

# Communication strategies and responses to change around issues of sexuality in Catholic higher education

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## Abstract

Sometimes, change around sexuality at Catholic higher education institutions exists in the shadow culture –the values and systems that drive a culture of an institution but that differ from those openly espoused. Past studies have often focused on the creation of LGBTQ student organizations at one or at most four institutions. The present study examines qualitative data from 31 employees at 17 different Catholic colleges and universities across the USA in which employees indicate how they navigated the process of effecting change around human sexuality at their Catholic institution. Interviews were transcribed and coded with a three-phase coding procedure that was then reviewed by an expert panel. Participants experienced both supportive and resistant reactions from colleagues. Issues of human sexuality were defined broadly to include not only student groups around orientation (i.e., LGBTQ student groups) but also sexual assault policy and prevention, policy around transgender student housing or restrooms, incorporating sexuality into the curriculum, same-sex employee benefits, etc. Reasons for resistance included fear, misunderstanding, mission incongruence, and perceived scandal. Methods of navigating change consisted of data gathering, increased visibility, taking a student focus, public conversations, trainings, one-to-one education, task forces, student protests, engaging with university heritage and mission, sensitivity to language used, and more discreet methods of effecting change. These data strengthen the literature by offering a detailed description of these methods, identifying the geopolitical atmosphere as relevant to the change process, noting some methods as ineffective, and clarifying communication that occurs in the shadow culture. Beyond Catholic higher education, readers may find these themes useful in effecting change at their own higher education institutions, including institutions with much fear and anxiety around sexuality.

## Keywords

Catholic higher education; Catholicism; Sexuality; Organizational communication; LGBTQ student groups; Organizational change; Methods of communication; Catholic colleges; Catholic universities; Sexual orientation; Sexual diversity.

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### Ethical approval

This article contains a study with human participants performed by any of the author who gained proper institutional review board (IRB) approval.

### Conflicting interest

The author has no conflicting interest to declare.

## 1. Introduction

When changemakers attempt to effect change around sexuality in Catholic higher education, there are few resources for how to go about such change. Navigating change around sexuality in Catholic colleges and universities can be difficult because of what Morey and Piderit (2006) call the shadow culture –values and systems that drive behavior but often differ from the publicly espoused culture of a university. Schools, for example, may place emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, but avoid the topic of sexual orientation (Love, 1997). Issues around sexuality, particularly at institutions of Catholic higher education, may be shrouded in fear and anxiety, possibly resulting in the loss of one's job (McCarty, 2014). In an article describing the persecution that happens for engaging in ethical discourse around sexuality, McCarty (2014) identified the need for increased administrative support for engaging in sexuality scholarship. What follows is a study of how changemakers went about effecting a change around issues of sexuality (ranging from student groups around orientation, university policy issues around sexually and gender diverse identities, to housing and services for transgender students) at their institutions.

## 2. Literature review

Sexual orientation is seen as a topic that suffers from much discrimination in a Catholic college or university setting. Over the last several years, Catholic colleges and universities have been incorporating sexual orientation into their non-discrimination policies –a debate often documented in university newspapers (Archbold, 2012; Dionisopoulos, 2013; Nelson, 2012). Because of the religious status of the universities, this was often a choice of the administrators and the board of trustees. There had been some cases of the administration opting not to include sexual orientation in the nondiscrimination clauses, which caused students to protest until protection of students, faculty, and staff was ensured by its inclusion (Sheridan, 2010). This concern regarding discrimination was rekindled after the approval of Title IX exemptions for religious institutions, possibly opening the door to new avenues of discrimination (Stack, 2015). In a comparative analysis of Catholic and non-Catholic institutions, Miceli (2009) found a significant difference in the perceived limitation of programs and services targeted towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals at Catholic institutions –that programs and resources for LGB students were perceived as less available to Catholic students.

In a study of three religiously affiliated institutions (one Protestant and two Catholic), McEntarfer (2011) identified modes of communication that changemakers used when creating student groups around sexual orientation. She found that changemakers communicated in four ways: collaborative, conciliatory, assertive, and underground/subversive –seemingly on a spectrum from most to least cooperative. In collaborative navigation, the organizations were able to work with the administration, going through the proper channels to meet the needs of the group. Through conciliatory navigation, groups needed to concede to university limitations, such as where or how a group can advertise its name. Assertive techniques often involved publicly confronting the limitations, e.g., through rallies, sit-ins, protests, or petitions. The underground or subversive techniques involved resisting limitations in a less public way –identified by the author as potentially risking the existence of the group– through such means as secret groups or meetings (McEntarfer, 2011).

In change processes around sexuality (often creating a group or program around sexual orientation), reactions that changemakers encounter are rarely discussed in a categorical framework in the literature. McEntarfer (2011) identified how the administration responded, acting as a catalyst for her participants' modes of communication. In the creation of a program to educate about diverse sexual orientations, Kirkley and Getz (2007) noted the reactions they encountered in passing. They identified reactions of discrimination, silence, and fear or concern regarding agendas and recruitment. Though McEntarfer (2011) and Kirkley and Getz (2007) discuss the reactions they (or their participants) encountered, there seems to be no studies specifically coding the reactions/responses that changemakers encountered when creating change around sexuality in Catholic higher education.

In his study of LGBT student groups at four different institutions (two Protestant and two Catholic), Coley (2018) identify the tactics that students used in effecting change for these groups. Coley defined tactics based on either their communicative type (direct confrontational tactics or conscious-raising tactics) or institutional relation (extra-institutional or institutional), at times using them together with no clear definition or distinction. This lack of distinction acts as a limitation for those curious about the specific communicative methods that people used alongside the nuanced responses they received. While students are important to the change process, institutional change requires action from a number of agents. Employees are often in meetings that students may never attend or are aware of institutional history inaccessible to the student experience. The present study differs in that it offers (1) an in-depth description of the tactics or methods of communication employed (2) largely by employees of these institutions rather than students.

