and tenure (Gardner & Veliz, 2014; Gonzales, 2013; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007; Tuttle & Dillard, 2007).

The perception of legitimacy is important, as it helps to limit the involvement of external organizations in internal decision-making (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988). Universities must guard, however, against making purely symbolic gestures in an attempt to thwart external pressure; this will likely lead to a lack of trust on the part of institutional constituents (Stensaker & Norgård, 2001). Attempts to demonstrate legitimacy can prevent institutions from highlighting their distinctive nature, keeping them bound by tradition (Blanco Ramírez, 2015; Ward, 2015).

Types of Environmental Pressure

As they seek legitimacy for their universities, leaders make strategic decisions regarding the direction of their institutions, and environmental pressure plays a major role in how those decisions are made (Bastedo, 2007). The state appears to be the strongest source of pressure, and institutions that depend on governmental resources are likely to comply with their standards (Verbruggen, Christiaens, & Milis, 2010). Pressure also comes from elsewhere within the field. One form of pressure in recent decades comes from external rankings, such as those created by

U.S. News and World Report, which affect the perspectives of those within higher education. A study found that the *U.S. News* rankings had a major effect on future peer assessment scores provided by senior administrators (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). As the rankings become more widely accepted, they create a sense of legitimacy for colleges and universities and promote homogenization (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Blanco Ramírez, 2015; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011). For example, some institutions may change their criteria for tenure and promotion to align with external expectations as they seek to climb in various rankings (Gardner & Veliz, 2014).

Accrediting and other formal agencies within the field of higher education create legitimacy as they verify an institution's quality and are a major source of external pressure (Blanco Ramírez, 2015; Dattey, Westerheijden, & Hofman, 2014; Gonzales, 2013; Morpew & Hartley, 2006; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011). They are a substantial source of coercive and normative pressure (Krücken, 2007; Morpew & Hartley, 2006; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). As accreditors seek evidence that institutions are legitimate, Webber (2011) suggests they are likely to accept practices that are visible across many institutions. Specialized accreditors can strongly influence faculty who acquire personal prestige as their program is accredited and its legitimacy made visible (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007).

Other pressures come from political actors and economic factors. Covaleski and Dirsmith (1988) argue that as powerful individuals and organizations force universities to comply with politically sanctioned processes, they reveal societal expectations in pursuit of their own self-interest. Economic factors impact tuition-dependent institutions as they seek to add popular programs (Jaquette, 2013) and otherwise mimic successful institutions in fiscal downturns (Gardner & Veliz, 2014).

Universities also display isomorphic tendencies in the research and scholarship agendas of their faculty (Milem et al., 2000). As faculty experience pressure to do more research, their disciplines also experience isomorphism as research agendas are set by editorial gatekeepers and others (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007).

The forces that shape the organizational field of higher education are not necessarily national or global in origin. Often organizations may be more responsive to their local or regional environments (Vaira, 2004; Zha, 2009). It is likely that community colleges, for example, are more strongly influenced by state than national government, so there may be less organizational diversity within a state. Regardless of their origin, the fundamental nature of the three isomorphic forces is the same.

The Three Mechanisms of Institutional Isomorphism

As noted earlier, Mizruchi and Fein (1999) were early critics of researchers' attempts to operationalize institutional isomorphism by treating the three forces as discrete variables. They demonstrated that researchers routinely categorized pressures as mimetic that could reasonably be classified as either coercive or normative. Several years later, Washington and Ventresca (2004) built on their work, suggesting that the three mechanisms be seen as "categories rather than variable indicators" (p. 83). For the purpose of this study, therefore, the three forces are treated as overlapping categories rather than distinct variables. After consideration of each mechanism separately, there is a brief discussion of the way in which they interact with and flow from one to another.

Coercive isomorphism. This mechanism is described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as "isomorphism that stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy" (p. 150) and the state is often cited as a primary force in national and global studies (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988;

Croucher & Woelert, 2015; Dattey et al., 2014; Heugens & Lander, 2009; Joo & Halx, 2011; Krücken, 2007; Liang, Saraf, Hu, & Xue, 2007; Tam & Hasmath, 2015; Vaira, 2004; Verbruggen et al., 2010). Because the state is often a major source of funding, government agencies wield considerable coercive power (Croucher & Woelert, 2015). The government both “sets the rules as well as controls important resource flows” (Verbruggen et al., 2010, p. 8). The state is an agent for homogenization as it enforces compliance with legislation and legal rulings (Dattey et al., 2014). The legal environment exerts coercive pressure as universities maintain symbolic compliance (Bastedo, 2007; Dattey et al., 2014). Even when judicial rulings do not bind institutions to a specific course of action they still influence internal discussion and policies (Lipson, 2007). By following government-established policies, universities gain legitimacy and keep governmental agencies from direct involvement in their internal affairs (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988).

In their meta-analysis, Heugens and Lander (2009) found that when organizations routinely interact with governmental agencies, as in higher education, they show higher levels of isomorphism. The implementation of a performance-based pay system in South Korean higher education, in spite of strong faculty resistance at both public and private universities, illustrates how pressure exerted by a central government can be “stronger than the pursuit of technical rationality and cultural resistance” (Joo & Halx, 2011, p. 294). In Germany, Krücken (2007) argues that the state was most important factor in the rapid transformation of higher education as a result of the Bologna process. National governments are also subject to isomorphic pressure at a global level and use policy initiatives to exert pressure on higher education in order to conform to global standards (Vaira, 2004). Although the U.S. Department of Education does not have the

same degree of centralized control found in most countries, its ability to regulate Title IV funding makes it a considerable source of coercive power.

Leaders responsible for ensuring institutional compliance are not always convinced the required changes are necessary. A study on how Enterprise Planning Resource (ERP) systems were assimilated within organizations found that although government coercion did not affect managers' beliefs, it did make them more active participants in the process (Liang et al., 2007). In other words, managers changed their behaviors but not their beliefs.

Accrediting agencies are frequently cited as sources of coercive isomorphism (Dattey et al., 2014; Krücken, 2007; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). In the German transformation following the Bologna process, Krücken (2007) found that although accreditors were a source of normative pressure, they were effectively a secondary regulator after the state. Faculty can feel especially powerless as they comply with accreditation standards (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). The rules governing tenure and promotion can also become a source of coercive pressure as higher levels of research and scholarship are rewarded (Milem et al., 2000; Tuttle & Dillard, 2007).

Mimetic isomorphism. This mechanism results “from standard responses to uncertainty” as institutions model themselves upon those seen as successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Universities situated in the lower and middle ranks imitate those at the top, as evinced by doctoral and comprehensive universities' faculty more intensive focus on scholarship, copying the research university model (Milem et al., 2000). Similarly, less selective colleges become universities at a higher rate than more selective institutions by adopting “the structures and practices of the dominant organizations in their field” (Morphew, 2002, p. 215). Even when it comes to efforts to brand a unique identity, universities emulate the practices of institutions seen

as successful (Blanco Ramírez, 2015). There are global effects as well, as Zha (2009) argues that research universities ranked highest globally are emulated as the successful archetype.

A case study at an institution seeking to raise its academic profile and position in external rankings found that faculty and administrators made choices to mimic research universities to gain prestige and access to increased funding (Gardner & Veliz, 2014). In a similar case study, a state college received a major gift and transformed into a university; administrators and faculty alike started to ask questions about what kind of institution they wanted to resemble (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). The university's college of business deliberately pursued specialized accreditation as a result of their comparison (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). Faculty at accredited institutions influence faculty at other institutions to copy their practices through their involvement in setting standards and creating culture and tradition (Dattey et al., 2014; Finch, Deephouse, O'Reilly, Massie, & Hillenbrand, 2015). Mimetic isomorphism is also seen as institutions and faculty search for "best practices" at other institutions within their disciplinary field (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007; Webber, 2011).

A study exploring the institutionalization of racial diversity initiatives found that university officers adjusted "their affirmative admissions policies and procedures in part by modeling them off of other comparable universities" (Lipson, 2007, p. 1009). In other cases mimicry is unconscious as individuals simply do things based on their own experiences, which Milem et al. (2000) describe as a "common mental model."

In religious higher education, Dosen (2012) argues that cultural slippage occurred as religious universities mimicked preeminent secular universities. In contrast, at religious NGOs in China headquartered in North America, institutions use mimetic isomorphism to retain their religious identity by exchanging staff across national boundaries and through denominational

oversight (Tam & Hasmath, 2015). These contrasts show that pressure to conform can come from opposing viewpoints.

Normative isomorphism. This third isomorphic mechanism is tied to professionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Once something is accepted as valid within a profession, normative pressure emerges (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). As normative pressure increases, van Vught (2008) argues that diversity within the system of higher education decreases. This is ironic, as universities are complicit in setting their own norms of what is acceptable or desirable (Blanco Ramírez, 2015). The field becomes bound by its own rules of what is considered legitimate.

Mission statements are a classic example of normative pressure within higher education: “They exist because they are expected to exist” (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 458). Although they are normative, institutions can use them to communicate messages, including what makes them distinctive (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Morphew & Huisman, 2002).

In their case study of the state college that transformed into a university, Rusch and Wilbur (2007) found that the normative culture of the specialized accrediting body was a powerful force. They further found that faculty were motivated to achieve accreditation to enhance their personal prestige, demonstrating how individual goals impact organizational decision-making. At an institution seeking to move up in the rankings, Gonzales (2013) found that faculty “consistently relied on the socially constructed norms and definitions used by agents and agencies that compose and organize the field of higher education” (p. 202). She further argues that legitimacy often is perceived in one specific way, and faculty who seek legitimacy faithfully shadow the norms and behaviors linked to aspirant institutions. At another institution seeking to raise its prestige, Gardner and Veliz (2014) found disciplinary differences to be important as some emphasized research more than teaching. However, they point out that the

emphasis on research seen in STEM fields eventually influenced expectations for scholarly output in other disciplines.

In addition, faculty are susceptible to normative pressure through group membership as they hire from within (Finch et al., 2015) and from their shared experiences in graduate school (Milem et al., 2000). Faculty as a body also “incorporate normatively-defined notions of what colleges and universities ‘should’ be” (Morphew, 2009, p. 261).

Professionalization is seen elsewhere in the university setting. As universities embrace diversity initiatives, for example, they hire administrators from other universities and their professional networks share information and programming ideas (Lipson, 2007). Those familiar with higher education know that virtually every administrative function has access to a professional network with its own values and norms. Examples include the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers, the Society for College and University Planning, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the Association of International Educators, the Association for Institutional Research, and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, to name just a few. Other organizations at the institutional level presumably have a normative influence, such as the American Council on Education, the Council of Independent Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and similar groups.

Overlapping mechanisms. Building on the work and suggestions of prior researchers (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; Tam & Hasmath, 2015; Washington & Ventresca, 2004), this study treats the three mechanisms as interactive analytical categories rather than discrete variables. Many of the studies already discussed confirm that the various categories overlap; in many instances, one mechanism leads to another over time. An exploration into a reduction in the

diversity of topics in accounting research found that scholars addressed topics that were frequently downloaded, a type of mimetic isomorphism (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). However, over time performance evaluations began to reward scholars based on the number of downloads, a type of coercive pressure, and as more and more institutions adopt the practice the authors argue it will become a normative force (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). Similarly, Halfman and Leydesdorff (2010) found homogenization in publication and research productivity amongst elite universities worldwide: There is coercive pressure to produce similar levels of output, and researchers engage in self-monitoring as they try to conform to global expectations. The transformation of German higher education as a result of the Bologna process provides another illustration of how normative and coercive powers work together. In this study, Krücken (2007) found that professors act as a normative influence upon accrediting bodies, which in turn exert coercive pressure on universities through regulations and standards.

In their study of religious NGOs in China, Tam and Hasmath (2015) found that as governmental rules tightened, NGOs mimicked successful organization's strategies, one of which was increasing professionalization. In this case the move was coercive to mimetic to normative. A study of Australian and British branch campuses located in Malaysia and Singapore found normative and coercive pressures working concurrently as they conformed to the expectations of the main campus while accommodating local cultural, commercial, and educational expectations (Shams & Huisman, 2014). A case study examining a thirty-year period at a Norwegian university shows how forces exert pressure concurrently (Stensaker & Norgård, 2001). The governance structure of the university faced coercive pressure as external political forces pushed for decentralization while faculty pushed for strong academic divisions. Over the years, the coercive forces initially dominated with a gradual shift to the normative pressure

exerted by faculty. A study on the impact of accreditation on public and private universities in Ghana revealed a particular challenge for private universities as accreditors assumed the public universities' norms were valid (Dattey et al., 2014). The private universities had to comply with legislation, follow norms established by public institutions, and were strongly influenced to emulate the public institutions.

A study of how faculty time allocation has shifted over 20 years revealed that advising and counseling students has remained relatively unchanged (Milem et al., 2000). The authors claim that faculty are influenced by other faculty, both as former students and current colleagues, and claim:

This has created common mental models that professors consciously or unconsciously mimic as taken-for-granted ways of doing things (an example of mimetic mechanisms). These observations have been reinforced by common patterns of normative socialization in graduate schools (an example of a normative mechanism) and by the nature of the academic reward system that focuses primarily on research and, to a lesser extent, teaching activities (an example of a regulative [coercive] mechanism). (p. 472)

This illustrates how forces interact with and build upon one another. After a state college became a university, Rusch and Wilbur (2007) found that mimetic and normative mechanisms were concomitant: Faculty and administrators considered what universities they wanted to resemble and administrators argued that universities, as opposed to colleges, held specialized accreditation. The school of business decided to pursue accreditation, and the primary mechanism shifted to coercive as they had to meet specific standards (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007).

The overlapping of the three mechanisms is seen outside higher education as well. As organizations assimilated an ERP system, Liang et al. (2007) suggest that the diffusion of best

practices through user groups and conferences (mimetic mechanism) led to effective training programs (normative). A study into how organizational practices become diffused globally found strong evidence of all three pressures from states and large corporations and through trading ties across countries (Guler, Guillén, & Macpherson, 2002)

Stensaker and Norgård's (2001) study at the Norwegian university also revealed that a once innovative university gradually shifted towards standardization in response to external pressure. This underscores the challenge many universities face as they seek to differentiate themselves despite the isomorphic tendencies of the higher educational field: Conform to be accepted as legitimate, differentiate to be competitive.

Divergence and Convergence

In order to survive, organizations must conform to social norms (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988), but Delmas and Toffel (2008) indicate that external pressure can sometimes cause heterogeneity within a field as institutions respond in different ways. The institutional theorists' debate about structure and agency is relevant here: Structuralists posit as organizations seek legitimacy they become homogeneous; advocates for agency argue that institutions can choose how to respond to pressure and that institutionalization can actually be a springboard for entrepreneurialism and nonconformity (Heugens & Lander, 2009). This tension is evident within higher education as universities balance the importance of legitimacy with a desire to appear unique.

The results of a study into university's branding efforts within an urban environment suggest that universities conform to the wider environment in order to seek legitimacy within their field, but also seek to differentiate themselves within the field (Blanco Ramírez, 2015).

Differentiation must then be accepted in order to be effective. Thus institutions may find it impossible to truly differentiate themselves (Blanco Ramírez, 2015).

For those engaged in research and scholarship, isomorphic forces appear to be particularly strong in standardizing productivity output and driving research agendas within disciplines (Halffman & Leydesdorff, 2010; Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). However, faculty emphasis on academic freedom and disciplinary differences can act as a counterweight to institutional pressures to conform (Joo & Halx, 2011).

When accreditors or other bodies establish standard qualifications for faculty this can contribute to homogenization (Skolnik, 2015). A study of how faculty are recruited to business schools did not find widespread convergence across all institutions, rather it identified convergence within groups: institutions with accredited programs, those with similar rankings, and so on (Finch et al., 2015). However, because the schools exist within a local and unique environment, divergent and innovative practices were found. Public and private institutions often differentiate themselves based on their dependence on various funding sources (Tolbert, 1985) and as they respond to globalization (Taylor & Cantwell, 2014). An analysis of over 300 mission statements from four-year colleges and universities showed that it is differences in values rather than in classification that define institutions (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

The need to survive is a key reason for convergence within higher education. Less selective baccalaureate colleges move from a liberal arts to a more comprehensive mission and become universities, Jaquette (2013) argues, in part because failure to do so leads to death. In his study, virtually all mostly or highly selective institutions, which are perceived as legitimate, survived without a change in mission. However, more than 75% of nonselective and over 50% of less selective colleges either converted to universities or ceased to exist between 1966 and 2010.

Universities are increasingly reliant on tuition revenue and therefore the “goal of serving a distinct mission is replaced by the goal of maximizing revenue” (Jaquette, 2013, p. 540). A related study into the trend of colleges becoming universities also found evidence of declining institutional diversity (Morphew, 2002). A subsequent large-scale study of trends in institutional diversity in U.S. higher education between 1972 and 2002 demonstrated that, despite dramatic changes in the higher education environment, there was no growth and arguably a decline in institutional diversity (Morphew, 2009). Yet despite this decline, Scott and Biag (2016) argue that higher education remains “a highly complex and differentiated field” (p. 26).

This ongoing struggle for differentiation highlights the importance of human agency. Although Scott and Biag (2016) acknowledge that isomorphic pressures within higher education are powerful, they argue there is a “widely shared belief in modern societies that organizations (including colleges) are constituted to be ‘rational actors’” (p. 38).

The Role of Agency

An early criticism of institutional theory is its assumption of a passive role on the part of institutions (Oliver, 1991). Although institutional isomorphism leads to increased legitimacy as institutions conform to norms (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988; Heugens & Lander, 2009), these external pressures can also create limits on an organization’s available choices (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007; Zha, 2009). Despite these limits, there is widespread agreement that strategic response to isomorphic pressure differs from institution to institution (Delmas & Toffel, 2008; Oliver, 1991; Scott & Biag, 2016; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Cantwell, 2014; Vaira, 2004; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011; Zha, 2009), emphasizing the impact of human agency.

Noting that most research within the school of institutional theory focuses on organizations, Wilkins and Huisman (2012) suggest studying the top decision makers because

they “process information in different ways and can therefore interpret environmental pressures in different ways” (p. 638). A study of organizational adoption of ERP systems found that top managers serve as a mediating influence as they were more likely to participate when strong external pressure was present, particularly coercive pressure (Liang et al., 2007). Even when coercive pressure is removed, managers may still be influenced by normative and mimetic pressure in their decision-making. Lipson (2007) interviewed over 40 campus officials at three schools from 1999-2004, more than 20 years after the *Univ. of California v. Bakke* (1978) decision, which upheld the legality of affirmative action policies but struck down race-based quotas. Although admission officials could have used the decision to eliminate affirmative policies at their institutions, Lipson found that mimetic and normative forces were involved as institutions continued to view such policies as part of a broader diversity initiative. However, he continues: “Affirmative action endures because it is useful for the managers rather than solely because it is morally or legally warranted to protect the rights of the recipients” (Lipson, 2007, p. 1021).

