PRESIDENTIAL DECISION-MAKING AT THE PROTESTANT EVANGELICAL
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE WHEN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND MISSION ARE AT
ISSUE AND SURVIVAL IS IN QUESTION

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Paul Lowell Haines

2017
DEDICATION

To my parents, Paul Whitefield Haines and Florence Alice Hall Haines, now long departed, but without whom I would not have taken my first step; always loving me for who I am; supportive of me in every endeavor; ever urging me to be my best, and consistently challenging me to draw closer to Him without whom life has little meaning.

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Soli Deo Gloria
ABSTRACT

PRESIDENTIAL DECISION-MAKING AT THE PROTESTANT EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN COLLEGE WHEN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND MISSION ARE AT ISSUE AND SURVIVAL IS IN QUESTION

Paul Lowell Haines

Mary-Linda Armacost

Like most presidents of private, residential, 4-year, liberal arts colleges, the presidents of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges face an increasing number of institutional challenges, many of which threaten institutional survival. Added to their burden, however, are the unique challenges of navigating an increasing number of values and missional conflicts that arise when cultural norms and related legal authority change rapidly and in a manner that is inconsistent with their deeply held religious beliefs and those of their institutions. These cultural and legal changes present challenges to Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents and to their personal and institutional convictions in ways that have not been experienced previously.

This study examines the thinking and decision-making of ten Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents who are faced with these challenges. Specifically, this study asks, how has the Protestant Evangelical Christian college leader navigated the values conflicts that arise when religious beliefs and institutional mission are deemed to be inconsistent with evolving cultural norms and legal authority? Using data from one-on-one interviews with ten Christian college presidents, and institutional documents from their respective institutions, this study found that these presidents (1)
stay true to personal religious faith; (2) focus on and remain committed to institutional mission which, in all cases, aligned with their own personal convictions; and (3) implement a variety of operating strategies, both offensive and defensive, to address the challenges confronting them today.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The history of American higher education is replete with stories of overcoming obstacles, achieving the impossible, surviving with nothing, and limping along with one foot in chains. With the exception of a few elite institutions sprinkled across the country, most colleges and universities in America continue to struggle—day to day, month to month, year to year—expending significant effort to remain viable, relevant and, indeed, open. The multitude of challenges they face are exacerbated by the constantly changing financial, regulatory, demographic, cultural and legal landscapes and environments in which they operate.

In their new book, Bowen and McPherson (2016) acknowledged this difficult reality and bravely assert that “there are too many too-small institutions competing for a limited student market” (p. 64). They concluded, reluctantly, that the small college sector might be better served if a number of stressed colleges and universities simply closed their doors and went out of business (Bowen & McPherson, 2016, p. 65). In their view, this most extreme example of institutional decision-making is, for many, no longer just a “possibility” but rather now a “probability” (Bowen & McPherson, 2016, p. 66).

Bok (2013) has acknowledged the seriousness of the situation for the small four-year colleges and universities in America. Although he notes that life is still good for the “few private colleges…[that can] attract outstanding students and offer an education of the highest quality… with more applicants than they can accept and substantial endowments,” the situation “changes dramatically” for the remaining private colleges who find it near impossible to compete successfully for what is left of the student market (Bok, 2013, p. 11). Bok (2013) notes that most small colleges “constantly struggle to
balance the books, and scores of them over the past fifty years have had to give up the
fight and close their doors” (Bok 2013, p. 11).

The challenges facing these institutions are many and pervasive: declining or
stagnant enrollments, rising operating costs and budget deficits, tuition increases and
discounting, continuous leadership changes, public skepticism, diminishing state and
federal appropriations, exploding technology costs, and society’s increasing consumer
and commodification mentalities, to name a few. This growing list of concerns has
resulted in the definition of the vulnerable or “at risk” college moving beyond the “dated
stereotype of a college that is smaller than one thousand students, private, religiously-
affiliated, residential, and fully dependent on tuition” (Martin & Samels, 2009, pp. 3-4),
to a new definition that identifies the stressed college as an “institution that is dependent
on tuition or state appropriations, smaller than it should be and needs to be, and lacking in
name-brand recognition. The school’s enrollment, endowment gifts and grants have been
flat, at best, for several years, and most, if not all, long-range planning efforts address
subsistence rather than sustained growth” (Martin & Samels, 2009, p. 3). This new
definition cuts a broader swath and includes many more, small, private, liberal arts
colleges within its wake.

Of course, the foremost issue for all of these vulnerable or at-risk institutions is
the lack of financial support and resources (Martin & Samels, 2009, p. 3). Most small,
private, liberal arts colleges have been “under financial siege” and now find themselves
having to “re-examine their missions and justify their existence[s]” due to financially
exigent circumstances (Hartocollis, 2016). The seriousness of the concern is evidenced
by the growing list of small, private, liberal arts colleges that have closed, or attempted to
close, their doors in recent years. The boards of Sweet Briar, Antioch, Sojourner-Douglas, Cooper Union, Marian Court, Lexington, Mid-Continent (now in bankruptcy proceedings), and Saint Joseph’s (now closing) have all reached the difficult decision to close for lack of financial resources at one point or another in the last four decades. Although some of these closings have been delayed or postponed by outside intervention of the state’s Attorney General or activist alumni, the fact remains that many of these institutions have reached a point where intensive care is required and hospice care is likely warranted. They are representative of a much larger group of stressed, small, private, liberal arts colleges. As noted by Hartocollis (2016),

[s]maller colleges are especially hard-hit [by financial difficulties]. Many of the endangered ones are in rural areas and have traditionally drawn from regional markets, but have lost market share as students become more willing to travel beyond their home territory. Often they have not been able to keep up with the demand for expensive science and technology courses.

Some are women’s colleges, historically black colleges, or religiously affiliated—appealing to smaller audiences.

They also tend to be less selective, with anemic or highly restricted endowments that make them overly dependent on tuition. Their alumni do not provide as much support as those of elite colleges… which have powerhouse endowments (p. 2). Hartocollis (2016) has described a broad cross-section of America’s private, liberal arts colleges. All, to one degree or another, are financially strapped and in peril.

The Christian college, one of the foundational players in American higher education, is not immune to this daily struggle. For it, however, the changing landscapes and environments also include meeting head-on, changing cultural norms and evolving legal authority that, at times, can be viewed or interpreted by some constituents as being inconsistent or conflicting with faith-based mandates to which they subscribe, and
deeply-held personal, denominational, or institutional religious beliefs to which they are subject. These changing contexts, and, more importantly, the Christian college leader’s response to these changing contexts, can result in consequences of the most serious sort, including, most recently, the potential loss of an institution’s ability to participate in life-sustaining federal and state student financial aid programs.

It is in this context that the leaders of institutions comprising a particular and distinct subset of the Christian college universe, i.e., those Protestant “Evangelical” Christian colleges who (1) find an increasing number of the rapidly changing cultural norms inconsistent with institutional religious beliefs and missions and (2) reject societal, governmental and legal efforts to impose those cultural norms on their institutions, must learn to cope and to navigate effectively.

The place of the Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges in American society has changed radically over the last fifty years. From their perch on the strongest limb of the American oak of academic tradition, they now find themselves clinging for life to an increasingly brittle and dying branch of academic “irrelevance,” subject to breakage by the next mighty wind of change. This new environment presents the Protestant Evangelical Christian college president, whose personal religious faith and institution’s religious mission may be perceived to be directly in conflict with changing cultural and societal norms (and, indeed, evolving and related legal authority), with a unique set of life-impacting challenges never before encountered by faith-based institutions of higher education in America. The primary intent of this study has been to explore the presidential responses to these rapidly changing times and to these mission-impacting challenges.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine presidential decision-making at Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges at a time when religious values and mission are at issue, and the survival of these colleges and of their values and missions are in question. In this study, I aimed to better understand the thinking and decision-making of presidents of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges who are faced with changing cultural norms and legal decisions that challenge the very values upon which these unique educational institutions were founded and continue today.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to address the following question: How has the Protestant Evangelical Christian college leader navigated the values conflicts that arise when religious beliefs and institutional mission are deemed to be inconsistent with evolving cultural norms and changing legal authority?

Significance of the Study to Christian Higher Education and to the Field of Higher Education Generally

Many may challenge or question the worth and importance of a study focused on Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidential decision-making. But for the scores of institutions and hundreds of thousands of students (and their parents and families), faculty, administrators, staff, trustees, and alumni of these unique institutions, whose lives are, and have been, forever influenced for good by the educational experiences these institutions provide, the study’s findings have great value.
Similarly, this study has relevance to those who acknowledge and value the foundational importance of institutional diversity to the fabric of American higher education. The Protestant Evangelical Christian college is one of the remaining unique and distinct educational formats of a powerfully diverse system of higher education that has long-prided itself on the variety of its offerings.

This study also adds value to the field of higher education generally by focusing specifically on the Protestant Evangelical Christian college president’s navigation of most difficult circumstances where religious beliefs and positions are at issue and institutional survival may be in jeopardy. Challenges to a president’s personal faith commitment and to an institution’s core religious beliefs and mission likely demand different leadership considerations, skills, and actions than those demanded in addressing “common” crises confronting institutions of higher education, such as financial stress and enrollment decline. When the core religious beliefs of a leader and the institution he or she leads are challenged, do different leadership characteristics come to the forefront? Are different considerations at play?

Despite my intimate knowledge of and belief in this unique sector of higher education, I did not know the answers to the questions contemplated by the research here. In a Christian college context, survival, if ever an issue, has arisen primarily for reasons of declining enrollments and insufficient resources. It has not been due to governmental imposition of changing societal mores that conflict with long-held tenets of a faith-based institution of higher education. (The one exception to that general statement, of course, might be the Bob Jones University v. United States case where the Supreme Court supported the IRS decision to revoke the University’s tax exempt status as a religious,
charitable and educational organization because of what was deemed to be the institution’s racially discriminatory admissions policies (Bob Jones University, 1983). Accordingly, the research and conclusions here are of value, not only to me as a practitioner in Christian higher education, but also to the entire sector as it confronts a changing world.

This research study, then, will benefit leaders of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges who are facing these perceived challenges to values and to mission at an ever-increasing rate. It also will benefit presidents of Christian and faith-affiliated colleges, generally, who, although possibly more flexible or liberal in interpreting certain religious tenets, still adhere strongly to the importance of faith and wrestle with its application to daily life. And finally, this research will benefit leaders of all small colleges who are faced with value conflicts that must be resolved. There is little in the literature that addresses this specific issue as directly as I do in this study.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

I commence this study, in Chapter 2, with a review of the relevant literature to provide the reader with some background and an understanding regarding what is becoming an increasingly uncommon form of American higher education, the Christian college. I first address the Christian college in American history and note its strong and pervasive presence prior to the Civil War, and then, its slow, but steady decline in subsequent American educational history. I then address the realities faced by the remnant of Christian colleges that continue to operate on the American educational landscape, and focus, specifically, on one unique subgroup of the American Christian college, the Protestant Evangelical Christian college.
After establishing the history and identity of this study’s subjects, I turn my attention to the serious, life-impacting issues now confronting this unique grouping of education providers. I first address the deep religious beliefs of these institutions and how those beliefs have been impacted, in particular, by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, legislative and judicial decisions since that time, and, more recently, by the Supreme Court’s decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, (2015), all of which have presented the Protestant Evangelical Christian college with serious values conflicts.

I then address presidential decision-making when confronted with serious values-conflicts. In so doing, I focus specifically on presidential decision-making in crisis, and then look more deeply into several types of presidential decision-making that are uniquely applicable to the Evangelical Christian college today: values-based decision-making (including authentic and servant leader decision-making); mission-centered decision-making; and faith-based decision-making.

In Chapter 3, I detail the methodology I used to address the research question presented. I first describe the Pilot Study that was executed to determine study participants and then describe the data collection process itself, which involved interviewing ten presidents of Evangelical Christian colleges across America, all selected by the Pilot Study. This chapter concludes with sections focused on my efforts to ensure the integrity of this study’s results and to address ethical considerations raised by the study.

Chapter 4 provides a lengthy recitation of the findings resulting from the ten interviews conducted with the study’s participants. The findings are organized under 4 broad themes and 34 subthemes involving the challenges, risks, impediments, and
strategies identified by the presidents as relevant to decision-making at the Evangelical Christian college in today’s environment.

In Chapter 5, I discuss and analyze the study’s findings in an effort to distill the thinking of the study’s ten participants into several broad themes that respond to the study’s research questions. In so doing, I note and address the participant’s perception of the severity of the times and the influence of personal religious belief and institutional mission on exercising leadership in this context. I then identify five specific practices that can assist the president of the Evangelical Christian college in addressing the values conflicts currently confronting his or her campus.

And, finally, in Chapter 6, I draw conclusions regarding the study’s results and recommend that the president of today’s Protestant Evangelical Christian college, in addressing the many values conflicts that face his or her institution, (1) remain true to personal religious convictions; (2) adhere to institutional mission; (3) educate institutional constituencies regarding the many social issues confronting the institution, and of the potential consequences for failing to address such issues adequately; (4) engage the academy and secular American society in new and multitudinous ways to reverse its isolationist image; (5) review and revise institutional policies and procedures, especially those regarding hot-button social issues, to ensure they are written thoughtfully, concisely and with clarity so that they assist, in a positive way, the institution in addressing the values conflicts currently at issue; and (6) assert leadership that is well-considered, thoughtful and appropriate, while at the same time strong, passionate and decisive.

The dissertation concludes with a list of recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Christian College in History: The Cornerstone of American Higher Education

Like their secular brothers and sisters, the self-described Christian colleges in America are plagued on every front with survival challenges. Significant funding shortages, declining enrollments, rising costs, increasing complexity, over-regulation, and public skepticism are as characteristic of these institutions as they are of so many of their secular counterparts. And yet, added to the burden of the Christian colleges are unique struggles involving faith and belief, and their practice, that further complicate and exacerbate the struggles facing all small colleges. Accordingly, they warrant special attention.

The Christian college is a charter member of America’s richly diverse system of higher education. Indeed, the Christian college, and in particular, the Protestant Christian college, has been a staple, if not an essential ingredient, of American higher education since the founding of America’s first “Christian” college, Harvard University in 1636. At its founding, Harvard’s goal for learning was “to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3), and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning” (Ringenberg, 2006, p. 38). Similarly, Duke University’s founding mission (or what Duke described as its institutional “Aims”) was also grounded in the Christian faith. Its founding mission statement stated:

To assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; to advance learning in all lines of truth; to defend scholarship against all false notions and ideals; to develop a Christian love of freedom and truth; to promote a sincere spirit of tolerance; to discourage all partisan and sectarian strife; and to render the largest
permanent service to the individual, the state, the nation and the church. Unto these ends shall the affairs of the University always be administered (Duke University Aims Statement, 1903, 1924).

Recognizing the influential role the Christian faith played in early American higher education, Ringenberg (2006) described, “the founding of private colleges in America as primarily a Christian endeavor” (p. 13; see also Dockery, 2007, p. 5). Moreover, until late in the nineteenth century, most American colleges had an association with a Christian church or denomination (Patterson, 2001, p. 17; Burtchaell, 1998, p. 819). Princeton, Brown, Rutgers and Dartmouth, to name a few, all began as institutions affiliated with Protestant denominations (Patterson, 2001, p. 17).

In the centuries that followed these first efforts to educate America’s citizenry, the Christian college multiplied many times over to where, prior to the advent of the Civil War, it held a predominant position in American higher education (Ringenberg, 2006, p. 83). As Ringenberg (2006) has explained, at that time, most colleges and universities in America had deep religious roots and purposes.

Despite Christian higher education’s early successes, however, by the latter part of the nineteenth century (1870-1890), the “winds” of secularization were blowing steadily throughout the land and many American colleges initially created for sincere Christian purposes began to lose sight of their founding missions (Ringenberg, 2006, pp. 111, 113-144; Marsden, 1994, pp. 123-131). Reuben (1996) has noted that religion on campus was virtually reconstructed during this period, as natural theology was deemed an inadequate form of religious education (pp. 88-95). In fact, lectures on natural theology and evidences of Christianity were discontinued; moral philosophy began to be discredited; the interests of younger philosophers relating to theism declined while
interest in the psychology and science of religion increased; and curriculums were
adjusted accordingly (pp. 88-95; see also Marsden, 1994, pp. 123-131). Secularization
increased at an ever-accelerating rate and, accordingly, the last century and a half
evidenced a steady decline in the number of American institutions of higher education
that identified themselves as “Christian,” or who carried out their historically religious
purposes (Ringenberg, 2006, pp. 113-143).

Indeed, Notre Dame’s Mark Noll has noted that with respect to religion in the
American university, “almost all of the important studies of which I am aware are
narratives in one form or another of decline” (Noll, 2002, p. 74). Chandler (1992), too,
noted this decline, stating that institutions of higher education that were affiliated with
mainline Protestant denominations faced an uncertain future as the forces of
secularization were upon them (p. 108). Patterson (2001) confirmed this by noting that:

[s]tate institutions which previously embodied a non-
sectarian Protestant ethos, moved increasingly further away
from any overt expression of religious allegiance. Some
other elite colleges that were founded on a Christian base
achieved university status and gradually shed most of their
evangelical Christian distinctives; although the price of
these changes varied from school to school, secularization
proved irreversible (p. 20).

The subtitle of Marsden’s (1994) history and critique, too, acknowledged the move from
a time of “Protestant establishment” to a time of “established unbelief” (p. iii). Chandler
(1992) predicted this “slide” into secularization would be virtually complete by the 21st
century (p. 108).

Although the 21st century has now arrived, and Christian colleges are still with us,
their numbers have significantly diminished as has, arguably, their role and influence in
American higher education. As Ringenberg (2006) has noted:
no longer then, by the last generation of the twentieth century, did the avowedly Christian colleges sit at the apex of the country’s educational structure. That mid-nineteenth century reality was now gone. Some of the old colleges continued to operate as unapologetically Christian institutions, and to their ranks were added many others during the last century; but the Christian colleges of 1980, although growing in program quality and public respect, did not hold the same position or prestige in society that they once did (p. 143).

Indeed, Carpenter and Shipps (1987) noted that these colleges and universities now “fill a large but relatively unknown place in American higher education” (p. 1).

The Contemporary Christian College

Today’s Protestant Christian college in America is generally understood to be an institution that takes the Christian faith seriously and seeks to integrate that faith into its academic program (Dockery, 2007, p. 5). As noted by Dockery (2007), the president of Trinity International University, “the integration of faith and learning is the essence of authentic Christian higher education and should be wholeheartedly implemented across the campus and across the curriculum” (p. 5). Andringa (2009) has described the colleges as “unapologetically and intentionally ‘Christ centered’“ (p. 183), while the Christian university also has been described as having the following distinctive attributes:

(1) it is God-centered and loyal to the Christian revelation, particularly as focused on Jesus Christ and his gospel; (2) it commits itself to the formation and maintenance of a Christian world view; (3) it is marked by humility of mind and a communal core that fosters integrity and candor; (4) it is beholden to the church, the world, and God; (5) it grapples with issues of Christianity and culture; and (6) it seeks to balance academic freedom and confessional fidelity (Carson, 1997, as cited in Patterson, 2001).

Although Protestant Christian colleges have taken different forms over the years, and the term describes a broad and diverse group of educational institutions, their central,
unifying characteristic has been and continues to be their intentional commitment (1) to the Protestant Christian faith as the foundation for their operations and (2) to the integration of a Christian world view into their academic programs (Ringenberg, 2006, p. 193).

**The Protestant “Evangelical” Christian College in America**

Over the last 50 years, a growing subset of the Protestant Christian college in America has been identified as the Protestant “Evangelical” Christian college. These unique institutions are known for their strong commitment to Biblical authority and to their orthodox views on central faith tenets.

The terms “Evangelical” and “Evangelical Christian” have received significant lip service in recent months as all manner of political candidates and pundits seek to categorize and to claim support from that certain influential part of the American electorate known as the “Evangelical Christian.” Despite the frequent use of the terms, it is true that there is great confusion and misunderstanding regarding their meaning. As noted by influential cleric and author John Stott (1999), “evangelical believers have often suffered from a bad press, being misunderstood and misrepresented” (p. 13).

Achieving clarity regarding the terms has not been assisted by the sector’s “tendency to fragment” (Stott, 1999, p. 11). As Stott (1999) has noted, “[p]eople now refer to the multiple ‘tribes’ of evangelicalism and like to place a qualifying adjective in front of ‘evangelical’” (Stott, 1999, p. 11). Stott (1999) has noted that, “[t]here are many to choose from: conservative, liberal, radical, progressive, open, Reformed, charismatic, postmodern and so on” (p.11). Stott (1999) has concluded, however, that what unites
evangelicals is much greater than what divides them (p. 11), and Bradley (2008) has noted that “the ‘claim’ to biblical authority remain[s] constant in all forms of evangelicalism” (p. 4).

The term “evangelical” is defined as “of or denoting a tradition within Protestant Christianity emphasizing the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by faith in the Atonement” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). The adjective “evangelical” means “pertaining to the gospel,” and has been used from the time of the Reformation, some five hundred years ago (Bradley, 2008, p. 4), whereas in noun form, the word has had different meanings at different times (Bradley, 2008, p. 4). Bradley (2008) has noted that “[m]ost will agree that the word and its variants are unusually malleable and possess almost infinite adaptive power” (p. 4).

Despite its many varieties, Stott (1999) has clarified that the evangelical faith is not: (1) a recent innovation (rather, he has stated, it is original, apostolic, New Testament Christianity); (2) a deviation from Christian orthodoxy (rather, it has been used by faith stalwarts since the time of Martin Luther); nor (3) a synonym for fundamentalists (rather, he has noted that fundamentalists, contrary to evangelicals, have become known for their extreme and extravagant views) (p. 18).

