



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

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Learning to Listen to Sexual Minorities

The research team of Yarhouse, Dean, Stratton, and Lastoria draw on their decades of experience both in the psychology of sexual identity and campus counseling to bring us the results of an original longitudinal study evaluating what sexual minorities experience, hope for, and benefit from.

Their work looks at the students who arrive on campus with boxes of belongings to unpack. Some are more heavy, tidy, valuable, or private than others. For many students, two of these boxes could be labeled, my faith and my sexuality – and these can be among the most cumbersome to handle. How do you balance the two without having to set one down? How do you hold them both closely and securely, but still move forward to settle in with new friends in a new environment? How do you keep from dropping one or the other, spilling its embarrassing contents for all to see?

Such can be the struggle for any student, but especially for any sexual minority who identifies or struggles with an LGB+ identity or same-sex attraction on a Christian college campus. For these students their faith and their sexuality often feel both tender and in acute tension. Who is God making them to be? What do they need to grow in to develop faithfully, and what might they need to leave behind? How can they truly flourish?

Rich with both quantitative and qualitative data, their book gives an unprecedented opportunity to listen to sexual minorities in their own words, as well as to observe patterns and often surprising revelations about life and personal development both on campus and after graduation. Here, the authors answer some brief questions about why there is a need for *Listening to Sexual Minorities* today.

Why did you want to dive into the controversial topic of sexual minorities on Christian college campuses?

Mark A. Yarhouse: Christians navigating sexual identity and religious identity can become casualties in the culture wars regarding sex and gender. We wanted to listen to these Christians. We wanted to hear from them in their own words. We wanted to gain more insight into what it's like for them to navigate their faith and same-sex sexuality. We hoped to equip the church to respond with greater wisdom and compassion.

How has your previous work and research lead to this project?

Stephen P. Stratton: Our research team has been studying the experience of being a sexual minority at Christian colleges and universities for about ten years now. We have completed two previous studies about these students and published the results in peer-reviewed professional journals. Currently we are in the midst of a longitudinal study with this student

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Janet B. Dean (PhD, The Ohio State University) is a licensed psychologist and associate professor of psychology at Asbury University. In addition to teaching a number of undergraduate courses in psychology, she mentors students interested in research, advises the local chapter of the Psi Chi Honor Society in psychology, and cofacilitates Asbury's annual undergraduate research symposium SEARCH.

In 2014, Dean was recognized by the Kentucky Psychological Association with the Outstanding Undergraduate Student Mentor Award. Prior to joining the Asbury faculty, Dean served as a counselor in the university's Center for Counseling for four years. She has more than twenty years of experience in psychological assessment and treatment across a variety of settings, including university counseling, community mental health, correctional and forensic psychology, and her ongoing private practice. As affiliate faculty, she also teaches counseling courses at Asbury Theological Seminary.

population—collecting detailed information by annual survey and interview. This group of students is unique culturally in that they are explicitly trying to discern how to hold their sexual identity and their faith. They are in prime years for development of these valuable aspects of personhood, and our team has had the opportunity to hear the stories from this era. Our team believes that we are listening to voices that regretfully are often not heard well by those in Christian higher education communities. They are also not well understood by others outside of Christian higher education who often assume they know what the experience of these students must be. This book is hopefully a chance to help those in Christian higher education, and those who are not, to listen to those living the experience.

Why is it important for administrators and faculty at Christian colleges and universities to understand the experiences of the sexual minorities they are interacting with?

Michael Lastoria: Over my thirty-five-year tenure as the Director of Counseling Services of a Christian liberal arts college, I had the opportunity to hear the stories of a number of LGB+ students. I was moved by their desire to hold on to their faith while simultaneously navigating the difficult developmental terrain solidifying a sexual identity in the midst of a not-always-welcoming environment.

Understanding the desire of *any* student at a Christian college to grow holistically, I simply came to believe that we must do better for these young men and women. We must model a redemptive community where they can grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. I eventually came to be seen by a few LGB+ students as one of several adult mentors on campus with whom they could be comfortable and vulnerable. I later became an adult advisor for the informal LGB+ dinner group on campus that met biweekly for a meal and discussion. It was this experience that made me interested in the work that Janet, Steve, and Mark had been doing. Shortly thereafter I became a member of the research team.

What do you hope people take away from this text?

Janet B. Dean: This book is the culmination of our past twelve years of research, which has focused on listening to sexual minorities on Christian college campuses. They have shared their experiences and helped us to better understand how things have changed and how they haven't for these students at faith-based schools. As such, this book is our gift back to these students. They were brave enough to share with us, and we want to give back to them and to others who share similar journeys. Our hope is that this book will contribute to a greater sense of community and hope for these students as well as positive changes in the subculture of these faith-based schools. In other words, we hope this book will encourage campus communities to become more intentionally relational, secure, and formational as they create holding environments for sexual minorities and learn to hold their own faith and sexual identity.

Lastoria: A common approach to the LGB+ issue on Christian college campuses is to



Stephen P. Stratton (PhD, Auburn University) is professor of counseling and pastoral care at Asbury Theological Seminary. A licensed psychologist, he previously served as an adjunct professor at Asbury University, where he was the director of the Center for Counseling for eighteen years. Stratton has special interest and training in the areas of human relational attachments, contemplative prayer, and the integration of counseling and Christianity.

Michael Lastoria (EdD, Loyola University Chicago) is professor of family studies and a senior counselor at Houghton College. He previously served as the director of counseling services at Houghton and is also a licensed marriage and family therapist in the state of New York.

polarize (why are *they* here?). This is understandable as our entire culture is becoming more polarized on a multitude of religious and political matters such that civility and creative discourse has become all but impossible. A redemptive community must do better. Our work was designed to address (and help reverse) this drift toward polarization by being able to see our sexual minority students as whole, and possessing a desire to flourish in a Christian community. By and large they are not seeking doctrinal change or an overthrow of the campus sexual ethic. They come to our Christian campuses in search of an academic community that will enable them to integrate their faith with important life concerns.

Can you talk a bit about the research project that brought all of this together?

Dean: We wanted to know more about the experiences and overall functioning of sexual minorities who attend faith-based colleges and universities, particularly in light of the perceived tension between sexual identity issues and a more traditional Christian sexual ethic. Instead of using convenience sampling as is typically done with smaller subpopulations, we wanted a random sample across many institutions throughout the United States, which we were able to obtain. In addition, we wanted to be sure that we were getting a fuller understanding of these students' experiences that was both more objective and more personal. To this end, we included a self-report survey with many established scales as well as semistructured interviews. The survey data was analyzed and compared to other samples and subpopulations where possible. The interview data was analyzed through a rigorous qualitative process to limit any potential biases in interpreting the data. As such, we are confident that the data in this book truly reflects these students' experiences while minimizing as much as possible any biases that we might bring to this work.

Yarhouse: We invited students who are navigating sexual identity at Christian colleges to tell us about their experiences. This is a large, national study that is longitudinal in design, so we tracked the participants over time. We had a mix of quantitative measures and qualitative interviews. There is a lot of rich data here.

Stratton: Through surveys (quantitative analysis) and interviews (qualitative analysis), the scholarly community hears directly from the student and provides aggregate accounts of perceptions and experiences of this unique sample. We are moving away from reasoning based on anecdote.

The scholarly community is presented with a model of how sexual minority students attempt to hold the sexual identity development and their religious and spiritual identity development.

The scholarly community has the opportunity to consider an intentional educational community for sexual minorities that is intentionally relational, formational, secure, and Trinitarian. This book moves from description to our view on where to go in higher education.