Within organizations different departments have varying degrees of influence, leading to diverse responses to external pressure (Delmas & Toffel, 2008). The type of institution may also play a role, as private universities appear able to make and act on strategic decisions more quickly than their public counterparts (Taylor & Cantwell, 2014). This may be a result of greater coercive forces at public institutions as they are more dependent on state government for funding. Universities, or their constituent parts, can also differ as some pursue a global or national agenda while others are more focused on local concerns (Zha, 2009).

Universities with a strong faculty culture often must find ways to compromise as administrators respond to environmental pressure (Morphew, 2009). However, the concept of

faculty self-governance seems to be morphing into a “more managerial model in which administrators exercise strategic control and increasingly respond to market forces” (Scott & Biag, 2016, p. 47). Therefore, there is a shift of control as different agents become the drivers for organizational change.

A number of scholars advocate the use of resource dependence theory along with institutional isomorphism (Oliver, 1991; Tolbert, 1985; van Vught, 2008; Verbruggen et al., 2010; Zha, 2009). One of the benefits is that it can help identify strategies organizations can pursue to resist conformity (Oliver, 1991). Oliver offers five broad strategies with associated tactics in response to institutional processes: Acquiesce, compromise, avoid, defy, and manipulate. The pursuit of specialized accreditation for a business school provides an example of acquiescence as faculty members complied with standards they did not believe in, simply because they felt there was no choice (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). Compromise is seen as faculty in international branch campuses maintained courses equivalent to those offered at the main campus, but modified to prevent accusations of westernization or attacking local beliefs (Shams & Huisman, 2014). Compromise is also evident in the study of religious NGOs in China whose home base is in North America. In that study Tam and Hasmath (2015) found that organizational leaders cooperated “with local agents, fostering trust with the local government, and keeping a low profile” (p. 290). Wilson and McKiernan (2011) advocate for an approach somewhere between defiance and manipulation. They suggest that professional associations and other institutions within higher education, previously agents of conformity, can be encouraged to act collectively to exert counter pressure on accreditors.

Advocates for agency argue that institutions choose how to respond to pressure, and institutionalism can become a springboard for entrepreneurialism or deliberate deviance in

response to that pressure (Heugens & Lander, 2009). Their interest in the pursuit of academic freedom and emphasis on disciplinary differences make faculty an important source of deviance within higher education (Joo & Halx, 2011).

Loomis and Rodriguez (2009) argue that as institutions determine where to allocate scarce resources there are two primary choices: quantity or quality. They claim that professional programs are especially susceptible to homogenizing forces as a university follows a technical production model as it competes for more students: leaders become managers and professors become interchangeable (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009). In contrast, institutions can pursue quality through, among other things, attracting students interested in learning rather than simply earning a degree, hiring and holding on to exemplary faculty, and creating an idea-production model (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009). They make one additional point: “No [high] quality university is tuition driven” (p. 488). As so many universities are tuition-driven (Jaquette, 2013), their choices may be limited as they seek survival and pursue legitimacy.

Higher education, religion, and agency. Special attention is given in this paragraph to Barret Taylor’s (2015) article, “Responses to Conflicting Field imperatives: Institutions and Agency Among Evangelical Christian Colleges.” Using a case study approach at three evangelical Christian colleges (ECC), Taylor argues that these institutions “sit at the juncture of the institutionalized fields of religion...and higher education” (p. 208). He claims that because ECCs require resources from both of these organizational fields they must maintain legitimacy in both. As the institutions face different, and sometimes conflicting, obligations from the two fields, the role of agency becomes critical. Human actors must find creative solutions to these conflicts as they comply with the normative structures of both higher education and religion. Taylor argues that these solutions must become institutionalized, otherwise the university will

spend too much time, energy, and other resources dealing with conflicts between the two fields. He writes that neo-institutional theory “predicts that a college whose officials develop and maintain a consistent solution to the problem of integration is relatively likely to prosper” (p. 220) and argues “decision-makers at ECCs that wish to remain active within both fields could pursue consistent and targeted strategies (rather than ‘scattershot’ approaches) as they seek new resources” (p. 220). Taylor’s findings also suggest that colleges respond to this type of between-field conflict by complying with the norms of the field providing the most resources. One additional implication is that “decision-makers at ECCs that are more deeply involved with one field than the other may find their operations and decisions drifting toward the norms of that field” (p. 220).

It seems evident that “a mix of macro social forces and individual or organizational agency influence the strategic decision-making of [higher education institutions]” (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012, p. 639). Therefore, although powerful isomorphic forces are visible within the organizational field of higher education, the role of human actors responding to these forces must be taken into consideration as well.

Summary: Institutional Isomorphism and Higher Education

The forces of institutional isomorphism are a strong presence within higher education as universities compete for legitimacy and status within their organizational field. University leaders face decision points as they respond to external pressure from a variety of actors, including the state, both local and national; accreditors, both institutional and specialized; professional associations; and society; and as they seek economic survival. The three isomorphic mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative—are all evident within higher education and interact with one another.

Coercive isomorphism is the dominant mechanism within the organizational field of higher education, primarily as a result of the state's control of resources and ability to regulate, and secondarily through accrediting agencies' role in verifying legitimacy. Universities comply, at least symbolically, with government regulations and legal rulings in part to prevent intrusion into their internal processes. This symbolic compliance does not indicate that human actors believe in the value of those regulations, merely that they recognize the necessity of complying. For religious institutions, coercive pressure also comes from the organizational field of religion, which, like higher education, is highly institutionalized.

The second isomorphic mechanism, mimetic, is also a powerful force within higher education as universities model themselves on their more successful counterparts. Universities do so in order to gain prestige and access to resources and also through a desire to conform to "best practices" within the field. This is especially the case within academic and administrative departments, as they too are searching for legitimacy. Mimetic isomorphism also occurs as those within the field simply repeat what they have seen and is often an unconscious rather than a deliberate response. For religious universities, copying the practices and adopting the ideology of secular institutions exacerbates the tension between the two organizational fields to which they belong.

Normative isomorphism within higher education is strongly evident as a result of the high levels of professionalization within the field. Faculty in particular exert normative pressure through their long-term involvement within the field, first as undergraduates, then as graduate students, and finally as colleagues. They face both personal and professional reasons to comply with the norms of their disciplines as they seek to gain prestige for their programs, thus validating their personal worth.

Finally, the review of the literature also shows the overlapping and concomitant effect of the three mechanisms. Various studies show that one mechanism can over time lead to another, as normative forces can become coercive, mimetic turn into normative, and so on. Therefore, viewing the three mechanisms as interactive analytical categories rather than discrete variables is a logical approach to their use in qualitative research.

As universities are shaped by external forces, the research shows that sometimes this pressure creates uniformity and sometimes variability within the field. Although the focus of this research is on isomorphic pressure, universities are also engaged in a continuous struggle to demonstrate how they differ from other players within the field. These differences are tied to values more than classification, although there are clear distinctions between public and private universities. For tuition-dependent universities in particular the need to find consistent sources of revenue acts as a homogenizing force as they focus on survival. Universities already perceived as highly legitimate and successful are somewhat shielded from isomorphic pressure; in fact, due to their status they act as a homogenizing force as other institutions mimic their practices and recruit their faculty and administrators. However, all universities face isomorphic pressure and, in their ongoing quest to achieve or retain legitimacy, institutional decision makers make strategic decisions that differ from institution to institution.

The role of human and organizational agency emerged as an important discussion within the literature. Although there is strong evidence supporting institutional isomorphism within higher education, the field is in many ways highly differentiated. Clearly rational actors, whether individuals or groups, within the field respond to pressure in different ways. However, as higher education moves toward more managerial models of governance, disciplinary distinctions and the pursuit of academic freedom are not as powerful in exerting anti-isomorphic force as in the

past. Nevertheless, agents within universities do have options as they respond to environmental pressure. Oliver's (1991) five strategies of acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation, provide a way to categorize such responses.

For Christian universities, the role of both agency and institutional isomorphism is complicated due to their position at the crossroads of higher education and religion. As Taylor (2015) notes, individuals within these institutions must find creative solutions as they attempt to retain legitimacy and acquire resources from both fields. Balancing the needs of religious and educational agencies, decision-makers must satisfy the demands of both while preserving their own unique identity.

Conclusion

Christian universities exist at the intersection of the church and higher education. Their search for legitimacy requires them to meet the expectations of both fields, including the demands of the state, accreditors, and other agents and agencies within higher education. The homogenization of Christian universities can be traced through the centuries as they have responded to shifts in societal values and norms. The majority of Christian universities elected to minimize rather emphasize their religious identity but some attempted to maintain a foothold in both the academic and religious worlds. The CCCU was organized to help protect their interests in a sociocultural environment increasingly opposed to conservative Christian beliefs. Recently, the issue of homosexuality has emerged as a major conflict for Christian universities, contributing to an already uncertain future.

As Christian universities seek to maintain a precarious balance, they struggle with their response to the issue of homosexuality, especially in light of the legalization of same-sex marriage. They are perceived by their own students to be a negative environment for those who

experience same sex attraction (SSA). There is a sharp distinction made, however, between homosexual identity and homosexual behavior. Many Christian universities seek to provide a welcoming and supporting environment for students who are still developing their religious and sexual identities even as their institutional policies prohibit homosexual activity. Many SSA students who are struggling in this formative process value the official teaching and behavioral expectations of the Christian universities in which they are enrolled. But other students—as well as administrators, faculty, and staff—are not monolithic in their beliefs and attitudes regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriage. There is often ambiguity between the official position of the church and these personal beliefs.

Institutional isomorphism is evident within higher education as institutions compete for legitimacy and resources. The state is a strong source of coercive pressure as universities comply with legislation and government regulations. Although coercive isomorphism is perhaps the strongest of the three mechanisms within higher education, both mimetic and normative forces are clearly evident as well. Christian universities, most of whom are tuition-dependent institutions highly reliant on access to public funding sources, receive decreasing direct support from the church. As a result, institutional theory predicts they are likely to move towards the norms of the field from where their support comes, in this case pushing them to resemble the rest of the field.

However, these Christian universities are composed of rational actors who make decisions based on their own worldview. As these agents respond to environmental pressure, they are aware their universities provide students an alternative in a field which has seen a marked decrease in institutional diversity over the last few decades. They want to provide a religious

community with shared values and beliefs to conservative students, including those who identify as SSA.

Christian universities provide an important alternative to secular higher education but face increasing pressure to conform to the organizational field of higher education. Their response to the cultural normalization of same-sex relationships is the fulcrum on which the future of Christian higher education is currently balanced. It is important to understand how decision makers at Christian universities perceive isomorphic forces relative to the issue of same-sex marriage and how they are considering their responses to that pressure. This study seeks to explore their perceptions and potential future actions.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Research generally falls into one of three broad worldviews: positivism/post-positivism, in which the researcher seeks to know an objective truth; constructivism-interpretivism, in which the researcher seeks to understand a subjective reality; and critical theory, in which the researcher attempts not only to understand a subjective reality, but to transform it (Ponterotto, 2005). Given its emphasis on statistical techniques and controlled experiments, all quantitative research is situated within the positivist/post-positivist worldview. Qualitative research, in contrast, is appropriate within all three camps.

This study was designed to use qualitative research methods, required when the focus of the research is to explore and understand an issue (Creswell, 2013). The research questions guiding the study are:

- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe isomorphic forces relative to their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their institution's response to these forces?

As seen in the research questions, the purpose of the study is to understand and explore, not to test or measure, and is therefore in the constructivist tradition. This view is characterized by its insistence that “objective reality can never be captured” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994a); there are multiple realities, each uniquely constructed by individuals who view things from their own perspective (Hatch, 2002). For constructivists, “reality is constructed by the actor (e.g., research participant)” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The goal is understanding rather than knowing, therefore the researcher's perspective “does not attempt to adjudicate between competing truth claims in

order to determine the one best answer; rather, interpretivism suggests that all one can do is accurately and thoroughly document the perspective being investigated” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). The researcher seeks to find meaning, and is more concerned with truthfulness than with truth itself, recognizing that truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

This search for meaning is constructed jointly by the researcher and the participants. Merriam (1991) notes: “The researcher, as the primary instrument for both data collection and data analysis, shares in the world of the researched and then interprets what he or she experienced there” (p. 49). Hermeneutic techniques are therefore often used to interpret the co-construction of the participant’s perception of reality (Hatch, 2002), and meaning is uncovered as the research and participant interact.

Using a constructivist approach, I acknowledge that I cannot be separated from my values but recognize the role those values play in my approach to the topic of study. Within the context of this study, a constructivist-interpretivist stance acknowledges that there are many ways to perceive external pressure and that my biases could hinder my ability to see how others perceive these forces. During the research process, I considered carefully how my own thoughts and feelings might be influencing my understanding of the participants’ reality as I interpreted their statements.

This study employs basic qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), techniques consistent with a constructivist approach. Data collected included both survey responses and interviews with presidents of universities maintaining membership in the CCCU.

Participants

The study relied on purposeful sampling: intentionally sampling “a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research about the research problem under examination” (Creswell, 2013, p. 147). This strategy led to the decision to question presidents at U.S. institutions that maintain full membership in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), a group that was both appropriate and adequate (Kuzel, 1999). However, as the number of member universities is relatively small, only 112, there was a very real possibility that not enough respondents would be available for an extended interview. There are many demands on a university president’s time, so a survey was sent to the entire population of CCCU presidents to maximize the number of responses. Each respondent was also invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to probe more deeply into the questions guiding the research.

There are three major limitations to the study as a result of the participant selection process. First, it focuses on the perspective of the individual presidents rather than multiple players within the institution. Although this allowed me to look at more institutions, the views expressed are more narrowly defined than in a multi-site case study, for example. Second, only those presidents who responded to the invitation are represented, so the data does not present a complete picture. This is a limitation which is, of course, true in most exploratory studies. Third, the study excludes Christian universities that are not members of the CCCU, and therefore cannot provide the full diversity of thought within the overall population.

Recruitment and Access

Participants were recruited through a two-step process. The CCCU maintains a public list of its member institutions, and site approval was not required as contact information for university presidents was readily available from their respective websites. The university where I

work maintains membership within the CCCU, and the president wrote on my behalf to his peers within the organization informing them of the study and including an invitation to participate in the process (see Appendix B). A second invitation was sent over the next few weeks to those who had not yet responded. Each president who completed the online survey was invited to participate in an interview. No incentives were offered to participate in the survey or subsequent interview.

The confidentiality of the research participants was maintained by replacing their name and institution from the survey responses and interview transcripts with a code. All names of individuals or institutions were replaced with pseudonyms in the interview transcripts and in this study. The code table used to connect institutions to survey responses and interviews was encrypted and stored on a flash drive separately from raw data.

The participants were all highly educated professionals, and the questions posed minimal risk. Each participant in the online survey received an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Those who agreed to an interview received a second consent form (see Appendix D). Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative studies should have a flexible structure in which a framework is established before data collection begins but adaptation can occur as circumstances demand (Hatch, 2002). The framework for this study was in two parts: an online survey and a more in-depth interview. The goal of the online survey (see Appendix E) was to capture information from as many institutions in the population as possible. The survey was designed with a tight focus and avoided ambiguous and leading questions (Davies, 2007). The goal was to evaluate whether Christian

universities are considering changes to their policies and to obtain their presidents' opinions on: (a) the effect of the *Obergefell* decision, (b) the likely institutional response to the decision, and (c) the primary sources of pressure to change or retain their current policies.

The survey was sent to 109 presidents at CCCU institutions, of whom 34 responded. At the end of the survey, presidents were invited to participate in a telephone interview of 30 minutes or more to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and 18 volunteered. Twelve interviews were ultimately scheduled, ranging from 22 to 39 minutes in length, as some participants extended the interview of their own volition. Participants were recruited until saturation, the point at which findings become redundant and no new knowledge is gained (Wertz, 2005). The conversations were recorded and transcribed after obtaining verbal consent.

The interviews were semi-structured; conversation was guided with some prepared questions yet remained open for the exploration of new and interesting concepts that emerged (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Hatch, 2002). This type of interview promotes genuine dialogue, according to Häggman-Laitila (1999), who argues that passive listening is not appropriate. Instead, she suggests that interviewers ask questions, clarify their positions, and even make objections in order to get to the root of the participant's experience while preventing misunderstandings. Working notes were taken during the interviews to remind me to return to major points during the interview (Seidman, 2006); they were also used to capture moments when participants stressed a concept or thought. These field notes, along with notes taken while reading the survey responses, contributed to the reflective process so critical within the constructivist tradition.

Because IRB approval was required before data collection could begin, the initial interview questions (see Appendix F) were developed before data from the online survey could

be reviewed. However, the interviews reflected the emergent process that characterizes qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, after an initial analysis of the survey responses the interview questions were refined and some were dropped and others added. As new ideas and themes continued to emerge during interviews, additional questions were framed.

Data storage. The data from the survey responses was deleted from the web hosting service after it was downloaded. All of the raw data, including the downloaded survey responses, notes, audio recordings, and transcripts were encrypted and stored on a notebook computer. The code table was encrypted and stored on a flash drive separately from raw data. The transcription was done by a third-party service whose transcribers are required to sign non-disclosure agreements. All of the transmission of the audio recordings and transcripts was done using 128-bit SSL encryption, the highest level of encryption available to the general public.

Audio recordings and the code table will be destroyed after successful defense of the dissertation or within five years, whichever is earlier. The coded transcripts and survey responses will be retained indefinitely for future data analysis with all identifying information removed. Consent forms were signed electronically when participants read the informed consent form on the initial questionnaire and agree to proceed with the research.

Data Analysis

Gathering the sample, collecting data, and analyzing data are concurrent and interactive in qualitative research (Davies, 2007). Initial review of the data from the survey responses affected the interview questions, and preliminary analysis of the interview responses continued to shape later interviews. After data collection was finalized, all of the data was analyzed in a search for meaning.

In qualitative research, Hatch (2002) argues that “the only way to understand the data analysis process is to do it” (p. 54). Although there is truth to this statement, he and many others provide guidance as to various ways to approach the analytical process. In psychological research, Giorgi and Giorgi’s (2003) four-step approach is frequently used (Wertz, 2005). First, the researcher begins by looking holistically, seeking to make sense of the whole experience rather than discrete elements. The second step, Giorgi and Giorgi continue, is to transform the everyday units of meaning provided by the participant into units of meaning. They caution that the researcher should avoid the use of jargon and labeling. These units are then transformed through the use of imaginative variation, using one’s imagination to seek possible explanations, to draw attention to the meanings lived out by the participant; it requires the researcher to transform implicit factors into explicit (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Finally, they suggest the researcher create a general structure to describe what is essential about similar types of experiences. Put more simply, the researcher is moving from the direct statements to the underlying structure (Willig, 2007). This four-step process can be applied in other disciplines.

The general process described by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) was used in this study. After reviewing the data holistically, it was necessary to organize the data to determine the units of meaning. There are three styles of organizing data suggested by Miller and Crabtree (1999): template, in which the researcher determines codes prior to analyzing data although the codes are open to revision; editing, in which the researcher creates the codes while interacting with the text; and immersion/crystallization, in which the researcher’s intuition is paramount—the researcher is immersed in the text for an extended period and interpretations are crystallized. This study incorporated both the template and editing styles to analyze the text, which use deductive and inductive reasoning respectively. Huberman and Miles (1994) agree that both

deductive and inductive reasoning are “legitimate and useful paths” (p. 431) to determine analytic categories.