Adding further clarification, Thompson (2008) has noted that “evangelicalism, as a whole, emphasizes the role of Scripture, so that a robust commitment to the Bible’s singular authority is regularly held up as one of the distinctives of the evangelical movement” (p. 11). Stott (1999) has confirmed this, adding that most evangelicals allow
for some interpretation of the Scriptures with respect to those sections of the Bible that are figuratively or poetically (rather than literally) true and should be interpreted accordingly” (p. 19).

As applied to the Christian college, then, the term “evangelical” refers to an institution that emphasizes the authority of the Bible and a commitment to the orthodox tenets of the Christian faith. The Evangelical Christian college’s strong focus on the authority of the Bible as it applies to social and cultural issues of the day is a relevant factor in the Evangelical Christian college’s most recent conflicts with changing cultural norms. It is also a factor of great relevance to the President of the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, as he or she wrestles with such conflicts.

Ringenberg (2006) has noted that as of 1980, “[t]he continuing Christian colleges include[d] those affiliated with the smaller evangelical denominations, a number of independent evangelical colleges, most Southern Baptist and Lutheran institutions, some Presbyterian colleges, and a few colleges affiliated with other major denominations and traditions” (p. 184). Although these institutions share many characteristics with their Catholic brother and sister institutions, they are often distinguished from most Catholic colleges and are often described as “evangelical” or as “committed Christian” (Burtchaell, 1998, p. 743). Burtchaell (1998) has noted that these colleges are similar to today’s evangelical church in style, meaning that they are “typically Biblical in preaching, mildly Wesleyan or Calvinist in theology, congregational in polity, conservative in ethics and politics, enthusiastic and informal in ritual, cautious toward the regnant culture, [and] plain in manner” (p. 743).
Others, like James Turner, noted author in religious history and Professor of the Humanities at Notre Dame, have noted that the bulk of Evangelical Christian colleges today are somewhat insular, conceiving of the Christian college as “of Christians, by Christians, and for Christians” (Noll, et. al., 2008, p. 77). Turner has further noted that the Protestant Evangelical Christian college typically requires permanent faculty members to adhere to a Statement of Faith; indeed, Washington D.C.’s Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (the “CCCU”), the largest association of Evangelical Christian colleges in America (and further described later in this dissertation), only accepts as full members colleges and universities that hire as full-time faculty members and administrators persons who are professing Christians (Noll, et. al., 2008, p. 77).

At the end of the 21st century’s first decade, approximately 900 of the over 4,000 non-profit colleges and universities in America identified themselves as religiously affiliated (Andringa 2009, p. 168), and less than 200 of those were generally understood to be Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges that considered the integration of faith and learning to be central to their academic programs (Ringenberg, 2006, pp. 184, 249; Dockery, 2007, p. 9). Whereas earlier Christian colleges in America were characterized by classic academic programs existing in a Christian structure, today’s Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges are focused on the active integration of an orthodox view of the Christian faith into each academic program (Dockery 2007, p. 5). These institutions typically have board-approved institutional mission statements that are grounded in the Christian faith (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009), and require the hiring of Christian faculty and the adherence of students, faculty and staff to a Statement of Faith.
(Carlberg, 2002, p. 229). Many are church- or denominationally-related, but some are independent and non-denominational (Carlberg, 2002, p. 229).

As noted by Carlberg (2002), who, prior to his recent and untimely death, was a Protestant Evangelical Christian college president, most of today’s Protestant Evangelical Christian liberal arts colleges are:

denominationally supported and sponsored; the 20% that are independent from any church authority maintain their distinctiveness by carefully adhering to their missions, requiring faculty and trustees to be confessing Christians, and admitting students who are at least sympathetic to Christian values. Some even build Christian faith statements into their official employment documents for faculty. While some criticize this practice, evangelical institutions regard the faith requirement as a way to acknowledge the common assumptions that are fundamental to their communities of scholarship. Broad latitude is generally given to faculty to practice their intellectual pursuits without inhibiting academic freedom. Indeed, the boundaries of common faith insure freedom of exploration without fear of arbitrary interference by outside forces. Such an approach enables an evangelical faith-based institution to pursue a natural integrative approach to scholarly endeavors (p. 229).

For the most part, these institutions have achieved some level of operational success by maintaining sufficient enrollments and financial support to keep their doors open (Noll, 2002). At the same time, they have not, to any significant degree, distinguished themselves as sophisticated research institutions or exceptional academic institutions with national reputations for excellence and quality (Noll, 2002). Despite those realities, many of these institutions show up regularly on numerous lists identifying the best colleges in America. Because they have generally flown below the radar, however, these institutions have received little national attention and even less criticism, until recently.
The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

The CCCU, of which all presidents and institutions interviewed for this study are members, was first organized in 1976 and currently claims a membership of 115 institutional members in North America and 65 affiliated members in 20 countries around the world. CCCU is a tax exempt organization under Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3) and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. The CCCU is the largest affiliation of Evangelical Christian colleges in North America.

As a basic requirement of membership, all CCCU members must satisfy the following requirements for membership:

1. All member campuses must offer comprehensive undergraduate curricula rooted in the arts and sciences, and be located in North America. All U.S. members must have non-probationary regional accreditation and Canadian institutions must have the equivalent accreditation in Canada.

2. Member campuses must have a public, board-approved institutional mission or purpose statement that is Christ-centered and rooted in the historic Christian faith. They are committed to integrating Biblical faith with educational programs.

3. Member campuses must have a continuing institutional policy and practice, effective throughout membership, to hire as full-time faculty members and administrators (non-hourly staff) only persons who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

4. Member campuses must be supportive of other Christian colleges and universities and have commitment to advance the cause of Christian higher education through participation in programs of the CCCU and payment of annual dues.

5. Member campuses must demonstrate responsible financial operations, have institutional practices that reflect high ethical standards, and operate all financial and fund-raising activities consistent with the standards of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (CCCU, 2017).
As previously noted, each of the participant institutions in this study are member institutions of the CCCU. Accordingly, each is “Christ-centered,” “rooted in the historic Christian faith” and committed to “integrating Biblical faith with educational programs” (CCCU, 2017). In addition, each institution only employs as members of the faculty and administration individuals who are professing Christians.

The Evangelical Christian College’s Clash with Changing Cultural Norms

As cultural norms have changed rapidly over the last five decades, the Evangelical Christian college has found itself in an increasingly precarious position. What follows provides background regarding the sector and its evolving concerns.

Biblical Authority: The Foundation of the Protestant Evangelical Christian College

As noted above, and consistent with most Christian colleges in America, the Protestant Evangelical Christian college views the Holy Bible as “God’s Word” and the ultimate authority regarding all of life’s questions. For these institutions, the Bible’s content is believed to be the inspired “Word of God,” and hence, it is the Christian’s obligation to observe and to obey its tenets (Stott, 1999, p.19). Although throughout Christendom, there exist different interpretations and views regarding the authority, inerrancy, and historical or current relevancy of the holy scriptures, for the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, that is less so. To the leaders of this group of institutions, a traditional, orthodox (or high) view of the scriptures is well-entrenched, and the Bible’s words are viewed as having towering and binding authority for the Christian (Stott, 1999).

An understanding of this characteristic of the Evangelical Christian college is helpful in understanding the challenges in decision-making faced by the Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents today. The Bible is viewed as speaking
specifically to contemporary issues, and it does so in ways that, in the view of the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, are increasingly inconsistent with today’s culture and rapidly changing social mores. This reality creates significant conflict situations for these presidents, who daily find themselves navigating conflicts between personal and institutional faith positions and changing cultural norms.

The Sexual Revolution and Its Implications for the Protestant Evangelical Christian College

The most controversial cultural issues now facing leaders of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges find their genesis in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Over the last five and a half decades, American social norms have pivoted 180 degrees with respect to a whole host of issues related to sexuality. Albert Mohler (2015) has noted, “[a]s the sexual revolution completely pervades the society, and as issues raised by the efforts of gay liberation and legalization of same-sex marriage come to the fore, the Christians now face an array of religious liberty challenges that were inconceivable in previous generations” (pp. 2-3). Mohler (2015) has further noted that transgenderism presents another of these challenges to the religious beliefs of those who look to the Bible as religious authority (p. 3).

With respect to each of these social issues, and consistent with religious belief, the Protestant Evangelical Christian college president looks to the scriptures for guidance. There, he or she finds significant content that either directly or indirectly addresses each of the social and sexual issues coming out of the sexual revolution. Whether it be sexual promiscuity, sexual immorality, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, or gender equality and transgenderism, the Bible speaks, directly or indirectly, to issues confronting the
Christian. As is often the case within Christianity, however, the interpretations and perspectives regarding exactly what the Bible says with respect to these issues abound.

For students of American higher education, then, understanding the importance of scripture to the Christian, and especially to the Evangelical Christian, unveils the conflict confronting Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents today. Society and culture, to an increasing degree, no longer agree with religious positions taken on many of these issues by most Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges. Accordingly, the stage is now set for future challenges with respect to these concerns, as now we face, in Mohler’s (2015) words, “an inevitable conflict of liberties” (p. 3).

The Conflict Plays Out

Since the 1960s, and during the last decade in particular, Mohler’s “conflict of liberties” has been increasingly in evidence as a host of federal and state legislative actions, executive branch pronouncements, and judicial decisions have been enacted or promulgated that arguably impinge on religious liberties. For example, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010), (the “ACA”), signed into law by President Barack Obama, includes provisions that require employers (including many faith-based institutions of higher education) to make available and to provide to employees certain types of contraceptives and related services as part of their health insurance plans. Some of these contraceptives and related services are viewed by many such institutions as abortifacients that violate religious beliefs.

This example of governmental regulation involving religious beliefs has been viewed widely as inappropriate and intrusive. Catholic and Protestant institutions, in particular, have mounted numerous challenges to the law’s applicability to faith-based
institutions. Among the member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C., alone (all of whom believe their religious rights have been challenged by these legal requirements), the abortifacient requirement has resulted in the filing of eighteen lawsuits against the government (all related to the contraceptive and abortifacient mandate). Although efforts have been made by the federal government to “accommodate” the concerns raised by these institutions, to date, no satisfactory resolution has been forthcoming, and these institutions remain in conflict with, and at risk because of, ACA provisions.

The issue remains hotly contested as the Supreme Court recently vacated and remanded an earlier decision by the Court of Appeals in Little Sisters of the Poor Home for the Aged v. Burwell (2017), recognizing that the parties had agreed that employees could be provided contraceptive coverage by insurance companies without notice by the challengers (Little Sisters of the Poor, 2017). Subsequently, the administration of Donald Trump has issued on Executive Order providing protection to organizations like the Little Sisters of the Poor in these matters (Executive Order, 2017). The ultimate resolution of these concerns remains to be seen.

Mohler’s “conflict of liberties” is also in evidence with respect to numerous governmental promulgations, the intent of which have been to broaden the reach and impact of anti-discrimination laws. For example, the clash between changing cultural norms and unchanging religious beliefs can be seen in the Obama administration’s reinterpretation, through Executive Orders and “Dear Colleague” Letters, of Title IX.
Title IX states the following:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

(Title IX, 2010) “Title IX applies to all educational institutions, both public and private, that receive federal funds,” which includes almost all public and private colleges and universities, including most Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges (NCAA, 2017). Title IX also reaches, not only student athletes, but also the employment relationship between the Protestant Evangelical Christian college and its employees. The Executive Orders have sought to expand the statute’s prohibitions against discrimination based on a person’s “sex” to include discrimination based on a person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Although Title IX, in its original form, (which prohibited discrimination in athletics based on sex), has been long-supported by faith-based institutions, this recent expansion of definitions by the Obama Administration’s Office of Civil Rights has created significant religious conflicts for faith-based institutions of higher education who hold true to more conservative religious positions on the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. These conflicts have played out not only in the student context, but also in the employment context. For example, George Fox University in Oregon has had to defend a discrimination complaint filed by a transgender student under Title IX (Hunt & Pena (2014). Spring Arbor University, on the other hand, has had to defend an action filed by a transgender administrator under Titles VII and IX. The case was ultimately
settled (Spring Arbor, 2007). In both cases, Title IX was used to challenge Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges for their religiously-based student and hiring practices.

Although federal pronouncements under Title IX have provided a religious exemption for church-controlled entities, the exemption is not sufficiently broad to cover faith-based institutions of higher education that are not church-controlled. Accordingly, these institutions have been forced, arguably, to operate in violation of recent legal authority and, accordingly, have been at risk of being challenged legally for adhering to their religious beliefs. (It should be noted that as of February 22, 2017, the administration of President Donald Trump has withdrawn the prior administration’s protection of transgender students under Title IX, demonstrating again the unsettled and rapidly changing nature of and context for this research (Dear Colleagues Letter, February 22, 2017).

The examples cited above are but two of many that exist at the state and federal levels where governmental actions have intruded upon religious freedoms. The Supreme Court’s Obergefell decision, described below, suggests such intrusions are likely to continue and to multiply.

**Obergefell**

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States of America, by a narrow 5-4 ruling, issued its decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. _____ (2015), determining that the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution “requires a State to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out of state” (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015, p. 1). This landmark decision was hailed and celebrated by many in the LGBTQ community, its supporters, and many
members of the general public as a long-overdue and long-justified recognition of a right that is “inherent in the liberty of the person” (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015 p. 4). By those who disagreed with the decision, however, it was viewed with disbelief, great sadness, and as an undermining of American democracy, the institution of marriage, and the constitutional right to freely exercise religion.

Whether one supports or opposes the Obergefell decision, it presents monumental challenges to faith-based higher education in America, and, in particular, to the Protestant Evangelical Christian college. It also is the most recent evidence of a society rapidly changing its historical positions on a host of traditional values and social mores, the result being that many faith-based institutions that still cling to those once-shared values and mores now find themselves out of the mainstream.

Although the Obergefell decision was specifically applicable to state licensing issues with respect to same-sex marriage, the precedent it established is more extensive and far-reaching. In today’s shifting environment regarding historic sexual mores, not only do Obergefell’s conclusions present Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges with serious issues regarding same-sex marriage and its application to their religious beliefs, but Obergefell’s rationale can easily be extended to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity generally. Both are problematic for the Protestant Evangelical Christian college that adheres to traditional and orthodox tenets of faith that, in turn, have much to say regarding human sexuality.

As noted by Bernhard and McIntire (2015), in a Chronicle of Higher Education article published on the same day the ruling was issued, the case also signaled a warning
to Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges that there might be negative financial consequences for maintaining historic religious convictions. Bernhard and McIntire (2015) noted:

The Supreme Court ruled on Friday that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. What will be the effect on higher education?

For most colleges, not much.

But for others — in particular, Christian colleges — the ruling beckons toward an uncertain future . . . Christian colleges across the nation — many of which forbid same-sex relationships among students and faculty members — said they faced an uncertain future, with the decision potentially affecting their tax exempt status, accreditation, student housing policies, and ability to admit and hire people based on religious convictions.

The authors also quoted R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, who warned “[m]any religious institutions simply could not afford to operate [without tax exemptions], [s]o it’s not just a question of tax exemptions, it’s a question of existence” (Bernhard & McIntire, 2015).

And that is the crux of the concern for the Protestant Evangelical Christian college president today. The recent changes in public opinion, legislation, and court opinions with respect to long-established cultural norms regarding sexual morality, including same-sex marriage, have placed their institutions in potential jeopardy.

**Institutional Diversity: Sustaining the Crown Jewel of American Higher Education**

Given the growing threats to America’s Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges, the question arises as to what impact their failure would have on America’s system of higher education. With that in mind a brief discussion of institutional diversity in American higher education is warranted.
The American system of higher education is unique with respect to its heterogeneity (Malloy, 2003, p. 1; Harris, 2013, p. 1). The system’s variety of institutional offerings, generally known as “institutional diversity,” has resulted in a smorgasbord of educational options for the student to consider, whether seeking out career training or an advanced research degree (Harris, 2013, pp. 1-2). Bok (2013) has noted that “[m]uch of what is most praise worthy about higher education in this country (as well as much that is troubling) can be linked in one way or another to these distinctive characteristics [of institutional diversity]” (p. 14). Edward Malloy (2003), former president of the University of Notre Dame, noted that:

We in the United States have benefitted enormously from the rich array of institutions, each with its distinctive sense of purpose, tradition, and constituencies deliberately served. Nowhere else can one find institutions specifically created to serve under-represented minorities or Native Americans, for example. In no other country is there such an impressive range of religious-affiliated institutions (such as the 130 or so currently under Roman Catholic auspices) reflecting the multiple religious traditions present here… We have single-sex colleges and military academies and small liberal arts colleges. Community colleges provide opportunities for adult learners, recent immigrants, and those holding full-time jobs. Land-grant universities, local and regional campuses, and world-class flagship institutions serve millions of students. The Ivies and other top research institutions are among the best in the world. Even the newest entrepreneurial for-profit education and e-learning providers contribute to the diversity of opportunity and access that characterizes American higher education (p. 2).


America’s colleges and universities differ in many ways. Some are public, others are independent; some are large urban universities, some are two-year community colleges,
and still others are small rural campuses. Some offer graduate professional programs, others focus primarily on undergraduate education. Each of our more than 4,000 colleges and universities has its own specific and distinct mission (p. 1).

Both Malloy (2003) and ACE (2012) underscored the importance of institutional diversity to the American system of higher education. Malloy (2003) further noted, “[o]ur differentiation of identity, mission, and sense of purpose is our greatest national resource” (p. 2). ACE (2012) noted, “[t]his collective diversity among institutions is one of the greatest strengths among America’s higher education system, and has helped make it the best in the world” and that “[p]reserving that diversity is essential if we hope to serve the needs of our democratic society and of the increasingly global scope of the economy” (p. 1).

So why is it that we should be concerned when America’s institutional diversity is threatened? Harris (2013) has written, “[i]nstitutional diversity represents one of the great and unique features of the American higher education system and serves as an influential foundation of the system’s historical success” (p. 3). Citing Birnbaum (1983) and Morphew (2009), Harris (2013) has further noted, “many scholars argue that institutional diversity embodies a significant ideological aspect and represents one of the most significant strengths of the U.S. higher education system” (p. 3). Harris (2013) further noted that “American society demands a range of requirements for higher education to fulfill from reaching different student populations, providing a variety of academic fields and degrees, and multiple entry points into the system,” concluding that no one type of institution could meet all the needs presented by American society (p. 3).
And so it is that the small, private, residential, liberal arts colleges in America, including those unique educational institutions whose missions and purposes are to serve Protestant Evangelical Christian students, play roles that they alone can play and meet needs that they alone can meet. These institutions, like all institutions that add to the rich diversity of the American higher education landscape, provide unique services and learning environments that are integral to America’s long-standing commitment to institutional diversity in higher education. When their existence and survival are at risk, the entire system shudders and groans.

As Malloy (2013) has stated, “we all have an interest in sustaining the hallmark variety in the types and sizes of colleges and universities that constitute our country’s loosely organized system of higher education. Such heterogeneity simply does not exist in many other parts of the world” (p. 1). ACE (2012) similarly noted that “the diversity we seek and the future of the nation do require that colleges and universities continue to be able to reach out and make conscious effort to build healthy and diverse learning environments that are appropriate for their missions” (p. 2).

The fate of America’s small, private, secular, residential, liberal arts colleges, and of its Protestant (and Catholic) Christian colleges (whether evangelical or not) matters. Like each of the various constituent parts of American higher education, these institutions meet the needs of specific students and play unique and distinct roles that enrich the American higher education landscape and our nation as a whole (Bok, 2013, pp. 14-16). Allowing for their demise impoverishes the American system of higher education and each new closing represents one additional step in what has become recognized as the “steady homogenization” and slow “move toward similarity of types of institutions
within [American] higher education” that some have observed over the past 40 years (Harris, 2013, p. 3). Each such step is a step away from the American higher education system’s historic commitments to heterogeneity and institutional diversity, commitments that, to date, have resulted in the world’s best system of higher education.

**Presidential Decision-Making**

In the context of the mounting financial pressures and multitude of operating issues confronting all private, 4-year, residential, liberal arts colleges and universities, and in the added context of rapidly changing cultural norms that can conflict with a Christian college’s religious beliefs and missions, Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents must make hard decisions, some of which may have consequences with respect to institutional survival. Such decision-making is made from a lonely place while carrying a heavy burden. While significant literatures now exist regarding multiple types and facets of presidential leadership and decision-making, most of that focuses on a leader’s skills, resolving everyday problems and occasional crises, or moving an institution and its people forward. Those literatures are of limited value, however, in addressing difficult decision-making situations involving personal and institutional religious beliefs and core missional commitments involving religion, especially when institutional survival is at stake. It is with that narrow context in mind that we turn to the literatures addressing leadership that is crisis driven, values-based, mission-centered, and faith-based. First, we turn to leadership in crisis.

**Presidential Decision-Making in Crisis**

Zumeta, Breneman, Callan and Finney (2012) have noted that there is reason for “serious concern” today regarding the “capacity of American higher education to address the challenges it faces in coming decades” (Zumeta, et al., 2012, p. 126). The authors
noted that concerns exist regarding the sector’s physical, fiscal, motivational, and political capacities to address the changing world confronting it (Zumeta, et al., 2012, p. 126). The authors then listed challenges facing American higher education, including (1) dramatic technological changes; (2) the loss of America’s pre-eminence in science, technology and higher education participation and attainment rates; (3) the decline of completion rates; (4) rapid student demographic changes; (5) the inconsistency of state funding; (6) increasing tuition; (7) insufficient federal and state student aid; (8) deregulation; and (9) growing competition (Zumeta, et al., 2012, pp. 158-338).