Given the sensitive nature of sexuality in Catholic higher education, and the methods of communication described by McEntarfer (2011), I analyzed the methods of communication by changemakers around any issue of sexuality on Catholic campuses –sexual orientation as well as sexual assault, transgender students' living accommodations, sexual health and reproduction, incorporating sexuality into the curriculum, obtaining same-sex partner benefits, etc. Because this scope included more than changes around sexual orientation groups and included more than three Catholic institutions, I have broadened the themes of communication while examining specific communication methods more in-depth than McEntarfer. The present data builds on past studies by including a broader sample size of institutions as well as a contextual look at effective methods of communication offering more verbiage and situational context than past studies. I have

also considered the reactions participants experienced to the change they were initiating. These reactions/responses were the landscape for why certain methods were chosen or worked with varying success. In the current study I set out to examine if there were patterns that an inductive thematic analysis could reveal in successful efforts of communication in change regarding issues of sexuality in Catholic institutions of higher education.

### 3. Materials and methods

These data were collected as a larger study about the broad experience of change around issues of sexuality in Catholic higher education (Levand, 2018). I collected qualitative data from 31 employees (faculty, staff, and administrators) of 17 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. Using three iterations of coding through inductive thematic analysis (Braun; Clarke, 2013) which was then reviewed by an expert panel, I identified themes across each of the 17 cases. In this article, I examine the methods of communication employees used when effecting change around an issue of sexuality at their institution as well as the reactions they encountered in this process.

I grounded this study in an ecological psychological framework which focuses on human behavior in relation to their environment (Jacob, 1987; Schoggen, 1978). Because I was studying sensitive topics in a Catholic environment, I obtained participants using snowball sampling methods (Biernacki; Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008). A total of 31 participants and 17 universities were represented in the study. These universities varied in heritage (e.g., religious order, diocesan, independent Catholic). Participants consisted of 10 faculty members; 6 residence life staff; 15 administrators, including directors, deans, and vice presidents of various offices (i.e., student affairs, student life, various diversity offices, etc.); and 3 various staff positions such as campus ministry, health promotion, and Title IX coordination. Participants were recruited if they were employed at a Catholic institution of higher education and had participated in effecting change around at least one issue of sexuality at their institution.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews over the phone. Stem questions consisted of: how or where did you start with the change you wanted to make at your institution? What reactions did you encounter? Who or what was most helpful and why? Who or what were some of the biggest challenges? What other changes around sexuality have you seen at the institution? The general university categories consisted of 15 order institutions, one diocesan institution, and one independent Catholic institution. The 15 order institutions were made up of nine different religious orders. Nine of the order schools had religious heritages of priest or friars, while six were founded by sisters or nuns. To maintain anonymity, the 17 universities represented various traditions that will not be further divided.

Data were coded using inductive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis: familiarizing self with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. After familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, and searching for themes, I reviewed the themes two more times, using a qualitative coding software before presenting them to an expert panel (for a more detailed review of methods, see Levand, 2018).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Methods employed

McEntarfer (2011) examined methods of communication used in navigating change around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) student groups at three different religiously affiliated universities, two of which were Catholic. Where the author coded these types of navigation regarding the relational factors between the LGBTQ group efforts and the university, I have coded methods of communication as unilateral, in relation to what the changemakers actually did to create effective change. For example, I have omitted instances of concession (i.e., McEntarfer's conciliatory navigation in which groups needed to concede to university limitations) and only included helpful initiatives employed by those effecting change. I have organized these 12 themes into three major groups: preemptive, active educational, and policy/institutional.

#### 4.1.1. Preemptive

Preemptive methods of effecting change involved actions or mindsets taken by changemakers prior to moving forward with larger, institutional change. These methods involved data gathering, increased visibility, and taking a student focus.

**Data gathering.** Participants occasionally mentioned gathering data before moving forward with change efforts. This took the form of seeking out what other universities had done regarding their primary issue of concern. For curricular changes, participants identified doing readings in gay studies to prepare for a new set of courses:

“So the group of us that wanted to develop this program had to educate ourselves and each other.... We read our way through [an anthology on gay studies]. ...we had to ground ourselves enough in the literature to be able to say with any kind of authority, this is what should be done.”

Participants working in several areas around sexuality reported similar experiences. One administrator working to enhance sexual assault awareness training recalled:

“The way we approached [the change] was we spent a full year in my office evaluating the different existing Bystander Intervention training programs that were already out there, and we did not settle on just taking an existing program and implementing it here. We actually created a hybrid [training].”

Participants working in gender inclusive housing and restrooms, gender diversity in leadership, and campus climate around LGBTQ discrimination all reported gathering data from their own university population and/or other universities' efforts.

**Increased visibility.** An observation by many participants, especially when changing campus climate, involved a need to increase visibility for their particular issue of change. The presence or absence of visibility impacted the environment. Some participants recognized this and increased visibility as a way of changing the conversation on their campus. One participant said,

“we even had administration on campus who identified themselves with specific orientations”

which they noted were not commonplace at their university but started to come out more once the university seemed to support it. Participants used employee sexual identity visibility to influence the way that the student body and broader university talked about LGBTQ identities in a more accepting way. One participant recalled a program on LGBTQ community issues they moderated at their university. Students could and would use this platform to come out publicly at which allies and friends would support them, engaging in a conversation about the appreciation for diversity. The participant identified this as

“one of the most heartfelt experiences that you ever can have because people were leaving, I mean there's not a dry eye in the house, ... students were feeling like a weight had been lifted off of them that they are finally able to, you know, publicly identify themselves and [the] connection between the administrators and faculty and the students had become so significant because now students are looking in the audience and they are seeing their professors.”