Inductive analysis. Due to the short responses and reliance on lists of choices in the online survey, the editing style was employed only for two open-ended question. The style was used extensively to analyze the interviews, however, as inductive techniques were applied to the text to look for emerging themes. After finalizing the transcripts and developing some initial impressions, I waited several days to review the text with an open mind. I coded the data using a two-stage process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The first cycle consisted of a combination of in-vivo and holistic coding. In-vivo coding simply refers to highlighting specific words and phrases used by the participants, while holistic coding is a concise summary of a section of text. Because this cycle occurred after reading the transcripts and listening to the interviews multiple times, a number of the participant’s words, phrases, and concepts readily emerged, aligning with the in-vivo approach. Holistic codes were used to capture large segments of text with a word or short phrase. After creating this initial set of codes, the transcripts were reviewed and several previously non-coded segments were assigned relevant codes.

The second cycle consisted of creating meta-codes to group the in-vivo and holistic codes into emergent themes (Miles et al., 2014). During this process the data was condensed from over 80 codes into smaller categories. After additional review, some categories were eliminated and the remaining codes were further condensed into broad themes. Findings were culled from a close analysis of and reflection on these themes.

Deductive analysis. In addition to the inductive approach of the editing style, the template style was employed and codes related to institutional isomorphism and agency were applied using deductive logic. These codes were predetermined and aligned with DiMaggio and

Powell's (1983) theory of the various pressures that influence organizations and with Oliver's (1991) typology of strategic responses to institutional pressures. These codes were used extensively in the analysis of the interviews.

Validity and Credibility

The research was designed to be descriptive and exploratory and did not seek to prove causality or anything else. That does not mean that questions of internal validity are not important. Trustworthiness and authenticity are highly valued qualities in research conducted in the constructivist tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b). This study does not claim to represent the perspectives of all Christian universities, or even to fully capture the views of the participants in this study. Rather, the goal was "to open a small window to what is going on" (Malterud, 1999, p. 329) and provide a glimpse into how some presidents at Christian universities are thinking about and responding to the issue of same-sex marriage and the environmental pressures they face.

Triangulation, using multiple methods of inquiry to increase validity (Creswell, 2013; Davies, 2007), is an important technique in qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994a), "qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand" (p. 2). In this study, triangulation was achieved through the use of both an online survey and interviews. Additional strategies for validation suggested by Creswell (2013) were also employed: the use of rich, thick description in reporting findings; peer review; declaration of possible bias; and, most importantly, member checking. Rich, thick description required the use of direct quotations, which demonstrate the participants' commitment, passion, or other emotions that illuminate a phenomenon (Willig, 2007). The results of the inductive analysis were sent to a peer reviewer who has expertise in

qualitative methods. He provided confirmation of the general coding schema, gave constructive feedback, and asked questions that helped to shape the organization of the findings. To ensure the interview data were correct, the transcripts were sent to all twelve participants, nine of whom responded to verify accuracy; several made minor corrections or contributed additional information.

Researcher positionality. I have worked exclusively at religiously affiliated universities for over two decades: 17 years at a church-affiliated college associated with the United Methodist Church and almost eight years at a Christian university affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene. The church-affiliated college's relationship to the United Methodist Church is about heritage rather than commitment to the religious beliefs of the denomination, which has virtually no influence over the internal governance of the university. By contrast, the Nazarene university has close ties to the denomination, which is part of a larger group of religious traditions considered conservative Protestants (Keiser, 2008). Within the Church of the Nazarene, any sexual relationship outside of a heterosexual marriage is considered immoral, including homosexuality, pre-marital sex, and adultery (Church of the Nazarene, 2013). The direct impact Supreme Court rulings could have on my employer is one of my primary motivations for researching this topic. It is possible that the university as it is currently constructed will not exist in the same form as it does today.

In many studies in educational research, the demographic characteristics of the researcher are likely to present potential for bias. It is, of course, impossible for our gender, race, and other personal factors not to affect the way we perceive the world. In my study, however, I believe the fact that I am a White, middle class male was unlikely to be a significant source of bias, as my focus is on institutions rather than individuals. These characteristics, however, certainly affected

how I related to my research subjects and made sense of their comments. I was brought up in a conservative Protestant tradition and consider myself an evangelical Christian. My faith is an integral part of my identity and plays a major role in the way I view and relate to my family, my friends, and the wider community. Given the intolerance of both conservatives and liberals when they feel threatened by those with opposing viewpoints (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014), I sought to guard against the potential for my own intolerance. I also endeavored to present my findings in a way not perceived as threatening to those with a more liberal ideology.

My personal views on questions of religion, morality, and values are closely aligned with those of the evangelical Nazarene university where I work. They are based on a worldview that is faith-based and Christ-centered, and are no doubt in line with my participants who are also from conservative Protestant institutions, making me an insider. Therefore, there is minimal risk that I misrepresented the *other* (Briscoe, 2005) when it comes to my participants. There is a danger, however, that because I share similar religious beliefs with my participants, I did not identify flaws or inconsistencies in perspectives with which I am predisposed to agree. Indeed, a post-positivist might argue that since I was more of an insider than an outsider I could not retain objectivity (Chavez, 2008). Contrastingly, Chavez goes on to describe several benefits to insider status, including more access to and familiarity with subjects as well as immediate legitimacy. She cautions, however, that it is necessary for the insider to engage in critical self-reflection. Because we all have differences, identifying too closely with subjects may have caused me to miss ways in which I am unlike them and therefore misinterpreted their words or non-verbal cues.

It was essential to hear my participants' views and responses objectively and to avoid value judgments on their positions. Through regular and careful review of my notes and

obtaining critical feedback from external readers, I sought to reflect their views accurately as I explored my research questions.

Member checking. Within a constructivist framework, research participants should be more than sources of data, and are minimally provided an opportunity to review and offer feedback on research findings (Hatch, 2002). To establish credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that member checking is “the most critical technique” (p. 314). The preliminary findings from both the survey and the interviews were therefore sent to the twelve interviewees to ensure that their views were represented fairly, that their identity was protected, and to solicit any additional comments. Six responded to verify they were presented fairly, and several also requested a minor change to preserve confidentiality or provided clarification or expansion of their comments.

Summary

This research study utilized basic qualitative research techniques within a constructivist tradition to explore the perceptions of presidents at Christian universities relative to same-sex marriage. Purposeful sampling was used, and the research participants were recruited from the 112 universities that maintain full membership in the CCCU. Data collected included 34 survey responses. Upon completing the survey, 18 presidents volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews and 12 interviews were conducted. All data were encrypted and stored electronically, and procedures were in place to assure the confidentiality of the participants’ responses.

Data were analyzed using both inductive and deductive methods, and the analysis itself was iterative and ongoing throughout the process. The findings were determined after much reflection upon and careful consideration of the data. Due to the qualitative nature of the study,

trustworthiness is essential and was achieved through triangulation; acknowledgment of bias; peer review; the use of thick, rich description; and member checking. As a result, the following findings are a credible reflection of the views of the respondents. The findings provide insight into how presidents at Christian universities are thinking about the issue of same-sex marriage and the long-term implications of the *Obergefell* decision.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative study explores how isomorphic forces are interacting and shaping perspectives at Christian universities subsequent to the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage. Policies related to sexual orientation serve as the focal point for the research, which is guided by the following questions:

- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe isomorphic forces relative to their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their institution's response to these forces?

At the time of data collection in early 2017, there were 112 members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) located in the United States. My home institution was excluded from the study, as well as two other institutions for whom the president's contact information was not readily available. The remaining 109 institutions are located in 33 states. Thirty-four individuals from 23 states responded to the online survey, of whom 12, representing ten states, were interviewed. Table 4.1 shows the response for the online survey and the interviews by geographic region.

Table 4.1

CCCU Institutions Contacted, by U.S. Census Region

Region	# Institutions	# Completing Survey	# Interviewed
Northeast	9	1	0
South	41	12	4
Midwest	34	12	5
West	25	9	3
Total	109	34	12

Eleven of the respondents were presidents; at one institution, the president asked his vice president of student development to participate. For simplicity, the respondents are referred to as presidents throughout.

Response to Survey Questions

Data collection began with an online survey, which was administered for two primary reasons. The first was as a recruiting tool to engage presidents with the research questions and consider an eventual interview. It was highly successful in this regard, as 12 of 34 survey respondents were interviewed. The second goal was triangulation, that is, to provide a multiple measures approach to validate interview responses. This goal was also achieved, as both data sources are aligned.

Two of the respondents, who were also interviewed, described their policies as passively inclusive. These institutions have no explicit policy regarding same-sex behavior, and their position is discussed in more detail below. The rest of this section describes findings from the remaining 32 online surveys. Only one institution is currently considering changing its policies regarding same-sex behavior, and any change would be limited to students, not employees. When asked if the Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage would eventually result in a need to choose between changing policy or losing federal and state benefits, 35% indicate it would. However, when asked how long it would be before their institution would face such a decision, almost 85% indicated it would be within the next five to ten years. This suggests that participants expect to confront a major decision in the next decade, but are not necessarily drawing a straight line from the *Obergefell* decision. No one believes such a choice will come in the next two years, likely a result of the “breathing room” provided by the recent presidential election. Of the four who selected “Never,” only one provided a rationale; an analysis of their

responses to other questions suggests that at least two seem to be saying that “Never” means they will never change as opposed to believing such a choice will never come.

Table 4.2

How Long Before a Choice Between Changing Policies or Losing Tax-Exempt Status/Title IV?

Time to Choice	Frequency
Less than two years	0
Within five years	13
Within ten years	14
More than ten years	1
Never	4

Asked what their response to such a choice is likely to be, only two indicate they would expect to change while another two noted a need for additional discussion and evaluation. The majority, 75%, indicated they would mount or join a legal challenge, with the remaining four stating they would relinquish tax-exempt status and/or Title IV eligibility if necessary. In interviews, respondents from this last group indicate that they likely would also join a legal challenge as a first step. All of these responses are in line with the data collected in interviews, although the interviews show a more nuanced view than the single choice response the survey offered. One president, for example, indicated his institution would join a legal challenge in the survey but in the interview said it would likely change its policies if a challenge was unsuccessful.

Analysis of Open-ended Questions from Survey

When prompted to identify the primary source(s) of pressure to change or retain policies and practices for employees and students involved in same-sex relationships, respondents identify more pressure points to change than to retain their policies. There are three categories related to retention of existing policies: board of trustees, denominational affiliation, and external

supporters such as alumni and donors. Respondents reference these categories only 11 times, and sometimes characterize it as support rather than pressure. In contrast, there were 46 references related to pressure to change policies, spread across eight broad categories.

Table 4.3

Sources of Pressure to Change Policies

Source	Frequency
Government (federal, state, local)	13
Students and faculty	10
External supporters (donors, alumni)	7
Changing social norms	5
Advocacy groups (e.g., Soul Force)	5
Court decisions/potential litigation	3
Accreditors	2
Grant agencies	1

Several institutions indicate that faculty, staff, and students on their campuses express diverse views, as do alumni and donors. A small number of institutions indicate they feel little or no pressure to change their policies. The responses, listed in Table 4.3, align with the sources of pressure identified during the interviews. One notable exception was the relative infrequency with which accrediting agencies are mentioned in the survey compared to the interviews.

The other open-ended question asked institutions to explain why they would or would not change their policies in the event they must make a choice in the next five years. The president at one institution indicates it might change policies related to students but not faculty and staff; there was no explanation for why it was considering a change for students. Of the two presidents who indicate their institutions would change, one did not answer the open-ended question and the other writes they “might change” but that it would be more complex than a simple response to potential loss of tax-exempt status or Title IV funding. The remaining responses all relate to why institutions will not change their practices. The overwhelming reason, with 18 total

responses, was commitment to religious beliefs and mission. Four respondents indicate their confidence, or at least hope, in the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom. There were also two references to the new administration in Washington, although in the interviews the Trump presidency was described as providing "breathing room" rather than likely to take specific actions to bolster religious freedoms. Finally, there were two references to Fairness for All legislation and the Utah Compromise, in which the Mormon Church supported LGBT rights in employment and housing while advocacy groups supported religious freedom for the Church.

These results from the online survey are limited, and primarily serve as background for the more in-depth interviews. They are validated by the interview results and show that many CCCU institutions experience significant pressure to change their policies from both external and internal sources. The interview results confirm the survey respondents' belief that most CCCU institutions will face a major decision on this question within the next five to ten years. Finally, the results confirm that, in general, the majority of Christian universities are not intending to change their practices. The interviews reflect a more nuanced view and demonstrate that some presidents acknowledge that their universities' intentions today may alter in the future.

Interviews

Eighteen of the 34 respondents to the survey initially agreed to be interviewed and 12 interviews ultimately took place. All of the interviewees were men, which is not surprising as only eight CCCU presidents are women. An unanticipated finding was the significance of the geographic and political dimension, which is discussed in more depth later in the chapter. The 12 interview participants are evenly divided between blue and red states, with six located in states voting for Hillary Clinton and six in states voting for Donald Trump. To preserve confidentiality, the interview findings are presented using pseudonyms. Specific states are mentioned only if

there are at least five CCCU institutions in the state. Due to the importance of geographical and political variations, the pseudonyms listed in Table 4.4 include region and whether the state voted for Clinton or Trump in the 2016 presidential elections.

Table 4.4

Participants by U.S. Census Region

Pseudonym	Region	Red/Blue State
Anthony	Midwest	Blue
Davis	Midwest	Red
Edward	South	Red
Elliott	Midwest	Blue
Frank	West	Blue
Harrison	South	Red
Henry	Midwest	Blue
James	South	Red
Graham	West	Blue
Nathan	West	Blue
Roger	Midwest	Red
Walton	South	Red

Prior to data collection, due to media reports I believed that all members of the CCCU had non-affirming policy positions restricting intimate same-sex relationships. However, two of the 34 survey respondents, Frank and Anthony, described their policies quite differently. After reviewing the preliminary findings, Frank wrote that his position was “passively inclusive,” that is, there is no “specific policy that actively welcomes diversity in sexual orientation/gender identity, but we don’t have a policy that prohibits it.” Both presidents, who represent a minority viewpoint within the CCCU, agreed to be interviewed. When the findings refer to Frank or Anthony, their position as passively inclusive institutions is reiterated to prevent confusion. The other ten universities are referred to as non-affirming.

Positions on Same-Sex Marriage

Aside from Frank and Anthony, the presidents express very similar views on the issue of same-sex relationships. In Elliott's words, "The most intimate forms of sexual behavior are reserved for heterosexual marriage." They base this position on their understanding of Biblical principles, as Graham explains:

[Our university] has a statement of faith and a community covenant, which honors an orthodox Christian and biblical framework on the issue of gender, sexuality, and marriage. In all cases, we believe that marriage is reserved for a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage.

Henry echoes, "Our Biblical interpretation is that intimate sexual relationships, which we think are God-created, are between one man and one woman." However, respondents also make a clear distinction between person and behavior. Roger and Harrison, for example, mention the scholar Mark Yarhouse, who differentiates between sexual attraction, orientation, and practice.

Individuals who experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay or lesbian are welcome on their campuses, whether as students or employees. Harrison declares, "The issue of identity and homosexuality is one for us where we place no moral stigma on a person's orientation. We take the position that one's orientation is almost 100% not a chosen issue." As a result, institutions do not wish to be unwelcoming or inhospitable to individuals who experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay or lesbian.

There is a clear expectation, however, that individuals who experience same-sex attraction will not engage in sexual or even romantic relationships. When it comes to employees, and in one case students, there is often an additional expectation that public advocacy in support of same-sex intimacy is prohibited. At the same time, there is no desire to paint homosexual

activity as inherently worse than any other form of sexual expression outside of a heterosexual marriage. Harrison explains:

We've written our code of behavior to where sexual activity between any two unmarried persons is a violation of university policy because it's connected to the Biblical position of the denomination. Whether one is heterosexual or homosexual, the same policy applies to both of them.

"We draw the line at behavior, homosexually or heterosexually," agrees Edward, "we draw the line at behavior." This clear distinction between behavior and identity is widely held.

"The Only Identity that Matters"

Regardless of sexual identity, Henry wants to provide support for all students dealing with sexual attraction: "We just try to meet the students where they are, because we see that more as a growing, learning, human development process for traditional students." James believes that his institution is "pretty much identical to the microcosm in society of maybe four percent of our student body that are struggling with that issue in their life." He continues:

When students do self-report through counseling, or a chapel experience, or a mentor or faculty member, that they're struggling with the issue or they're dealing with the issue or they're trying to figure out what is truth and what is not, then we support them in that process of exploration through Biblical perspectives and counseling and support through Res Life staff and our team. We talk about behavior versus ideation, and we talk about the importance of purity. We do that with students that are struggling with opposite-sex attraction as well, and wanting to act out on that.

Other presidents describe the importance of sexual purity and call for students to be celibate unless they are in a heterosexual marriage. Roger describes "the phenomenon of people that we

come in contact with both internally and externally whose experience was a persistent same-sex attraction, but who were living biblically faithful lives in that context because they're committed to celibacy." They acknowledge that individuals in this category face a lifelong struggle.

This desire to live what Roger describes as a biblically faithful life is why Nathan remarks that some openly gay and lesbian students "have agreed to be part of our community either in spite of or because of our posture on human sexuality." The universities encourage students to live a celibate life rather than punishing or seeking to change them. Graham describes it this way: "No one receives any form of discipline or direction on the basis of orientation or identification other than the offer of help and assistance." The critical thing from James's perspective is that they

know from day one that we're an institution that loves students, and we want to help them in their identity development, which is their identity in Christ. That's the only identity that we really believe matters and so that's the identity that we work with for the whole time that they're students.

Continuing the theme of supporting and developing students rather than changing them, one president noted that his institution's psychology program does not advocate reparative therapy. This technique, also known as conversion therapy, seeks to change the sexual orientation of homosexual or bisexual individuals.

"We Would Have a Conversation"

Although spiritual development may be the primary goal, some students are going to violate the code of conduct just as some employees will break their lifestyle agreements. Without exception, the presidents do not describe their universities' policies as calling for immediate suspension of students or termination of employees. For employees, presidents used expressions

such as, “We would have a conversation,” to describe the process. Elliott would seek to “clarify our understanding” to determine if the employee intends to remain in a same-sex relationship. The presidents are definite, however, that an employee who persists in a same-sex relationship would be terminated for breaking their contract. It was not as obvious how the disciplinary process works for students. In some cases, presidents indicate suspension is a possibility; others simply mention discipline or sanction. It is likely that most institutions would not dismiss a student until, in Graham’s words, “repeated, unrepentant participation” is displayed. Elliott raises a personal aspect for those enforcing policies: “The reality is when you know someone and it’s more than an arms-length relationship, it shapes how you respond personally to these issues.” At these universities, students and employees who engage in heterosexual activity outside of marriage are subject to the same process as those engaged in a same-sex relationship.