Finney (2014) has added to the list of current concerns by noting state structural budget deficits, rapidly-expanding Medicaid spending, increasing financial pressures on families, and the mismatch of current financial policies and educational needs (pp. 6-7). Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina has noted that America’s long-recognized leadership role in higher education has diminished and that in recent years “our institutional and public policy has focused almost exclusively on matching past achievements, making only modest improvements to current programs, and devoting inadequate attention to the need for new and restructured strategies and policies” (Zumeta, et al., 2012, p. 62). Although the challenges facing many in American higher education are numerous, Weary (2009) has noted that most institutions descend into “fragility” at some point in their histories (p. 77). In his words, most are “one mistake away from bankruptcy” (Weary, 2009, p. 77).

The literature is replete with efforts to analyze what is required to successfully lead institutions of higher education during difficult times (Bataille & Cordova, 2014; Fullan & Scott, 2009; Kezar, 2014). Dubois (2016) has noted that presidents should be
prepared for crisis (p. 17/29). Ballard & Brown (2011) and Kezar (2014) have stressed the importance of a president having a good team of subordinates in meeting crisis (Ballard & Brown, 2011, p. 84; Kezar, 2014, p. 115). Ballard & Brown (2011) have also noted that it is important to recruit new board members who have experienced organizational complexities and successfully addressed institutional difficulties (p. 85). Careful and well-planned board education can also be of great assistance in times leading up to crisis (Weary, 2009, pp. 81-92).

Once a crisis hits, numerous skills, abilities, resources, and actions are required. Dubois (2016) has noted the importance of strong public relations efforts, especially in crisis (p. 17-18/29). Burke, Morris & Tattersall (2012) have focused on the need for presidential confidence and institutional clarity of mission. Dubois (2016) has added that “in times of severe crisis, the president’s voice matters and it may be the only one that does” (p. 18/29).

Ballard & Brown (2011) have underscored the importance of analyzing the problem causing the crisis and trying to understand it (pp. 84-85). Heifetz & Linsky (2002) have noted that it is important for the leader to “operate in and above the fray” (p. 66). Cormier (2009) has focused on the institution’s mission in times of crisis and has declared that institutional leaders must, “live the mission,” especially in times of crisis (p. 95). Burke, Morris & Tattersall (2012) have written that whenever “confusion begins to reign, it is the president’s clarion call that should reorient the faithful back to the institution’s reason for being” (p. 32).

Weary (2009) has spoken to the need for the president of an institution in crisis to inspire employees without raising unrealistic expectations (pp. 88-89). The president can
enhance employee dedication while stalling or reversing declining morale (Weary, 2009, pp. 88-89; Ballard & Brown, 2011, p. 87). Ballard & Brown (2011) have further noted the importance in having a president confront crisis with a collegial and consultative mindset (p. 86). Presidential communications should always be “open, honest and transparent” (Ballard & Brown, 2011, p. 88; Bataille & Cordova, 2014).

Many studies of leadership confronting crisis conclude with a section on the importance of presidential self-care while managing crisis (Ballard & Brown, 2011, p. 90; Heifitz, 2002; Heifitz, Grashaw & Linsky, 2009). Regular exercise routines are imperative (Dubois, 2016, p. 23/29), as are opportunities to relax and revitalize (Ballard & Brown, 2011, pp. 90-93). Scheduling opportunities for introspection (Heifitz, Grashaw & Linsky, 2009) and networking with other similarly-situated college presidents (Ballard & Brown, 2011; Heifitz Grashaw & Linsky, 2009) can also assist the president in personally surviving institutional crisis.

The President and Values-Based Decision-Making

Values are viewed as “underlying attitudes and beliefs that help determine an individual’s behavior” (Viinamaki, 2012, p. 29). More succinctly, values drive behavior (Wells 1997). Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) have noted five value characteristics that are consistently reported in the literature. In their opinion, values: “(1) involve beliefs, (2) relate to desirable end states of behavior, (3) guide evaluation of behaviors or events, (4) remain stable across time and context, and (5) are ordered by relative importance” (pp. 230-255). Peregrym and Wolff (2013) have defined personal values to be “defining characteristics that tend to prevail over time, often have a determinative influence on our attitudes and actions, and can express themselves in many different ways” (p. 3). Despite
their tendency for stability over time, Hartley & Schall (2015) have noted that core values at times “subtly shift” or are emphasized in different ways to meet changing circumstances (p. 10).

Effective values-based leadership is dependent upon a leader having a sense of his or her own values, a consciousness or awareness of those values, and the competence to put those values into practice (Viinamaki, 2012, pp. 35-36). The values-based leader seeks to exercise decision-making skills in ways that are consistent with personal values and ultimately result in doing the right thing (Kraemer, 2011).

Values and values-based leadership are not always “good, right, fair or just”; rather, they can reflect a “negative orientation” and can be destructive (McCuddy, 2008, p. 2). McCuddy (2008) has posited that values-based leadership that is characterized by “self-fullness” and complete stewardship hold the greatest promise for leaders today (p. 11).

Viinamaki (2012) has noted that a leader’s ethics and values are especially influential because of the impact he or she has on others and on institutional performance and effectiveness (pp. 28-29). Kraemer (2011) has noted that values-based leaders “seek to inspire and motivate, using their influence to pursue what matters most” (p. 2). For the values-based president, “what matters most is the greater good, the positive change that can be effected within a team, department, division or organization, or even on a global level” (Kraemer, p. 3). If organizational leaders do not speak to the importance of ethics and values, employees will be unclear as to their importance (Brown, Huntsman & Trevino, 2000, p. 135).
Kraemer (2011) has identified four principles of values-based leadership: (1) the practice of self-reflection; (2) maintaining balance and perspective; (3) exhibiting true self-confidence; and (4) practicing genuine humility (pp. 13-76). Covey (1991) has acknowledged that principles are not values, but that principles “surface in the form of values, ideas, norms and teachings that uplift, ennoble, fulfill, empower, and inspire people (p. 19). He has suggested that “principle-centered leaders” are characterized by the following attributes: (1) they are continually learning; (2) they are service-oriented; (3) they radiate positive energy; (4) they believe in other people; and (5) they exercise for self-renewal (pp. 33-39). Every organization seeks to “gain and maintain alignment with core values, ethics and principles” (Covey, 1991, p. 48).

Dimovski, Pearce and Peterlin (2015) have noted that the shared values of an organization are usually “embedded in the culture of the organization” (p. 283). Shared values are important in creating strong organizational cultures (Mintzberg, et. al., 2005, p. 309 & Schein, 1985). For Collins and Porras (2002), it is the “core values and sense of purpose” of an organization, or what they identify as the “core ideology” of an organization, that guides and inspires people throughout the organization and remains relatively fixed for long periods of time” (p. 48). They posit that a core ideology is the organizational anchor that says: “[t]his is who we are; this is what we stand for; this is what we’re all about” (Collins & Porras, 2002, p. 54).

Values drive decision-making (Phillips, Reynolds & Urbany, 2008, p. 76). In addition, “[v]alues transcend both context and experiences. Therefore, they can be used for making tough decisions in complex situations that have not yet been experienced” (Dean, 2008, p. 2). Phillips, Reynolds & Urbany (2008) have observed that all decisions,
whether ethical or unethical, are values-based and “necessarily involve an implicit or explicit trade-off of values” (p. 75).

Values-based leadership is often described as being related to or encompassing other leadership theories (Russell, 2001; Dimovski, Pearse & Peterlin, 2015). Two of specific relevance to this study are “authentic leadership” and “servant leadership” (Ladkin & Taylor, 2009).

An accepted definitive definition of authentic leadership does not exist (Ladkin & Taylor 2009, p. 65). However, the expanding literature is rife with efforts to create such a definition (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis & Dickens, 2011, p. 1122). Authentic leaders have been defined as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (Avolio & Gardner 2004, p. 321, as cited in Avolio Gardner, et al. 2005).

Authentic leadership is viewed as being informed by or an expression of the “true self” and requires that the leader be self-aware and inclined toward “moral virtue” (Ladkin & Taylor, 2009, p. 65). Authentic leaders are “those individuals who know who they are, what they think and behave, and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspective” (Avolio et al., 2004, pp. 802-803). Authentic leaders also have been defined as “genuine people who are true to themselves and to what they believe in” (George & Sims, 2007, p. 8).

The concept and theory of servant leadership was first brought to light by Robert K. Greenleaf (Spears 1996). Although Greenleaf did not define the term, he did focus on
servant leader behaviors and the influence they had on their followers (Kuzmenko, Montagno & Smith, 2004, p. 82). Laub (1999) has attempted to summarize the concept by noting:

Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization (p. 83).

The servant leadership concept “views a leader as a servant of his/her followers. It places the interest of followers before the self-interest of a leader” (Kuzmenko, Montagno & Smith, 2004, p. 80).

Servant leadership is considered a “values-based” approach to leadership (Dimovski, Pearse & Peterlin, 2015, p. 283). Citing Kuczmarski and Kuczmarski (1995), Russell (2001) has noted that values are “very pertinent to servant leadership” and that “[l]eaders need to develop a value system that serves” (Russell, 2001, p. 79). Core values of servant leadership include the values of humility and respect for others and the personal values of honesty and integrity (Russell, 2001). Servant leadership has long been the most influential leadership model within the Christian community (Davey and Wong, 2007).

Values-based leadership and decision-making look to deeply-held, often shared, beliefs to determine how they will impact leadership decisions. Here, we are studying circumstances in which deeply-held religious beliefs and values, both personal and institutional, are perceived to be challenged. Acknowledging that, we know that each
president in higher education brings to the table a different set of values that guide and
direct decision-making. Similarly, each institution has developed, over time, values that
it deems to be of importance in carrying out its educational purpose. What is vital to one
may not be important for another. What for one represents a red line that cannot be
crossed may be a small bump in the road for another. Accordingly, the personal and
institutional values involved and evident in any decision-making are consequential.

Acknowledging the above, the Evangelical Christian college president brings to
his or her responsibilities a value set that often is heavily influenced by religious belief.
The Holy Bible, to which the Protestant Evangelical Christian college president looks for
guidance as the “Word of God,” is filled with value-laden directives, mandates and
commandments on numerous subjects. The Christian is expected to order his or her life
in accordance with these Biblical mandates and admonitions, and to live in a manner
consistent with them. Accordingly, when the Protestant Evangelical Christian college
president of today is confronted with changing societal mores on a variety of fronts that
conflict with personal or institutional values that, in turn, spring from biblical mandates,
admonitions and religious belief, decision-making can become challenging and
problematic.

As stark evidence of this reality, the many changes in American culture that find
their genesis in the sexual revolution of the 1960s have presented significant values
conflicts and difficulties to many Christians and Christian colleges. The Holy Bible is
replete with references to all manner of sexuality and sexual expression. For the
Protestant Evangelical Christian college president who looks to the Bible to understand
God’s will and to determine life’s course, he or she is immediately put into conflict with the society in which that life is lived.

**The President and Mission-Centered Decision-Making**

Hartley (2002) has noted that some colleges and universities have carefully developed ideas with respect to the educational programs they offer, and have developed distinctive missions to memorialize those ideas (p. 3). Indeed, in Hartley’s (2003) view, these institutions have found a “because” that brings significant meaning to on-going educational programs and activities (p. 100). Hartley and Morphew (2006) have noted that institutions often incorporate ideas that their benefactors and constituencies value into their mission statements (p. 467).

Hartley (2002) has described mission as an “internal compass” that enables organizations to “retain their bearings and not lose their way” (p. 4). Newsom & Hayes (1991) have noted that for many organizations, their missions are their “reason[s] for being” (p. 28). Hartley (2002) notes that, when well-defined, a mission can be a “touchstone, a kind of common law by which information is interpreted and decisions made” (p. 10). Having a clear purpose informs decision-making, and having a shared purpose can ennoble work and promote a sense of importance and uniqueness about work responsibilities (Hartley, 2002, p. 10). Moreover, having a common or shared purpose can result in a better and more meaningful institutional life (Hartley, 2003, p. 99).

Fisman, Khurana & Martenson (2009) have described mission as the “True North” of an organization, and have noted that every decision made by an organization should completely align with that mission, and no decision should deviate from that mission (p. 39). The authors have identified the following reasons for why organizations deviate from mission: “(1) unclear or misguided missions; (2) flawed decision-making
cultures; (3) the inability to share responsibility; (4) sub-optimal boards; and (5) incomplete information” (pp. 40-42). They also have outlined seven practices that can help organizations stay true to missions: (1) getting leaders to evaluate their governance performance; (2) building relationships based on trust; (3) distinguishing governance from other tasks; (4) articulating the organization’s mission and strategy; (5) planning for leadership succession; (6) making decisions with the full board; and (7) creating systematic flows of information (pp. 42-43). For the Protestant Evangelical Christian college whose “true north” is increasingly under public scrutiny and challenge, implementation of the seven practices to stay true to mission have growing importance.

Institutional missions are often memorialized in mission or vision statements. Mission and vision statements serve different purposes, but function in a complementary manner (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008; Abelman, Dalessandro, Janstova, Synder-Suhy & Petty, 2007). Whereas mission statements deal with the present, vision statements address the future (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008). In citing to Dill (1998), Hartley notes that, “‘mission’ tends to ‘point to hard-nosed operational goals or core organizational competencies . . . while ‘vision’ connotes the idealized values, assumptions, hopes, dreams and aspirations of a group” (Hartley, 2003, p. 76; Collins & Porras, 1996). A combination of both mission and vision likely have importance for the Christian college at a time of uncertainty.

Hartley and Morphew (2006) have noted that “articulating a shared purpose is a requisite first step on the road to organizational success” (p. 456). The literature suggests that articulating an institutional mission can be instructive in that (1) it assists institutional members in determining whether certain activities are consistent with
institutional purposes and (2) it can inspire members and inform those external to the organization (Hartley & Morphew, 2006, p. 457). Hartley & Morphew (2006) have posited that mission statements are often not aspirational, but can have common elements, although differences are noted between public and private institutions (pp. 466-469). For the Protestant Evangelical Christian college that finds itself increasingly out of step with its culture, and with its mission increasingly viewed as suspect, the importance of thoughtfully articulating a shared mission has heightened significance.

Collins and Porras (2002) have cautioned, however, that mission statements can often become “verbose, meaningless, [and] impossible-to-remember”; they urge each institution to write mission statements in broad, but clear terms (p. 84). The statement needs to be big, but simple and understandable (Tichy & Sherman, 1993, as cited in Collins & Porras, 2002, p. 85). A mission statement needs to be something “clear, compelling, and more likely to stimulate progress ....” (Collins & Porras, 2002, p. 85; Pekarsky, 1998, p. 280). The Evangelical Christian college finds its mission in the unique purpose of educating young people by integrating the Christian faith with learning; a big and broad mission, but easy to understand.

Hartley and Schall (2005), in their study of Swarthmore and Olivet Colleges, concluded that institutional mission provides continuity with respect to key values over time, noting that these core values are “powerful, legitimizing elements in discussions about institutional direction” (p. 10). Hartley (2002) has further noted, however, that institutional mission and purposes evolve (p. 120). Hartley and Schall (2005) have explained that “core values must sometimes subtly shift or be emphasized in new ways to fit changing circumstances” and that institutions “must periodically struggle to redefine
Greer & Horst (2014) have argued, however, that such shifting and evolving could result in “mission drift” that results in an institution’s losing its foundational purposes (p. 18).

The mission and/or vision statements of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges, or “Christ-centered colleges and universities,” as described by Abelman and Dalessandro (2009), “tend to be more shared, clear and compelling than those offered by secular 4-year institutions” (p. 103). However, they also are less complex and offer “less relative advantage than [those] of secular schools” (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009, p. 105). Railsback (2006) has posited that Christ-centered colleges (including CCCU institutions) “continue to have a relatively high level of orthodoxy with regard to historic tenets of the Christian faith” (p. 42). Abelman and Dalessandro (2009) suggest that fact may translate into shorter, more concise and definitive mission statements (p. 106).

For the Protestant Evangelical Christian college leaders of today, their institutions’ mission-centered purposes are their commitments to integrate the Christian faith into all aspects of their academic and extracurricular programs. Abelman & Dalessandro (2009) have noted that most Christian colleges have intentionally incorporated in their missions or mission statements references to their religious identities, defining values and guiding principles (p. 88). For example, the mission statement at Taylor University is “[t]o develop servant leaders marked with a passion to minister Christ’s redemptive love and truth to a world in need” (Taylor University Mission Statement, 2009). Wheaton College’s mission statement has stated that: “Wheaton College serves Jesus Christ and advances His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and
benefit society worldwide” (Wheaton College Mission Statement, 2013). Each of these thought-provoking statements, and many others like them, attempts to encapsulate in as few words as possible the central, guiding force behind each institution, the core purpose of its existence.

In the case of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges like Taylor and Wheaton, these statements are undergirded by, built upon, and reflective of a deep Christian faith, which incorporates a central belief in the Holy Bible as the Word of God. In essence, these colleges’ missions and sole purposes are to carry out God’s purposes in this world and to integrate the Christian’s belief and practice with all of learning and all of life. For the Christian, his or her faith permeates and is relevant to all aspects of life, including, most importantly, education.

When one acknowledges that the Christian college mission, at its core, is to integrate Christian faith into learning, then the issues confronting these institutions and providing meaning to this study become clearer. The Protestant Evangelical Christian college looks to God as He is known through the Holy Bible for how to live and to operate. That belief is then incorporated into the institutional mission. When the Holy Bible, as interpreted by leaders of the Christian college or of the church, differs from current culture, societal mores, or changing governmental positions or pronouncements, or when, accordingly, the Christian college, because of its religious beliefs, finds itself at odds with the society and culture in which it exists, complexities become evident. It is in that light that questions arise regarding how the Evangelical Christian college president leads and manages when religious belief, as reflected in institutional mission, is challenged.
The President and Faith-Based Decision-Making

The literatures regarding faith-based or faith-influenced leadership and decision-making (especially as they address the Christian leader), are not so deep or so large as are the literatures regarding most other forms of leadership or decision-making. This fact may be due to the relatively small number of people involved in faith-based leadership positions, and may also be influenced by the popularity of the Servant Leader model of leadership among Christian organizations (Davey & Wong, 2007). That being the case, there is a growing body of literature that sheds light on this narrow area of leadership interest.

Fernado & Jackson (2006) concluded, in their interfaith study, that religion significantly shapes and influences the judgment, emotions and motivational qualities of leaders. The perceived connection with an “ultimate reality” is also deemed to be a likely source of solace, guidance and inspiration (Fernado & Jackson, 2006). Toney & Oster (1998) concluded that CEOs of faith have more profitable companies, attain superior goals, and are more successful financially. They are also less focused on wealth and profits, demonstrate superior performance, and evidence better health, fulfillment and satisfaction (Toney & Oster, 1998). Longenecker, McKinney and Moore (2004) found that leaders whose religious commitments are of high to moderate importance demonstrated a higher level of ethical judgment and were less accepting of unethical behavior.

Despite the positive benefits of faith-based leadership, Henck (2011) has noted that the “isolated environment” in which the Christian higher education leader works can create a limiting culture if the leader is not willing to “change practices as needed”
Carey (2014) has noted that financial turnarounds depend on leaders and their “ability to create change” (p. 315).

Studying Christian college leadership at a time of strategic transition, Searcy (2010) concluded that good, mutually-beneficial, personal, professional, cultural, social, economic, and religious relationships were keys to success (p. 172). Moreover, presidential positivity and creative visioning were of great importance, as were effectively communicating key organizational and missional messages (Searcy, 2010, pp. 172-173).

In his study of the influence of Christian faith on three Christian college presidents’ carrying out of their responsibilities, Newberry (2005) concluded that (1) the maintenance, preservation and promotion of the institution’s religious mission were of utmost importance; (2) the presidents regularly conversed with God through prayer; (3) leadership practices were shaped by a pastoral viewpoint; (4) spiritual terminology was regularly evident in conversations; (5) institutional vision was seen as a “joint effort with God;” and (6) leadership practices promoted a spiritual agenda (pp. 201-228).

Gill (2012) studied one president who was successful in turning around a deeply troubled Christian college. Gill (2012) noted that the president was “relationally strong” in that he demonstrated humility, respect for others, kindness, warmth, appreciation, integrity, trustworthiness, and great success in engaging the community (p. 115). In addition, he was a “good fit” for the institution in that he was spiritually mature, aligned with the school doctrinally, reflected the school’s values, and embodied its mission (Gill, 2012, p. 116).
Burch, Swails & Mills (2015) have acknowledged that the servant leadership model is most “often touted” as the “best fit” for administrators at Christian colleges and universities (pp. 399-402). They concluded, however, that leaders often viewed their practice of servant leadership differently than their followers did (Burch, Swails & Mills, 2015, pp. 402-403).

Summary

Rarely have Christian colleges in America been challenged on the basis of their deeply-held religious beliefs. Recent cultural changes, however, have created a social and political environment where such challenges have become a reality and are occurring with greater frequency. For leaders of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges, responding to such challenges effectively has become a matter of the utmost importance and urgency. Unfortunately, the existing literatures regarding leadership provide little with respect to how Christian college leaders might best respond to these challenges, and how faith—particularly the Christian faith, whether personal or incorporated in institutional mission—should impact executive leadership and decision-making in the Protestant Evangelical Christian college setting, especially when institutional survival is in question. Certainly, studying the models of leadership described above can assist and support Christian college leaders in their work, but even these leadership literatures fail to address decision-making and leadership practice impacted by deeply-held religious belief.