**Student-focus.** Particularly helpful to change was adopting a student-focused mindset or frame for the change, or explicitly employing the welfare of students. Recalling how they began change around an already existing LGBTQ educational initiative on campus, one residence life staff member said

“...we could [still] have [this program], but just tailor the events towards our students like, at night time, and like, with a panel about what it is like to navigate certain spaces”

or have a student panel or someone from the community

“speak on personal experiences, talking about culturally sensitive issues, that we are a university that focuses on social justice.”

This participant outlined the need to make a program about LGBTQ information on campus more student-focused, which ultimately led to more student involvement.

Another participant described bringing conversations on healthy sexuality to campus by highlighting the disservice to students:

“And there was some question about what happens when students want to have conversations around sexuality and so basically the message that I was given was, “oh, you know, we don't talk about that, we don't talk about contraceptives, we don't talk about this, we don't talk about that.” And so I had to make the case to say... we are doing a disservice to students... this is probably the only arena that they have to have those types of conversations.”

#### 4.1.2. Active educational

Active educational methods of effecting change included what the changemakers did to create interpersonal or institutional movement around their issue. This theme involved public conversation (including prayer services, forums, and public letters/petitions), trainings, outside resources, one-to-one education, task forces, and student protests.

**Public conversation.** More than half of the participants described the active education method of having the conversation in some public format. Whether the university held a conference about LGBTQ people's experience in Catholic higher education, held a prayer service, held a public forum, or used a public letter or petition, participants described strategies placing the conversation in the broader university environment as useful for change. One faculty member drafted a letter that garnered signatures to support adding sexual orientation and gender identity to the university's non-discrimination policy. He gathered signatures, money, and contacted the newspaper. Recalling that many people were lending support, he noted

“I want to say the students [had] their own letter and that had maybe like 2,000 signatures. So there was lobbying going on all around.”

When describing materials for a drag show sponsored by the LGBTQ student organization, one residence life staff member listed the types of visible education involved:

“...like pamphlets, handouts, presentations –that were constantly going on in the room, like there were TVs set around the space and there was a constant presentation *PowerPoint* loop of just what drag is, and how the trans community is at high risk violence... according to research and just statistics... and just resources that we don't normally offer here.”

Other participants identified forums were helpful in educating the university. One faculty member cited the forum they held on campus climate data around gender representation in leadership saying

“we had a public forum where we told everybody what we had done and what our results were, and then we had recommendations that went to the president. I think that that, even in and of itself, was helpful.”

These types of conversations made accessing information about the topic or change easy and made digestible information about it readily available.

**Trainings.** Holding formal trainings for students or staff members was another method commonly employed by change-makers. Whether these trainings were in-house safe space trainings or inviting an outside entity to educate the university community about topics, many participants identified trainings as helpful for getting the information about sexuality to the university community. Residence life members talked about training key staff:

“We worked very closely with resident assistants to help train them to understand the reasoning and the needs when students are putting themselves out there about their sexuality and their change, how to embrace that... how to support them and how to...[help] the other students within the community to understand that more.”

Another administrator described training campus safety around managing cases of sexual assault as well. They described including campus safety because they would be first responders to incidents and should be included in trainings on sexual assault and diversity—trainings in which they were not previously included. Trainings happened around many types of issues of sexuality, often from on-campus departments, but at times, called in outside resources.

**Outside resources.** Participants also identified referring to outside community resources or inviting community resources to campus as a helpful strategy. Some participants might have had the funds to invite an outside source to conduct a training or invite speakers to campus. An administrator recalled inviting a civil rights lawyer to speak on campus. They discussed how the conversation that followed about the law and the Catholic identity of the institution was helpful, citing specifically the student benefit and involvement in deciding the message that they wanted to send as an institution.

One faculty member looked to outside resources for funding and when identifying a grant opportunity said,

“we received a call for proposals for an external foundation [that] wanted to give grants for the multiculturalization of the university.”

Outside resources could have also consisted of connecting students to various LGBTQ resources provided in the surrounding communities, organizations to help with events, or references on where to get birth control or condoms.

**One-to-one education.** It was with great importance that participants described the impact of talking with people individually to help educate about a cause. One participant discussed creating a team of administrators to create a safe space training on campus, when recalling difficulty persuading one member for help, the participant said:

“He had some value conflicts with it but we had coffee many, many times. I showed him different small Catholic campuses that have safe zone training programs and then also did some *YouTube* videos with him that they talked about that what type of conflict it is or is not with the faith, so it was the first beginning piece.”

Another administrator described using this strategy particularly with parents:

“But generally it would be parents. A parent who would call to say, ‘why do you have a group like this on your campus?’ And sometimes, through a conversation, they really kind of got it.”

**Task forces.** An initial effort of several universities involved creating task forces to work on particular issues related to sexuality. Some task forces were formed around issues of gender or orientation in order to best address the needs of those with similar identities at the institution by incorporating voices of those with these identities in the change process. One participant recalled a new president’s initiative to

“put together this inclusivity committee to identify these areas and then to put into practice these policies and procedures to help support the students.”

Another administrator described the constituents of the task force he formed:

“So I had a newly established college ombudsman who is a student advocate so that was huge. I had those two folks that served on president’s council... I had the mission officer... that was a tough one, I’m not going to lie to you there. The campus minister, director of residence life, three full-time professors... and then I actually had two people from the finance office and obviously my direct supervisor [VP of Student Affairs].”

It is important to note, however, that one participant felt like the task force, though formed, had little effect towards change.

**Student protest.** Almost seemingly as a last resort, participants described how student protest was an effective method of persuading the university to change policies. One faculty member attributed a policy change at their college to student influence and recalled that

“students had successfully protested and lobbied and used their leverage to get the College to modify its statement on non-discrimination to include gender identity and sexual identity.”

This was not a very prevalent theme in the interviews, but when it occurred, participants identified its strong impact.