As a side note, several presidents noted that their institutions had online programs or large graduate schools. Although not exclusively, in general the presidents accept that holding these students to the same standard of conduct was not practical. Referring to online programs, Harrison admitted, “There is no way in the world you legitimize a community that extends into cyberspace. We’ve not even tried to go there.”

“We Don’t Have a Position”

The two passively inclusive institutions represented by Anthony and Frank take a very different approach. Anthony represents their view succinctly:

There are faculty members, there are staff members [here] who are straight, and there are staff members who are gay, lesbian, or transgender. That’s part of our community. We don’t have a position against. We don’t have a position for, but I think that’s the whole point.

Similarly, Frank says, “I’m not willing to judge people [in same-sex relationships] that way, that’s not my job.”

They recognize the role that Scripture and creed play at other institutions. Frank acknowledges, “I appreciate their struggle and their literal interpretation of the Bible, but that’s not where we are.” For Anthony, “it’s just not a central factor of Scripture.” Anthony describes his institution’s affiliated church this way: Its identity “does not come through a set formula of beliefs or a creed. It does not identify itself by a set formula, and thereby it tends not to have positions.” In contrast, he argues that most Evangelical Christian institutions are “bounded set” organizations:

If you’re inside the boundaries, you’re part of the church; if you’re not inside the boundaries, you’re not part of the church. The boundaries for Christian colleges are often a statement of behaviors, or something along that line that you sign on to, and if you’re going to be part of the organization, you have to more or less live consistently with these.

The next section describes pressure these bounded set universities experience as societal forces increasingly push to change the boundaries. The more open position represented by Anthony and Frank’s universities contributes to that pressure.

Pressure to Change or Maintain Stance on Same-Sex Marriage

The presidents from the ten bounded set universities all describe varying degrees of pressure to change their policies, primarily depending on their geographic location and local political climate. When it comes to retaining policies, presidents usually define influences as support rather than pressure. Some of them, however, did describe more conservative voices pressuring their institutions to adopt more prescriptive policies. This section reports the importance of location on how presidents’ experience pressure to change their policies, the

disparate views they hear from a variety of sources, and their sense of the rapid pace of cultural change.

“We’re Living in a Different Planet”

One of the most striking findings is the substantial variance in pressure felt by presidents in California and other blue states compared to those in Bible Belt states. All four presidents from Southern universities, which are located in red states, indicate minimal to no state or local pressure. In contrast, presidents from blue states in the Midwest and West describe strong pressure from state government as well as local municipalities. Summarizing some conversations with his peers in California, Walton, who places his university in the Deep South, says, “It’s almost as if we’re living in a different planet.” He also indicates active resistance to the *Obergefell* decision in his state. Harrison, however, acknowledges, “Whatever happens on the West Coast will eventually get here.” Presidents from both red and blue states in the Midwest and the South are paying close attention to the social and legislative climate in California, preparing for the day when it reaches their own borders.

Regional pressure. Although several presidents expressed concern about their regional accrediting body as discussed later, the primary source of regional pressure is unequivocally state and local government. Concerning local pressure, Davis remarks that it does not matter who is in power in Washington, “Even if a Republican president somehow stalls the movement of the train from federal courts or even Supreme Court appointees, 60% of Americans are already living [in municipalities] under expanded LGBT protections if they don’t have state law.” Nathan also references the 60% number, but asserts those protections always include religious exemptions. These exemptions cover things like housing for married students. However, local pressure can

appear in other ways. For example, although James has no personal experience with local pressure in South Carolina, he references conversations with other presidents:

I realize the pressures they're under from a gay mayor, for example, in their town, that's attacking the college, or they're trying to buy land and someone tries to stop it because of what they perceive as the school's discriminatory policies.

He goes on to say that, according to the CCCU's chief legal counsel, local government is the most important factor in determining risk for same-sex marriage policies followed by state government, accreditors, and then the federal government.

It is at the state level that presidents convey the strongest sense of pressure, although only those in blue states. Elliott portrays his state as "not quite California or New York or Massachusetts, but we're not far behind politically." The state passed a same-sex marriage law prior to *Obergefell*, and he feels pressure from the state legislature as well as a U.S. Senator who is a vocal supporter of LGBT issues. Henry expresses concern about Illinois state legislators who held discussions last year about restricting state grants to non-discriminatory institutions. He believes those conversations were a direct result of the publicity surrounding SB 1146 in California last year. That bill's original intent was to apply the same standards for anti-discrimination at both public and private universities.

The two presidents from California talked extensively about their experience with SB 1146 and ongoing state initiatives. Nathan says that when SB 1146 was introduced, the state caught his university off guard, along with over 30 other faith-based institutions in California. It would have allowed private lawsuits targeting institutions receiving state grants. Religious institutions in California spent about \$500,000 as part of their effort to get the bill changed or dropped, according to Davis, a Midwestern president. Despite their own considerable efforts,

Graham credits the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) opposition to the bill for at least 50% of their victory and argues there are many state legislators who still want to restrict access to grants. There is a real sense of uncertainty about how to respond to the state. Nathan discusses the difficulty of a constitutional challenge, for example:

You can't really wave the First Amendment and say we can do what we want to do under the guise of religious freedom because they'll wave the Civil Rights Act right back at us and say, 'You know, it's a civil rights issue.'

Graham acknowledges the dilemma for California legislators: If student grants are coming directly to the university, he wonders, "Is that essentially a partnership with the state, and if so, can the state partner with an educational institution whose fundamental views of human sexuality are at odds?" He suggests that the issue is only going to gain more traction: "Particularly in light of the Trump victory, California has determined, self-announced, to be the most progressive state in the nation." It is also notable that the two passively inclusive institutions represented in the interviews are both located in progressive states that legalized same-sex marriages prior to *Obergefell*.

Accreditors. Most presidents indicate their regional accreditors currently support their religious mission. Henry claims, "We are confident that the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) absolutely understands our faith perspective, they understand our faith identity, and we have no reason to believe that HLC has had a change in policy." Similar perspectives came from presidents in Western and Southern states, with Nathan indicating he feels "no pressure at all." It is fair to say, though, that presidents are concerned about how that may change. Several mentioned that Gordon College in the Northeast, as noted earlier, faced some negative publicity regarding their position on homosexuality. Graham notes that "as soon as a news report hit the

wires then the accreditation folks jumped in the middle of the fray,” while Roger describes the scrutiny of Gordon as a “warning shot” for other regions.

Given the strong support presidents describe currently, this uncertainty about the future disposition of regional accreditors seems unwarranted. Edward, however, bases his concern about regional accreditors on feeling “under siege” from the Department of Education (DOE) under the Obama administration:

I think the government has put such pressure on regional accreditors; regional accreditors have put so much pressure on all of the rest of us. It just kind of trickles down to us. And one of the things that’s not been explicitly defined, but something that is very much a part of the conversation is that diversity is regarded as a value above all values. Homosexual rights, the treatment of transgender students, the hiring practices of people who identify as gay and lesbian, all those sorts of things fall into that nebulous category of diversity.

The long-term concern about the role of regional accreditors, therefore, relates to how they serve as a conduit for initiatives originating at the federal level.

National pressure. At the national level, presidents again describe their perceptions quite differently. Those in the West tend to see federal pressure as relatively insignificant compared to state pressure, while those in the South see the federal government as one of the primary sources of pressure. In particular, they saw the Office of Civil Rights at the DOE under the Obama administration as a major threat. Several presidents highlight the Dear Colleague letters put out by the DOE “when they chose to reinterpret the Title IX law,” as Davis puts it. Although there is a general sense that this movement has been tempered by the new Trump administration, Harrison thinks that federal grants “may well soon have a litmus test attached to them regarding

full and open acceptance and affirmation of gay marriage or any sexual practices.” Edward discusses the use of “diversity” as a code word:

If homosexual behavior is regarded as a protected class, like race is, we realize that we are going to find ourselves outside the tent very quickly. There has been increasing pressure in that direction. All Christian schools realize that we can very well be looking at the possibility of losing federally guaranteed student loans and Pell grants, and a number of things that are very important to us. On the government side there has just been almost a sense of siege, primarily coming from the Department of Education.

Several presidents commented on the DOE’s decision to publicize the names of institutions who requested a religious exemption as a specific example of its posture towards Christian universities. They express much less concern about the likelihood of losing tax-exempt status although they clearly feel increasing public pressure.

Accreditors. Although the presidents do not feel pressure from regional accreditors, the story is somewhat different regarding specialized accreditors. Harrison’s opinion is that fields like social work, psychology, and medicine are under additional scrutiny. One institution is currently seeking accreditation for its counseling program, and the president says, “We are cautiously working our way through.” Another president notes that his psychology program’s accreditor “gives a pass to religious organizations as it relates to human sexuality.” However, in the South, Walton identifies the American Bar Association (ABA), which accredits the Law School, as the primary internal pressure to change policy. There is a sense that pressure is building, if not yet fully realized.

Public opinion and public pressure. Even the presidents in the South see a shift in cultural tides; Walton concludes, “The nature of society is moving.” Harrison uses the recent

presidential campaign as an example: “We saw our first campaign that was run where those on both sides of the aisle were not making an issue to protest gay marriage at some level. It’s filtering down at a really fast rate.” The presidents also comment on two ways in which the media has influenced society. The first is the impact of the popular media in legitimizing homosexuality. Elliott notes, “For our students, Ellen [DeGeneres] has always been out as a lesbian and as a media positive image.” The second, according to Nathan, is media attention to “stories of students that might feel discriminated against or alumni groups that are saying we should change our policy.” He expresses concern about “the existential threat of public shaming if we have too much attention called to our views on human sexuality, and a group, or a group of people are agitated.” He refers to this as a “reputational threat” and worries more about damaging his institution’s reputation than he does about litigation. It can be hard to keep a low profile, however, when there are so many individuals and groups who give voice to their own belief in what the institutions should be doing.

“Various Voices”

Numerous constituents demand to be heard, often representing very diverse views. This is a challenge for presidents who seek to balance competing perspectives from within the church; their students, alumni, and faculty; other Evangelical Christian institutions; and various other groups. They are lobbied “from various voices claiming to represent [an] entire constituency,” says Davis, describing an alumnus writing a letter in which he maintained he spoke on behalf of the entire alumni base. Their institutions depend on these constituents for funding, recruit students from their ranks, and in many cases are controlled or even owned by them. It is from within these groups that presidents feel the strongest pressure to not only retain, but strengthen their policies, yet these groups can also be strong sources of pressure to change.

The Evangelical Church and denominational ties. Universities with close ties to their denomination can experience deep-seated pressure to retain or strengthen policy. One perceived danger is the push towards fundamentalism or engaging in a culture war. Davis underlines one of the major sources of that kind of influence:

One of the highest pressure groups are the most theologically conservative pastors or churchmen and churchwomen where their view is that any kind of way to distinguish between civic policy and private church or church college policy is all one and the same. They don't make room for a Christian who could advocate or even support, which is a lower threshold from advocacy, civil rights for same-sex attracted persons. When they don't make any space for that, then there's a fundamentalist overtone to either a college's policy or their communication about this.

He also mentioned a similar source in conservative donors, "who think of their philanthropy as a tool to fix culture or fix society." According to Harrison, a Christian university can be placed "in an awkward position where a lot of the membership of your denomination would want you to be stridently angry and mean and you're not." None of the presidents expressed any interest in accommodating voices on the far right. At the same time, those with close denominational ties definitely feel pressure to retain their existing policies. Walton joked that if he were to steer his university in a different direction, "I think there would be a different person in this office fairly quickly!" The universities themselves can reinforce one another's positions. Frank, who is a president at a passively inclusive institution, notes that within the CCCU there is "lots of like-mindedness."

There is recognition, however, that there are churches and universities within Evangelical Christianity that are more open to accepting and affirming same-sex relationships. As "more

scholars, theologians, institutions move toward either an explicit affirming position or a more affirming position,” Roger predicts there will be “a continued growing rift within Evangelical Christianity.” He goes on, “With every evangelical church that suddenly moves to a more embracing and affirming position, it tends to put additional pressure on those who continue to hold out for a traditional position.” He contends that as Christian universities change their policies, whether within or without the CCCU, “it raises the question if there will be an expectation that universities pushing universities will follow suit.” An example of how this pressure may be wielded comes from Anthony, one of the presidents at a passively inclusive institution. As a voice within the Christian higher education community, he contends:

I’m troubled by schools that want all of the perks of an affiliation, but don’t want some of the mandates that come with that. The perks are we don’t pay taxes and the perks are that people who give a gift to us don’t pay tax on the basis of that gift. Yet at the same time students who come here can take advantage of financial assistance that comes from state or federal government, and we don’t want anyone to restrict certain practices, which the rest of society finds to be discriminatory. I don’t know that we can have it in every way. My own take on it is there should be institutional integrity somehow that says, ‘We can either practice who we are and take the liability that comes with that, or we choose to change who we are, so that it accords a little better alignment with what society at large is looking for.’

In addition to the voices above, various other constituents also push for a more affirmative stand, including alumni groups.

Other external influences. Several presidents describe efforts made by LGBT advocacy groups like Soul Force, which has visited at least two presidents’ institutions, the Human Rights

Campaign, and other special interest groups. They recognize these efforts are not slowing down; indeed, Nathan argues that Christian higher education is now an even greater target:

I think the biggest implication [of *Obergefell*] is that special interest groups that have long advocated for gay marriage being the law of the land need other battles to fight. It wasn't like they closed their businesses and said, 'Mission accomplished. We can shut down our special interest groups and advocacy groups and we can let go of all of our employees and stop our fundraising efforts.' Their fundraising is directly proportional to something that seems like an injustice and it just seems like it could be that faith-based higher education is logically next in the crosshairs because we're very visible, we get state and federal funding, and we're not a church.

In addition to these larger, sponsored legal challenges, private lawsuits related to job or sex discrimination are a source of concern as well.

Presidents describe challenges from other organizations. The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) recently pulled the cross-country championship from North Carolina because of the state's position on the gender bathroom law. Henry questions what the ripple effect on his athletic conference might be: "Will our athletic conference allow any institution that has a faith understanding that draws that distinction as far as gender identity to bid on or even host conference championships?" He already accepts that it would be impossible to host a national championship. These external organizations are under pressure too. Edward notes the NCAA's recent experience with a Human Rights Campaign initiative "that got a lot of publicity, basically saying, 'Shame on you,' for allowing these faith-based schools, these discriminatory schools in your organization." Although he is pleased that the NCAA pushed back, arguing that faith-based schools add to diversity, he recognizes that the pressure is not

going to stop. James describes filling out a bank application to receive a grant, and one question was, “If we fund this grant, how will this help support LGBT communities and their ideals?” He asks, “How do I answer a question like that?”

Several are worried about, in Elliott’s words, losing “access to health care facilities for nursing clinical and PA rotations and to public schools for student teacher placement.” He says his university cannot survive the loss of this access and echoed Henry and James’s concern about access to an athletic conference. Henry refers to his perception that getting into an academic honor society like Phi Beta Kappa is not possible for a conservative faith-based institution.

Internal influences. In general, there is little evidence of internal pressure to change policies on the part of faculty or staff, likely because of close scrutiny and full disclosure during the hiring process. A number of presidents describe the care their institutions take to ensure a good fit. However, some faculty do advocate for change. Harrison acknowledges that there are liberal professors at Christian universities:

It’s the kind of collective group to start with that wants to challenge and push the issue and do critical thinking regarding cultural issues. It’s normal that there will be more and more professors on Christian campuses that will view these issues differently than the church.

Henry talks about conversations he has with faculty, staff, and students who would like his institution to change its policies. He says, “They are not in the majority, and they very certainly understand that trying to advocate for that would be going against the institution’s scriptural understanding of those issues.” There are, therefore, a few faculty voices quietly arguing for a more affirming position.

Those presidents whose institutions house online and/or graduate and continuing studies programs reveal a potential source of pressure: internal consistency. At most institutions with these programs, it appears there is no attempt to hold students to the same standards as the traditional undergraduate student body. Online students, for example, may be in a same-sex relationship without even knowing there was a policy for traditional undergraduates. The one exception is Nathan's university, which has similar behavioral expectations for all students. Roger, in particular, is worried about the potential for the policy disparity to be used against his university. There is an implication that it is somewhat hypocritical to have different standards.

“A growing disconnect.” Perhaps the strongest source of internal pressure to change comes from young people, both students and young alumni. Student pressure is one of the few sources that Walton identifies. He indicates that there is almost no conversation in his local community on the topic of same-sex marriage, but

I will tell you that it bubbles below the surface among our students. Most of our students are church related. Most of them are from evangelical churches, but there certainly are quite a few of them that find the church's position to be intolerant. At this point, they are not out campaigning. They're not protesting. They're not requesting gay ombudsmen and homosexual fraternities, sororities, or those kinds of things. But I know if you have conversations with them, which I've had with young people, there's a growing disconnect between their feelings on this matter versus that of their elders.

Roger sees the same thing at his campus and believes that the ongoing shift in student opinion is “not out of deep theological reflection, but out of a desire to be kind, to shift toward an affirming position.” Elliott reckons this trend reflects the influence of popular media and the impact it has

had on students and young alumni who have grown up in a “gay-affirming environment.”

Students who have grown up in this environment see the issue quite differently than their elders.

There is a “vocal left edge” at Edward’s campus who “see it as a civil rights issue rather than as the administration and most of the adult population [at the university] see it as a moral issue.” James states that 70-80% of Generation Z students think the *Obergefell* decision was the right one. Further, he says that it and other decisions are already “having a huge impact on the kind of student we’re getting.” Similarly, Walton says:

I think that if you look at surveys of evangelical young people, you will see approaching 50% of those who identify themselves as evangelicals and who are under 30 think that same sex attraction, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender relations are perfectly fine. When those numbers reach the majority of the young, all you have to do is sort of project into the future and see where that’s headed.

Anthony, at a passively inclusive institution, concurs, and thinks that conservative churches need to understand that change is inevitable “not so much because society at large is shifting, but because young people are shifting, and if we want anyone in church on Sunday morning, they’re going to be asking us to make some change.” The presidents accept that young people’s views are changing more rapidly than the views of the general population.

“The Speed is Just Astounding”

The presidents agree that the rapid pace of change is remarkable. As James says, “The speed in which the social mores of the United States have changed is just astounding.” Elliott concurs and stresses the cultural and legal shifts since the *Obergefell* decision are particularly dramatic. This rapid pace is one of the major reasons the presidents overwhelmingly believe they will have to make a major decision on this issue in the next five to ten years. Of the ten

presidents with non-affirming policies, only one is confident that his institution will not be confronted with such a decision. In contrast, four expect to make a decision within five years and the remaining five within the next decade. James believes that “if we follow the trend line, the trend line is we’ve got a ten-year window here.” Elliott is less optimistic; the only reason he suggests five rather than two years is the result of the recent election.