It is with that reality in mind that I have studied ten Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents, each of whom has wrestled with how deeply-held personal religious faith and institutional religious mission impact leadership, decision-making,
and, ultimately, institutional well-being, at a time when changing cultural norms are perceived by institutional constituencies to be increasingly inconsistent with religious faith and mission.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The Research Question

In this study I have endeavored to address the following primary question: How has the Protestant Evangelical Christian college leader navigated the values conflicts that arise when religious beliefs and institutional mission are deemed to be inconsistent with evolving cultural norms and changing legal authority?

Research Design

Ravitch and Carl (2016) have identified nine different approaches to qualitative research: action, case study, ethnography, evaluation, grounded theory, narrative, participating, phenomenological and practitioner (pp. 20-24). The authors have noted, “[t]he purpose of phenomenological research is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation (Lester 1999, p. 1). Phenomenological research methods often include exploring a phenomenon with a group of individuals and data collection tends to include interviews” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 24).

In this study I used the phenomenological approach, which best suited the goals of the research. I designed this study primarily as a qualitative study comprising interviews with ten (10) presidents of Christian colleges, all of whom were institutional members of the CCCU, the leading association of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges in America.

The Pilot Study and Participant Selection

My work began with the establishment of a pilot study group, the members of which included Dr. Robert Andringa, former President of the CCCU; Dr. Alan Cureton,
President of the University of the Northwestern; and Dr. Timothy Herrmann, Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Master of Arts in Higher Education program at Taylor University. One of the goals of the pilot study group was to ensure that the institutions selected to participate in this study would be as representative of today’s Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges as possible and to develop an effective interview protocol. The pilot study group determined that the study’s participants should be leaders of self-described Evangelical Christian colleges who were members of the CCCU.

Of the ten institutions selected by the pilot study group to participate in this study, five (5) were controlled or affiliated with a church denomination, while five (5) described themselves as non- or inter-denominational, a status that indicates no denominational affiliation. Each of the ten institutions studied here adopted “Statements of Faith” or “Doctrinal Statements” that outline core religious beliefs. Some of these statements are duplicative of denominational statements to which they are subject. Although such statements vary somewhat from institution to institution, certain core or essential beliefs are shared in each of the institution’s documents. Those shared core beliefs or doctrines that are relatively consistent across the institutions and are indicated in each institution’s foundational belief statements include, but are not limited to the following:

1. There is one God, eternally existent in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Ultimate Creator and Sustainer of all things in heaven and on earth;
2. The Holy Bible is the only inspired, authoritative written word of God, progressively revealing God’s will for humankind.
3. Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God who made known and carried out God’s plan of redemption through His virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and ascension, and who will return in power and glory.
4. The Holy Spirit is present in the life of the believer, testifying to the lordship of Christ and enabling the believer to live a godly life.
5. Humankind, though uniquely created in God’s image, rebelled and stands in need of redemption.
6. God graciously extends salvation to anyone who comes to Christ by faith.
7. The Church is the community of believers who express their unity in Christ by loving and serving Him, each other, and all people (Taylor University, Statement of Faith, 2017).

All but one of the institutions identified by the pilot study group to participate in this study were rated as Tier 1 institutions in the U.S. News and World Report 2017 Ratings of America’s Best Colleges. The nine highest-rated colleges appear and are rated in several different categories, including, National Universities, National Liberal Arts Universities, Regional Universities and Regional Colleges. The tenth institution was rated in Tier 2 of the 2017 Best College Ratings.

This study included a diverse and representative group of colleges: two (2) institutions selected were located in the Eastern United States, three (3) in the Midwestern United States, two (2) in the Western United States, one (1) in the Northern United States, and two (2) in the Southern United States. Of the institutions identified to participate in the study, six (6) were located in rural, small-town settings, and four (4) were located in metropolitan areas.

With respect to academic programs offered, all ten institutions considered themselves primarily to be liberal arts colleges and universities. Half of the institutions, however, provided a substantial number of professional or vocational educational programs. Nine (9) of the institutions self-identified as providing undergraduate and graduate programs and one (1) provided only undergraduate programs.

Regarding the data relevant to this study, the selected participant institutions ranged from 90 to 150 years in age, with only two being less than 100 years old.
Institutional endowments ranged from $40 million to $200 million. Student populations ranged from 1,000 to 4,500 undergraduate students and from 25 to 2,000 graduate students.

With respect to the presidents participating, all but three of the presidents had been in the chief executive position at their respective institutions for a decade or more. The three with shorter tenures had been in the chief executive position at their respective institutions for four, five and nine years, respectively. Seven of the presidents participating were male and three were female.

Data Collection

Interviews

I collected data with respect to this study by conducting a series of in-depth, in-person interviews, with the ten presidents of the CCCU colleges identified in the Pilot Study. I conducted the interviews between September 29, 2016 and December 17, 2016. Interviews were one-on-one and were scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed professionally verbatim. Nine of the interviews were conducted on-site at the participant’s campus. One was conducted at a hotel in Indianapolis, Indiana, where the respective president was visiting for a donor development visit. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted as necessary, as were subsequent email communications.

Prior to the interviews, I provided the participants with a memorandum that summarized the purposes of the research and set forth the questions to be presented. I also provided the participants with information and an agreement regarding confidentiality, as well as an authorization form regarding the recording of the interviews.
I asked participants a series of pre-determined questions about Christian college leadership in the current environment. In addition, I asked participants a few open-ended questions designed to provide freedom of response and to elicit opinions and perceptions beyond the study’s immediate focus. I used an interview protocol to ensure required topics were adequately covered, but allowed deviation from the protocol as appropriate and warranted.

The interview protocol included, in part, the following questions:

1. What are the greatest impediments to addressing the challenges presented when religious beliefs and institutional mission are deemed to be inconsistent with evolving cultural norms and applicable legal authority?

2. What specific strategies have you used to successfully address these challenges?

3. What specific leadership skills are required to successfully confront these challenges?

4. What influence do church or denominational positions or beliefs have in such decision-making?

5. How do personally-held religious beliefs influence decision-making with respect to these challenges? (See Appendix A for full interview protocol).

I believe that my experience and reputation in the Christian college sector, in addition to my current membership on the CCCU Board of Directors, was helpful in obtaining a 100% participation rate of those executives requested to participate in the study. I also believe my familiarity with the participants, and their familiarity with me, resulted in open, frank, and fruitful discussions.
Review of documentation

I collected additional data through the review and analysis of institutional documents, policies and websites. These data were used to supplement data obtained through the one-on-one interviews and to provide me with a better understanding of the uniqueness of each institution. The documents reviewed included: statements of faith; mission statements; core institutional policies related to cultural norms; vision statements; admissions and advancement publications; student newspapers; catalogs; news reports and other similar material.

Field notes

I maintained detailed notes of each interview session. Moreover, on each interview day, I put into writing my observations regarding the events of the day, the success of the interview, and any peculiarities that may have occurred. I used notes to provide context for the transcriptions and to record my thoughts and reactions with respect to the day’s events.

Data Management and Analysis

I used commonly accepted qualitative research procedures in conducting the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interview recordings were transcribed and stored electronically. They were then reviewed in their entirety and an inductive analysis was completed to determine broad themes and understandings. I used consistent terms to code the transcriptions, field notes, and any other written documentation made.

Controversy and Confidentiality

The controversial nature of the issues surrounding this study, (sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, pre-marital sex, transgenderism, abortion, and other products of the
sexual revolution of the 1960s), the emotions evident whenever they find the spotlight, and the high stakes involved for being found “out-of-step” with the new majority’s morphing opinion on the subjects, were cause for special concern in conducting this study. I, of course, desired honest, forthright and candid responses and discussion from each interviewee. That outcome likely would not have been forthcoming, however, if the interviewee was concerned that he or she, or his or her institution would pay a price for such candor. Accordingly, I paid careful attention to each interviewee’s responses regarding the desire for confidentiality.

To that end, each interview commenced with an honest discussion regarding the desire or need for anonymity. Although several interviewees were guardedly open to having their institutional identities made known in the study, the clear majority preferred anonymity because of the controversial nature of the issues surrounding the study’s topic. I, therefore, made a decision early in my research to maintain confidence with respect to the study’s participants, despite the fact that revealing the participants’ identities would likely have increased the study’s credibility. Accordingly, this study does not identify participants or their respective institutions, and all responses attributed to a certain interviewee are attributed in a manner as to protect his or her identity (e.g. the use of pseudonyms like “President Ash” or “President Bond”). Moreover, participants have only been described by using broad institutional descriptors, in order to provide the reader with a general understanding of the kind, character, and quality of the individuals and institutions participating in the study. Although revelation of identity would have been
preferred, the desire for confidentiality is certainly understandable and has resulted in honest and candid participation that only enhances the study’s validity, value, and importance.

**Reliability and Validity**

The Role of Self

The personal biases of the researcher are always of concern in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 13). Here, I had a vested interest in this study and in its results. I spent four years studying in a Protestant Evangelical Christian college and graduated from one in 1975. I then spent the first ten years of my professional life working at a Protestant Evangelical Christian college in various capacities. During my 25-year career as a lawyer, I advised colleges and universities of all types, many of which were Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges and universities. I then served on the Board of Trustees of a small Protestant Evangelical Christian college for fourteen years and now serve on the Board of Directors of the CCCU. I have served as the president of a Protestant Evangelical Christian college located in Upland, Indiana (which was not selected as a participant in the study) since June 1, 2016.

In addition to these professional involvements in Christian higher education, I also am a strong proponent of (1) faith-based higher education and (2) the integration of faith and learning. I believe that Christian higher education is a valid and important option provided under the umbrella of institutional diversity that is important to the success of American higher education.

Despite these recognized potential biases, I have significant personal credibility, developed over 25 years of serving as legal counsel to many secular and CCCU
institutions. In addition, my own personal 10-year experience of serving as an administrator, and now president, at a CCCU institution should provide valuable insight and perspective. Although concerns may be raised regarding the potential negative consequences of bias, my personal credibility, both in higher education and with respect to the law, enhance the study’s credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 24).

Credibility & Triangulation

As described above, to ensure credibility in participant-selection, interviews were conducted with ten (10) Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents who collectively constituted nine percent (9%) of the CCCU’s 115 members. Participants were selected in consultation with a pilot study group of reputable Christian higher education practitioners.

To enhance the study’s credibility, findings were triangulated. First, detailed professional transcriptions were made of each of the interviews and I adhered carefully to their content, assuring reliability of the data. In addition, I kept detailed and comprehensive notes throughout the data collection process. Second, institutional documents were collected and reviewed from the ten institutions whose presidents participated in the study to ensure an accurate understanding of the institution and consistency between institutional documents and content derived from interviews; along these lines, data were cross-analyzed with these documents to verify and confirm the interview data. Finally, member checks, or “participant validation,” were used to enhance credibility by asking interview participants to review study findings and provide feedback (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, pp. 197-200).
Ethical Considerations

Pursuant to request, confidentiality of all study participants was maintained to the extent possible, and no observations or quotations were attributed to any study participants without consent. Institutions whose presidents participated in the study were identified only generally and not in a manner that would reveal identity.

Prior to conducting each interview, the researcher underscored with the interviewee the voluntary nature of the interview and potential risks that could be encountered as a result of participation. Interviewees were asked for their consent regarding recording the interview. Quotes were not attributed to any interviewee in a manner that would reveal identity.

Study Limitations

Although this study incorporates the thoughts of leaders of nine percent (9%) of the member institutions of the CCCU, and although sincere efforts were made to identify as participants, institutions that appropriately represented the broad diversity of the CCCU institutional membership, such a study will always be subject to challenge as not being representative of any particular institution.

In addition, as with any qualitative study, this study was influenced by the quality of the questions presented, their relevancy to the study’s purposes, and the perceptions of the interviewee as to what is being asked. Moreover, although my objectivity and the questions used may be subject to challenge, efforts were made to remain objective and focused on the study’s purposes.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

The Research Question Presented

The purpose of this study was to address the following research question: How has the Protestant Evangelical Christian college leader navigated the values conflicts that arise when religious beliefs and institutional mission are deemed to be inconsistent with evolving cultural norms and changing legal authority?

Analysis of Interviews

More than fifteen hours of interviews with the ten presidents of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges who were the subjects of this study resulted in a significant amount of data. Interview transcripts, once professionally created, were carefully studied and analyzed to identify common themes, understandings, and observations that could be helpful in answering the research question presented.

The table set forth below identifies the broad themes and subthemes that I identified and used to organize my study and commence my analysis.
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Overview of the Chapter

The findings that resulted from my study and analysis are presented in this Chapter 4. The first section of this chapter addresses the perception of a majority of these ten that they are leading during a unique time, a time of first impression. In “An Uncommon Time: The Unique Challenges Confronting Today’s Evangelical Christian Colleges,” the leaders share their thoughts on the distinctive nature and consequences of the times in which they find themselves.

The next section of this Chapter 4, “Endangering Mission: The Risks Facing Today’s Evangelical Christian Colleges,” focuses on the threats confronting today’s Christian college. Of the many risks identified by these higher education leaders, seven, in particular, were uniformly acknowledged as most significant, and are addressed here.

In “Obstructing Mission: Impediments to Accomplishing Mission,” eight obstacles to leading effectively that were identified by the presidents are described. Here the presidents acknowledged that significant challenges exist that hinder their ability to navigate today’s challenges successfully.

In the fourth and final section of Chapter 4, “Fulfilling Mission: Strategies to Navigate the New World,” twelve strategies are identified and discussed that these ten presidents believe are essential to the successful navigation of today’s difficulties. For most Christian colleges these strategies involve new thinking prompted by what are perceived to be dangerous and dynamic times.

An Uncommon Time: The Unique Challenges Confronting Today’s Evangelical Christian Colleges

“Today is different, and I wonder if [educators from] previous generations said their day was different.”
The Worst of Times?

This study’s research question makes the assumption that something is different today, and that today’s Christian college president is operating under changed circumstances or evolving contexts that create unusual challenges for the leader in Christian higher education. As an initial matter, then, participants were asked whether the premise of the question had merit. In other words, had circumstances changed? Were religious beliefs and institutional missions being challenged in ways previously unseen? The respondents answered in the affirmative.

President Ash stated, “I think the fact…we’re openly challenged now for why we should even exist is different than it would have been thirty years ago.” Here, President Ash was referencing the increasing calls among certain agenda-driven groups for the withdrawal of tax exemptions from faith-based institutions of higher education that take conservative, faith-based positions on certain sexual liberty issues. Such an action would likely force many of these institutions to shut down their operations. President Bond concurred, stating, “you know, in the 150-year history of Christian higher education in the United States, I don’t think anything has quite been like what we’re going through now.” President Cain acknowledged the newness of the situation confronting Christian higher education by noting, “[we] are in a place that we haven’t been, particularly as it relates to the whole human sexuality issue. We have not been here before.” Responding to the same set of questions, President Dell offered an interesting perspective by noting,

What I think is really different now is, far from being insignificant, it appears to me that…conservative Christian higher education institutions…are not being seen as insignificant, they’re seen as important powers in a process of trying to engineer social change, in particular, what others see as civil rights issues.
I think at some point in time those that were fighting those battles would have never thought to go and bother the Christian colleges and universities about what they thought about this…wouldn’t have cared what their policies were, wouldn’t have cared who they admitted and didn’t admit, wouldn’t have really cared how they were treated because they were just the backwater.

President Dell’s comment suggested that the calls for withdrawing federal and state aid, and, as a result, starving Christian colleges, are actually evidence that the Christian college has become more, not less, significant to society. Otherwise, in his opinion, it would continue to be ignored. President Dell went on to note:

It’s striking, we’re [now seen as] a public challenge, so the whole of higher education is interested in what happens [at the Christian college.]

And that legislators feel compelled to actually pass laws that attempt to legislate how Christian institutions act internally. That I think is different. I don’t remember a time, certainly not in my career, but even in recent [history], when that was the threat . . . that people [were] so interested in what we do, and consider[ed] it so important that they need[ed] a legal framework that forces us to act in certain ways.

I think people see us as symbolic and instrumental, symbolic of and instrumental in perpetuating a particular way of life in society.

Here, President Dell opines that the reason the Christian college has taken on an air of greater importance in the eyes of certain individuals who oppose conservative opinions on social issues, is because the Christian college is viewed as a leader, and an influential one, in propagating a contrary view to their own.
Most of the Christian college presidents interviewed agreed with the basic assertion that the Christian college today was likely facing the most complex and challenging times in Christian college history. The presidents also offered a long list of specific challenges faced by Christian college presidents today that are making today’s operating environment unique. These challenges, which participants felt were different in scope, complexity, and severity than those faced by their predecessors, fell into five main categories: the broken business model; the complexity, pace, range and intensity of higher education today; the rapid change in culture; federal and state government intervention in higher education; and higher education’s increasing dependence on technology. Each of these is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

**The Broken Business Model**

All American institutions of higher education are experiencing serious challenges to their financial health and ways of doing business. The Evangelical Christian college is no exception and because it typically is smaller in size, heavily dependent on tuition and federal/state aid, experiencing declining or stagnant enrollments, residential, and limited with respect to endowment resources, it is experiencing these issues in an even more dramatic and institution-shuddering way. Indeed, President Ash acknowledged that from a financial perspective, things on the Evangelical Christian college campus were “much more intense than they were twenty, thirty years ago.” When talking about the business model common to most Evangelical Christian colleges, President Hart admitted he was “less confident about it” moving forward. Other participants concurred.

It was not surprising, therefore, that all study participants acknowledged that the business model under which their institutions have historically operated is in serious need
of repair or replacement. Participants noted changing demographics, declining enrollments, morphing public opinions regarding the value of a college degree, increasing economic challenges, intensifying financial pressures, accelerating technology demands, growing competition from nonprofits and for profits alike, affordability concerns, escalating globalization, and expanding use of discounting as among their many concerns. Each of these issues, alone, would be cause for concern. But together, they amount to a virtual battering ram of operational problems undermining and sabotaging the business model under which the Christian college has operated for centuries. From the perspective of the participants, the increasing instability of today’s business model sets today apart from other days in Christian college history.

**Complexity, Pace, Range and Intensity**

Three presidents interviewed identified the complexity and pace of the world of higher education today, and the range and intensity of the issues confronted, as reasons that distinguish this day in higher education from any other. President Ernst noted,

I think the number of challenges, the complexity of some of the challenges, and the rapid pace of change which creates some of the challenges, I do think are different than they were in the past.

Here, President Ernst concluded from her vantage point of having served as an executive for more than a decade that the pace and complexity of her responsibilities had increased, not decreased, leading her to conclude that today’s challenges are unique in higher education history. President Frantz concurred, stating, “The urgency and complexity of this moment is not due to any one factor, but all the factors together.” Here, President Frantz spoke specifically to the many challenges Christian colleges are facing due to the influence of changing social norms that impact American higher education, and, in
particular, the Christian college. President Frantz went on to conclude, “the range and the intensity of the issues is new.”

**Change in Culture**

Most of the presidents interviewed identified the significant shift in social norms in the last five decades as having increasingly distanced the Evangelical Christian college from the majority of society with respect to certain long-held values. President Frantz noted:

> the simple feature that is new is that we’re trying to negotiate all this when the moral high road of the larger culture is no longer coincident with the moral and spiritual values [that are in evidence at the Evangelical Christian college] and that have undergirded these colleges.

For President Frantz, the challenges that these new issues present are exacerbated by the fact that, for the first time in America higher education history, American culture’s social and spiritual norms are no longer coincident with those of the Christian college. In other words, in any discussion or conflict regarding these issues, the two sides start from different vantage points, making ultimate resolution more difficult. President Ernst noted:

> Some of the values that have always been formed with the Christian faith, and Christian colleges and our Code of Conduct, are not only, not the majority values anymore, and in the minority position, but really are being challenged as to whether or not they should be able to coexist peacefully with a culture whose morality has significantly changed, particularly in terms of the sexual ethic . . . but even, I think, in terms of respect and regard for human life.

President George described this societal change as a drift toward “secularity.”

Addressing this slide into secularity, President Hart noted that, “Christians for a long time in our American culture, Protestants especially, counted on a kind of cultural
hegemony of the Judeo Christian ethic, that too has been eroding.” President Hart noted that he had seen this cultural hegemony go from something that most people took for granted to something that no one can take for granted. President Hart opined that Christian organizations including Christian colleges have not adapted well to these new circumstances.

The loss in status of the Judeo Christian ethic in American society and culture has resulted in a rude awakening for leaders at the Christian colleges. Since their founding they have enjoyed a privileged, powerful and supported status in American society. Indeed, for centuries they were deemed above reproach. The change in that status has been disorienting to those in the Christian college sector and also has impacted decision-making about the sector’s future at both the macro and micro levels. It also is further evidence of an uncommon time in Christian higher education.

**Government Regulation and Activism**

Half of the presidents interviewed identified government regulation and activism as one of the top reasons why Christian institutions today are experiencing challenges and struggles they have not experienced previously. At both the federal and state levels, activist legislators and courts have decided in the last several decades, and at an increasing rate, to use legislative and judicial power to impose and enforce social agendas. According to President Bond, today’s “existential encroachment on [the] deeply held values [of Christian institutions of higher education]” is unique in the history of American higher education.
Speaking to how the context of Christian higher education has changed today,

President Igor stated,

we’ve never had an aggressive pursuit that was a threat to our freedom to define our sincerely-held religious beliefs. And that’s the point of it that I have found is… aggressive and different.

President Igor further noted,

I also think we are dealing with a post-Christian society… now we are living with the reality of a pluralistic society. There are not the operating assumptions that Christians should be allowed to define themselves.