One participant, however, identified a situation about including transgender health care in the medical insurance in which protests seemed to have lost impact due to their general frequency on campus. This participant said that rather than a protest, students should work through the network of connections the participant had formed which eventually led to effective change with minimal public attention.

#### 4.1.3. Policy/institutional

Various policy or institutional methods of navigation involved how the changemakers either used or avoided various institutional components to effect change. These themes include engaging tradition, language sensitivity, and discreet methods.

**Engaging tradition.** Engaging the tradition (mission, history, heritage) of the university or Catholicism proved to be a useful method of effecting change in Catholic universities for over two thirds of participants. One administrator recalled hosting an event supporting LGBTQ students on campus and navigating some backlash from student groups, mentioning:

“We just kept pushing that Christ taught us to love all individuals regardless. So love one another as you love your neighbor. So that was pretty much our purpose, regardless of the Catholic teaching or what not, that was our focus –to support everyone.”

In getting a safe space training on campus, one participant recalled personalizing the training, making it more applicable to their Catholic environment, saying

“we had tried to make some amendments that would make it more mission-focused or mission-oriented and how people understand, that actually, commitment to human dignity and diversity is part of the Catholic Social Teaching of the church.”

An important note, however, was a contradiction that appeared in a couple interviews. Some participants echoed similar viewpoints around the Catholic pastoral approach and dogmatic approach, stating

“I think that fundamental contradiction between the dogma of the church and the reality of people’s lives is something that those of us who are concerned with education around sexuality and the Catholic institutions have to push to resolve.”

**Language sensitivity.** Language sensitivity could have been a source for dispute or resistance, but was also used as a method of creating successful change. Participants recounted ways in which they avoided certain words or clarified words/misunderstandings because of social connotations. One participant recalled the creation of their LGBTQ student group:

“we definitely had some pushback, but we were very careful with how we framed it. We had to avoid all words like activism, advocacy, recruitment; it was all about raising awareness and doing education.”

Changes in partner benefit plans underwent similar scrutiny:

“[The university] really tried to finesse it, so nowhere does it say that they provided same-sex benefits instead they did a plus-one system so that you could add one person to your...health insurance coverage.”

**Discreet methods.** Similar to **McEntarfer’s** (2011) underground/subversive description of navigation, I have coded some participants’ methods of navigation as discreet. These are instances when participants described making changes, often institutional, without asking permission. One participant described a practical change in dealing with transgender student housing as

“not an outspoken one, not anything you’re going to find in policy but just in practice.”

Another housing director described adding components to a document that recognized more than two genders:

“So, it was pretty simple. Like, I didn’t actually ask for permission. I had mentioned it to my supervisor, but my supervisor is responsible for way too many things that one person does... I know I mentioned it but now that form has actually changed [to reflect more than two genders].”

On the topic of communication, this participant added

“I didn’t get any emails back from the Vice President or the dean of students, though. So I guess I never followed up and I just went ahead and made the changes.”

This particular participant identified supervisors avoiding answering the question and felt that making the change was more helpful to students than waiting for explicit permission.

Though participants might have been doing these changes without permission, it was not often out of being told directly they should not make a change, but rather used it as a way of avoiding confrontation until the change was already in effect (i.e., on a housing form, or conducting an event using external funding).

## 4.2. Reactions/responses

Reactions that changemakers experienced from other university employees or offices also had culturally relevant factors to the Catholic context. Reactions to change efforts varied greatly. These reactions experienced by participants influenced the type of method they would use to effect change at the institution. People responded supportively or with resistance. When responding with resistance, I coded the reason for the resistance as well as the resistant outcome or actions taken.

**Supportive responses.** Several participants reported certain people in the university (i.e., the student life staff, residence life staff, the student body, individual supervisors, etc.) or virtually the entire university community responding in some positive way. When discussing updating a safe space training to make it more relevant to the university context, one participant said

“I think once we rolled it out, [everyone] has been very supportive. I don’t think we got any question about –if anything, people were wondering when a safe space [training] was going to be happening.”

Supportive responses occurred with a variety of changes from safe space trainings, to educational initiatives, to curricular changes. Another participant described getting a curricular approval at their university:

“We had to go through that approval process for a new interdisciplinary minor, it went up through the ranks at [the university], through the curriculum committee, through the council of deans and up to the president and it was approved without any resistance and with a great deal of support.”

**Resistant responses.** A majority of the study participants reported some type of resistance associated with their change regarding an issue around sexuality. Changes around sexual assault policies or trainings were most frequently reported to have no resistance, even in more conservative environments. I have coded resistance in two ways: the reasons for resistance (fear/nervousness, misunderstanding, mission/identity incongruence, and perceived scandal) and resistant (in/)actions (silence/avoidance, rescinding offer, and Church hierarchy involvement).

## 4.3. Reasons for resistance

Participants met resistance at many different levels and from many different facets of university life. These reasons often overlap and are not mutually exclusive. For the sake of contextualizing the landscape of changemaking, I have coded these reasons for resistance into four groups: fear/nervousness, misunderstanding, mission/identity incongruence, and perceived scandal.

**Fear/nervousness.** The most commonly cited reason for encountering resistance was because of fear or nervousness. Fear was coded as a barrier to change when experienced either by the changemaker or others. Fear of losing one’s job can be enough to prevent a change. When fear is coded as a reason for resistance, the discussions appear more ambiguous. About a president’s motivation toward offering same-sex partner benefits, one faculty member noted:

“[the president’s] predecessor had told us on numerous occasions after we had demonstrated... that he did not want to be the first president of a Catholic school to give domestic partner benefits.”

Of what the president was afraid remained unclear.

Similarly, one administrator identified fear of getting backlash from more conservative Catholics, saying that they did not want to

“put out there into the world that, okay [our university] now has transgender bathrooms and the reason why is because then that’s going to raise some red flags with some conservatives.”