A minority describe a feeling of inevitability about the ultimate outcome. Elliott draws a parallel between divorce and same-sex marriage. He recalls “a point in time where getting divorced could be a ticket to exit a Christian college or university. Not the case for most of us today.” He believes a similar result for same-sex marriage is inevitable. Leading up to the last election, Edward describes his “sense that this is the inevitable direction and the siege is about to be successful, and instead there was a sense of backing up and respecting the mission of faith-based schools. At least for a time.”

“Breathing room.” Edward’s phrase, “at least for a time,” indicates the mood of most of the presidents—there is some time before the cultural wave crests. Most of the presidents referred to the (a) election of Donald Trump or (b) to his appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of the DOE as indicating a slow-down in the pressure to change. In Harrison’s words, “What felt like immediate change six, seven months ago—we may have a little bit of a four-year reprieve on that, so it might not come as quickly.” The presidents from California did not echo this feeling, however. Graham feels that the Trump presidency provides breathing room “if you don’t live in California. There’s breathing room at the national level, but I think there’s great concern at the state level.” The rest of the presidents are not complacent and realize that it is a temporary pause. Frank, at one of the passively inclusive institutions, agrees that the next four years provides an opportunity for his more conservative peers “to get smart about” the issue.

Elliott calls it a “small window of opportunity in the next ten to 12 months for [Fairness for All legislation] to happen. If it doesn’t happen then I don’t think it’s got a shot.” This breathing room offers Christian universities a respite to collect themselves and construct their individual and collective response to the pressures they are facing.

Responses to Pressure

The responses the presidents discuss are by no means uniform. The only specific response the ten presidents have in common is a willingness to engage in a legal challenge. They want to avoid such a challenge if possible and express a variety of possible first and second responses to the pressure they experience. This section explores some of those responses before considering the legal challenge. It also presents the presidents’ current thinking about their potential actions in the event a court challenge is unsuccessful and the role of their boards in the decision-making process. Finally, the section concludes with a brief discussion of how the presidents perceive the role of the CCCU.

“Civic Pluralism”

Six of the ten presidents talk about the possibility of a compromise solution, hoping there is a way for advocates of religious freedom to work together with advocates for the LGBT community. Although all four of the presidents from blue states talked about this option, only one from the South did. Those who feel the most pressure are the most likely to talk about considering a compromise option.

Henry argues for compromise because “American society should be robust enough that it’s a both/and and not an either/or.” Harrison expresses a compromise position as “confident pluralism or civic pluralism.” He explains it:

It's the admission that we are a nation of many faiths, many religions, and even within Christianity itself that there is a wide diversity of opinion regarding issues of sexuality, but what we seek is the right for each religious body to have freedom of religion to govern its life in the way that it thinks best. We can take an approach like the Utah Compromise where the LGBTQ and Mormon Church got together and figured out a way that they could both be winners. The Mormons stood with them on non-bullying and rights to work and rights to housing and all kind of issues like that, while LGBTQ stood with the Mormons on rights to hire people in their institutions who were in good standing with their own moral ground. I think that is the best path forward for Christianity. It'll be the strategy that I'll use, just to admit that we're pluralist. Christians no longer have the only or dominant or ruling seat at the table, but we are one member at the table, and we have as much right to be who we are as we give to other people to be who they are, and that plurality and diversity and unity does not mean that we're all alike. It just simply means that we have space for each other to exist without contest and conflict all the time.

Elliott describes “quiet conversations” between “the most visible leaders of the LGBT community” and the CCCU and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) on the “Fairness for All” agenda. He says they are trying to find common ground:

We would try to pass a law at the federal level that would stipulate certain rights for employment, housing, and other non-discrimination areas for LGBT persons while at the same time guaranteeing the right to hire based on our faith, beliefs, and to set behavioral expectations for organizations like Christian colleges and universities.

This tactic is very different from the culture war approach of the “moral majority” movement, says Harrison. No president expresses any interest in campaigning against gay marriage and

several explicitly affirm they have no intention of such a campaign. Davis, for example, says, “I don’t know that it is Christian to prevent a same-sex attracted person from getting an apartment in civic spaces. That smacks of 1950s and ’60s civil rights Jim Crow laws.” There is clear recognition that *Obergefell* will not be overturned and there will be no repeal of existing federal or state legislation protecting LGBT rights. Solutions like Fairness for All or the Utah Compromise present a chance to maintain existing policies indefinitely.

In the Midwest, Davis is already putting the approach into action at a state and local level. He has “given testimony at the [state] legislature on a RFRA bill, Religious Freedom Restoration Act” and invited a state senator and state representative, both Christians, to participate in a board meeting earlier this year. He claims, “They’re conveying to us sympathy that there is for articulating religious liberties while LGBT protections are expanding.” Locally, he adds,

We had a [county] commission that was recently advancing a human rights ordinance, which is essentially expansion of LGBT protections. Through work with a county commissioner and our county councilman in making the case for the articulation or the codification of religious liberties while LGBT protections are being expanded, that tabled the vote and revised it through a county attorney and actually improved the circumstance for a Christian college.

He stresses that the key word in all of these conversations is *while*. He is convinced that protections for LGBT rights are going to expand and is confident that can happen *while* “religious liberties rooted in the First Amendment” are simultaneously asserted. For instance, “married housing on our campuses doesn’t have to have the same law as civic spaces.” He, like Henry, advocates for a both/and rather than either/or approach.

Meanwhile, in California, Nathan and Graham are also interested in the pursuit of the Fairness for All legislation but are less sure about its success. Nathan's concern is that "there are voices on the far left and the far right that both aren't listening. They just want to undo the other side. They're deaf to conversation." He expresses hope that eventually when things "settle down a little bit that we'll come to maybe a common understanding about how religious communities can not only survive but flourish in a democratic, pluralistic society." Although Graham is open "to a positive relationship" with the LGBT community, he is concerned about the details of any compromise agreement: "My experience with my friends in Utah as to whether that actually works out as cleanly as it sounds is, at this point, not completely favorable. Before [we] would take a specific action we'd have to see the specific components." After reviewing an early draft of this chapter, Graham wrote:

An additional rationale for being dubious about Fairness for All legislation is not only wanting to see specific component parts, but a fundamental concern that equating sexual orientation and gender identity with race/ethnicity/religion is bad legal policy and also a theological problem for evangelical Christians.

All six of the presidents who talk about a compromise solution also advocate for other responses, one of which is the importance of informing the public that Christian higher education is a valuable component within society.

"Telling Our Story"

Making a case. Six of the ten presidents relate the importance of the Christian higher education community engaging with the outside world to make their case. None of the presidents describes direct engagement with public officials as something that they have regularly done and it appears to be a relatively new strategy. Davis urges, "Christian colleges must—we can't just

consider it—we must be politically active now. I don't mean becoming fundamentalist icons that actually do damage to our movement, but actually having relationships and telling our story." He argues that now is the time for leaders at Christian universities and in the church to be intentional in their lobbying efforts:

The good news of that is it's not just "being political" in terms of some kind of snarky dirty business. A lot of it is simply reminding our lawmakers of religious liberty precedent that's already there and articulating the public good of our schools. It's an easy case to make.

Roger says it is important that "we continue to make a case at local, state, and federal levels for the importance of being able to operate according to conscience." In addition to political lobbying, there is a wider conversation with the public. Henry is convinced that if "you live in American society, you understand the importance of religious freedom; most people do. They may misinterpret it, and they may not understand it to varying degrees, but that is part of the American fabric." James is counting on that sentiment as well and argues that Americans want more, not fewer choices. He would like to begin "changing the narrative to the increasing level of discrimination against Christian higher education" to highlight that shutting it down, which he believes is "obviously the ultimate goal of liberals," will reduce diversity and choice. James describes the importance of changing the conversation, "making a new case in a new, positive way." He continues, "We've always spent so much time on what we're against that it's kind of refreshing to talk about what we are for."

In addition to the religious liberty argument, some of these presidents also vocalize the positive economic impact of Christian higher education and its contribution to expanding access to higher education. Davis believes "it's very easy to make a case for our economic public

good.” In his home state of Indiana he notes there are 31 private colleges, enrolling one of every ten students in the state but awarding one of every three degrees. His claim is that private institutions receive an average of \$4,000 per bachelor degree students while state institutions receive \$52,000. He concludes, “If we are using less public money and generating more degrees, we’re the best use of the public money that there is, regardless if we are religiously identified or not.” In California, Nathan is also trying to tell the story of how faith-based institutions add civic, economic, and intellectual value to society. He maintains that there can be different perspectives in a pluralistic society:

We just need to begin conversations so that there’s a mutual understanding that there’s a lot of good that we bring and that our value in the long term is going to be directly proportional to our perceived contribution to society.

That perceived contribution, contend James and Davis, includes high retention and graduation rates, support for students of color, low debt rates for graduates, and enrolling higher than average numbers of first generation students. All of this contributes to Davis’s “confidence in navigating this future.” He says, “My point is even making the economic argument is pretty sound that Christian colleges are absolutely essential for the future of our nation and for the public good.” The attitude they express is not one of defiance but of taking pride in what Christian higher education can offer. According to Harrison, Christian universities should buck the trend and, rather than “trying to appear more generic,” embrace their distinctiveness as a Christian university. For his institution, he claims, “The more we have intentionally defined ourselves as a Christian university, the faster our enrollment’s grown.” In his view, the value of taking a clear and vocal position may contribute to the long-term viability of Christian higher education while benefiting institutional enrollment.

Inconspicuous but transparent. Elliott, who is in a blue state, is less interested in making a public case and takes a more circumspect approach:

We've been deliberately trying to be less vocal, less public on these issues; not shying away when people ask us what we believe, but on the other hand we haven't tried to raise a target and wave it around in the air because we'd just as soon spend our energy and resources on other things than this.

In California, Nathan works to reduce potential "lightning rods" by being sensitive to the language his university uses to describe and disclose its policies on same-sex marriage. There are two reasons for this. The first is consistency "with the way we live out our faith and community [to] come alongside gay and lesbian students and work with them to make them feel welcomed and not bullied and harassed." The second reason is "to stay under the radar as much as possible, and we don't draw attention with certain inflammatory words or language that might cause us undue attention." Nathan says, "I worry more about reputational threat than I do about litigation threat." Others also remark on removing language that sounds harsh or judgmental.

They recognize, however, that policy language must be clear and unambiguous to inform potential employees and students about their policies. "We've had to encode a lot of things in our policies and handbooks," says Edward, "that before just went without saying." He adds, "Before, it was understood that this was a self-selecting body of people, that they would understand our language. We can't assume that anymore." It is evident that new employees receive clear communication about their university's behavioral expectations during the hiring process. For prospective students, James thinks transparency is imperative and uses visit days to ensure there is no doubt about his university's stance. The result is that some families may not send their children but still appreciate the clarity. He says,

Every once in a while somebody will come up to me afterwards going, “Guy, there’s no way I can have my son come to this kind of institution,” and I just smile and I say, “Isn’t it wonderful that we’re that transparent, that you know that instead of coming and then finding out later and being angry that we didn’t tell you the truth?” They often turn the corner at that point and they go, “Wow, you’re absolutely right. That is so cool. Thank you.” Even though I know they won’t come, I have a new friend.

Of course, even as the presidents work to make friends and find a compromise solution, they recognize that may not be enough.

“A Last Resort”

Although a legal challenge was the only universal strategy among the ten presidents, Nathan concisely captures the reluctance of the group: “To me, a legal challenge is a last resort.” Graham agrees, “This would not at all be our preferred approach. We would only take that approach if we felt like there were serious constitutional issues related to the First Amendment.” At the same time, Roger believes it is important to defend the “institutional right to operate according to conscience,” arguing that “each one of these areas is a little bit of the beachhead that the ground that you give then makes it very difficult for ground further down the road.” His institution was part of a challenge regarding mandated coverage under Obamacare. The suit was brought not only because of the institution’s pro-life stance but because “we want to continue to establish that under the constitution we have the right to establish policies that are congruent with [our beliefs].” Walton’s university also has some experience with litigation, as it joined forces with Notre Dame and Brigham Young to “push back on the ABA” regarding some of their regulations related to gender and other items.

Some do not have the resources or desire to mount a legal challenge, particularly if the issue is access to federal financial aid programs. Henry describes his institution as relatively small with limited financial resources, making it impossible to take a role as a lead litigant. Instead, his institution provides financial support to the CCCU and the Alliance Defending Freedom, an organization created to defend religious freedom. Harrison would consider joining “a class action suit on the basis of religious freedom” but realizes that institutions like his “can’t tread water without financial aid very long and still be viable.” His university is making plans to exist without access to federal aid but likely would take action if their tax-exempt status is threatened. He believes,

That one is more defensible in the court system simply because it clearly is a religious institution with a religious purpose controlled by the church with its board of governance structure. We would seek to protect that in every way possible.

The language that the presidents use is one of defense rather than offense. Davis emphasizes, “Our posture would not be to actively obstruct either local municipal ordinances, state law, or federal law that would codify expanded LGBT rights to living spaces.” However, he would push back on attempts to expand those rights to married housing at his university on the basis “that there’s already longstanding legal precedent for exemption from generally applicable laws in civic spaces.” A number of presidents are counting on the religious freedom argument.

Some presidents express confidence that the right to religious liberty is a bedrock principle. Henry asserts that religious freedom is “part of the American fabric.” In red states, James and Davis describe support from U.S. and state senators and representatives as well as local officials, which gives them additional confidence. Under the Trump presidency, Harrison wonders if “the potential for a new Supreme Court judge tilts in the direction of religious

freedom versus the loss of religious freedom.” In addition to groups like the CCCU, Henry talks about the ACLU’s “mixed history of supporting religious freedom. They support religious freedom to a point, but up to that point they certainly are strong partners.” Graham believes that the ACLU’s support was a major factor in the eventual alteration of SB 1146 in California last year. Part of Davis’s confidence is his increased understanding of how much precedent exists for religious liberty. The other part of his confidence comes from the

direct relationships that I’ve been building with lawmakers who are either Democrat or Republican who really do cherish First Amendment rights and acknowledge that that is a fundamental freedom for Americans, in fact, a public good that we would flourish as a society by having that kind of diversity.

Taking the time to build relationships is one of several additional responses presidents are considering.

Other Strategies

Although with less frequency, the presidents suggest other potential strategies. Table 4.5 lists these ideas, who articulated them, and adds a brief quote or description. Note that the presidents do not advocate either the “Benedictine option” or the “cultural war,” but mention them as options that other Christian universities might be considering.

Table 4.5

Other Strategies

President	Strategy	Description/Quote
Harrison, Henry, Roger, Walton	Alternative funding	Identify alternative sources of funding to replace lost federal financial aid. Either through the church, national organizations, financial institutions, or philanthropists.
James	Be a good neighbor	“Everything we have, everything we own is available every day [to the local community].”

President	Strategy	Description/Quote
Harrison, Roger	Benedictine option	Harrison: “A withdrawal into monasteries of thought and work and patience and practice where you...cloister yourself, protect yourself in every way and ask for nothing from society, but return not much to society.” Neither he nor Roger would take this approach but they acknowledge that some might.
Walton	Change as little as possible	We would “probably go through a slow, rearguard action of trying to be just as close to not obeying as possible.”
James	Create change agents	Challenge students who enter with a pluralistic worldview to consider a different perspective. “They don’t hear it in a caustic way. They hear it in a winsome way and they begin to read a little more and challenge their own thinking.” He hopes this will promote “change agents in a world that really needs to change.”
Harrison, Davis	Cultural war	Harrison describes this option: “Fight them, sue them, march them, elect the right judges, politicians.” He advocates strongly against this, “I think the culture war has proved disastrous for Christianity.” Davis agrees, saying “fundamentalist icons...actually do damage to our movement.”
Roger	Demonstrate compassion	We need to “demonstrate in as many ways as possible that we’re going to be compassionate. We’re going to be sensitive. We’re going to be hospitable. We’re going to acknowledge the deep struggle that members of our campus community, who would identify as LGBT or same-sex attracted, experience. We don’t want, ever, policy to be what we default to as a way of avoiding difficult situations with people.”
Nathan, Davis	Mutual understanding	An intentional effort to build positive relationships with state legislators.
Davis	Room to maneuver	The parent denomination needs to recognize that a university functions “a little bit differently...than a congregation” and should allow some variation “in how policies are lived out.”
Roger	Workarounds	Rather than refusing to sanction same-sex marriages in their chapel, they “approve or disapprove officiants” based on whether they belong to a church with congruent beliefs.

Despite all of the efforts to find a compromise, make a case, wage a defensive legal battle, or any other response, Christian universities might not be able to hold off the pressure to change their policies. Apart from Davis, all of the presidents, including Frank and Anthony at the

passively inclusive institutions, accept the possibility—for some the inevitability—that they will have to choose between changing their policies and coping with losing access to Title IV funding, losing tax-exempt status, suffering irreparable damage to reputation, dealing with class action lawsuits, and so on. The question then arises, what if all these strategies fail?

If All Else Fails

The presidents fall into three categories: those who expect to change their practices, either temporarily or permanently; those who do not believe they will ever change, regardless of the outcome; and those who are unsure what the outcome will be. All accept that there will likely be major consequences whichever direction they ultimately choose.

Many schools within the CCCU are not “strong financially solvent shops to start with. This would be the death knell for many of them,” says Harrison. Although his university would not change its stance, he believes a number will have to decide, “Is it better for us to knuckle under on this one and survive with the Christian message for the world or would it be better for us to close?” Walton’s institution would mount a “slow rearguard action” against intense federal pressure for as long as possible but eventually would probably change its policies. Roger reluctantly admits that his institution would probably change its practices but then suggests that, alternatively, they might be able to “almost shut down and then revision it, reimagine it.” Harrison also talks about the concept of reshaping: “A university that is making the choice to die or change, that university might make a decision to compromise for a period of time while they’re able to get their act together and figure out another way to do it.” Much of Roger’s ambivalence to change is because “it’s hard for me to picture a scenario where we could change our practices fundamentally and still be actually true to who we are.”

There are other consequences of such a decision beyond maintaining institutional identity. Walton readily acknowledges that the denomination might decide to withdraw financial and other support from the school and use it to support another institution to “see if they could keep it live under their previous direction.” However, he says if this were to happen in 20 years instead of five, “their position might alter...although I doubt it.”

In the second group are those presidents who are emphatic that their institutions will not alter their policies. In the last six months, says Edward, he has come to the realization, “My first answer always needs to be, ‘Our mission will not change.’ If we’re half as big, or if a third of the faculty has to be laid off, ‘The mission will not change.’” James takes a similar view and hopes his university will be able to access new donors “or try to develop those kinds of friends now that have access literally to hundreds of millions of dollars.” Harrison’s institution is already two years into a “five year run-up to be in a position where we can be free of federal financial aid if we needed to be.” If his institution has to make a decision, he does not want it made “with a financial gun to its head.” His institution has some additional leeway on the tax-exempt concern as Tennessee “is probably one of the safest states to be in” regarding property tax assessments. Likewise, Henry’s university has been planning for the last year to “create a structure where we would approach various entities nationally to talk about [alternatives for federal and state grants].” They are also conversing with financial institutions to create a student loan program. Although his university does not have the same buffer for property tax as Harrison’s, he maintains, “We would pursue our religious beliefs over accepting any type of resource that would influence us to change that path.” Nathan is not certain exactly what path his institution will take but knows that it will not change deeply held religious convictions.