This comment adds further support for the perceived change in culture noted in prior sections.

President Igor continued to share soberly,

[I]t’s really interesting to . . . face this new reality, and then to face it at both the state and federal levels . . . that [governments] are going to dictate . . . who we can hire, and the fact that [government is] trying to strip us of the right to hire co-religionists, . . . that’s unprecedented . . . in terms of its effect and intrusion . . . very much a threat.

As noted by a majority of the participants, the increasing weight of federal regulations, in both cost and compliance, has become increasingly burdensome. So much so, that President George blurted, “I don’t know what more the [government] can pile on us!”

Several participants noted the increasing insensitivity of the federal regulations to faith-based concerns. President Igor observed that more and more regulatory changes “remove our right to self-define what is a sincerely-held religious belief.” Another president, President Hart, noted the apparent “confusion” of the federal government as to what constituted a religious organization, defining the term “way too narrowly” and resulting in “a real threat to religious liberty.”
Dependence on Technology

All ten of the presidents interviewed acknowledged the pervasive influence of technology and social media on their institutions. Since most of the participants were creatures of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries, technology alone has set the current day apart as a unique and different period of time for them as college leaders. As noted by President Cain, “the whole world is open to anything…highly scrutinized, highly interpreted…often misinterpreted…out of context,” thus making operating an institution and responding to public relations concerns infinitely more difficult and populated with unseen minefields. The radical acceleration of technology has also made higher education “ubiquitous” in the words of President Bond, meaning the multitude of digital vehicles and formats available to the student seeking a degree is now almost limitless, and another distinguishing and unique aspect of today’s higher education environment that sets it aside from all others in higher education history.

A Few Moderating Thoughts

While each of the executives interviewed acknowledged the serious nature of the times, and many described it as “different,” several cautioned against thinking of today’s context as the “worst of all times.” President James acknowledged, “[i]t’s an extremely challenging time, [but]…. I don’t know that it is end of the world time. It will take some rethinking and adjusting [as] to how we do our work.” President James was not denying the perilousness of the times. He simply was not sure today’s difficulties were more difficult than those of the past.

President Frantz concurred, and noted, “I do think something is different about today, but not as different as everybody thinks.” President Cain acknowledged that
“there is something different about today’s climate and environment,” but countered, “on the other hand, I think …Solomon was right, there’s nothing new under the sun.”

President Cain’s comment could be nothing more than an acknowledgement that from a faith perspective it matters little as to whether this is the best or worst of times. Regardless, from his perspective, God is in control. President Dell reasoned that “there are interesting ways to think about how it’s different. Oh, I believe, [at least] my impression is, it is different, but then, of course, I think the bias of history is you tend to think that the moment you are living in is the most pressing and most dire…and probably, objectively that’s not true.” President Hart provided additional perspective by noting,

I think one of the mistakes we can make…I have always been taken with C.S. Lewis’s idea of “chronological snobbery,” where you think that the moment you are in is the most important, either best or worst. I think there is a kind of arrogance or lack of humility that can creep into one’s thinking if you start to believe that, definitely, this is the best time or the worst time.

Acknowledging President Dell’s and Hart’s cautionary notes, there is no disagreement. The presidents interviewed believe, at the very least, that their institutions are facing very different and very serious days, and during the most unique and potentially life-threatening of times.

Endangering Mission: The Risks Facing Today’s Evangelical Christian Colleges

“We absolutely are at risk!”

Accepting the contention that the Evangelical Christian college is faced with a uniquely difficult and treacherous environment in which to operate and carry out its mission, the presidents interviewed strongly supported the view that Evangelical Christian colleges today, and the remnants of their sister institutions, are at significant
risk, and that their survival hangs in the balance. When asked if today’s Evangelical Christian colleges are at risk, President Bond said,

Of course we are!...I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it. I wake up concerned about two things. One is that [my institution] is at risk...that means the kind of education that I believe the next generation of students needs is at risk. And I also wake up in the middle of the night thinking “I’ve got 1000 employees here...their mortgages, their retirement, their kids’ education...their livelihood is based on being employed” and I feel a deep sense of responsibility to them.

President Bond was representative of the other presidents interviewed. To each, these are days of great consequence and each is well aware of their responsibilities to navigate successfully the rough seas ahead.

In discussing specific risks to which their institutions are subject, the presidents identified seven broad categories of risk that were of greatest concern to their institutions:

(1) financial viability; (2) the changing external environment; (3) the potential loss of government funding; (4) accreditation and acceptance concerns; (5) mission creep; (6) the environment within the institution and the church; and (7) public relations and social media. These are discussed in more detail below.

Financial Viability

A strong theme across all of the interviews involved concern that the long-term financial viability of institutions of higher education is in serious question. Presidents noted current issues in cost, affordability, access, recruiting and retention as of greatest concern. President Cain was resigned in noting, “people are shopping.”

President Cain also noted that in recent years the institution’s relationship with students and parents had become much more “transactional” than in the past. President
Cain went on to state that “there’s a lack of ability to pay, but also [a lack of] willingness to pay.” These observations are evidence of the increasing commoditization and product orientation of American higher education.

President George, who is at a denominational school, noted that his institution had experienced increasing enrollment challenges as the affiliated denomination had experienced growing membership difficulties. As denominational membership had declined, so had institutional enrollment.

President George also noted the increasingly competitive environment that had resulted from the rising cost of higher education and the declining or stagnant pool of potential students. He noted the “natural risk” of economic viability in a very competitive market.

President George added that private Christian institutions were increasingly finding themselves having to address the value proposition, not only as it related to fellow Christian colleges who were competitors, but more often as it related to secular, public and private institutions as well. In many cases, especially when addressing students and parents who were increasingly focused on the cost of tuition, that had become a significant challenge. President George admitted that “[t]he value proposition is a huge challenge for most of our schools.”

At the Evangelical Christian college, the compounding financial problems involving affordability, cost, recruiting, enrollment, commoditization and value are evidence that all is not well. At tuition-driven institutions, these issues constitute the primary fuel for the “at-risk” flame.
The Changing External Environment

One theme that appeared throughout the interviews was the challenge of leading Christian colleges in a time of social change, especially in terms of the public and popular view of Christian faith. President Cain noted,

I do believe we are at risk more so than in the past…because I think this is the first time in…certainly in my own history and involvement in higher education, but even my historical understanding, it’s the first time our religious liberties have been encroached upon at the level they are now…I think we are seeing much more of an external environment that is, at times, hostile, and at other times, certainly unsympathetic to persons of faith.

The theme of the negative impact of external forces on the Evangelical Christian college focused on two specific concerns: first, the rapidly changing American culture; and second, the influence of federal funding on the life and operations of the Christian college (which is discussed more in the next section).

With respect to the cultural changes, the presidents uniformly acknowledged that the culture within which they operated had changed dramatically in the last fifty years. In so doing, the culture and the Christian college had drifted apart in their views on a variety of relevant issues, most notably, human sexuality. In recognizing this increasing divide, President Hart noted, “secular culture doesn’t really understand the kinds of commitments that we have and the kinds of values we have, and has framed our traditional understandings as a kind of bigotry”. The end result has been an increasing isolation of the Christian college from its surrounding culture. This isolation has only exacerbated the other challenges already facing Christian higher education. It is much easier to face difficulties when others are at your side, than it is when you are alone.
The Potential Loss of Government Funding

In terms of governmental intrusion into the life of the Christian college, governmental funding (or the threatened withdrawal of the same) was uniformly identified as one of the most significant causes for concern with respect to the future of Christian higher education. All participants agreed that the federal government’s growing use of funding as leverage for ensuring compliance with regulations, some of which may contravene religious beliefs and affect the institutions’ ability to hire co-religionists, contributed to their institutions being at high risk.

President Dell warned,

When unelected people make these decisions, they are changing the fundamental way in which the federal government has treated financial aid or federal funding. Throughout our history what they’ve said is federal funding goes to students and students choose where they want to go to school. They have to choose from within accredited institutions, of course, but the federal government has not acted as though [it is] directly funding institutions. It says, you have to be a credible institution [and] an upstanding member of the academy, as is recognized by your accreditation. And, if you are, it will leave it to the citizens to decide where they want to [pursue] their education, and the government, in its wisdom, takes tax money from everybody, liberals and conservatives alike, and gives it to the students, and says go wherever you feel like going.

Now what’s happening, however, is that [there is] this idea abroad in the land that fundamentally changes that, that says, the government will now decide where you as an individual tax-paying citizen can send your children and get federal support or state support. It is [going to] decide which schools are appropriate for you, for the education of your children.

I think that is a fundamental shift and change in the way Americans have thought about education or about the support that they get from government to pursue education.
The immediate consequences are to allow some of the foundational understandings of our democracy to be eroded.

President Dell went on to note that,

If we fail to address this moment in time where these understandings are being eroded, that is [a] fundamental problem…

Expressing frustration at this perceived governmental intrusion on the affairs of the Evangelical Christian College, President George contended,

The government’s able now to do almost anything. They’ve defined…redefined…marriage for us, they’ve told us that gender doesn’t mean that much anymore, you can change, if you want, from one to the other and back if you want. And then there are penalties if you don’t accept their interpretations of some of these things. They hold Damocles sword over our heads and say, if you don’t agree you may lose your Title IV funding. This was never the case when I started, this is all new.

President George went on to acknowledge,

I don’t know what more [government] can pull on us that we have to comply with, and we have to provide them information to justify our existence and [our] continued use of guaranteed student loans. Pell grants, work study and all of that. But we are roughly 50% dependent in revenue stream on these kinds of sources….

Sadly, way too many of our students are borrowing their way through school and we don’t like that. We discourage it, but at the same time, we’re needing students.

President Dell and President George expressed the frustration and bewilderment expressed by all of the presidents interviewed regarding more recent governmental actions. The government’s willingness to use the power of its purse to coerce social change at the expense of the faith-based institution of higher education has caught all of
the participants off-guard, and they each are struggling to regain balance, and to determine future courses of action.

With no exceptions, each of the presidents acknowledged serious concerns regarding the future financial viability of their institutions and the faith-based higher education sector in general. In particular, the presidents cited the potential inability to participate in federal and state student aid programs as most worrisome. President Dell noted,

If the federal and state governments create legal barriers for our students to gain access to that funding so they no longer . . . can use that . . . funding to come to our institutions, that’s not rocket science. We absolutely are at risk. The institution simply could not continue to exist in its current form if federal and state funding were no longer available to our students.

As each of the institutions participating in this study was significantly dependent on revenue derived from federal and state student financial aid programs, President Dell’s concern was shared by all those interviewed. Loss of federal or state funding would likely be a terminal circumstance for all.

**Accreditation and Acceptance of Degrees**

Of greatest concern to one participant and of significant concern to the other participants was the specter of growing difficulties with accreditation and acceptance of institutional programs and degrees. President Bond described the concern as a “reputational” one that impacted Higher Learning Commission accreditation, program accreditation, student teaching, and the availability of internships and practicums to students. President Bond further noted that “if we’re seen as bible-thumping, bigoted, homophobic, intolerant, hateful universities,” a price may be paid with respect to
reputations, accreditation and acceptance. President Bond also noted that even though
the sector may be able to win some court battles or preserve some protecting laws by
good maneuvering, the accreditation and acceptance concerns could trump everything.

As noted by President Bond,

> It’s your oxygen supply. I mean, you can have lots of good
> things going for you with medication, but if someone’s
> steppin’ on the oxygen supply, and you’re there on a
> ventilator, you know, it’s a matter of time before you run
> out of options on how to keep going.

The accreditation and acceptance issues are increasingly seen by the participants as some
of the most serious issues facing the Evangelical Christian college. Even if financial
issues disappeared, accreditation and acceptance issues could alone render mortal wounds
to the Protestant Evangelical Christian college.

**Mission Creep**

In identifying the numerous risks confronting the Christian higher education
sector, there was a common understanding among the presidents interviewed that the
challenge that hung in the balance was whether these unique institutions would be able to
continue being the institutions they were created to be. All acknowledged that the
inability to carry out institutional mission was becoming a most serious risk for all, and
that failure of mission was a growing possibility for each. As noted by President George,
“the ability to maintain mission without caving into pressures…that’s a big concern.”

As mentioned in an earlier section, the need to maintain mission is particularly
important for Christian colleges, whose missions are strongly tied to the values and
beliefs of the Christian faith and to the values and beliefs of their employees and leaders.
When participants described the challenge of maintaining mission, they described
something larger than a simple leadership struggle. Rather, the challenge directly impacted their personal capacity to do work as institutional mission was tied and important to their personal faith as well.

In particular, participants noted that if federal or state regulations continued to change in a way that would influence or dictate who the institution must hire, especially in the classroom, institutional mission would be at risk. And yet, because of the current volatile environment surrounding human sexuality, nondiscrimination concerns, religious liberty, and civil rights, hiring practices were seen by all the presidents as being currently in play and at significant risk. As noted by President Dell,

You are only a step or two away from program directors, from unelected administrative folks, either in accrediting agencies, in professional accreditation agencies, in athletic associations, or in federal departments…the secretaries and their undersecretaries and staff…you’re only a step away from them putting into play something, some hurdle that contravenes our identity and our DNA as Christian institutions.

President Dell went on to note that in that environment, and in an environment where the federal government can withhold participation in federal aid programs, adherence to mission is at risk.

President Dell also noted that these threats to mission, “are not idle.” Here, President Dell was defining Christian institutions as not only shaped by their faith-centered missions, but also as comprising staff members, administrators, and the like who shared the faith values of the institutions. The challenge presented by laws impacting hiring and nondiscrimination criteria is that they put these faith-based hiring values in jeopardy.
Internal Constituencies and the Church

Participants also identified the shifting views of internal constituencies on issues of cultural importance as a current risk to the Christian college. As President James described, within the campus border, students were viewed as holding more liberal views on many of the issues surrounding human sexuality than were held by faculty, and faculty, in turn, were viewed as holding more liberal views than did administrators, trustees, parents, and other supporting constituencies. Accordingly, within the institutions themselves, there were current and ongoing discussions and disagreements regarding institutional beliefs and commitments regarding these new societal norms.

Similarly, the denominations and the Christian church in general were debating human sexuality issues, that were brought on by the similar debates taking place socially, legally, and globally. As a consequence, in many cases, the governing religious authorities are still in the process of determining their stances on the issues coming out of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. This reality has had a polarizing effect on Christians everywhere, often making thoughtful, reasoned discussions difficult.

As noted by President Cain, “we are at risk, even within our own faith-based communities, who are finding themselves at all points along the scale, as to how tolerant we should be, or where we should just draw the line in the sand and not be willing to have that conversation, and then every place in between.... And so, I think we are at risk even within our own faith communities.” This unstable internal environment, both within the institution and within an institution’s denominational or faith community borders was identified by participants as another factor placing their institutions at risk.
Public Relations and Social Media

As a final theme identified in participant interviews, regarding applicable and recognized risks to Christian higher education, participants raised the issue of their inability to significantly control media. In an age where news travels quickly and is not always accurate, participants viewed media control, or the lack thereof, as having been detrimental to the Christian college.

In discussing these media challenges, President James noted:

. . . . And then you throw in the role of media. You know, when someone like Mark Cuban pontificates that college is a waste of time, or [a] Consumer Reports’ cover story [is entitled] “I Ruined My Life by Going to College,” [but actually] it was all about college debt, you know, it distorts things in ways that make it difficult to respond to in a broad cultural way.

President James raised a point of real concern shared by the participants. For the most part, they viewed the media (of all sorts) as being unhelpful to the Christian college and a contributing reason for its difficulties today.

The media challenge was identified as being especially relevant at a time when human sexuality topics, especially with respect to same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, were at issue within the Christian world itself, and yet of keen interest to the general public. As noted by President Hart, “these are very complex, difficult, nuanced topic[s]…but social media and the culture wars have no room for nuance. It’s a pretty ham-fisted kind of approach on both sides.” As such, those issues, and especially the nuances involved and necessary to understanding religious positions on the issues, were viewed as very problematic for the Christian college and as subjecting it to risk.
Summary

The threats confronting Christian higher education today, as identified by the presidents here, were perceived as significantly influencing the present and future of the Christian college. As noted by President Dell, “all of us are encountering different ways in which the threats are actually being put into action.” President Ernst noted,

I see this next decade as being very significant in terms of whether …the education academy…our education academy…and the United States as a nation [will] say we affirm the importance or the value of religious faith and life to the broader culture, and we affirm that in the breadth of institutions that have always been a part of the strength of the American higher education system that we can have institutions that are serious about their religious faith, and that includes the values that are a part of their campus life …we’re certainly not gonna be in the dominant position, but its whether or not there is room for our kind of institutions to be one of the options.

Accepting that the risks identified here were real, the reality for the Christian college president, then, was to identify the impediments that exist and prevent his or her college from achieving institutional mission. It is to the impediments that stand in the way of institutional success that this study now turns.

Obstructing Mission: Impediments to Accomplishing Mission

“There are many places where you can unintentionally set off an improvised explosive device…and you don’t want to do that…so you try to be wise, pray for guidance and pray you have support.”

Accomplishing anything in the world of higher education can be a challenge. Higher education institutions have survived, and in many cases thrived, over decades, and indeed centuries, based on inflexible structures, slow processes and technical procedures. They are comfortable with the past, slow to change, reluctant to be creative, and most
hesitant to try something new. Yet in this complex and trying world, a world that demands flexibility and quick responses, the historic commitment to process, the hesitancy to deviate from the way it’s always been done, and the propensity to raise minor philosophical roadblocks to change can put a toe tag on the best of ideas.

So it is with the Evangelical Christian college that now finds itself struggling for survival. In an environment that demands action and resolve, the Christian college leader faces problems that can impede progress at every turn. Accordingly, a portion of each interview was spent identifying and discussing these barriers to change. The barriers identified were then grouped into eight broad themes, which are set forth and discussed below.

**We’re Not Built for This!**

The presidents interviewed expressed a general discomfort with the highly complex social issues and vociferous public reactions that recently have imposed themselves on the Christian college and separated these colleges from their secular brothers and sisters. As the issues that have caused these concerns have only come to the forefront in recent years, many Christian colleges are still wrestling with how best to address the many issues presented, whether they should adopt clearly thought-out policies regarding such issues, and, if so, how those policies should read. From the outside, where cultural views and social mores have changed rapidly, there is little patience for the slow, thoughtful, contemplative processes that are sacred to the academy. Acknowledging that discomforting reality, President Cain noted,

> The infrastructure and the shape of the academy is not built for this, so we’ve got to be [more] willing to be very strategic and we’ve got to be [more] willing to make some changes that are outside what the typical academy has
known. I don’t think we’re prepared for the new day, the 21st century academy...If we don’t change, we’re going to go the way of the dinosaur....

President Cain put a spotlight on the problems caused by a fast-changing culture that butts heads with slow-moving, process-driven, academic institutions. The challenges of today do not have the patience to await the well-considered judgments of the academy. Accordingly, the very nature of the academy at work stands as a chief impediment to addressing the challenges confronting the Evangelical Christian college today.

**Ignorance, Fear and the Lack of Trust**

Effective treatment and resolution of the significant challenges putting today’s Evangelical Christian college at risk require knowledge and understanding of what those issues are, creativity to address them, courage to resolve them, and the trust of those impacted by such decisions. Unfortunately, the presidents acknowledged that all of these criteria are in short supply at today’s Christian college.

President Cain affirmed that, from her viewpoint, a chief impediment to addressing today’s risks is the “lack of understanding of the real nature of the challenge.” She acknowledged that the ignorance regarding many of today’s challenges, especially those challenges arising in the human sexuality arena, is pervasive. She also noted that “we find ourselves needing to educate our boards, to educate the faculty, our staff, [and] all of our stakeholders... [including] parents.” She then declared that in order to address today’s issues adequately, “we have to train our constituencies well...they need to understand what’s happening.” President Ash concurred and admitted that his board and faculty “don’t understand much about human sexuality.”
The presidents interviewed generally were united in their agreement regarding the need to educate campus constituencies with respect to the many challenges facing the Christian college. Several admitted, however, that they had yet to implement an educational agenda with these constituencies. The lack of knowledge regarding the issues of the day, was generally recognized to be a significant impediment to adequately navigating the issues confronting Christian higher education today.

Addressing another impediment visible on today’s Christian college campus, President Cain identified “fear” as an issue, especially with respect to the human sexuality controversies. The president noted that persons on Christian college campuses who have watched these social issues play out on the national stage are fearful of being labeled either a “bigot” or a “heretic,” depending on which side of the issues they fall, and, therefore, they seek to avoid discussions regarding these issues, and often remain mute with respect to them.

Participants also noted that fear shows up on campus in a different way, in that Christian college campuses are typically risk averse, and, therefore, often avoid taking even reasonable risks in order to preserve the more comfortable status quo. President Frantz noted the concept of managing risk is likely even less visible on the Christian college campus than it is on the secular campus. Fear also serves as an impediment to change.

A third related impediment noted by the presidents involved the concept of trust, or rather, the lack of trust among various constituencies within the institution. President Ash noted that “there has to be a high level of trust between the board, administration, and staff so that people can talk out loud, and don’t feel they are threatening mission by
talking out loud.” President Igor noted, “[i]t’s a benefit to each other when we are strong, but we have trouble recognizing that...we just have suspicions of each other that are well-founded.” These presidents were pointing to the need for trust across various groups in the academy in order to adequately address the significant problems confronting Christian higher education today. Constituents need to trust their leaders.