Some employees experienced fear involving termination or fear of backlash from conservative constituents. Some participants also reported a fear of people calling in under false pretenses to deceive the employee to get information and somehow denounce or slander the university in some way (i.e., a blog post, conservative magazine article, report to the bishop, etc.). One housing professional recalled:

“And I think we didn’t know whether the student was transgender or somebody was inquiring maybe for negative reasons or somebody was ‘testing us’ to see if we were really Catholic, you know, that sort of thing.”

I occasionally encountered the same type of skepticism when seeking study participants. Fear often coincided with the other three reasons for resistance –misunderstanding, the change as against a Catholic identity, and an apparent scandal.

**Misunderstanding.** Another common source for resistance was misunderstanding what the change was about or generally being uneducated about sexuality. One faculty member reflected on the administration’s reaction when hosting a “big gay” student event:

“For them big and gay meant big old penises and on big old gay men... [It] has been [the administration’s] prescription that anything related to [the LGBTQ student group] means sex... That’s true for some external constituencies to the university as well.”

Similarly, a faculty member reported on feedback from a drag show the student group was planning to implement. The participant said,

“I was reading about the opposition to the drag show, it’s almost just completely about that it promotes a gay lifestyle.”

It was clear to the participant that the resistance was coming from a misunderstanding about what the student events would be about.

Misunderstanding from the administration was also reported by another participant when trying to form an LGBTQ student support group. When talking about the initial steps of forming the group, the participant said:

“That was met with resistance from the administration when we first proposed it, because the fear was that this was going to be a hookup group that the only reason students were wanting to do this was so that they could hookup with other students who were identified as like themselves.”

While the administration misunderstood the student group to be a sexually driven social group, drivers for change eventually educated the administration on how a student group around orientation and gender identity can be a supportive, educational experience for college-aged students.

**Mission/identity incongruence.** Another reported reason for a resistant reaction involved the perception that these things cannot happen at a Catholic university –that supporting any same-sex concept or discussing sexuality is against a Catholic identity. One participant recounted getting calls from parents about a sexual and gender minority informational event,

“so I was getting calls from parents of students, saying that they heard that we were putting on a week of programs that supported a gay lifestyle [and] how can we do that as a Catholic University?”

A strong critique of this Catholic identity often came from faculty members or other university constituents. A campus minister identified this type of resistance they experienced from faculty members on campus:

“There were some faculty and administrators who were very conservative in their thoughts and their ideas about the whole sexual identity piece and this was a Catholic University and this is the blah, blah, blah... that they are intrinsically evil, all that kind of stuff that you would get.”

While another participant recalled some feedback they got when effecting a change around supporting LGBTQ students in residence life:

“We did have some backlash I would say from some faculty members who didn’t see that this was something that as a [Catholic] Institution, we needed to reflect on because we were identified as a Catholic institution and based on Catholic teachings it goes against what a lot of the teachings proclaim.”

A small but important theme was present in this study –people interpreting the Catholic identity as against supporting sexually and gender diverse people. This was likely a driving force in the few cases of resistance from conservative Catholic student groups reported by participants.

**Perceived scandal.** Some administrators exercised caution, trying to prevent the perception that they were doing something scandalous. The fear of having something appear scandalous is a long-standing concern for the Catholic Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* outlines the term scandal as something extremely problematic that “lead[s] others to evil” (para. 2284). Though later, one participant and priest noted that by scandal, the Church means something that would lead others to evil while Catholic institutions interpret scandal to mean a ‘public relations nightmare.’ This concept is reflected in reactions encountered by participants –fear of “creating scandal” around an issue of sexuality. Participants talked about not doing anything that might send a message by which the public may get confused. One participant recalled being told that the newly formed student group should “not do anything that could be considered a social endorsement of homosexuality.” Something as simple as citing a Planned Parenthood resource on sexual health information could also have been seen as support for the organization, creating a “scandal” for the Catholic university.

#### 4.4. Resistant (in/)actions

From any of the above listed reasons, participants noted the resistance they encountered being active or passive such as encountering silence or avoidance of the issue, an offer being rescinded (i.e., an award or employment position), or Church hierarchy involvement.

**Silence/avoidance.** One of cited response involved silence or avoidance from administration or people necessary for the change to become a reality. After experiencing this reaction, one participant referred to this phenomenon:

“And this was indicative of what I think of as the time of silences. And what are we silent about? We’re silent about the things that we’re afraid of, that we don’t want to happen.”

On the topic of getting services for a transgender student, one faculty member mentioned that they

“think [the university] was kind of mum on it, like they weren’t commenting when they were asked to comment... There’s just kind of this air of secrecy over many topics on campus...”



A similar air of secrecy was reported when one administrator was asking how to respond to student inquiries about sexual health. They said,

“there was some question about what happens when students want to have conversations around sexuality and so basically the message that I was giving was, oh, you know, we don’t talk about that.”

Reporting on a situation in which the administration took harmful actions against the resource center for sexuality on campus, a faculty member identified a similar reaction –that “they just acted like none of that had happened, which it did.” Whether it was explicitly being told to be silent, not returning e-mails asking for permission, or avoiding situations of change, several participants identified silence or avoidance as a response they had encountered.

**Rescinding offer.** Occasionally, there have been times when a university was granting an award to an individual or signed a contract with a new employee and rescinded the offer (or was forced to rescind the offer) over a matter of sexuality.

Several participants discussed accounts of job offers, various awards, or speaking engagements being rescinded. One participant identified a time when their student group was told not to give an award for service to the LGBTQ community to the person they had chosen:

“The question was could we give an award to somebody who was basically working, basically, at cross-purposes to the church... And the answer was like “no. You can’t. You can bring that person to speak, you could talk about it in class, you could have a panel discussion, you bring a movie, but you can’t give somebody an award.”