Although Graham says “absent a sea change” his institution will not change its policies, at another point in the interview he was somewhat less confident:

I don't know. I mean we pray at the beginning, we pray at the middle, and we pray at the end, but I would say that if there were a draconian circumstance where laws were enacted, and we ended up having to navigate the course of legal challenges, then at the end of the day we would most likely go without federal aid.

At another point, he echoes Roger's concept of “a reshaped rationale for being” and adds, “I think that it's also possible that we could just see a wholesale shift in the way we accomplish our mission.” It is unclear what that might look like. Elliott simply does not know what will happen at his institution:

Everybody wonders, ‘Okay, at what point do you fold and decide preserving 97% of our mission is better than going out of business?’ I don't know what the tipping point would be on that. For us, I think there are some trustees for whom they would go down to the death fighting this and other trustees who would say, ‘Okay, if it's a matter of doing 97%, we'll do 97% and give it our best shot.’

His comment highlights the important role of the board of trustees in making these strategic decisions for their universities.

Board of trustees. Although presidents have a major role in determining their universities' position on these issues, their boards of trustees make the final decisions. Trustees are sometimes represented as external agents, but these presidents recognize that their boards are the primary source of control and authority on these topics. The ten presidents all refer to their board at some point and some report that their boards are very engaged in conversations on same-sex marriage. Nathan's board is actively considering language related to employee

policies, for example, and Davis's board spent "two full days on LGBT" issues this January. Roger notes that the board at his institution ratified a document regarding marriage and sexuality. At many institutions, the boards are all members of the parent denomination or a closely associated denomination. One participant's university was founded and is still legally owned by its parent denomination and therefore has the strongest ties to the church.

Walton, who indicates his university would likely change its policies if necessary, believes the "board would probably decide the mission of the university was worth it." Contrastingly, Harrison says he has "little doubt [that] the board would make the decision toward loyalty to denominational ethical position." Nathan's board has "had hypothetical conversations" about what it would do if an eventual legal challenge failed:

What's a line that we're not willing to cross with the hill that we're willing to die on? There are so many nuances to that that it's hard for me to say at this point what direction the university would take. It certainly would not be yielding deeply held theological convictions that are rooted in scripture and the historic Christian faith that we're saying, 'Well, we're willing to roll over on these issues for the sake of survival.' We're not going there.

Regardless of the outcome at each institution, it is evident that the boards will be heavily involved in making the decisions.

Role of the CCCU

Seven of the 12 presidents discussed the work and role of the CCCU, both as it relates to the issue of same-sex marriage and more generally. Five of those presidents are from institutions with non-affirming policies, that is, they believe it is wrong to have a sexual relationship with a member of the same-sex. Frank and Anthony, at passively inclusive institutions that take no

position on the issue, spoke at great length about the organization's priorities and whether they have a future in it. Interestingly, neither Graham nor Nathan in California mention the CCCU directly. This may be because the CCCU directs its lobbying efforts primarily at federal officials, and Graham and Nathan indicate the principal source of pressure is at the state level. For possibly the opposite reason, James, Harrison, and Walton are the other presidents who make no mention of the CCCU's work. All three are at institutions located in the South and indicate they feel little or no current pressure to change their policies.

The five presidents are relying on the CCCU to lobby on behalf of religious freedom. Davis says their membership in the CCCU is paying "for lobbying work to be done continually on these topics that keeps space for us through First Amendment rights and articulating religious liberties." Elliott notes that the CCCU and the NAE are "hard at work on the 'Fairness for All' agenda," which he endorses. Henry's university is not able to take a lead role due to its financial situation; involvement with the CCCU provides a way for his university to bolster support for religious freedom. Similarly, Edward's institution joined the CCCU about a year and a half ago "to be a part of a bigger group that has the connection, the ability, and the awareness to lobby first of all, and then to join in a lawsuit if need be." These presidents are counting on the CCCU, but there is also uncertainty about the organization's future.

Henry wonders what will happen to the CCCU if "societal pressure continues down the path where institutions are going to be willing to openly change their policies." He thinks "the structure and nature of the CCCU could change fairly dramatically in the future." Depending on what the majority of member institutions do, his may or may not remain in the CCCU. He talks about the situation with Union University, which left the organization "because they did not feel like the CCCU was moving fast enough" when Goshen and Eastern Mennonite announced they

were changing their policies on same-sex marriage. He says, “We’re not quite in [the Union] camp but we’re also not in the camp of Eastern Mennonite and Goshen either.”

Frank and Anthony, on the other hand, wonder if their institutions will be able to maintain membership in the CCCU, given that their policies permit students and employees to be in same-sex relationships. Frank says his predecessor told him their institution “‘is probably the most liberal in the group.’ I don’t know if we are or not, but I would say that we’re probably definitely on that end.” He has no interest to “lead any charge for reform that [non-affirming universities] should all be like us” and would be willing to maintain membership as an affiliate rather than as a full member if it came down to that. Anthony takes a stronger stand. When asked if he was comfortable being part of an organization that engages in political lobbying on an issue they do not support, he initially says, “No,” then qualifies:

I’m not uncomfortable with an organization lobbying along those lines. I am uncomfortable with the lobbying giving the impression that it’s a single perspective organization. My fear is, that more often than not, the environment is presented as a cohesive, unified environment and it’s just not.

Anthony does not believe the CCCU effectively represents his university, which is currently trying to determine how it relates to the organization: “It is challenging for us to be included in the CCCU now, because they’ve made such a definitive statement on the topic, which essentially marginalizes us.” At the same time, he says it would be “deeply disappointing” to leave, but the CCCU is making it hard to remain. Ironically, he thinks the CCCU could strengthen its position as it works towards Fairness for All if it allowed more variety in its membership: “That alone would show a little bit of compromise.” He concludes, “When it comes to the CCCU, we’re either on the edge and about ready to fall off, or we’re on the cutting edge.” He hopes that other

universities and churches will follow his university's lead and take a more moderate stance. His view, however, is certainly not representative of the majority of CCCU institutions today.

Conclusion

This exploratory study reveals that presidents at Christian universities do not have, as previously understood, uniform policies regarding same-sex intimacy. Although 32 of 34 total respondents report non-affirming positions, two respondents describe themselves as passively inclusive. These two presidents, along with ten from non-affirming institutions were interviewed. The ten institutions have policies prohibiting sexual relationships outside of a heterosexual marriage but make strong distinctions between behavior as compared to attraction and identity. Their presidents describe varying degrees of rapidly increasing pressure from multiple sources. The strongest source emanates from state legislators and advocacy groups in blue states. Just as important, the presidents are aware that current and future students are more affirming of same-sex relationships and that the disconnect between students and church and university leaders is expanding swiftly. The presidents are navigating the future through a variety of strategies to delay, circumvent, or prevent changes to their policies. Their boards of trustees expect to face major decision points within the next five to ten years. As the presidents reflect on their policies, describe external and internal pressures, and talk about their responses, they are uncompromising in their beliefs but are not strident or harsh. James explains:

God's the one in charge and we're trying to follow Him, but we want to be faithful. We want to be loving. We can't condone what He doesn't want us to condone, but bottom line is we can love people through the process.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Christian universities today seek to maintain their religious identity in a pluralistic world. A major challenge for such universities relates to their policies and practices regarding sexual orientation, particularly in light of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) decision legalizing same-sex marriage. This chapter provides a brief description of the purpose of the research, summarizes and discusses the findings, makes suggestions for future research, and highlights implications for practitioners at Christian universities who must make sense of, and decisions about, this issue.

The last few decades have seen a major shift in the view of same-sex marriage in American society. Although same-sex marriage is now widely accepted, many Christian universities retain a traditional view of marriage. Findings from this qualitative study provide insight into how Christian universities seek to preserve their religious identity in a changing world. Institutional isomorphism theory suggests that a variety of pressures drive organizations within a field to resemble one another over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Christian universities experience pressure to conform to the rest of the higher education field even as they attempt to keep their unique identity. The purpose of the research was to explore how isomorphic forces interact and shape perspectives at Christian universities in the wake of the *Obergefell* decision.

A review of the literature provided context and structure for the research study. It examined the history and role of Christian universities in the United States, analyzed prior research on the issue of sexual orientation at religious universities, and described institutional isomorphism theory. The review showed that Christian universities struggle to maintain a balance between the secular and religious world, and the issue of same-sex marriage throws this balancing act into stark relief. Institutional isomorphism theory provided a framework for

understanding how Christian universities attempt to retain their legitimacy as higher education institutions. Their future, and possibly survival, will be determined largely by their response to the widespread societal acceptance of same-sex relationships. This study provides insight into how presidents at Christian universities perceive isomorphic forces relative to the issue of same-sex marriage and how they are considering their responses to that pressure.

Summary of the Findings

Findings from the interviews, supported by the data obtained from the online survey, provided answers to the following research questions that guided the study:

- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe isomorphic forces relative to their policies on same-sex marriage?
- How do presidents at Christian universities describe their institution's response to these forces?

This section presents findings relevant to the research questions.

Research Question 1

How do presidents at Christian universities describe their policies on same-sex marriage?

Although there are at least two passively inclusive universities, almost all CCCU institutions took the position that a heterosexual marriage is the only place for sexual intimacy. These universities expect their faculty, staff, and traditional undergraduates to abide by policies congruent with this viewpoint. In general, institutions do not attempt to enforce their policies with online programs or programs geared towards continuing education. Most institutions expect their employees to hold similar views or, at the least, not publicly advocate for a contrary

position. Students typically have more freedom to engage in advocacy, but the presidents did not describe significant student activism on this topic.

The ten presidents at universities with non-affirming policies agreed that, although there would not be a quick rush to judgment, they eventually would terminate employees who persist in a same-sex relationship or advocate for same-sex relationships. For students the picture was less clear, although it seems likely that persistent violation of the policies would lead to dismissal. This was true for students and employees engaged in an intimate heterosexual relationship outside of marriage as well as for those in a same-sex relationship.

The presidents made a clear distinction between attraction, identity, and behavior. They did not express criticism or judgment of individuals who are attracted to a member of the same sex or identify as gay or lesbian, although they expect such individuals to remain celibate. There was no suggestion that students who identify as gay or lesbian need to be “fixed.” The presidents expressed compassion and support for students who are working through their sexual identity and recognized that these students face a significant and lifelong challenge. However, they do expect compliance with their behavioral standards while students are enrolled at their respective institutions.

Research Question 2

How do presidents at Christian universities describe isomorphic forces relative to their policies on same-sex marriage?

Presidents at non-affirming institutions reported little overt pressure to retain their standards. When expressed, it was usually internal pressure from the board or external pressure from their associated denominations or the Church in general. They largely perceived these

forces as supportive rather than coercive. There was even less evidence of pressure to strengthen policy; when expressed, it typically derived from very conservative church members or donors.

Conversely, the presidents reported a wide range of pressures to change their policies, with considerable regional variance. Although some variance was anticipated, an unexpected finding was the degree to which geography and the local political climate affected the discussion. Presidents from California and other blue states described substantial pressure to change. Presidents from institutions in the South reported little direct pressure; however, they believed that, in time, they would be pressured to change to a much greater degree. At the state level in the blue states, where there is fear that legislators will eliminate access to state grants or otherwise constrain universities to adjust their policies, the pressure is stronger. Nationally, presidents indicated their concern with pressure from the Department of Education, especially under the past administration, as well as from specialized accreditors and the voice of public opinion.

As more churches and religious institutions within Evangelical Christianity become either “passively inclusive” or openly affirming, the challenge increases for those who retain their policies. Advocacy and special interest groups are also a key source of pressure. The strongest internal pressure is the changing attitude of young people who increasingly affirm same-sex marriage.

The presidents were amazed at how quickly societal norms have shifted and the rapid escalation of pressure on the issue of same-sex marriage. There was a sense that the election of President Trump has provided a momentary pause in which religious institutions can determine how to respond, although that was less true in states with high levels of local pressure.

Research Question 3

How do presidents at Christian universities describe their institution's response to these forces?

The CCCU and other groups advocating religious freedom provide support and leadership to Christian universities who hope to retain both their policies and their access to federal and state monies. One of the most common strategies that the presidents are actively engaged in or are supporting through their involvement in the CCCU is to reach a compromise solution that the LGBT community can endorse. This would entail an arrangement whereby the Evangelical Christian and other socially conservative faith-based communities will receive exemptions from federal, state, and local laws that provide civic protections for the LGBT community. In turn, they will sanction the establishment of civic protections in public places. The presidents ranged from enthusiastic to dubious on how this ultimately might work.

Another common response is to make a case that Christian higher education is a public good, providing value to the American economy and contributing to its diversity. These universities are simultaneously careful in the language they use to describe their policies, intentionally removing “lightning rods” that attract unwanted attention. Meanwhile, they also seek to be clear and transparent in their policies.

If these responses, and a variety of others, are unsuccessful, all ten presidents at universities with non-affirming policies are willing to participate in a legal challenge. They rely on the Freedom of Religion clause in the First Amendment and trust that the American public and legal system will continue to carve out religious exemptions to civil rights laws. Although the presidents termed it a last resort, most believed a legal challenge is inevitable.

Should a legal challenge fail, the universities do not share a default position. Some would change their policies to retain access to federal and state aid or to retain tax-exempt status. This

may be more likely for institutions that are in weaker financial positions. Some do not intend to change their position, even if the consequences are severe, while others would reconsider reshaping how the university meets its mission. The boards of trustees at each university will make the final decision on which direction their respective institutions take.

Finally, the future of the CCCU as an umbrella organization for Christian universities is somewhat unclear. The presidents value the CCCU's lobbying efforts related to religious freedom, but the two passively inclusive institutions do not support lobbying related to the issue of same-sex marriage. Another president wondered if the CCCU will have to restructure itself if more members become passively inclusive. This tension within the CCCU on the issue of same-sex marriage reflects the tension within the Christian community and the challenge for Christian universities who seek to maintain their policies in accordance with their religious beliefs.

Discussion

The findings in this section are aligned with the three research questions. They add to current knowledge regarding the position that Christian universities take relative to sexual orientation. The findings also add to scholarship in the area of institutional theory, as institutional isomorphism, particularly coercive force, is evident. The changing opinions of young evangelicals are given special attention in this section. Finally, the findings show the effect of agency as Christian universities respond to pressure to change their policies.

Positions on Same-Sex Marriage

The findings confirm previous research that the predominant view at Christian universities is that sexual activity should be limited to a heterosexual marriage (Williams et al., 2013). An unexpected result, however, was the discovery of a minority viewpoint within the CCCU that has existed for some time, contrary to media reports (Jaschik, 2015). These passively

inclusive institutions do not actively support same-sex relationships but do not have policies that restrict them. The majority viewpoint, however, is that same-sex behavior is contrary to Biblical doctrine and the teaching of the church. Consistent with findings from Wentz and Wessel (2011), presidents at these non-affirming institutions distinguish between identity and behavior, as do their parent denominations.

Although recent studies show that same-sex attracted students perceive their campus climate to be negative relative to homosexuality (Stratton et al., 2013; Watson, 2015; Wolff et al., 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009), the presidents in this study saw their campuses as supportive and welcoming. In a sense, this is true for those students who “have agreed to part of our community either in spite of *or because of* our posture on human sexuality,” as Nathan says (emphasis added). The presidents describe a willingness to help, assist, and support students who are dealing with questions of sexual identity, but within a framework that clearly establishes that same-sex behavior is wrong. This may be a comfort for gay and lesbian students who hold congruent beliefs and wish to pursue lives of celibacy (Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). For those who are unconvinced that celibacy is the answer, restrictive policies are hardly conducive to a welcoming environment, even if campuses have effective procedures to prevent and punish harassment and bullying of sexual minorities.

Elliott remarked, “When you know someone and it’s more than an arms-length relationship, it shapes how you respond personally to these issues.” This aligns with previous research that shows when one has a friend, relative, or close acquaintance who identifies as gay or lesbian, one tends to be more affirming (Wolff et al., 2012; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Despite any personal relationships or sympathies that may exist, their position on these issues remains firmly held.

The findings establish that the universities' policies are based on genuine religious conviction, not prejudice, fear, or hatred. In fact, it is clear that the presidents want their institutions to be perceived as more than simply a non-hostile environment. They perceive themselves and their institutions to be genuinely kind and welcoming and want others to see those qualities in them. They are not naïve and recognize that many outside their borders—and some inside—perceive their position on same-sex behavior to be intolerant. When Harrison, for example, mentions that sexual orientation “is almost 100% not a chosen issue,” reasonable people can argue that if it is not a chosen issue, why discriminate if orientation becomes behavior. The presidents may have biblically based reasons, but those outside the Evangelical Church are likely to see any theological distinction as a veil to cover prejudice. There was no suggestion from presidents, however, that their stance will change unless it is imposed from outside.

Pressure to Change or Maintain Stance on Same-Sex Marriage

It is evident that the presidents do feel tremendous pressure as it relates to their current position on same-sex relationships. To explore these perceptions, DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theory of institutional isomorphism was identified as an appropriate theoretical framework. The authors argue that as an institution competes “for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p. 150), it experiences pressure to conform to the rest of its field. The presidents from non-affirming institutions described multiple sources of pressure to change their policies, which align with the theory's typology of normative, mimetic, and coercive forces. Although there was substantial evidence of coercive pressure, only minimal evidence of normative and mimetic pressure was revealed.

Normative forces. Normative isomorphism is generally seen as a result of professionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and manifests itself once a concept is established as valid (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). Specialized accreditors or national organizations create normative pressure through the establishment of best practices or standards. Harrison also notes that faculty, particularly more liberal professors, “will view these issues differently than the Church.” He notes that professors in general are “the kind of collective group to start with that wants to challenge and push the issue and do critical thinking regarding cultural issues.” These faculty experienced their own disciplinary training, often at institutions with very different practices and policies, and carry those perspectives with them. A final form of normative pressure is the internal consistency issue that Roger and Harrison both mention. When Christian universities elect not to apply policies regarding same-sex relationships within their graduate, continuing education, or online programs, they effectively take a passively inclusive position for those populations. This creates normative pressure within the organization, as part of the university accepts the position as valid.

Mimetic forces. Mimetic isomorphism occurs during times of uncertainty as institutions seek to mimic legitimized models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Frank, at a passively inclusive institution, talked about the CCCU institutions having “lots of like-mindedness.” These are institutions that already have much in common, and the theory suggests that CCCU institutions will mimic those members with the highest perceived degree of legitimacy and success. Of course, as faith-based universities, legitimacy is determined from the perspectives of both religion and higher education. Because there is so much similarity when it comes to religion, it seems likely that those institutions within the CCCU with a reputation for academic quality will emerge as particularly influential.