Constituency Conflicts

One of the most significant reasons a college presidency is uniformly considered to be one of the world’s most difficult jobs is the vast number of constituencies to which the president is responsible. That reality also results in another of the primary impediments to the Christian college president’s ability to address today’s issues: conflicts with and among constituencies.

With respect to the human sexuality issues currently confronting the Christian college, President Dell noted, “communities we serve are divided about how to address these issues…. militantly so….” In fact, President Dell offered that, at times, an institution’s most vocal and emotional critics came from within its borders. He noted:

[the most] vociferous, vicious, strident, attacking critics [of our efforts to address human sexuality matters did not] come from those who were outside our faith communities…they came from those who were inside our faith communities. And they made it clear that they were going to seek to damage my institution because they disagreed with the way in which they…heard me positioning the institution on this issue.

In effect, President Dell was saying that “we have become our own worst enemy.” Indeed, some in the Christian community have become so entrenched in their positions on social
and sexual issues that they are unable to discuss or reason with others. This perceived intransigence is not helpful in reaching an ultimate resolution to the difficult issues facing the Christian college.

President Igor, in identifying what he described as “reactionary constituencies,” noted that “even within our own campus, [there are] coordinated, organized members of [our] constituency that are always going to be patrolling you.” He went on to note, for example, “if I come out too aggressively pro-Bible in my position on LGBTQ issues, there is a definite vocal reactionary constituency that will respond quite negatively.” He went on to clarify, “[t]hey’ll live with our position on LGBTQ issues as long as it is off the radar.” This feeling of living under a microscope and being subject to criticism or badgering for taking a stand on any issue is part of the job description for any college president. It can be particularly difficult, however, when the matters at issue involve religious faith and the application of that faith to life’s circumstances. The multitude of opinions that exist among a college’s constituencies, and the depth at which those opinions are held, can become an impediment for any evangelical Christian college president seeking consensus and to address difficult issues in a thoughtful manner.

President James highlighted the difficulty of reaching consensus regarding most of social and sexual issues now facing the Christian college. In particular, he noted the difficulty of “trying to walk a fine line between our constituent base and the broader culture on things like our view of marriage and family.” He went on to state, “I think our students are actually closer to the culture than we might want them to be, but our parents and our donor base, [and our trustees] would not be there.” President Ash noted that the percentage of students, faculty and staff that don’t agree with the University’s positions
on certain social issues is increasing. The president shared that at times “it feels like we are stuck between two groups [, both of which] are important to us…but that see the world differently.”

Each of the presidents interviewed acknowledged the broad diversity of views or social issues that are represented within their constituencies. Although the denominational schools could rely on church doctrine to resolve many disagreements, even they acknowledged the existence of generational and geographical differences in views among constituents on many of these important issues.

All participants acknowledged that even within the institution’s walls, there was often little uniformity in approach to some of these more difficult societal issues, despite the Bible’s teachings. In addressing this lack of uniformity and in responding to the question, “what do you do with that,” President James opined,

What you do… is what you do with other issues that come along that are difficult. You have to decide, based on your mission, what is the path forward. And what things are mission core and mission-critical, and what things you are willing to flex on.

Here, President James was talking specifically about mission-centered decision-making.

When confronted with the hard questions, the president should focus on institutional mission and determine the way forward from a missional viewpoint.

In summarizing the significant hurdles that constituencies can place in position to obstruct effective resolution of difficult institutional problems, President Dell opined:

So, the question is…how do we find a strategy that allows us to defend the freedoms and rights that we ought to have…that allows us to go on serving the public good…and that keeps our constituents in support of what we do?
The president went on to conclude, “I think that is a huge impediment.”

Constituency conflicts in matters such as these are most difficult. For the college president, Christian or not, they require the president to make a decision that he or she knows will be vilified by many of the institution’s constituents. And yet, leadership demands that the decision be made...and the price be paid.

The “Culture War”

As noted previously, American culture and its accompanying social norms have changed radically in the last five decades. During that time, the divide between the Christian college and its secular environment and surroundings with respect to certain social and human sexuality issues has deepened from a crack to a canyon as public perceptions that were once closely aligned with Christian college tenets have, over time, liberalized. As President Hart noted, “the culture wars have really hurt us.” By this, President Hart was speaking specifically to the challenges created for the Christian college by liberalized legal and legislative decision-making over a series of decades.

In addressing the issues presented to the Christian college by this “culture war,” President George questioned, “how can you be a Christ follower basing your values and beliefs on the Bible and 2,000 years of Christian history and development in a world where that is not seen as very popular anymore?” Although recognizing the cultural impediment, President George did not provide an answer to his question. He did note, however, that “we certainly are gonna be tested on our authenticity and our sincerity, and on whether we really believe what we say we believe.”

For the Evangelical Christian college, as expressed by the participants of this study, there is an increasing sense that the American culture has passed them by and now
views them increasingly as quaint, out-of-step, and of questionable value. For the Christian college to surmount this growing impediment, to reestablish itself as valuable to the American culture and to the academy, and to navigate its way to success and influence will require extraordinary, authentic and dedicated leadership.

**Accreditation and Association**

As American culture has changed, and with it America’s social and sexual mores, so too have many of its enacted nondiscrimination policies. Not only have state and federal requirements been expanded and applied in more contexts, but academic accrediting organizations have begun to discuss incorporation of expanded nondiscriminatory criteria in requirements for accreditation. Such potential changes in accreditation, would be significantly disruptive to most Christian colleges whose commitments to nondiscrimination, although strong, are less broad than those created at the federal and state levels in recent years. The presidents saw these potential, and increasingly discussed changes to national and professional accreditation and associational standards as having some of the greatest potential to impede their schools from accomplishing institutional mission. In fact, President Ernst identified this issue as the greatest threat confronting the Christian college of the future.

As noted previously, for the participants, the threat primarily involves potential changes in agency - or associational-required, nondiscrimination clauses that are currently under consideration by many accrediting agencies, professional associations, and sports organizations. If adopted, such clauses could come in direct conflict with institutional religious beliefs. As noted by President Ash, “the federal government still
has control over us…the accrediting agencies, the regional accrediting agencies, we’re still subject to [more] national forces that put us more at risk than probably in the past.’’

President James noted that changes in accreditation and associational standards, in ways that contravene institutional religious belief and mission, could result in loss of institutional access to public schools with respect to student teaching, health care facilities for nursing experiences, internships for physician’s assistant and other health-related majors, and internship sites for social work majors. The president noted, “it would be tough to recover from that.” Still another president, President Dell, noted, “you are only a step away from them [accrediting agencies] putting into play something, some hurdle that contravenes [your] identity…[your] DNA as Christian institutions…from losing access to accreditation, to athletic contests, [and] to federal funding.” Here, participants expressed deep concern (and fear) regarding the threat to institutional and program accreditation that their colleges now faced.

Acknowledging the increased activity on this front, President George declared the accrediting agencies were “meddling more, but they are meddling more in the kinds of institutions we have because CHEA and the Department of Education are meddling in their business more…the six regional accrediting associations are being told what to believe and how to enforce whatever.” Noting the severity of the accrediting/associational standards risk, President Dell concluded,

If you have an agenda to change people’s views on sexuality or on marriage or on immigration . . . if you see your enemy and you see the resistance rooted in the church and faith communities, then it’s a really short leap to say, let’s go to educational institutions in those communities and force them to change . . . or go out of business.
The issues of institutional accreditation and associational acceptance were viewed by the presidents as two of the greatest potential impediments to accomplishing mission and future survival.

**Government Intrusion**

Another impediment viewed as most significant in impacting the Christian college’s ability to carry out mission and remain viable, is the increasing intrusion of the federal government into institutional operations. As President George quipped, “I frequently think back to Ronald Reagan’s quote, ‘if the government says we’re here to help you, you’d better be very cautious.’” On a more serious note, President Ash and other presidents acknowledged the increasing significance, cost, and intensity of governmental regulations, and the growing body of judicial and legislative actions that impact deeply-held religious values. President Dell questioned,

> Will we allow the federal government, or state governments, or interest groups lobbying those state governments, to shape the educational systems of the country? Now, without a doubt, people have always wanted to shape education, but the federal government has been in the past called to serve as the honest broker, if you will, to level the playing field so that anybody who is a genuine, upstanding member of the academic community can gain access, and can offer to serve the public. And, of course, we have. The ways in which Christian higher education has served the public are many and deep.

Here, President Dell challenges the new role the federal government has assumed in trying to “shape” American educational systems in ways that satisfy certain social standards advanced by certain agenda-driven groups. President Dell suggests that these government actions are inconsistent with and an abrogation of its prior role as an” honest broker” in higher education.
President George underscored the seriousness of the concern regarding government intrusion by noting:

I guess the greatest impediment is the prevailing view of those people who would like to tell us what to believe and how to have an institution that looks like every other institution. I mean, it’s just an enforced conformity to a particular secular, non-religious view of human nature. I think the whole idea of a “world view,” that used to be talked about more than it is now, is still very important.

As noted previously, of greatest concern to the presidents were governmental and judicial efforts to dictate “hiring standards” to these institutions. Efforts to strip these institutions of the right to hire consistent with religious beliefs were viewed as directly contrary to religious mission and as an impediment of the most serious kind. Participants viewed the ability to hire consistent with religious belief as central to mission and reason for being.

**Wise Counsel**

Christian colleges, like most institutions of higher education, are naturally risk averse. That character trait, when combined with an operating environment that is often characterized by mistrust, misunderstanding, questioned value, concerns about existence, and legal challenge, can lead to operational paralysis on many fronts. It can also lead to an environment where the importance of working with lawyers and understanding legal analysis and conclusions has heightened significance.

Participants noted this reality, and identified it as another impediment to carrying out mission. At a time when Christian college presidents need to act decisively in order to preserve mission, they described often being stymied by the legal advice they received. President Ash, who was familiar with legal affairs, noted that “lawyers do not know how to translate legal advice into the operational context.” Accordingly, the advice provided
was often impractical and did not take into consideration the realities facing the institution’s president. President Ash further noted, “the fact that [a situation may have] a legal component, I think paralyzes some operational presidents…they don’t know how to judge the advice.”

Here, President Ash noted the tendency of many presidents to avoid risk, exercise caution, and rely on legal advice. As legal advice is most often liability-focused and risk averse, President Ash noted that it can paralyze a president and keep him or her from taking needed actions. The inability of legal counsel to provide advice in a manner that identifies risks but enables educated action becomes an impediment to achieving results. Similarly, it becomes an impediment to navigating the many challenges and values conflicts confronting the Evangelical Christian college president today.

This concern also evidenced itself in the perceived need to be highly technical in the drafting of policies regarding some of today’s “hot button” issues. Participants noted that policies and other written documents regarding controversial topics, such as human sexuality, had become so carefully drafted and nuanced that Christian college leaders themselves had increasing difficulty understanding and explaining them.

Participants viewed (a) the legal technicalities, (b) the perceived need to be precise in explanations and (c) the inability of legal professionals to craft legal advice that was practical to the context as additional impediments to the preservation of institutional mission.

**The Leadership Vacuum**

Although only one president specifically identified leadership (or the lack thereof) as an impediment to accomplishing and preserving mission, I perceived the concern as an
earnest one, and one worthy of identification in this study. President Cain noted that from her perspective, there appeared to be a “lack of leadership” among the Christian colleges capable of maintaining institutional mission while, at the same time, navigating the increasingly rough cultural waters in which they operate. She identified:

A lack of strong, spiritual leadership…of statesmanlike leadership …we seem to be floundering in really being able to look to those who can clearly articulate that the [Christian college] is important … and then to provide leadership.

President Cain went on to declare, “I think there is a leadership vacuum…and specifically [a lack of] spiritual leaders.” President Cain’s comments highlight what may be an obvious concern. As the Christian college has never experienced an operating environment much like the one in which it currently operates, it is hard to know whether the leadership currently established at its helm is up to the task. Time, of course, will tell, but whether valid or not, President Cain’s perception is worthy of note at a time in the history of the Christian college when most understand institutional missions to be at risk, and institutional survival to be in the crosshairs.

**Fulfilling Mission: Strategies to Navigate the New World**

“If we don’t address the risks…we just become like every other organization…secularized and not distinctive.”

Recognizing that these are challenging days for the Christian college, the presidents interviewed have begun to identify and to implement strategies to improve the positions of their institutions. Indeed, President James shared a hint of optimism during his interview when he stated, “I believe there is a way forward and a reason for these institutions to exist.” Identifying that way forward, and the tools that can be helpful in the journey, are the primary purposes of this study.
I spent significant time in each interview discussing the various ideas and strategies that are percolating, rising to the surface, and sometimes, being implemented during these days of new challenge. Participants shared a multitude of thoughts and comments that I made an effort to distill and categorize. From those, twelve strategies were identified by the presidents interviewed and are discussed below.

**Establish Personal True North**

It is true, and of great importance to this study, that each president acknowledged a deep sense of religious faith during their interviews. Each identified himself or herself as a Protestant Christian who strove to evidence the Christian faith in his or her daily activities and professional responsibilities. For each, the Christian faith was the compass by which to live one’s life. It was the “true north” by which each participant navigated.

It is also important to note that each president expressed a deep sense of religious conviction regarding his or her current assignment. Each believed that he or she had what is commonly known in Christian circles as a “calling” to be in his or her position of responsibility, and that God was daily active in his or her life and in the life of each president’s respective institution. President Frantz noted a sense of “God’s providence” in bringing her to her position of leadership. She also noted that “God prepares people for particular times.” President Frantz also noted that she believed she was in her position “for such a time as this,” quoting a passage from the Book of Esther in the Bible (Esther 4:14, The English Standard Version).

This sense of destiny and God’s providence is of significance at a time when these presidents are facing challenges to institutional viability. Their belief in a higher power who is interested and involved in daily life and its challenges, and who has brought them
to their positions of responsibility at just this time, provides a sense of purpose and guarded optimism despite the significance of the challenges faced. As President Hart noted, “I am optimistic [about the future], but I am optimistic [only because I know of] the way that Jesus works.” Similarly, President Cain noted “I’m optimistic, but only because of who I know God is.” Here, the participants were speaking specifically about the ways their faith supported their leadership in challenging times.

In fact, each of the presidents interviewed underscored the foundational importance of the Christian faith in addressing the challenges currently confronting their respective institutions. Each identified a deep grounding in the Christian faith and noted it as central to any strategy they would devise to navigate the values conflicts that they faced in their present day contexts. President Hart noted:

Like anybody, I have my anxieties, but I try to integrate them with my own prayer life, and my own deep sense of dependence on God and deep sense that God has been faithful…that God does really care about raising up and educating the next generation for Christ, and that’s not going to change…I have a lot of confidence in that.

President Hart reflected what I found to be true for each of the presidents participating in this study. Each was passionate about their personal relationship with Christ, wholly dedicated to serving him through their responsibilities, and confident that God would use their efforts for good.

In addition, each looked daily to the elements of their Christian faith for support in decision-making and exercising leadership in difficult times. For example, in addressing a question that asked each to identify the five aspects of their personal faith that were most important in influencing daily decision-making, the reading of the Bible, concentrated times of prayer, and consulting with Christian colleagues and friends ranked
among the most important and most influential. To these ten respondents, the strategy of establishing “true north” involved a consistent application of personal religious beliefs to daily activities, including these activities involving significant values-based controversies.

**Bring Your Best Game**

Each of those interviewed was an impressive professional who exhibited a whole-hearted commitment to his or her institution. Acknowledging that, a theme that was evident across all ten interviews was the love, pride and deep commitment each president had for their respective institutions and responsibilities. Without exception, each was committed to working hard to ensure the success and future of the institutions they served. And, to date, their institutions, although arguably challenged and under fire, had been successful and productive for many decades, and in a few cases, for more than a century.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed an understanding of the relative unimportance of their positions when compared to the much greater importance of their institutional missions. As President Frantz noted, “you have to see the task of preserving…the mission of Christian higher education, as much bigger than the task of preserving your own job…I think that’s fundamental.” President Frantz went on to note that “once you’re there, that gives you a great deal of freedom to really…think deeply and broadly and boldly about what other things we need to try.” Clearly, the participants demonstrated a good understanding of who they were and of the relative greater importance of their institutional mission.
This 100% commitment to the accomplishment of institutional mission, even at personal cost, was evident in each interview. For example, as President Frantz further ruminated, “I think, very personally, you have to totally come to terms with the fact that you’re not trying to protect your job…if you’re going to deal with [today’s challenges, they are] sufficiently risky that if you are in our jobs, and your highest good is to protect your job, you’re in trouble.” He continued on to state, with conviction, that you have to be willing to “put yourself at risk in order to try to keep your institution from being at risk…if you think this is about you…it’s not.” President Frantz underscored an attitude that was prevalent in all the participant interviews, and that was a deep sense of and acceptance that “it’s not about me.” The presidents interviewed were clearly focused on what was best for their institutions and for their students, and personal wants and desires took a back seat.

With respect to the perceived need for a president to be fully committed to carrying out presidential responsibilities, especially in these difficult times, President Cain noted, “I feel a commitment and an urgency, but [my institution] really belongs to the Lord. It’s His work and it’s His ministry…God can work through the storms.” President Cain then addressed the potentially immobilizing element of fear and stated, “we have to position ourselves in a way that acknowledges what’s happening [in our culture and the current operating environment], but, at the same time…I am so determined about this…we cannot submit to fear.” President Cain went on to clarify herself by noting, “and so I hope what I’ve been saying so far is not translated as fear, because I don’t feel that.”
In thinking about the element of fear in facing present-day challenges, President Frantz posited that the presidents of Evangelical Christian colleges today should attack their duties with excellence, creativity and “fearlessness.” Here, President Frantz was framing the relationship between quality leadership, commitment to mission, and dependency on faith as essential ingredients to successful navigation of the issues facing today’s Christian college.

Without question, an underlying theme of all the interviews conducted was that the challenges facing the Evangelical Christian college today demand both a significant, unflinching commitment on the part of the executive, but also a resolute confidence in each college president’s abilities, role, and value, and in the presidents’ deep and abiding Christian faith. Accordingly, it is of strategic importance that each bring his or her best game to the contest.

Stay True to Institutional Mission

All participants believed, wholeheartedly, that God had a mission and special purpose for their respective institutions. Correspondingly, all of their institutions had adopted mission statements that sought to put into words just what their respective religious missions were. Each of the institutions has clearly articulated mission statements that encapsulated their primary institutional purposes. As President Igor noted,

One of the things that I think is a great advantage is, we’re so clear about our mission, and the documents really support and guide us. And then we have a board that is very committed to it. I’m very committed to it. I have an executive team that is very committed to it. And, by and large, the faculty have bought in… you know, you always have a few outliers…but not very many. And they do a good job of bracketing!
President Ernst noted that, “when you are president, I think you have to be fully committed to the mission of the institution, as you are the chief spokesperson for that mission…what I tell myself is that we have to faithfully be sure we are clear about mission, [and] that we are fulfilling our mission with excellence.” Here, President Ernst reflected well what was expressed by all participants, a deep commitment to carrying out institutional mission.

In noting the critical importance of mission to the Evangelical Christian college, several participants acknowledged that their institutions’ missions were very similar to and in concert with their own personal convictions. President Ash discussed how important mission was to many faculty and staff at the Evangelical Christian college, citing as evidence that many Christian college employees across the country worked for substandard wages and were willing to sacrifice opportunities, prestige, amenities, and resources in order to work at these missionally-driven institutions. President Ash referred to that reality as the “loyalty factor.”

All participants acknowledged the central and strategic importance of maintaining mission to the future of the Evangelical Christian college. They noted that one could identify case-after-case of once-great Christian colleges who no longer ascribed to faith as a result of substantive changes to missions and mission statements over time. They also acknowledged, however, that mission statements could and should change in minor ways over the life of an organization. Such changes, however, should typically amount to minor “tweaking,” not substantive differences. Several noted that the significant
cultural changes now confronting Christian colleges may require more substantive missional clarifications but cautioned, if undertaken, such clarifications should be undertaken with great care.

The study also addressed the topic of mission as it relates to survival. In responding to a question regarding the interaction of mission and survival to today’s Evangelical Christian college, President Frantz responded,

Part of the mission of these institutions has been to, at least to aspire to, be salt and light within the larger world of higher education and the larger world of culture, and if we cannot find ways of making ourselves understood in this new climate, it may not be so much that we don’t survive, but that we will have failed…but to me to fail in doing the thing you were called to do is a different way of losing your capacity to survive.

Here President Frantz acknowledged that survival can mean different things to different people. For her, survival at all costs is not acceptable. If the Christian college can no longer pursue its mission, President Frantz would contend it has ceased to survive.

Participants were uniformly convinced that a strong commitment to institutional mission was central to the future survival of the Evangelical Christian college. Maintaining mission without caving into cultural and governmental pressures, was deemed by all to be a key strategy and ingredient for survival.

Hire Well

Several presidents surmised that the single greatest threat to the future of the Evangelical Christian college was the institution’s increasingly challenged ability to hire co-religionists in faculty and staff or other positions. What at one time was just a possibility, is now becoming more of a reality as proposed changes in nondiscrimination clauses are actively put forward and lobbied for; such changes would, in turn, impact
state and federal funding, accreditation standards, association memberships and student internship experiences. As noted by President Frantz, “part of mission at places like the schools you are evaluating…is hiring people on the faculty and staff who have walked this journey, who espouse the Christian faith, and who are seeking in their own lives to become the kind of deep, thoughtful, life-long learners that we’re trying to develop in our students.”