The participant not only had to rescind the offer for the award, but had to rescind the offer for the person to speak on campus. This was a result of another faculty member threatening to call the bishop should the speaker come to campus.

**Church hierarchy involvement.** A less reported but highly feared action of resistant responses was getting the Church hierarchy involved. This often looked like calling the local bishop and could occasionally result in ecclesiastical investigation. One health services participant recalled the bishop giving orders about what can or cannot be included in the insurance plan. The participant identified having to comply because of the bishop’s involvement.

Bishop involvement was also described regarding issues of academic freedom. One faculty member discussed engaging in public discourse on sexuality. A statement the participant made was published in a local newspaper and said

“as [the bishop] read that, he called our president and the president called me down and asked me to publicly disassociate myself with [the university] anytime I engaged in any type of public scholarship.”

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Methods of communication

**McEntarfer** (2011) examined the ways in which changemakers communicated to effect change at three different religiously affiliated universities. She identified these ways of communicating as collaborative, conciliatory, assertive, or underground/subversive. This categorization may be useful in describing the communication between changemakers and the university leadership to navigate the power dynamic. I have expanded my scope beyond this power dynamic and coded these methods of communication by operational effectiveness –or where these types of communication were most appropriate. This analysis places emphasis on the method’s contextual usefulness in the change process for those planning to implement change. In short, this analysis contributes to the literature above by broadening the scope of what constitutes “communication” in how people effect change around issues of sexuality, broadens what constitutes “sexuality” beyond sexual orientation student groups, and examines 17 universities from a variety of Catholic backgrounds, increasing the environmental scope of the change.

The ways employees have communicated here are components of organizational change. Organizational change theories often take into account the uniqueness of the environment, and situational analysis which may take much trial and error (**Batras; Duff; Smith**, 2016). Many of these changes require a number of what **Rogers** (2003) calls ‘champions’ –or people leading the change. Rogers’ institutional stages of change have three main parts: initiation, decision, and implementation (**Batras; Duff; Smith**, 2016). The initiation activities of the process include agenda setting (identifying the problem or need for a change) and matching (trial of solutions to the problem). The initiation and implementation activities are separated by the decision to adopt a given change. After organizational leaders decide to adopt a change, the implementation activities can happen: redefining/restructuring (the re-making of an innovation to fit the specific institution), clarifying (slowly implementing the change across the organization, helping to clarify misunderstandings or addressing adverse side effects of an implemented change), and routinizing (when the change has become embedded in the organizational culture).

The various tactics employees used to communicate in effecting change often fall before or after the leadership’s decision to implement such a change. The way I have coded the preemptive, active educational, and policy/institutional communications do not fit neatly into the stages of change in a linear process. Rather, depending on the institutional environment, the communication tactics used can appear at any of the stages in Rogers’ model. Leadership (i.e., administrators) may also be fragmented, where some leaders want to adopt a change and others are disinterested or resistant. These will be important situational factors to consider when implementing change on a campus.

### 5.1.1. Preemptive

The preemptive strategies identified in the data include the behind the scenes work –gathering data, increasing visibility, and focusing on students.

Gathering data about what other universities are doing or what one's own university has done in the past has been reported as a useful step. **Hughes** (2015) identified communication tactics such as using research to build a case as an important component of effecting change. Along with many other tactics, Hughes noted these tactics as stemming from the organizational change literature (**Meyerson**, 2003; 2008; **Kezar**; **Lester**, 2011). From the above data, an important part of this process is examining other Catholic universities in similar geographic and social/political environments more so than just schools within a similar religious order. A key insight from this study includes that participants in universities of the same religious order identified vastly different environments around LGBTQ attitudes, largely because of their geographic environment and its social/political location.

Increasing visibility of LGBTQ employees on campus was an important tactic used in creating change. **Hughes** (2015) identified intellectual discourse and demonstrating allyship as useful tools for change. The particular method of employee visibility as a mode of communicating safety, allyship, or bravery can provide support for students in ways that public discussion or other forms of allyship cannot.

Part of the preemptive communication strategies included adopting a mindset that involved a student-focused philosophy about the change. **Hughes** (2015) stresses the importance of framing the message within the mission of the school. While I also found religious mission incorporation to be an important method of communication (and coded it under policy and institutional forms of communication), if participants discussed how this change benefits students, change was much more likely to happen. The philosophy of student-focused concern seemed to be driving many of the change-makers not only in my study, but those of other scholars as well (**Love**, 1998; **McEntarfer**, 2011; **Fox**, 2017). This may be helpful because many schools focus on undergraduates for financial stability (**Morey**; **Piderit**, 2006).

In **Rogers'** (2003) stages, data gathering almost always falls in the initiation stage. If employees are gathering data about how other universities handled a similar situation, they have likely identified a problem they are trying to address. In the early stages of a larger cultural change, increasing visibility and a student-focused philosophy can increase awareness of the issue that need a larger systemic change. Bringing this awareness and frame can help constituents of a campus culture begin to understand the problem, increasing the chances of adopting a solution to the given issue on campus.

### 5.1.2. Active educational

Consistent with other types of organizational change models is the concept of good education or training. In discussing eight factors of effective organizational change, **Fernández** and **Rainey** (2006) identified this process as providing resources, often seen in the present study as making available to the community resources that educate about the topic. Many participants did this by engaging in public conversations with forums or inviting speakers. Safe space trainings proved to be a useful tactic for participants in this study, congruent with that of others (**Getz**; **Kirkley**, 2006; **Hughes**, 2015). Some campuses had the finances to invite outside resources like professionals and trainers about a specific change around sexuality. Forming task forces or other groups that are in charge of motivating the public dialogue also helped keep the issue in the public sphere. **Hughes** (2015) identified one-on-one interactions as a helpful method of active education, a finding supported by the present study. As suggested by **McEntarfer** (2011) and supported by this study, if the resistance was high, student protest appeared be a useful tool to in the conversation. A unique insight from this study, however, indicates that the administration on campuses that protest too often may not take the protest seriously enough to effect change and that other methods of navigating change may be more useful.