Outside the CCCU, Roger argued that as more evangelical denominations or institutions move in a more affirming direction, those “universities like us that have a clear statement in favor of the traditional position, will look [more] antiquated or at least be perceived to be both antiquated and close-minded.” This type of pressure could also be described as coercive and therefore highlights one of the shortcomings that the original authors and subsequent scholars have noted with institutional isomorphism theory. That is, the categories are not empirically distinct and mimetic force in particular could often be classified as either coercive or normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; Washington & Ventresca, 2004). In this case, there are elements of both forces. Some Christian universities may alter their practices to mimic what they see as changing trends within evangelical Christianity while others view the changes as contributing to coercive pressure to conform.

Coercive forces. The strong indication of coercive pressure is not surprising, as coercive isomorphism “stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). The issue of same-sex marriage is one that is highly politicized, as much of the discussion with the presidents demonstrated. It was particularly evident in the interviews with presidents in the blue states, especially with Graham and Nathan in California. The introduction of SB 1146 in California last year clearly surprised them, and Graham said the loss of state grants, or Pell grants or accreditation, “would all be just really draconian, horrifying, almost unimaginable for an institution like ours.” The concept of tying access to state grants also spilled over to other states; Henry, for example, referred to conversations amongst Illinois legislators. Although SB 1146 was ultimately amended, there is a real likelihood that a bill with similar provisions will be reintroduced in 2017 (McGreevy, 2016b). This seems highly likely since California, “particularly in light of the Trump victory,” said Graham, “has determined, self-

announced, to be the most progressive state in the nation.” The “almost unimaginable” impact of losing state or federal funding for institutions reveals the high degree of pressure governmental agents can apply.

Interestingly, the presidents in these blue states were at times almost dismissive of the impact of the federal government while those in red states were much more concerned. That sense of pressure, however, was primarily a result of the actions of the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) under President Obama, and it seems likely that there will be a pause under President Trump’s administration. Even with a Republican administration, Harrison said, “We saw our first campaign that was run where those on both sides of the aisle were not making an issue to protest gay marriage at some level.” Eventually there will be another U.S. president with more liberal policies, and the presidents clearly feel that long-term access to federal aid is threatened.

Another important source of pressure is the Church, although in this case the forces exerted are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Although the presidents generally describe pressure from the Church to retain their policies, there are theologically conservative voices that advocate an even stronger position. In contrast, there are also liberal voices within the universities’ affiliated denominations that exert pressure to move to a more inclusive position. Roger described a “continued growing rift within Evangelical Christianity.” Christian universities are in a unique position according to Taylor (2015) due to their juxtaposition between two organizational fields: higher education and organized religion. He argues that colleges respond to this type of between-field conflict by complying with the norms of the field providing the most resources. There was scant evidence that the denominations provide significant financial resources, and some universities are not associated with any specific tradition. The church,

however, does serve as a fertile ground to recruit students and as the basis for the universities' religious mission and identity. If affiliated denominations change their position or explicitly allow Christian universities more latitude on the issue of same-sex marriage in admission and possibly hiring, it will, of course, be much easier for the universities to comply with more publically accepted social norms.

Other forms of coercive force were also expressed, although some forms of pressure are currently more theoretical than actual. For example, the presidents generally indicated they feel supported by their regional accreditors. There was a fear that specialized accreditation in fields like medicine, nursing, social work, and others is more likely to be withheld at some future date. Others talked about the potential challenges of placing students in hospitals, schools, and other organizations for clinical experiences. Although there is no immediate threat, universities such as Elliott's cannot survive without access to these facilities. These organizations, along with Christian universities, also face the threat of public shaming from LGBT advocacy groups like the Human Rights Campaign. Nathan made an important observation about special interest groups, specifically mentioning Campus Pride, Human Rights Campaign, and others:

They need other battles to fight. It wasn't like they closed their businesses and said, 'Mission accomplished. We can shut down our special interest groups and advocacy groups and we can let go of all of our employees and stop our fundraising efforts.'

It is difficult to assess the impact these and other groups have on society as a whole, but it is clear that same-sex marriage is here to stay. There is increasing "media attention on faith-based higher education as it relates to stories of students that might feel discriminated against," claimed Nathan. The risk of damage to Christian universities' reputation is increasing, which ultimately could be even more costly than the loss of federal and state grants or tax-exempt status.

Although the proximate source of coercive pressure comes from state and federal government, the most important long-term source is the change in student attitudes. The presidents recognized students as a source of pressure but with the exception of a few, describe it as a relatively quiet internal presence. Ironically, it was Walton in the deep South, where the presidents currently experience minimal pressure to change policies, who described “a growing disconnect between [students’] feelings on this matter versus that of their elders.” Six years before *Obergefell* was decided, a survey of young evangelicals found that 56% favored some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples (Chamberlain, 2009). Walton mentioned a similar statistic and concluded, “When those numbers reach the majority of the young, all you have to do is sort of project into the future and see where that’s headed.” James pays very close attention to trends among young people, and claimed that “70 to 80% of Gen Z students, whether they’re believers or not, believe that the Supreme Court decision is the right one.” Roger suggested that students are more inclined to be affirming “out of a desire to be kind” rather than based on any theological position. This is consistent with Wolff et al. (2012), who argue that emotional response for students at Christian universities is more important than biblical understanding on questions of same-sex marriage.

Walton used the expression, “it bubbles below the surface,” to describe some students who see his university’s position as intolerant. As the speed of changing public opinion intensifies, student pressure may well become the most important coercive force. Due to the rapid pace, young evangelicals who see LGBT rights not as a moral but as a civil rights issue will eventually shift from what Edward describes as a “vocal left edge” to the mainstream. Therefore, an apt analogy to describe the effect of students’ changing opinions may be a tsunami. It starts as a wave that appears to be nothing more than a swiftly moving ripple on the surface but

when it hits low ground it rises quickly and leaves devastation in its wake. It seems likely that an increasing number of young Christians will view prohibitive policies on same-sex marriage as intolerant, anachronistic, and unkind. Will these students want to identify with institutions highlighted by advocacy groups or media stories as bigoted or prejudiced? Conversely, might some students seek out a university they see as anti-LGBT, thereby creating the intolerant climate presidents are trying to avoid? It is impossible to know, just as the impact of a tsunami cannot be known until the waters recede.

Christian universities experience significant pressure to conform to the rest of higher education as it relates to their policies regarding same-sex relationships. That pressure has escalated rapidly and is likely to continue, although President Trump's administration is likely to provide some breathing room for Christian universities. Inevitably, however, pressure from students, from state and federal government, from accreditors, from society at large, and even from liberal voices within the Evangelical church will lead to a major turning point. The growing disconnect with students who see same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue, the emergent rift within the church, increased media scrutiny, expanded efforts of LGBT advocacy groups, and activist legislators all point to the likelihood that universities will need to withstand or succumb to pressure to change their policies. The presidents' general assessments that this will occur within the next five to ten years seems likely, and institutions will either need to conform in order to survive or will need to leave the field of higher education. This binary decision set is stark, and it is clear that presidents at Christian universities wish to find alternatives. The next section considers the role of human agency as universities consider potential responses to these forces.

Responses to Pressure

As previously noted, there is broad acceptance that strategic response to environmental forces varies from one organization to another (Delmas & Toffel, 2008; Oliver, 1991; Scott & Biag, 2016; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Cantwell, 2014; Vaira, 2004; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011; Zha, 2009). Oliver (1991) suggests there are five strategies that organizations employ in response to institutional pressure each with three associated tactics (see Table 5.1). All of these strategies and most of the tactics emerged from an analysis of the interviews with the ten presidents at non-affirming institutions. Each president had responses in at least three and up to all five of the strategic areas.

Table 5.1

Oliver's Strategic Responses to Institutional Processes

Strategies	Tactics	Examples
Acquiescence	Habit	Following invisible, taken-for-granted norms
	Imitate	Mimicking institutional models
	Comply	Obedying rules and accepting norms
Compromise	Balance	Balancing the expectations of multiple constituents
	Pacify	Placating and accommodating institutional elements
	Bargain	Negotiating with multiple stakeholders
Avoid	Conceal	Disguising nonconformity
	Buffer	Loosening institutional attachments
	Escape	Changing goals, activities, or domains
Defy	Dismiss	Ignoring explicit norms and values
	Challenge	Contesting rules and requirements
	Attack	Assaulting the sources of institutional pressure
Manipulate	Co-opt	Importing influential constituents
	Influence	Shaping values and criteria
	Control	Dominating institutional constituents and processes

Note: Reproduced from "Strategic responses to institutional processes," by C. Oliver, 1991, *The Academy of Management Review*, 16, p. 152.

Acquiescence. The four strategic responses of compromise, avoid, defy, or manipulate were represented with very similar distributions; however, acquiescence was rarely mentioned.

Only one president, Walton, indicated that his university would ultimately choose to change its policies in order to retain tax-exempt status and access to Title IV aid. This was particularly interesting, as he noted very little pressure currently in his Southern state. He indicated that if his board did make this decision, the university “would probably go through a slow rearguard action of trying to be just as close to not obeying as possible.” Walton’s response aligns with the concept of symbolic compliance with norms in order to preserve legitimacy (Bastedo, 2007; Dattey et al., 2014). Such compliance carries a risk, however, as purely symbolic gestures can create distrust for constituents (Stensaker & Norgård, 2001). Two other presidents indicated they might comply. Roger did but then retracted somewhat and said those responsible for the decision might “almost shut down, and then revision it.” It was not clear what a reimagined model might look like. Elliott believed that change is inevitable at some point, and argued there are some parallels between how the Church handled divorce and the issue of same-sex marriage. Harrison did not believe his institution would comply because of federal or state pressure but did think that a number of CCCU members in weaker financial positions will be faced with the decision to comply or close. Those institutions that do comply are perhaps likely to take Walton’s approach of symbolic compliance.

Manipulate. Six of the ten presidents described attempts to influence others, which falls under the strategic response of manipulate in Oliver’s (1991) table. There are several ways presidents describe this kind of response. One way is simply to remind the public about the importance of religious freedom and choice in the United States. James described conversations with politicians who ask why students should receive federal or state money. He asked them:

‘These are taxpayers, are they not?’ They say yes, and I say, ‘If these taxpayers happen to be believers in Christian faith and they want their tax money for their kid to go to an

institution that they support, who are you to say they can't do that?' They look at you and go, 'Huh, hadn't hear that argument before.'

The problem with this argument and similar arguments about diversity and choice is that there are many groups who hold positions that the U.S. government and public do not support. If a church associated with the White Supremacist movement, for example, wanted to establish a university, it is difficult to imagine its students receiving Pell grants to help them pay for it given racial discrimination laws. Policies related to sexual behavior are distinct from policies related to race and ethnicity but are increasingly tied together under "that nebulous category of diversity," as Edward says. A different response that may be more effective in the long run is seen in the effort to build relationships with lawmakers and others who are on the other side of the same-sex issue. These efforts have two aims. First, simply "so that we could understand them more and they could understand us more," says Nathan. This understanding leads to improved relationships and for Christian universities provides an opportunity to present themselves as tolerant and accepting when it comes to sexual identity, if not behavior. The second aim is to tell the story of how religious universities provide a public good, particularly as it relates to the use of public monies. According to some of the presidents, CCCU institutions have lower default rates on student loans, provide access to disenfranchised students, and have relatively high completion rates. Davis describes these kinds of lobbying efforts as not "just being political" but as articulating what he sees as "a very good story to tell" about Christian universities. James talks about "making a new case in a new, positive way. We've always spent so much time on what we're against that it's kind of refreshing to talk about what we are for." These efforts to build relationships and increase understanding are closely tied to the next strategic response of

compromise, which cannot occur without understanding, if not agreeing, with the other's viewpoint.

Compromise. Eight of the ten presidents identified compromise as a strategic response. This was seen primarily through the tactic of bargaining, with presidents describing attempts to engage in the Fairness for All agenda. Henry and Davis both talk about a both/and rather than an either/or approach to LGBT rights and religious freedom. Harrison refers to it as civic pluralism, and believes it is “the best path forward for Christianity.” He continues, “It simply means that we have space for each other to exist without contest and conflict all the time.” This assumes that advocacy groups, society, and especially young people agree, especially as LGBT protections become normalized. The Fairness for All approach does seem reasonable and is likely the best chance Christian universities have to hold off an either/or scenario. However, depending on how far institutions have to move in order to compromise, initiatives like Fairness for All could be the first step on a path that leads towards passive inclusivity. A Christian university or advocacy organization like the CCCU that supports civil rights for LGBT persons certainly can continue to make the legal argument that they are entitled to retain discriminatory practices under First Amendment protections. However, the step of actively supporting LGBT issues is a significant philosophical departure. More particularly, it may create a major source of tension between those who support LGBT rights and more conservative elements within the Church. Davis wants parent denominations to acknowledge that universities need to be treated “a little bit differently...than a congregation” and allow some variation “in how policies are lived out.” Again, this is reasonable but it will create additional space between the Church and the university. There are also legal implications as the increased distance makes it harder to claim that the university deserves all the First Amendment protection of its parent denomination.

Avoid. Nine of the ten presidents described tactical responses aligned with avoidance. Several presidents talked about changing policy language, another example of symbolic compliance, or becoming less vocal to become a smaller target for special interest groups and media scrutiny. Walton's response of being "as close to not obeying as possible" while complying with potential new regulations is another example of concealment. Harrison and Henry are actively involved in finding alternative sources of funding to replace the potential loss of student access to financial aid; James and Roger also mention the concept. For some, avoidance means a willingness to forgo federal aid, tax-exempt status, and even the loss of accreditation. Edward asserts, "Our mission will not change," which is echoed by many of the presidents. They recognize that the consequences will result in radical change in how their mission is achieved and may lead to the institution closing. Harrison says that at some institutions, the boards "are going to be wrestling with the question, 'Is it better for us to knuckle under on this one and survive with the Christian message for the world, or would it be better for us to close?'" When actually faced with that decision, a few will choose to close their doors, but it seems more likely that the desire to spread their message will result in reluctant compliance.

Defy. Finally, the ten presidents' most common, if undesired, response from Oliver's (1991) schema was defiance. More specifically, they all would participate in a legal challenge in the event that federal or state governments impose laws or regulations that they believe would impinge on religious freedom. This is particularly true as it relates to the loss of tax-exempt status. The presidents generally believe that there is enough legal precedent protecting religious freedom that they would win such a challenge. However, Nathan in California is much less confident that a Freedom of Religion argument will trump the Civil Rights Act. The presidents also note the emphasis on diversity, which Edward describes "as a value above all values" for

accreditors as it “trickles down” from governmental agencies. Graham cautions, “equating sexual orientation and gender identity with race/ethnicity/religion is bad legal policy.” If society, legislators, and the executive branch increasingly treat sexual orientation as they do racial discrimination, the Supreme Court could easily apply the precedent set in *Bob Jones Univ. v. United States* (1983). As a result, the IRS could eliminate tax-exempt status for religious organizations serving a social purpose, such as higher education, that discriminate against individuals in same-sex relationships. Although the majority of presidents believe a First Amendment challenge will be successful, if the trend of public approval of same-sex marriage continues to climb, their confidence is misplaced.

Although the answer to the second research questions revealed that there is strong evidence of isomorphic pressure to conform, the presidents described a variety of strategic responses. There was little evidence of a unified response, however, beyond a willingness to unite in an eventual, albeit undesired, legal challenge to retain tax-exempt status or student access to federal or state monies. There is great confidence in the religious freedom protections of the First Amendment; however, as the public at large increasingly accepts same-sex marriage, it is very possible that civil rights will be seen as more important than religious freedom for higher education. Indicators of this are already present within society, as James’s grant application process demonstrated: The bank wanted to know, “If we fund this grant, how will this help support LGBT communities and their ideals?” In general, the presidents are not inclined to acquiesce at this point although a minority accept that such a decision is inevitable in the future. Symbolic compliance is a likely strategy in that event, particularly in more conservative regions of the country. Many presidents were quite clear that, at this time, their universities would not

change their policies even if the effect were to reduce faculty and staff or possibly lead to closure.

A number discussed articulating the public value of Christian universities to lawmakers and wider society, while others described the importance of building relationships with politicians and others with differing viewpoints. This lays the foundation for a compromise approach in which Christian universities and their advocacy groups support civil rights for the LGBT community, who in turn support religious freedom exemptions. Such a move is a reasonable strategy but may jeopardize relationships with more conservative constituents and is also a step towards passive inclusivity. Several presidents are actively seeking alternative sources of funding, which is a highly effective strategy to replace the impact of a loss of federal or state grants; however, it may not be as effective in responding to a loss of tax-exempt status.

Apart from one president, there was minimal evidence presidents are thinking about strategic responses related to future students' attitudes, the most important upcoming source of pressure. This is unquestionably the biggest shortcoming of their current strategizing followed closely by the lack of a unified response from Christian universities.

Limitations of the Study

There were several minor limitations of the study. First, no one from the Northeast region of the United States, 11% of all CCCU institutions, was interviewed. Although they represent a relatively small percentage of CCCU members, a perspective from that geographic region would have strengthened the study and is highly recommended for any scholar interested in extending this research. Second, by design, the study excluded Christian universities that are not full members of the CCCU, and therefore their perspective is missing. Third, although their position

gives them a broad vantage point, presidents represent only one voice within their universities. Future researchers should consider a multi-site case study design to gain a wider perspective.

A more serious limitation also relates to the research design. The survey and interview questions were written around the long-term implications of the *Obergefell* decision, specifically the possibility of losing (a) access to federal financial aid and (b) tax-exempt status. During the analysis of the data, the impact of state pressure and the role of students became evident, but the presidents were not asked specific questions about their potential responses in these areas. There is sufficient overlap in federal and state pressure that it is reasonable to conclude that responses would also be similar. However, an area for future research is the exploration of how Christian universities are considering their response to changing student values.

Suggestions for Future Research and Implications for Practice

In addition to consideration of the limitations previously noted, additional qualitative and quantitative research regarding sexual orientation at Christian universities is recommended. There would be great utility in longitudinal studies examining changing attitudes and perceptions on the intersection of human sexuality and religious belief within the Evangelical Church and at Christian universities. A related area for study is updated research into the attitudes of young evangelicals on questions of human sexuality and the relationship between civil rights and religious freedom. Similar studies at Christian universities, exploring current student, staff, faculty, and trustee attitudes towards these issues would also be valuable.

Although the study focused specifically on same-sex relationships, a number of presidents independently raised questions related to transgender issues. Future research into questions of sexual identity should include explicit consideration of transgender topics. There

was no mention of bisexuality beyond its simple inclusion as part of the LGBT acronym. Consideration of that topic may also be of value but does not appear to be as compelling.

Finally, although the presidents were asked questions about their policies on same-sex marriage as it relates to employees, it is possible that presidents answered the questions with only their full-time faculty in mind. Many of the respondents indicated that their universities are inconsistent in how they apply these policies to students in their online and graduate programs. It would be useful to determine if adjunct faculty are also treated distinctly, particularly as the percentage of teaching by adjunct faculty continues to grow at most institutions. In addition to these recommendations, there are also practical implications for Christian universities.