President Frantz went on to note, “this hiring for mission vision seems to be the thing that puts us most at risk.” She further commented, “I don’t see a way to carry on the mission [of the institution] in any people-transformational way that departs significantly from our policy on hiring.” Here President Frantz underscored the importance of the faculty member, in the classroom, integrating faith and learning, to the successful achievement of mission at the Christian college. Without that, the Christian college ceases to be what it was meant to be. President Ash concurred, adding, “the capacity for us to operate and hire based on our religious convictions, [and to have] staff who are fully committed Christians, and not just the Biblical Studies staff, but the whole staff…groundskeepers and everyone else” is crucial to survival. In other words, without that component of the Christian higher education experience, the Christian college loses its unique ability to integrate faith and learning.

Acknowledging this increasing concern, President George noted that he has instituted more intentionality into faculty interviews; that interview questions are now more in depth; that candidates spend time with the Chairman of the School of Theology; that he now interviews every candidate; and that each candidate is provided with a copy of the denominational “essentials” document. President Ash noted that a prime strategy
for survival needs to be to “hire good people.” The mission of the Christian college is
carried out through its people. If they do not fully support and subscribe to the
institution’s faith position and to its commitment to integrate that faith with learning, the
institution’s mission cannot be fulfilled.

In addressing this most serious of concerns, the hiring of people who support and
can implement the college’s mission, President Frantz noted, “I think the challenge ahead
of us is to try to make our hiring philosophy something that can be defended in terms of
value to the larger culture.” She went on to note, “we have to do less talk about
defending our [religious freedom] rights, and more talk about diversity and
pluralism…even though religious freedom is a very important value, I think fewer and
fewer people in society are valuing it.” President Frantz concluded her comments on
hiring by responding to her own question.

Do I think we’re at risk of not surviving? I think we are
hugely at risk of not surviving and carrying on the mission
as we’ve understood that mission, unless we can make our
core value of hiring understood in language that will be
financially supported by the public, and that will be
supported in accreditation by the academic community.

Like adherence to institutional mission, the presidents viewed the ability to hire co-
religionists in all college and university positions as essential to carrying on institutional
mission and surviving successfully. Accordingly, participants felt that hiring good
employees who were committed to the Christian faith and institutional mission was a
strategy that was crucial to maintaining institutional mission and viability through
troubled times.
Educate Internal Constituencies

In addressing cultural dynamics that have changed rapidly, education --- of the board, of the faculty and staff, of the student body, and of other institutional constituencies --- was identified as a strategy of importance throughout the presidential interviews. In terms of educating college or university Boards of Trustees, most participants acknowledged efforts to educate and to inform their trustees regarding, most specifically, current issues regarding human sexuality, civil rights discrimination, government and judicial activism, threats to state and federal student aid, and options to address these issues. Although President Hart acknowledged that he had not started such educational efforts with his board or educational community, most felt that they were seeing progress in their educational efforts.

To address these educational concerns, presidents noted that they had scheduled special guest speakers at board meetings (e.g. Mark Yarhouse from Regent University and Shirley Hoogstra from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities), assigned readings for trustee discussions (e.g. “Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities and Churches” by Greer, Horst and Haggard), and scheduled time regularly at board meetings to discuss emerging issues, latest developments, regulatory affairs updates, forces at work, and how to position the institution. President Dell noted that such efforts provided opportunities for trustees to “speak into what I do.” They also prepared trustees to more ably address controversial issues of importance to the institution.

The presidents interviewed described a variety of efforts they had undertaken to better inform their boards regarding current issues. President Ash, for example,
described a trustee session where he provided trustees with a document that set forth a number of difficult scenarios all involving difficult human sexuality issues that are confronted regularly by today’s Christian college administrators. Trustees were then given clickers that enabled them to respond to the situations presented anonymously. The results were then immediately available to the trustees for discussion. President Ash acknowledged that the session “was very helpful” to the trustees. Trustees learned that they, as a group, “were not on the same page” and did not see these issues in the same way. They also learned that the human dynamics of working with these issues were extraordinarily difficult and that there were no simple answers to many of the issues presented. President Ash noted the exercise also provided the trustees with an understanding of how they “lined up” with each other, and that, in some cases, there existed significant disagreement among trustees with respect to positions held regarding specific issues.

Participants also noted similar efforts that were being made to educate faculties and other institutional constituencies regarding these difficult cultural issues. Again, scheduling guest speakers to address human sexuality concerns was noted as one effort being made. President George discussed his own personal efforts to meet regularly with young faculty to discuss institutional perspectives on difficult cultural issues. In addition, on many campuses, new faculty orientation sessions were used for such educational efforts. Some participants noted the intentional scheduling of focused discussion groups and other special sessions for students, faculty, and sometimes whole campuses to address difficult cultural issues. Chapel sessions were noted as a prime opportunity to
reach the community. In addition, campus ministries offices and institutions’ student development programs were identified as prime vehicles for these education efforts.

These educational activities, and others like them, were identified by the participants as effective strategies to better educate the campus community regarding many of the more difficult issues facing the Christian college today. The participants acknowledged these efforts as helpful in informing and engendering support from internal constituencies regarding the positions taken by the institution on various issues of importance. With respect to the education of the presidents themselves, most participants acknowledged the importance and value of national organizations in their own training. In particular, educational sessions presented by CCCU and APICU were noted as especially relevant and helpful. As noted by President George, “thank goodness for CCCU and their affinity groups…they provide a variety of educational programs that give our folks a better chance to ramp up and to function better [in addressing difficult situations].”

Despite increasing efforts to inform and educate relevant communities, continuing ignorance and unawareness of relevant cultural issues were still of significant concern to participants. As noted by President Ash:

The biggest worry I have is that presidents are not talking to their boards and their larger constituencies about the cultural changes in a transparent enough way that these people can have a say into [those crises] …but also so that they can respond with some unified voice when a crisis arises.

President Ash went on to note, “[t]here is almost a fear…that if I talk to my board about this, it will get out of control, so we just won’t talk about it.” A preferred course, as
noted by President Ash, would be to have a board that was “engaged,” not with a sense of crisis, but rather with a sense of seriousness: As he noted, “we are trying to engage, not react.”

Educating internal constituencies regarding today’s hot button issues was deemed to be an important, and effective, strategy to confront today’s cultural challenges and reduce their impact on the Christian college. Although some participants have been slow to move in this area, all expressed an understanding of the importance of such education and most were in the process of increasing activities in this area.

**Engage the Culture**

Several participants raised a concern regarding what they deemed to be the “isolation” of the Christian college and the Christian college sector from the rest of academia and, indeed, much of society. The realization shared by most of the presidents was that the Christian college had unintentionally and inadvertently cloistered itself away from others in academia by focusing so intently on institutional mission. As noted by President Hart:

>[P]art of the responsibility here…is on us as Christian institutions …being a little too inwardly focused toward each other and towards ourselves and not having a strong public profile and public mission…as members of a collective set of higher education institutions.

Here President Hart acknowledged that the inward focus of the Christian college, over time, has resulted in the Christian college paying a price in public perception. That lack of public visibility has now come back to haunt the Christian college in that it has
developed too few friends in academia and elsewhere. Acknowledging this problem, President Frantz commented:

We [have] become isolated…And right now, as like no other time that I’ve ever seen, we’re at the risk of being islands out here in the middle, without being clearly understood by [the academy, the church, the funding sources, and the culture]…And, to complicate it further, [our colleges] have gotten used to thinking of themselves as individual institutions, and so, at this very moment, trying to create the kinds of coalitions that we all so want to create, is exceedingly difficult, because of the very independence that we’ve cultivated through this period.

Still another president, President James, noted, “I don’t think we can live with an isolationist’s perspective in today’s world.” These three presidents identified isolationism as having created significant concerns for the Christian college, most specifically because of the resulting failure of the Christian college to develop relationships that would have been helpful at times like those now confronting the Christian college.

This concern regarding isolationism set the stage for another theme identified in this study, and that was the need for these institutions to engage the culture in new ways. As noted by President Dell, “the idea that we can only lock arms with people who are exactly like us is a luxury we no longer have.” He went on to note, as did others, the need to “diversify…culturally, racially, ethnically…and to work together more is now an imperative.” President Bond asserted, “we’ve gotta double down on our efforts to be much more engaged…People just don’t know us!” Both President Ernst and President Bond acknowledged that due to its past reclusive nature, the Christian college must work overtime to become involved and build relationships with the broader higher education
community. Both, reflecting the sentiment of the other participants, viewed increased institutional engagement with the surrounding culture as critical to future success.

Affirming Presidents Ernst and Bond, President Igor declared, “we are going to have to stay in conversation with the culture.” Similarly, President Ernst asserted, “we have to be places that are not afraid of the difficult conversation…we have got to be part of the broader academy…We have to be known and involved outside the Christian bubble.” President Ernst suggested that perhaps one reason that the Christian college has isolated itself has to do with its hesitancy to participate in difficult conversations. He urged the sector to reverse that course and fully participate in the “broader academy.”

Although President Igor had similar beliefs about being involved outside the “Christian bubble,” he argued that the Christian college should seek to prove its credibility, noting it should not give up arguing its case. President Igor supported President Ernst’s challenge for greater involvement in the academy, but also urged that the Christian college not participate passively, but rather, actively and with resolve to prove its credibility.

Noting the potential benefit to the Christian college of greater engagement with the culture, President James opined, “the risk [to us] is significantly greater if we’re not involved…It’s harder to sanction people who have chosen [a greater] level of involvement than those who have chosen a more defensive or isolationist stance.” The need for greater engagement with the culture was a strategy identified throughout the presidential interviews. It also was generally acknowledged that the Christian college’s past tendency to remain set off and isolated has only compounded the difficulties at this moment in history.
Build Influence and Nurture Relationships: “We’ve Got to Make Friends”

Largely due to the perceived historical isolationism of the Christian college sector, the presidents were keenly aware of the fact that their institutions, and the Christian college sector of higher education generally, was virtually unknown and an enigma to most of American society. Accordingly, the sector was either not represented or easily misrepresented at federal, state and local levels in politics, government, business, and the media. As noted by President Bond, and affirmed by all other presidents interviewed, this public ignorance of the Christian college sector had real, significant and negative consequences, and was cause for immediate action.

The participants identified numerous strategies to address the significant shortcomings of the Christian higher education sector, all of which could fall under President Bond’s umbrella statement, “we’ve got to make friends.” As an initial strategy, there was common acceptance of the need for greater involvement, participation and visibility of the Christian colleges in all manner of professional associations, accrediting activities and business-related organizations. The participants noted that they themselves, or qualified representatives from the institutions they lead, should be active participants in the significant activities and responsibilities of those entities. Indeed, it was recognized that efforts should be made to participate at a leadership level to have maximum impact.

Accordingly, participants felt that Christian institutions should ensure the quality and professionalism of those who were identified to represent each institution, and should provide institutional resources to cover all expenses of such efforts. Organizations or associations noted as having particular importance included the Council for Christian
Colleges and Universities (CCCU), the Higher Learning Commission, state educational associations, and regional and professional accrediting associations. As noted by President James, “you want to be friends with people who are influential in decision-making.”

A third, but most important, strategy identified by the presidents involved building relationships with public servants who were either relevant politicians or involved in government at the local, state, or federal level. Such individuals have influence. Participants noted heightened efforts to visit elected officials at all levels of government, to invite those officials to visit or to speak at the campus, to place respected politicians on institutional boards, to build relationships with their respective governors and to testify in Congress or at state legislatures and commissions when requested. The participants also noted the importance of taking a nonpartisan stance in all these activities. The participants uniformly believed that public servants on all sides should be treated equally in terms of visits, invitations and other efforts to build relationships.

Another strategy identified by the presidents as building influence and nurturing relationships that could potentially further the purposes of the Christian college involved pursuing opportunities to join other similarly-situated institutions in partnerships, collaborations, and special interest groups. Participants mused that such collaborations could address a variety of concerns of joint interest to their colleges, including lobbying, international programs, endowment pooling and student loan provision. The presidents noted that membership in these efforts should not be limited to the Christian colleges, although certain special interest groups, like informal associations of Christian college
presidents were still deemed to be of value. Indeed, the presidents noted the importance of Christian college representatives reaching out for involvement in secular educational organizations of importance to the Christian college.

**Encourage Flexibility and Underscore the Importance of Change**

As noted earlier in this study, the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, like all colleges and universities, is, in many ways, resistant to change. That characteristic was of little consequence when the Christian college and the culture in which it operated were similar with respect to beliefs and aspirations. Now that the two have diverged, however, and there exists an increasing call for the Christian college to change, the ability to be flexible becomes of greater importance. In some cases, change may be precisely what is warranted and required in order to navigate today’s challenges and operational environment successfully. President Frantz noted that,

Most of our tradition, the moral high road of Christian colleges has not been all that different from the moral high road of the culture…The idea of no longer being grounded in a moral/spiritual vision that is viewed as coincident with the moral high road of the larger culture, I think, is a huge part of the novelty of this moment…I think that’s unprecedented…I think that is huge…I think that’s new…And there’s nowhere [for the Christian college] to seek refuge except in some new place.

President Frantz went on to note that this new environment in which Christian colleges find themselves operating in is going to require creativity and flexibility to navigate. The president also noted that “in order to carry on the same mission in the 21st Century that [Christian colleges were] called to pursue in the 19th Century, [the Christian college would] have to change…to be about the same mission in changing circumstances, you
have to translate that mission in different ways.” Here again, President Franz called the Christian college to increasing flexibility in order to meet today’s challenges.

This need for flexibility and openness to change was echoed by most presidents interviewed. There was an understanding that the world had changed and that institutional missions may have to be adjusted accordingly. All presidents interviewed were protective of their institutions’ core missions and confirmed that they would not, and could not, change their missions without board approval. Each president also confirmed, however, that they believed they did have authority to “refine and clarify” their institutional mission statements as warranted. Although President Hart commented that he had a “lot of latitude” to consider such amendments, he also admitted that he did his best to “stay away” from such opportunities. This was, no doubt, an acknowledgement that “tweaking” mission is fraught with danger.

President Dell noted the increasing pressure on Christian colleges to amend missional statements to comply with changing societal mores. He responded by noting:

…there are those who want us to…amend…and…revise our understanding of Scripture’s teaching, in particular, on the issues of sexuality and marriage. And…what we say is, no, we can’t do that. We belong to a faith community that for generations has understood God’s word in a particular way. This is how God designed human beings to be most fulfilled, and, in the long run, to be happiest. And we can’t be dishonest or dissembling about the truth that we see and hold dear.

President Dell’s comment underscored the fact that the presidents of these institutions want to be accommodating in their efforts to work within American culture, but they also recognize that there exist clear limits to their ability to accommodate.

While there was recognition of the need for flexibility and potential change in order to maintain mission, participants like President Bond asserted that “massive
changes’’ should be avoided. Participants acknowledged that some accommodations to the culture may be necessary in order to continue pursuing mission, but that each institution would need to determine for itself where to draw that line. President Ash urged Christian colleges to consider a pragmatic approach to resolution of the change issues, and also encouraged Christian colleges to look for non-polarizing positions that don’t compromise convictions in addressing change issues.

Here, the participants acknowledged that in order to navigate today’s challenges successfully, the Christian college will need, as a strategy, to exhibit greater flexibility and willingness to change. In acknowledging such, however, they also confirmed that such changes, if any, would have to be within limits acceptable to faith traditions and that didn’t compromise spiritual convictions. They suggested that reaching non-polarizing positions that did not compromise spiritual convictions might be the preferred goal.

**Communicate Your Value, Distinctives, and Benefit to Society**

A salient theme across the interviews was the need for Christian colleges to better communicate their value to the larger American society. Each participant acknowledged that Christian higher education had done a very poor job, especially during recent history, in communicating. President Hart noted, “we haven’t explained to the wider culture why we exist, what we exist to do, or what we contribute to society.” He went on to note, “our culture as a whole depends on [the Christian college], and doesn’t realize how much it gets from it.” He added, “we offer a particular niche…and a set of opportunities and contributions that are unique and that have gone unnoticed.” Here, President Hart identified public relations benefits that the Christian college sector has foregone because of its failure, over time, to communicate its value to American society.
Several presidents noted the distinctive benefits that the Christian college offered to the external community. In addressing those things that distinguish the typical Christian college from the larger state university, President Dell commented:

Now they have more lab [equipment]. They have a lot more money, they have more people, they have bigger basketball [and football] program[s] than we have, but...fundamentally...it’s not the education, it’s not the intellectual education that we offer [that’s different]. We have faculty who have the same kinds of degrees, we have the same kinds of programs. You can go to the same graduate schools with our degrees. The academic education is on par.

What distinguishes us is that we want to educate from a holistic vision. You would be hard-pressed to go to a state university and receive an education where they will overtly attempt to shape and form character...where wisdom is part of the curricula, the development of wisdom, of wise ways of thinking and living and acting. The state schools don’t attempt, and probably shouldn’t attempt to do those things. In any case, they have forgotten how to educate like that. But that is what we offer. It is at the heart of the education that we offer, that we say, we’re not only going to educate you for your intellectual development, but also in character and leadership ability. Doing that requires a certain kind of educational environment. It requires us to have the freedom to teach values, to teach principles that are drawn from Scripture and from our faith communities.

President Dell articulated a strong case for the unique contribution made by the faith-based college to society.

Participants concurred that the Christian college sector needed to significantly improve its national communications efforts. Toward that end, President Ernst noted that her institution had recently created a task force to determine how the institution promoted the common good, information that was being used to further the institution’s purposes by communicating what contributions to society were made by the institution’s students.
and faculty. Efforts like this were identified by the participants as increasingly important to reestablishing the perceived value of the Christian college to American society.

President Ash noted that in this day of increasing affordability problems, an additional important strategy was to establish a strong “value proposition” for the Christian college. Whether compared to state institutions or private, secular institutions, the presidents underscored the strategic importance of being able to communicate effectively the public and personal value of the private Christian higher education experience. As further noted by President Ash, “Even if you don’t necessarily affirm our particular Christian mission…we’re still of value to the public secular world.”

**Practice Practical Politics**

A developing strategy identified by President Hart was a growing set of political strategies, prohibitions or guidelines that could help the Christian college president navigate many of the values conflicts that were deemed to be more in evidence. President Hart shared that although he believed each issue should be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, the following were guidelines he had adopted to address potential political issues:

1. Do not donate to candidates of either political party or to either political party;
2. Do not sign group letters or statements regarding political or social issues;
3. Avoid partisan or socially-charged statements, where possible and
4. Do not feel the need to “be out in front” on any controversial issue. Sometimes the best response is no response.
Ensure Your House is in Order

Another strategy identified during the interview process involved internal policies, processes and procedures. Participants noted that many of the human sexuality issues that were prevalent today were not at issue a decade ago. Accordingly, many Christian colleges had only recently, in the last few years, drafted and adopted policies on several controversial human sexuality issues. Participants also noted that such policies, because of their controversial nature, could be heavily nuanced and, at times, difficult to read and to understand. In addition, they noted that legal counsel typically advised that such policies should be specifically written in order that they could be clearly understood. President Bond noted, however, that specificity could at times be interpreted as “rigid” or “strident,” that such language could be inflammatory to certain interest groups and that careful review and analysis of such policies was necessary.

President Ash acknowledged that with respect to each of the policies dealing with controversial topics drafted on his campus, he personally reviewed and revised the policies with the expectation that they would, in time, be published on the front page of the New York Times. He reported that this imaginary exercise was helpful in identifying and avoiding the use of unnecessarily inflammatory language. He noted, moreover, that in drafting policies, efforts were made (a) to use language that was positive rather than negative, (b) to avoid the use of controversial terms and (c) to identify basic governing principles while informing the reader that policies would be administered on a case-by-case basis.

President Cain noted that she had instituted an annual review by the trustees of the institution’s statement of faith, mission statement and purpose statement. Such actions
ensured that the documents were fresh in the minds of the leadership at all times and current in written form.

A final “housekeeping strategy” noted by President Hart, the president of a denominationally-related institution, was his effort to “stay close to the denomination.” With respect to matters of theology and religious conviction, President Hart noted that this strategy had resulted in the institution taking a more cautious public stance on several issues. On the other hand, however, it deferred some potential public criticism that would have been directed at the institution to the denomination.

**Exercise Leadership**

A final strategy identified by participants involved leadership, or the lack thereof, in the world of Christian higher education. The participants all acknowledged that stressful and complex days like those confronting the Christian college today demanded a special standard of leadership. President Cain noted that today presented the Christian college executive with a “great opportunity…to lead.” President George added that to successfully navigate today’s issues, “it’s going to take a leader at the presidential level who, unlike Issachar in the Old Testament, understands the times and knows what to do.”

Unfortunately, participants seemed unsure as to whether those leading today’s Christian colleges and universities are up to the task. President Ernst noted that, in her opinion, one-third of today’s Christian college presidents were making the effort to address today’s unusual problems, while two-thirds were not. President George shared, “I think a lot [of CCCU presidents] are sitting there with their eyes glazed over; they just can’t believe what they’re hearing and they are not prepared for it.” Still another, President Dell, stated, “I think we all still kind of feel like we can just put our heads
down, hunker down, and wait it out.” These insights suggest that there exists concern regarding whether sufficient skills and capabilities exist among current Christian college leaders to navigate current difficulties successfully.

In addressing that concern, one president, President Cain, identified,

a lack of strong, spiritual leadership, of statesmen leadership [exists today] … we seem to be floundering in really being able to look to those who can clearly articulate our positions, to clearly articulate why they are important, and then to provide leadership…so I think there is a leadership vacuum.

On a more positive note, President George posited that,

We may see a [new] generation of leaders developed, raised up, that is fully aware of what’s going on, and that is able to mobilize…and I think a lot of mobilization has to occur….