Most of the active educational methods had been documented as useful in previous research (**Getz**; **Kirkley**, 2006; **Hughes**, 2015; **McEntarfer**, 2011). A method less mentioned in the literature that appeared in the present study was keeping the university informed by inviting outside speakers to speak on a topic. This occurred as a training, which was not often politicized because administration has to preliminarily approve trainings on campus. In the Catholic context, having speakers seemed to be a useful educational tactic because of the protection of academic freedom. Though speakers were disinvited at times, several participants saw speakers as useful in keeping the conversation about a particular sexual topic active on campus.

These active educational methods of communication are often used to either raise awareness about an issue prior to big decisions or as part of the implementation activities. Trainings may happen because of a campus-wide initiative to increase an understanding about a topic in sexuality, or this may be a method of one department attempting to educate the entire campus about a particular issue. As part of organizational change, it is apparent that group experience plays a significant role in determining organizational culture (**Batras**; **Duff**; **Smith**, 2016). If a group engages enough of the campus in discourse about the issue, it may influence the experience of enough members of the institution to effect change. Another important insight from organizational change is that an organization's access to experts in the topic can further assist in effective change (**Rogers**, 2003). Task forces, for example, may work at universities who have access to experts on staff, while another university may not have the necessary expertise to form an effective task force.

### 5.1.3. Policy/institutional

The particular methods of communication of engaging the tradition, language sensitivity, and discreet methods are all present in prior research (Hughes, 2015; McEntarfer, 2011). While these methods are present in prior research, the current study yields more situational context for these communications. I have coded them under policy or intuitional method because of the ways in which changemakers employed them. Changemakers used discreet methods or being aware/sensitive to the language when they were encountering or about to encounter barriers from the university. The discreet methods were not necessarily subversive or underground as McEntarfer (2011) may indicate, but rather can be done as a conflict avoidant strategy or as part of a cultural norm. Hughes (2015), Kirkley and Getz (2007), Perlis and Shapiro (2001), and Yoakam (2006) all stressed the importance of engaging the institutional tradition in change around LGBTQ student services. While this is important, this strategy was also particularly helpful in the present study when discussing issues like sexual decision-making, incorporating sexuality into the curriculum, addressing sexual assault, and partner benefits. Engaging the Catholic and/or order tradition for any topic of sexuality seemed important for further institutional dialogue.

Schein (2017) discusses the underlying basic assumptions of an organizational culture as assumptions of operation that have had repeated success in implementing certain beliefs and values. People in Catholic institutions may find that operating discreetly about issues of sexuality may be one of these underlying assumptions. Depending on the university environment, this may be a preferred norm for dealing with topics of sexuality, while discussing the issue aloud may go against cultural norms in a way that is not conducive to change (until these underlying assumptions are questioned and worked out on an institutional level). Many people in Catholic institutions will call this type of communication “flying under the radar” or that administrators will “turn a blind eye” enacting a don’t-ask-don’t-tell type of communication when implementing change around issues of sexuality.

## 5.2. Reactions

I coded the reactions that participants encountered as either supportive or resistant. Participants identified positive reactions often described as “no resistance” or identified ways people approved—accepting the change happily, verbal support of the changemakers, and working to make a change a reality. Details on this type of reaction were not analyzed in depth because a supportive reaction is not a barrier that needs to be overcome. Participants noted that some people in their social circles outside of university life did not believe supportive change around issues of sexuality could take place in a Catholic institution. Love (1997) discussed contradictions and paradoxes of change for LGB students at religiously affiliated institutions such as leaders that could not lead, LGB people may have a strong Catholic identity, and that support could come from campus ministry or departments of religious studies. In the same paradigm, some people may view a Catholic institution accepting a change with no resistance as a paradox. For some, a comforting insight from this study is that some Catholic institutions do not find difficulty in adapting to the acceptance and support of LGBTQ persons.

With resistance, however, various methods of communication needed to be employed. Types of resistance included silence or avoidance, or more active roles like rescinding an offer from a speaker or potential employee, or getting the church hierarchy involved. In the particular university he studied, Hughes (2015) discussed what he called a culture on non-confrontation, referring to how students responded to resistance from administration, less about how administration was responding to change. The present study focuses on the administration’s silence or avoidance of the topic of change. Silence and avoidance were employed by administrators on a wide variety of topics. One reoccurring topic involved issues regarding transgender students. One participant speculated administration’s silence was due to the fact that no other campus has resolved how to manage housing for transgender students, leading to the void of direction. This could indicate a type of culture in between the espoused culture and shadow culture identified by Morey and Piderit (2006)—a nebulous culture where the value is not universally operated on in the shadows, but it is also not clearly espoused by the university. This type of neglectful permission—or permission-by-omission response—allows the administration to escape a certain sense of culpability should conservative constituents raise this as an issue, while also meeting the needs of students. Hughes’ category of “stalling behaviors” as a barrier can fit into this category, but does not completely encompass this experience as some people may not have intentionally stalled to prevent a change, but merely avoided addressing the matter to omit involvement in the change.

The more active roles of resistance involving rescinding offers and getting the church hierarchy involved appear to be only two types of methods described in the interviews. Hughes (2015) discussed controlling behaviors as a type of power dynamic including bishop involvement (also true for Love, 1998) or forcing LGBT groups to work with campus ministry. The present study supports the findings of Hughes and Love that hierarchical involvement can impede the process for effective change around issues of sexuality. The active resistance of rescinding offers occurred frequently enough in participant interviews that it demonstrates the need to identify this as a possible reaction, more than just the church hierarchy exerting power—the administration was also exerting power over the situation. Whether the administration was forced to do so by the bishop, for fear of donors withholding funds, or other reasons remains unclear. But what can be garnered from this data is the focus on the dialogue between the institution and hierarchal church. Some participants spoke of comfort in their president’s commitment to talk with the bishop. It is possible that the dialogue between a bishop and university administration offers more insight into how these colleges and universities may best support their LGBTQ+ constituents.