Implications for Practice

Unified strategic response. Christian universities do not have a unified strategy for responding to pressure to change their policies apart from their membership in the CCCU. If they wish to retain their policies, they must work together to construct a set of strategic responses. There are several obstacles to this recommendation. First, one of the most striking research findings was the impact of regional politics and social mores on the issue. Pressure to change policy and practice is likely to increase more rapidly in blue states, and institutions in those states need targeted, local responses. Meanwhile, presidents in red states, especially in the South, currently see the federal government as the larger threat to religious freedom and need a national response. Second, there is considerable diversity within the CCCU. The study revealed a minority viewpoint of passively inclusive institutions, and even among the presidents of the ten non-affirming institutions, the commitment to holding fast to their policies varied. Edward said that no matter what, their “mission will not change,” while Elliott argues,

In some ways, I think our care for people at the margins is more important than these issues, and to be honest it's hard to imagine many families today where they don't know and care for someone who is same-sex attracted.

The third obstacle is the growing tension within the Evangelical Church itself as denominations revise their positions on the issue. The CCCU represents at least 30 unique denominations in addition to universities that describe themselves as interdenominational or non-denominational. In light of these fundamental differences, it will be difficult to create and hold to a unified strategy. This is especially the case as the breathing room provided by the Trump presidency may be short-lived, and in many ways is less relevant in California and other blue states anyway.

Based on the responses suggested by the presidents, a unified strategy should comprise a combination of tactics. It should include a coordinated marketing effort, not a television or radio advertising campaign, but a consistent approach to discussing the issue in public forums, in lobbying efforts, and so on. The message should be one of compassion and acceptance for students and employees who are same-sex attracted while being transparent regarding policies related to behavior. Their messaging also must explain, succinctly and convincingly, why Christian universities have their policies. Universities should build relationships with local, state, and federal legislators across blue and red states. Those in red states may see little need to do so currently, given the lack of direct pressure. However, a coordinated national response requires national involvement. This is a key step prior to identifying some sort of compromise approach such as Fairness to All legislation.

Meanwhile, universities should also be preparing to lose their battle at every level. At a minimum, this means identifying alternative sources of funding to replace federal and state grants and loans. They can eliminate married housing to prevent an early legal challenge.

Beyond that, universities should prepare contingencies for the loss of tax-exempt status. For example, Christian universities should create a separate legal entity as a charitable foundation to fund student scholarships rather than placing donated monies in the endowment. Some universities for whom these pathways are not enough to guarantee financial survival may need to consider if compliance is a valid option. When it comes to access to public funds, retaining tax-exempt status, and remaining accredited, the presidents are already in agreement that a legal challenge is the final resort and would be based on the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment.

Even if Christian universities make a successful religious freedom argument, even if they are able to find a compromise solution with LGBT advocacy groups and lawmakers to pass Fairness for All legislation, and even if they make a case to federal and state officials that Christian universities add to the public good and provide students with choice and diversity, the most significant challenge remains. Will young evangelicals continue to enroll at Christian universities they perceive as intolerant or unkind? For an enrolled student, the university has an opportunity to present their biblical understanding of human sexuality but can only do so if students enroll in the first place. As more students have a relative or close friend in a same-sex relationship, their collective reluctance to associate with an institution that will not hire or admit that person will increase. Universities must find ways to engage these students before and during the admission process. The distinction between person and behavior at Christian universities is an important one but quite difficult to communicate to a high school junior via a marketing message. Christian universities need to pay close attention to attitudes of children in middle school and high school and make continual adjustments to their messaging. If they are unsuccessful in this, victories in every other setting are meaningless.

Engaging the boards of trustees. Because the boards at Christian universities have ultimate decision-making authority, it is essential that trustees have a complete understanding of the issue and possible outcomes. The boards need to determine what their response will be in the face of all the pressure to conform. Particularly for financially struggling universities, boards will have to decide if it is better for the university to shut its doors without compromising deeply held beliefs or agree to policy changes that are in direct conflict to those beliefs so they can continue to articulate their position to new generations of students. Even for institutions who might be able to survive in a limited way, neither choice is simple. Boards need to apprehend fully the consequences of every decision they make.

Maintaining a safe environment. With so much attention focused on external pressure, Christian universities need to be intentional in maintaining a safe and welcoming campus environment for same-sex attracted students. As Nathan noted, some of these students are attending because of, not just in spite of, the universities' position on sexuality. For these and all other students who experience same-sex attraction, it will be easy to feel under attack or unwelcome as these issues continue to gain prominence within Christian higher education. Universities need to be thoughtful as they discuss the topic on their campuses and should send unambiguous messages that their intolerance is not directed towards same-sex attracted students, but to those who would bully or harass them.

Implications for the CCCU. There are also implications for the CCCU as they seek to maintain a position consistent with the majority of their members while retaining passively inclusive institutions. After reviewing a preliminary draft of the findings from this study, a senior CCCU official stated, "The CCCU continues to hold a centrist position of advocating for traditional understandings of marriage for members while recognizing that there will be some

Christian institutions that do not maintain that position” (personal communication, April 6, 2017). This position is likely to become increasingly challenging as the number of passively inclusive institutions increases, which seems likely, while the most conservative institutions become more entrenched. The CCCU needs to demonstrate how it benefits institutions at the margins as it, like the institutions it represents, also faces an uncertain future.

Conclusion

For those who believe that the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment is a basic right that extends to religious organizations, the implications of the *Obergefell* decision are a matter of great interest. The decision to legalize same-sex marriage signaled a fundamental shift in societal values as well as legal opinion and emphasizes the importance of civil rights in the United States. There have been conflicts between the Free Exercise Clause and other constitutional protections since their establishment. Although the courts have generally been friendly towards religious universities, the decisions in *Grove City College v. Bell* (1984) and *Bob Jones Univ. v. United States* (1983) show that the Supreme Court is willing to allow Congress to restrict access to public monies and to refuse to grant tax-exempt status to religious universities whose beliefs are in conflict with national policy interests. The dramatic pace of change described by the presidents highlights that ending discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation could become a national policy interest within a very short amount of time.

Beyond any legal threat, pressure from advocacy and special interest groups is going to increase in the wake of the *Obergefell* decision, and Nathan was correct in his view that Christian higher education is a logical and very visible target. There is also reason to believe that pressure from specialized accreditors and possibly regional accreditors will increase, all in the name of diversity and tolerance. It is ironic that some of the most strident voices calling for tolerance are

themselves intolerant. Finally, there is pressure to change from within the Church itself and most importantly from the shifting opinions of young evangelicals. Although there may be some breathing room because of the recent presidential election, within the next five to ten years Christian universities will be making decisions on same-sex issue that will affect their future. If they wish to prevent being forced to choose between changing their policies and retaining access to federal aid and retaining their tax-exempt status, they must come together to create a unified set of responses to pressure to conform to the rest of the higher education field.

From “Withstand or Succumb” to “Navigating the Future” and Back

The pressure to conform is so strong that the initial impetus for this research was a conviction that it was inevitable that Christian universities will be faced with such a decision shortly. The title of the dissertation, “Withstand or Succumb: Christian Universities and the Implications of Obergefell v. Hodges,” underscored my belief that this was a binary either/or decision set for Christian universities. My first interview was with Davis, who suggested that I reconsider the title as he believes that Christian universities can find a both/and solution relative to LGBT rights rather than an either/or. He suggested using a word like navigating: “It’s more that we’re navigating this space rather than facing a penultimate black or white binary choice to either close down or continue as we are.” Later in our interview he talked about his confidence in “navigating the future” for Christian universities, and the concept of compromise and the idea of both/and rather than either/or came up many times with the other presidents. The new working title for the dissertation became, “Navigating the Future: Christian Universities and the Implications of Obergefell v. Hodges.”

However, through the coding and analysis process, the powerful impact of changing student values became increasingly evident. Although it is possible, even likely, that a

compromise solution such as Fairness for All will succeed, Christian universities who retain restrictive policies on same-sex marriage will eventually be marginalized. They increasingly will be perceived as out-of-step with the rest of society. As more mainstream and even evangelical Protestant denominations take a passively inclusive, if not outright affirming, position that perception will increase. Therefore, the title of the dissertation swung back to the original title, but for different reasons. The “Withstand or Succumb” in the title no longer refers to legal and governmental pressure, although those forces are both real and imminent, but to pressure from young evangelicals.

In the short term, Christian universities will survive with their current policies if they are able to reach a compromise with the LGBT community and convince federal and state officials that they add to the public good and increase rather than decrease diversity. Looking out a few more years, there is much less certainty that religious freedom will be seen as a more important value than civil rights for Christian universities. Although some may be able to survive despite a loss of federal and state funding and tax-exempt status, many will have to choose between compliance and organizational death. The universities that survive, despite high levels of legitimacy and financial strength, still face a long-term challenge. Their ultimate survival depends on their ability to win the hearts and minds of young people before they ever set foot on campus. It is a bleak prospect for Christian universities who are trying to navigate an uncertain future. They will either withstand or succumb to pressure to conform and, whichever choice they make, will be very different institutions than they are today.

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Appendix A

Predictors of Isomorphic Change

The following hypotheses are taken directly from DiMaggio and Powell (1983, pp. 154-156). As noted in the text, the first two hypotheses within each level are related to coercion, the second two are related to mimetic isomorphism, and the last two are related to normative pressures.

Organizational-level Predictors

Hypothesis A-1: The greater the dependence of an organization on another organization, the more similar it will become to that organization in structure, climate, and behavioral focus.

Hypothesis A-2: The greater the centralization of organization A's resource supply, the greater the extent to which organization A will change isomorphically to resemble the organizations on which it depends for resources.

Hypothesis A-3: The more uncertain the relationship between means and ends the greater the extent to which an organization will model itself after organizations it perceives to be successful.

Hypothesis A-4: The more ambiguous the goals of an organization, the greater the extent to which the organization will model itself after organizations that it perceives to be successful.

Hypothesis A-5: The greater the reliance on academic credentials in choosing managerial and staff personnel, the greater the extent to which an organization will become like other organizations in its field.

Hypothesis A-6: The greater the participation of organizational managers in trade and professional associations, the more likely the organization will be, or will become, like other organizations in its field.

Field-level Predictors

Hypothesis B-1: The greater the extent to which an organizational field is dependent upon a single (or several similar) source of support for vital resources, the higher the level of isomorphism.

Hypothesis B-2: The greater the extent to which the organizations in a field transact with agencies of the state, the greater the extent of isomorphism in the field as a whole.

Hypothesis B-3: The fewer the number of visible alternative organizational models in a field, the faster the rate of isomorphism in that field.

Hypothesis B-4: The greater the extent to which technologies are uncertain or goals are ambiguous within a field, the greater the rate of isomorphic change.

Hypothesis B-5: The greater the extent of professionalization in a field, the greater the amount of institutional isomorphic change.

Hypothesis B-6: The greater the extent of structuration of a field, the greater the degree of isomorphics.

Appendix B

Cover Letter and Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to ask you to consider participating in a research project being conducted by Jonathan Pickering, dean of institutional effectiveness and registrar here at [name withheld]. Jonathan is earning his Ed.D. in higher education administration from Northeastern University, and is exploring the effect of environmental pressure on Christian higher education, with a particular focus on the issue of same-sex marriage.

As you know, the issue of same-sex relationships within Christian higher education is complex. We all wish to reach out to others beyond the borders of our faith traditions while remaining true to our core values. However, we know that core values are not always shared across institutions, and shifts in institutional values can occur over time.

We have seen the shift in societal values over the last few decades, and the issue has become particularly complex in the wake of the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage. Serious questions of religious freedom are likely to emerge over the next few years as a result of the decision in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case.

I know that all of us have many demands on our time and receive many requests to participate in surveys. I would not endorse Jonathan's request if I did not believe it was important to Christian higher education.

Thank you for your consideration,

[Name withheld]

President, [Name withheld]

Enc. Invitation to participate in Jonathan Pickering's study

Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear President [Name of President],

As [name withheld] indicated, I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University and am actively working on my dissertation. Please consider participating in my study of environmental pressures facing Christian universities – it is completely voluntary, and you may opt-out at any time.

My study is titled *Withstand or Succumb: Christian Universities and the Implications of Obergefell v. Hodges*. Most formerly Christian universities are now indistinguishable from their secular peers. Although there are many reasons for this, one theory is that external pressure causes institutions to resemble one another over time. The purpose of my research is to explore how presidents at Christian universities perceive these forces acting upon their institution on the issue of same-sex marriage. The research also seeks to explore what kinds of responses to these pressures are being considered.

Initial data collection consists of a five-minute survey available at SurveyMonkey.

After the survey closes, I am also looking for volunteers to be interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of the issue and responses to it. An initial 30-minute telephone or online interview will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but confidentiality will be strictly maintained and pseudonyms will be used for you and your institution. The data is intended for my dissertation and potentially for future journal articles.

It is hoped that your participation in the research project will deepen our understanding of how Christian universities experience environmental pressure. The research may raise awareness of how changing social opinion and public policy regarding human sexuality is likely to impact

the future of Christian higher education. It may help other institutions as they seek to craft their own approach to the issue of same-sex marriage. Preserving institutional values within the context of a rapidly changing socio-legal environment is a mounting challenge, and we can learn from one another.

Please complete the survey at SurveyMonkey even if you are unable to commit to an interview. Your response to the questions will provide valuable data for my research. It is vital that we obtain a better understanding of this important issue facing Christian higher education.

If you have questions about my research or you would like to schedule an interview now, you can contact me directly at [mobile number] or via e-mail at pickering.jo@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Lynda Beltz at Northeastern University, at [mobile number].

Thank you for your participation,

Jonathan Pickering

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form for Online Survey

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Lynda Beltz; Student Researcher, Jonathan Pickering

Title of Project: Withstand or Succumb: Christian Universities and the Implications of Obergefell v. Hodges

Request to Participate in Research

We invite you to participate in a web-based online survey. The survey and interview are part of a research study whose purpose is to explore the environmental pressure Christian universities experience relating to same-sex marriage. This survey should take about five minutes to complete.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a president at an evangelical Christian university. The decision to participate in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the web-based online survey, you can stop at any time.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study. However, your responses will help us learn more about societal pressures facing Christian universities.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms and will not identify you or your institution as being affiliated with this project.

If you have any questions regarding electronic privacy, please feel free to contact Mark Nardone, NU's Director of Information Security via phone at 617-373-7901, or via email at privacy@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jonathan Pickering ([mobile number] or via email at pickering.jo@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz [mobile number], the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (# CPS16-12-09).

By clicking on the "accept" button below you are indicating that you consent to participate in this study. Please print out a copy of this consent form for your records.

Thank you for your time.

Jonathan Pickering

Appendix D

Unsigned Informed Consent Form for Interviews

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Lynda Beltz; Student Researcher, Jonathan Pickering

Title of Project: Withstand or Succumb: Christian Universities and the Implications of Obergefell v. Hodges

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to explore the environmental pressure Christian universities experience relating to same-sex marriage.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place via telephone or online and will take about 30 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to discuss your institution's policies and practices related to same-sex relationships and how your institution is considering its response to environmental pressure related to the issue.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about societal pressures facing Christian universities.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms for you and your institution.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Jonathan Pickering ([mobile number] or via email at pickering.jo@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz [mobile number], the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you,

Jonathan Pickering

Appendix E

Web-based Survey

1. Name of College/University:
2. College/University's Religious affiliation:
3. Is your institution currently considering changing its practices or policies for employees and students in same-sex relationships? [Select one] *Yes No*
4. Briefly identify the primary source(s) of pressure to change or to retain your policies and practices for employees and students involved in same-sex relationships:
5. The Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015. Will that decision eventually result in your institution being forced to either change its policies or lose federal and state benefits (such as its tax-exempt status and/or eligibility for Title IV and state financial aid programs)? [Select one] *Yes No*
6. If your institution is faced with a decision to either change policies related to same-sex relationships or lose its tax-exempt status or Title IV eligibility, how is it most likely to respond? [Select one]
 - Change policies related to employees and/or students in same-sex relationships*
 - Relinquish tax-exempt status and/or Title IV eligibility*
 - Mount or join a legal challenge*
 - Other: Please describe _____*
7. When do you believe your institution will be faced with a decision to either change policies or lose tax-exempt status or Title IV eligibility? Select one:
 - In the next two years*
 - In the next five years*

In the next ten years

More than ten years

Never

8. If your institution is faced with this decision within the next five years, briefly explain why it will or will not change its practices as a result:
9. Would you be willing to volunteer for a 30-minute interview? If so, please leave your email address here and I will contact you to schedule it:

Thanks for your willingness to take time to provide this information!

Appendix F

Interview Script and Initial questions

Questions were modified, added, or removed after the initial web-based survey data was available. Other questions were modified, added, or removed as themes developed during data collection. Follow-up and probing questions were also used as themes and ideas emerged during the interviews.

Introductory Script

You have been asked to participate because you are a president at an evangelical Christian university. As you know, the goal of this research is to understand how presidents at Christian universities perceive environmental forces acting upon their institution related to the issue of same-sex marriage and to explore what kinds of responses to these pressures are being considered.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to record our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, let them know I may ask the question again after I start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. To confirm, I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only pseudonyms will be used for you and your institution. If any time you feel do not wish to answer a question, let me know so we can move on to the next question. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you wish. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 30 minutes, unless you would like to extend it. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be

necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part I:

Your institution is affiliated with [university denomination]. Are you also a member of that denomination?

How long have you been president at the university?

Can you briefly describe your religious background?

Part II:

I am interested in learning how your university approaches the issue of sexual orientation in hiring and admission. I would like to get your perspective about the issue in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences and perceptions. If you mention other people, please use do not mention names. You may say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

1. Can you describe your university's position on homosexuality as it relates to hiring and admission?
2. What would happen at your institution if an employee revealed they were in a same-sex relationship?
3. Describe how your institution distinguishes between a person in a same-sex relationship from one who identifies as gay or lesbian but is not in a same-sex relationship:
4. You identified [sources of pressure from survey] as a source of pressure to change or retain your policies and practices. Could you expand on that?
 - a. After having had some time to think about the issue since the survey, can you describe other sources of pressure?

5. If faced with a decision to change policies or lose your tax-exempt status or Title IV eligibility, you indicated your university was most likely to respond by [provide response from survey]. Can you explain why you will take that approach?
6. Why do believe the you [will/will not] be faced with that decision in the next [number] of years?
7. Can you provide more detail into why your university [will/will not] change its practices if this decision point comes in the next five years?
8. What impact does the [denominational church] have on the university's position?
9. What other factors might cause the university to reconsider its current position on sexual orientation?
10. Are there other implications of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision for your university?
11. Could you talk about a personal or professional connection you have with an individual who is in a same-sex relationship?
 - a. Prompt: How did you feel about the person when you found out about their sexuality?
 - b. Prompt: Can you describe how your relationship with that person altered as a result?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Closing Script

Thanks again for taking so much time out of our busy schedule to speak with me. I may have some clarification questions for you after I review the interview, and I would also like to send you the transcript of our conversation so you can check it for accuracy. What is the most

convenient way of reaching you? If you are willing, I would also like to share my analysis of the research with you for your feedback.