These methods of communication paired with the types of reactions change agents may encounter exist within a culture of communication in a given institution. Some people may be resistant to change for a number of reasons—misunders-

tanding, underlying assumptions about scandal, mission incongruence, or repercussions. The reasons for resistance will help determine the types of communication that can overcome these barriers. For example, if there is one resistant leader that assumes a course on sexuality will involve sexual activity in class, a one-to-one conversation may clear up the misunderstanding allowing the course to run. If there are members at all levels of university life resistant about sexual assault education on campus because of fear that it will send a message of complicit acceptance of sexual activity on campus, inviting outside speakers and perhaps protests may encourage a change. Each campus has a number of cultural factors that will determine the best combination for effective change around issues of sexuality. The key to effective change will be to find the combination of methods that work best with the institutional culture.

## 6. Implications

This is the largest study to date about the experience of effecting change around sexuality on Catholic campuses. Previous studies often focused on one or three universities. The inclusion of 17 different Catholic colleges and universities shows the generalizability of data that was previously only indicative of a single campus culture. While qualitative data is not generalizable in the same way quantitative data can be, some scholars note that the context and characteristics of an organization or setting can increase the likelihood that the information would be useful to others in similar organizational contexts (e.g., Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2013). The present study also demonstrates the various campus climates and usefulness of different techniques in relation to different types of Catholic institutions. The ecological psychological framework that examines human behavior in relation to their environment brings a key relational component that was omitted in previous research. An employee's relationship to the institutional contexts of higher education and Catholic culture is unique and requires unique communication strategies. The present study demonstrates the usefulness of a variety of ways of navigating these barriers unique to the sexually restrictive environment one might find in a Catholic educational context. This is particularly important because students are considered chief changemakers in this process. This study adds to the existing literature by indicating the generalizability of previous research while also providing more nuanced context for methods of communication used in navigating these changes. Nuances such as the university's relation to its geopolitical environment, the concept of over-protesting as ineffective, identifying a nebulous culture of communication between the shadow and espoused cultures, and the focus on the relationship between the administration and the church hierarchy are all unique insights of this study that add to change efforts at Catholic institutions of higher education.

These nuances allow employees at Catholic institutions more data to better identify methods that would best fit their particular situation of attempted change. In my research, many experts in Catholic higher education told me that change is possible at the "more liberal institutions, like Jesuit schools" –an assumption that has informed previous research. However, with the inclusion of the variety of schools in this study, change is clearly possible at various types of Catholic institutions dispelling the myth that only particular orders would be open to such change.

The implications of this research do not only relate to those at Catholic institutions, or even strictly religiously affiliated institutions. Employees at any college or university that has an administration guided by fear around topics of sexuality can find these methods and insights useful. If an employee is effecting change around sexuality at their institution, the experiences of these participants may reflect similar institutional cultures where one or more of these methods of navigation could prove effective. Though this data is only a subset of a larger dataset, these strategies could offer new insight into addressing a long-standing resistance to change around sexuality at a university. For potential employees at a Catholic institution who see themselves as changemakers around these issues, this study offers a landscape for understanding how the change may be received, preparing the potential employee for work in this area.

## 7. Conclusion

This data yielded some key components for consideration when working around issues of sexuality in Catholic higher education. Because of the data on the role of fear around issues of sexuality in Catholic higher education, we should more clearly identify the roots of the fear around sexuality with the intention of considering sexuality as part of a holistic view of the person. Participants identified fear that had various levels of impact to change. Some instances of fear may have prevented a relatively minor adjustment such as using a word in advertisement for an event. Fear was also the reason some higher education professionals literally kept their involvement in further education and professional development on issues of sexuality in higher education a secret from their institutions. If fear can be so great that it prevents people from intuitions of higher learning from expanding their own knowledge, it should be addressed because it is often antithetical to the missions of the educational institutions and the Catholic Church.

The bravery of these participants should not be overlooked. Some participants were possibly endangering their professional careers by taking the time to participate in these interviews. The greatest cause for participants' fear was the way others used or misused Catholic teachings to threaten participants, effectively limiting information and educational intervention around sexuality. Evidenced in this research, Catholic colleges and universities need sexuality trainings for their entire institutional community –students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

## 8. Limitations

One limitation of this study involved the convenience sample. The sampling of university type was dependent on the recruited participants from the snowball sampling method. While necessary for researching sensitive information in an

institution, this possibly resulted in participants connecting to like-minded people and automatically delimiting individuals with differing views or housed in significantly less connected universities. Including the word sexuality in the title may have deterred some people from participating out of fear. One markedly liberal university refused interviews while another university expressed that they were afraid that I was posing as a researcher to attack their Catholic character. This same fear could have influenced the participation of various other liberal universities.

No one in this study identified themselves as “conservative.” I had reached out to campuses that had been identified by participants as “more conservative” campuses, but received no responses. These campuses may have such a strong culture of fear or very often avoid discussions on sexuality that any conversation is sensitive enough to avoid speaking to an outside researcher. If this is the case, it would support **Biernacki** and **Waldorf’s** (1981) conclusion that when studying sensitive topics, one may have difficulty contacting seed members. For future research, I would recommend a stratified sampling of Catholic universities by religious order and geographic location (urban, suburban, or rural) combined with the local political affiliation and resources for issues of sexuality. This would offer much more accurate information contingent upon relevant environmental factors.

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