Depending on which view prevails, the future of Christian higher education may hang in the balance. No strategy to navigate values conflicts, to address institutional difficulties, or to survive will be successful without capable leadership to implement it.

**Summary of Chapter**

The participants in this study agreed that the Evangelical Christian college of today is facing challenges rarely, if ever, experienced in the history of Christian higher education. Most believed that these challenges may be the most difficult and consequential ever confronted by these unique institutions of higher learning.

In that context, the presidents specifically identified as the unique challenges of the day, a business model that no longer meets institutional financial needs, the extraordinary pace and complexity of operating a college or university in today’s environment, the drastic changes in cultural values and social mores over the last five
decades, the increasing influence of government regulation, and the growing sector dependence on technology.

The participants also identified as problematic for the Christian college a series of risks that are placing these institutions in greater jeopardy. Among those of greatest concern to the participants were the myriad financial issues now facing these institutions, the changes in culture and public perception that have created a divide between the Christian college and the general public, the potential withdrawal of federal funding for religious liberty and diversity reasons, the growing challenges to academic programs from accrediting agencies, the pressures on the institutional missions of this sector’s colleges and universities, the changing views on social issues becoming increasingly apparent among the colleges internal constituencies, and the uncontrollable nature and impact of social media on public relations.

The participants also noted the many impediments that they see as hindering effective responses to these growing risks. Chief among these impediments were a general discomfort with the new, controversial role imposed by society on the Christian college, the general lack of understanding within the Christian community regarding the issues underlying many of the current values-driven conflicts, differences of opinion on many of these values-laden conflicts among institutional constituents, an American culture that has changed its views dramatically on issues of religious significance, evolving accreditation concerns, government intrusion into faith-based educational institution affairs, the inability of legal counsel to provide legal advice in a manner that enables action, and the perceived lack of leadership.
In concluding the chapter, twelve chief strategies were identified by the participants to assist today’s Evangelical Christian college president in confronting and resolving the values-laden conflicts currently facing the Christian college. These included: staying true to personal religious beliefs; maintaining an “all-in” commitment to achieving institutional mission; holding strong to that mission; hiring carefully and in concert with institutional mission; educating internal constituencies regarding today’s changing cultural dynamics and their impact on the institution; engaging culture in a more deliberate way; building relationships with influential parties; demonstrating flexibility; significantly improving internal and external communications; involving the institutions appropriately in political activities; ensuring institutional documents and policies are in order; and exercising leadership.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

General Observations

This study explores how ten presidents of noted Evangelical Christian colleges in America have navigated the many serious values conflicts that now confront Christian higher education due to rapidly changing societal norms and cultural values. My purpose has been to identify current thinking regarding, and potential strategies for confronting, these new challenges to institutional viability.

In conducting this study, I expected to encounter complexity and uncertainty, which I did, but I also hoped to discover a growing level of awareness, sophistication and creative thinking regarding these potentially life-impacting concerns for today’s Christian colleges. Although the study results, with respect to this second objective, were mixed, likely due to these rapidly changing cultural norms and to the diverse geographical environments and political climates in which these institutions operated, the results were a dynamic set of understandings and ideas that should provide benefit to other similarly-situated leaders in higher education and to the higher education sector as a whole.

A Sobered Optimism

Each of the individuals interviewed, whatever their tenure, expressed serious concern about the new realities that now confront them and their institutions. Indeed, most expressed disbelief at how quickly American culture had changed its views on human sexuality and religious liberty and, at the same time, how readily that culture had
turned its back on and jettisoned its support for long-established American institutions of higher education that have provided quality academic programming in a faith-based context for centuries.

Although this was reputedly an optimistic group of individuals, that was not necessarily the group I encountered when addressing the particular topic of this study. When optimism was expressed, it was a gritty, teeth-clenched optimism driven by a faith that believes in a Higher Power’s ultimate victory over life’s circumstances. The comment “we win in the end,” heard several times during the interviews, implied a determined recognition that the circumstances and challenges facing today’s Christian college are difficult, and may, indeed, become more difficult, and possibly even terminal. To these ten, however, the Christian faith assured adherents that better times lie ahead. Accordingly, these ten evidenced a resolute, spiritually-driven optimism despite today’s imposing challenges.

**A Discomforting Reality**

It was my sense that these proven chief executives were somewhat uncomfortable in their new and increasingly adversarial role; a role that had been foisted upon them and that they saw as obligatory in order to preserve the viability of the faith-based institutions for which they had responsibility, and of the sector of faith-based higher education generally. Indeed, each expressed, in one way or another, some level of discouragement regarding these rapidly changing events. Each also expressed concern that efforts to defend their institutions from increasing attacks were taking a growing toll on already limited institutional time and resources. Adding to their discomfort, this group of leaders
also appeared increasingly mindful of the inexorable challenges that lay ahead for their institutions, and the necessity for them to be up to the task in confronting and overcoming those challenges.

These ten also understood that despite the political sea changes that are evidenced with each passing election year, the long term trajectory of public and judicial opinion on many of the social issues now confronting the Christian college has not changed, and that this fact does not bode well for the Christian college’s future. Although there was some disagreement among the presidents regarding whether the Christian college was facing the most treacherous time in Christian college history, a clear majority of the presidents interviewed believed that to be the case. The loss of public support for Christian higher education, alone, was deemed a factor never before encountered by the American Christian college and, therefore, a factor that sets today apart from all other periods in American higher education history.

Of course, this study confirmed that there are no easy answers to these questions. Indeed, the participants are confronted with a brave and new, but increasingly unfriendly, world without the luxury of scholarly treatises or well-worn how-to books or articles on how to navigate the storm. Rather, they carry this heavy yoke alone, although in concert with those similarly yoked. That being the case, the thoughts and actions of these ten presidents add significantly to the conversation.

**The Influence of Personal Religious Belief**

The fact is, the participants and their respective institutions are people and institutions of faith, and more specifically, the Christian faith. That basic and undeniable certainty was evident in and permeated every interview. It is clear that there is no
understanding these ten, their institutions, or their approaches to resolving conflicts, values-based or not, without accepting and acknowledging that fundamental, underlying truth and fact. It pervades all they do. Their Christian faith influences and impacts the way they see the world, the way they approach their responsibilities, their view of the future, and their place in that future. Their faith is the cornerstone upon which their lives are built; it is the reason why their institutions exist.

The literature would suggest that these ten are values-based leaders whose deep religious beliefs determine their behaviors in decision-making (Barrand, 1958, p. 279). Kraemer (2011) would say they will likely exercise their decision-making skills in ways that are consistent with their personal religious beliefs. Viinamaki (2012) would suggest that because these leaders have a keen sense of their own religious values, a consciousness and awareness of those religious values, and the competence to put those religious values into practice, they have the potential to be effective values-based leaders. Similarly, Dean (2008), would argue that these ten, because of the religious values they hold dear, would be better able to address the tough decisions that confront Christian higher education today.

Acknowledging the above, it appears true that the leaders of the colleges in this study will not and cannot address the values conflicts they currently face, except through the prism of their religious faith. Indeed, the instant values conflicts would not even be values conflicts if not for the Christian faith. Accordingly, these presidents have resorted to faith-inspired resources, such as the Bible, prayer, and communication with fellow Christians, to determine how best to proceed with respect to addressing today’s issues in
a manner consistent with religious beliefs. Whether modern society, or even the law, concurs with their conclusions matters little, as they will seek first to live lives grounded in personal religious belief.

For those who do not share the Christian faith with the individuals who work and study at these institutions, it may be difficult to understand how faith can be so influential with respect to decision-making and the many conflicts facing the Christian college today. For those in the leadership of these institutions, however, their Christian faith is involved in and pertinent to all decision-making. Accordingly, the faith component cannot be ignored when discussing how these individuals navigate values conflicts that, indeed, only exist because of the faith they exercise.

Given this, participants confirmed that Christian college leaders exercise religious belief and practice in determining the best way to navigate the values challenges their institutions face. At a minimum, the leader of the Christian college will:

1. rely on his or her strong, personal spiritual faith in decision-making;
2. look to the Bible for guidance;
3. seek counsel from trusted Christian advisors, colleagues, and friends; and
4. pray to God for wisdom and guidance.

The presidents I interviewed had long-identified as Christians and described approaching decisions of significance in a manner similar to that listed above. The Christian faith, as put into practice by these executives, did not sit idly by when addressing difficult, life-impacting decisions, but, rather, was an, if not the, important ingredient to decision-making. Personal religious belief and spiritual faith were active participants in addressing any values conflicts confronting these chief executives.
The Commitment to Mission

All of the institutions studied had mission and purpose statements that underscored institutional commitment to the Christian faith and dedication to its integration with learning. In addition, all had statements of faith, doctrinal statements, or community standards, which imbedded the Christian faith deep into organizational structure and operations and most of which held community members to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. These institutions were created and exist today to educate in a Christian context. Contrary to the missions of many of their secular brethren, the missions of these institutions are broader than simply to educate. To them, it is the preservation and propagation of a religious belief system through education that is central to who they are and why they exist. These institutions are distinguished by religious mission. It permeates all they do. It inhabits who they are.

Collins and Porras (2002), have recognized the importance to organizational success of holding to certain missional principles, such as these, that never change (p. 220). In their words, such immutable principles are “truly sacred” for these organizations; to them, clearly identifying what cannot change will result in positive organizational progress (Collins & Porras, 2002, p. 220). So, too, it is for the Protestant Evangelical Christian college. By staying firmly grounded and tied to basic biblical tenets, it is able to be what it was and is meant to be, an effective, productive, faith-infused institution of higher education. If society or culture forces a change to that which “cannot change,” however, the Christian college ceases to be what it was meant to be, or, in Newsom and Hayes’ (1991) words, it loses its “reason for being” (p. 28).
Without question, the ten Christian college presidents that were the subjects of this study led institutions that were creatures of mission that had, for the most part, clearly defined commitments and operational goals regarding faith and education. Although words and phrases may differ somewhat, institution to institution, the central purposes, those things that “cannot change,” do not; these were institutions whose primary purposes were to provide quality higher education in a meaningfully integrated Christian context.

By Collins and Porras’s (2002) definition, these institutions had clearly identified the core values and senses of purpose, or “core ideolog[ies],” of their respective organizations. They would, therefore, likely contend that this self-understanding would guide and anchor these colleges in confronting the difficult challenges that lay ahead.

For the presidents, faculty and staff members at these institutions, those who daily carried out the institutional mission in the classroom and beyond, the institution’s religious purposes were not irrelevant or without influence. In Hartley’s (2002) words, these were the “true believers,” who shared a belief in the institution, its purposes, and its ability to make a significant contribution (p. 119). Indeed, all of the presidents noted that their personal religious beliefs closely aligned with the beliefs and religious missions of the institutions they led. They also noted that should their personal religious beliefs and their institution’s religious beliefs ever diverge, they would seek employment elsewhere.

These were not just educators; these were Christian educators, most of whom had no desire, whatsoever, to work or to teach in an environment where they were not fully encouraged to integrate their Christian beliefs with their institution’s living and learning environment. For them, it was not just an institutional mission that one
supported, but rather the carrying out of a personal calling that was central to personal 
belief. For each of these, the faith-based institutional mission was not just a unique 
attribute of the institution that happened to pay his or her salary, but rather, the core 
reason for his or her working at the institution in the first place. It was the reason they 
“signed up.”

As noted by many participants, most Christian college faculty and staff members 
were drawn to, and for that matter, stayed at the institution precisely because they 
believed in and were committed to the institution’s religious mission. These 
professionals, in many cases, had multiple opportunities to serve elsewhere and for higher 
pay, but chose to serve at the Christian college, even at reduced levels of compensation, 
because of a personal belief in and alignment with, institutional mission. In fact, for the 
institutions represented in this study, that alignment was a requirement of employment. 
Although faculty and staff may have varied a bit “around the edges” of religious belief, in 
order to gain and maintain employment, it was required that core tenets of the Christian 
faith be fully accepted and believed by all.

So, then, for the faculty and staff members at the Protestant Evangelical Christian 
college, they generally are fully aligned, personally and professionally, with institutional 
mission, committed to the integration of faith and learning, and, typically, convinced of 
God’s leading to their particular institution and teaching or working responsibilities. The 
same could be said of the Christian college presidents interviewed for this study.

In Hartley’s (2003) study of three small independent colleges, LeMoyne-Owen, 
Olivet, and Tusculum, he noted that the shared sense of purpose could be significant to 
institutions confronting change. In his study, institutions facing significant challenges
were able to improve their situations, although fragilely, largely due to a shared sense of mission among their constituents. Hartley’s findings may provide some hope to the Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges that were the subjects of this study. The missions of these universities were broadly accepted, endorsed by, and deeply engrained in the psyches of their constituents. According to Hartley (2003), this shared sense of vision could be helpful as these institutions continue to forge a way forward.

With that as background, the importance of mission, both personal and institutional, to the navigation of the values conflicts confronted by the Christian college leader becomes readily apparent. These leaders did not only look to their personal faith and its convictions in such decision-making, but also to institutional missions that were closely aligned to their personal beliefs. For them, decisions with respect to the values-based conflicts evident today must be grounded in, and consistent with, personal religious beliefs and institutional mission in order to be effectuated.

**Proposed Navigational Strategies**

After acknowledging the foundational importance of personal religious convictions and institutional religious mission to the navigation of the many values conflicts now confronting the Protestant Evangelical college, the participants then, identified numerous strategies that they have concluded are essential to the effective navigation of the values conflicts now confronting their institutions. It is to those strategies that were most widely identified that I now turn:

*Educating Internal Constituencies.* Typically, presidents do not make decisions in a vacuum. They report to a board of trustees and find themselves both responsible to and beholding to a variety of other influential constituencies. Accordingly, decision-making
regarding a host of issues of importance, including many of the values conflicts that are the focus of this study, must be taken with due deference given to and input received from these special groups of employers and influencers. One characteristic of successful leadership in this context is the ability to demonstrate sensitivity regarding the interests of these constituencies.

Unfortunately, with respect to many of the values conflicts currently on the table for the Christian college president, most, if not all, of these conflicts are relevant to constituent groups who are woefully under-informed regarding the complexities of the issues presented. They also are often ignorant regarding their religious faith’s application to these concerns. Accordingly, giving them due deference in decision-making regarding such issues can become problematic for the president and for the institution. Without an adequate understanding of the issues, from both a practical and faith perspective, insertion of these uninformed constituencies into the decision-making process can further complicate what are already very difficult seas to navigate.

Acknowledging that difficult fact, it is incumbent upon the Christian college president to create and implement opportunities, of all kinds, to educate these constituencies regarding the operational realities, as well as the religious implications, of such decision-making. The findings of this study indicated that Christian college presidents are beginning to understand the importance of meeting this new educational challenge, and are beginning to make concerted efforts to improve the knowledge base of trustees, faculties, and other constituencies.

*Engaging Culture.* There is little debate over whether today’s Christian college has been successful in engaging the culture in which it exists and operates. It has not.
Rather, it has operated for decades like the religious, cloistered off in monasteries, living a fraternal life in common with other religious. This isolationist existence has, until recently, been of little concern as American culture and society focused on the value of education rather than the definition of civil rights. Accordingly, the Christian college has been treated, since its inception, as a full member of the academy that has benefited from all kinds of public and governmental support. As a result, higher education and society, as a whole, have benefited from the participation of these unique institutions in the academy and from the quality and success of the sector’s graduates.

As American society began to shift its focus from support for education to an increasing emphasis on civil rights, however, the sector’s past isolationism has begun to extort a price. The sector’s insufficient networks of friends and supporters have been unable to plead its case when the sector’s operations, purposes and value were questioned or challenged, especially in the light of expanding public interests with respect to a variety of human sexuality issues.

Recognizing these shortcomings, it is now imperative that the Protestant Evangelical Christian college correct this course and reach out and build stronger relationships with the academy, and with secular American culture generally, in order to engender greater and broader support and to enable it to more successfully navigate the values conflicts confronting the Christian college sector. Presidents should reach out and build relationships wherever possible. For example, the presidents in this study suggested that Christian college presidents initiate or take advantage of opportunities to build relationships with presidents at peer institutions, whether faith-based or secular. In addition, presidents should ensure that institutions participate and are adequately
represented in accrediting organizations and activities (at both academic and professional levels), professional associations, and peer groups. In addition, participants suggested that Christian colleges reach out and try to build bridges with opposition groups.

Additional opportunities for engaging culture include: educating constituent groups (trustees, students, parents, alumni, faculty and donors) regarding the societal benefit of Christian higher education, identifying and developing relationships with influential community citizens, and mobilizing special interest groups.

_Hiring as if Your (Institution’s) Life Depends on it!_ The participants in this study uniformly underscored the importance of implementing and maintaining a hiring policy process that ensures new hire support for, and preferably, belief in, institutional mission. Without such a hiring requirement and process, the participants acknowledged that ongoing institutional commitment to mission is placed at risk as persons internal to the organization begin to lose sight of institutional purpose.

_Comunicating the Story._ Consistent with what was deemed to be the inadequate performance of the Christian college sector on a host of issues of concern today, the Christian college has not only been slow to tell its story, but, in the words of the presidents themselves, totally inadequate in doing so. As a result, misimpressions and misunderstandings regarding the sector abound. The public-at-large now questions the sector’s value, its quality, its legitimacy, and whether it should be supported financially. The sector is now subject to criticism and derision that would have been inconceivable a decade ago.

This turn of events is primarily due to a complete lack of effort by individual Christian colleges and the sector as a whole to tell its story. Particularly, due to limited
resources and a siloed perspective, these colleges and this sector have not seen public relations as a priority, have not funded communication strategies, and have not attempted to polish their images, neither in this current period of time nor historically. As a result, these institutions, individually and collectively, are left to be defined by others, many of whom have little or no knowledge of Christian higher education.

In that context, and in light of the fact that the most visible values conflicts now confronting these schools are emotional issues for many in the general public, the presidents recognized that serious public relations efforts and state and national communications strategies are warranted. These institutional leaders recognized that no matter how successful they were in accomplishing mission, and no matter what benefit they bestowed on society, if their story was not told, they would be defined by forces over which they have no control.

Recognizing those facts, the president of today’s Christian college must be increasingly concerned about communicating his or her institution’s value and benefit to society if his college is to navigate successfully the values conflicts currently confronting his institution.

Coordinating Political Activities and Building Relationships. Christian colleges have, historically, shied away from involvement in politics and have been satisfied to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21, The English Standard Version). That strategy has proven to be a bad one, however, as more recent events have demonstrated Christian higher education’s lack of influence on governmental activities
and the political process. In effect, Christian colleges have not “been at the table” when issues of relevance to the sector have been addressed. Accordingly, their voices have not been heard.

Although they now find themselves in the position of playing “catch-up,” the leaders of these institutions sensed the importance, for future sector health, of involvement in the workings of government. Accordingly, the leaders of these institutions are increasing their contact with government leaders; inviting those government leaders to serve on boards, visit campus and speak in chapels; monitoring legislative activities at the local, state and federal levels; expanding their associational efforts to address legislative and agency activity and, to put it simply, becoming more involved in governmental activities.

In addition to expanding efforts and involvement in political activities, the participants also recognized the urgency of building and deepening personal and academic relationships with a broad and diverse group of influential organizations, both within and outside the academy. Whether with state or national educational associations, academic and professional accrediting agencies, or groups of peer professionals and institutions, the participants recognized that the Protestant Evangelical Christian college has been remiss in not cultivating deep relationships with influential persons and organizations. That failure becomes particularly noteworthy at times of challenge.

In order to navigate the values conflicts confronting Christian higher education today, the Christian college sector simply has to become a “player,” to be at the table
when important issues are being discussed, and to have broad, deep, and influential relationships that it can call on in times of trouble. Isolationism is no longer acceptable at either the societal or governmental levels.

**Drafting Policies and Procedures that Support Decision-Making.** The pace at which cultural values and societal norms have changed in America, especially with respect to various human sexuality issues, has caught the historic Christian college off-guard. Although most of these institutions have, for centuries, held positions (some biblical, some written, some not) on all manner of human sexuality issues, many, if not most, have not seen, until more recently, the need to carefully and thoughtfully put those positions into written policies and procedures. That, of course, is no longer the case, and institutions across the country are wrestling with clarifying thinking, establishing positions, and developing rationales (both operational and faith-inspired) on a host of difficult human sexuality issues.

For the president confronting decisions involving values conflicts, the lack of well-considered and carefully drafted policies can be problematic. Without such policies, presidents are left to their own thinking, which may or may not represent the best thinking of their institutions and relevant constituencies. The presidents interviewed recognized the risky position in which the lack of established policies places the president, especially with respect to the volatile, values-based issues now being addressed. Accordingly, at many institutions, efforts are underway to consider and to draft institutional policies that can guide the president in such decision-making.

For today’s president, who is seeking to navigate values conflicts on the Christian college campus, decision-making in the absence of well-considered policies that address
those value concerns is risky and imprudent. Accordingly, when appropriate, presidents should lead and enable efforts to establish and implement such policies.

*Exercising Leadership.* Without doubt, the key factor in determining how and whether the Christian college successfully navigates the values conflicts it is facing currently is the quality and responsiveness of its leadership. Certainly, the ten presidents interviewed were representative of the best in Christian higher education. Each acknowledged the difficult circumstances now confronting his or her respective institution and Christian higher education generally, and each described the efforts he or she has made, to a greater or to a lesser degree, to address those circumstances. As a result, the participants’ respective institutions are either fully immersed in efforts to navigate today’s value conflicts, or are becoming so.

Unfortunately, as discussed in the interviews, these presidents perceived that they may represent the exception to the rule. They feared that the majority of Evangelical Christian colleges and their presidents today were generally ignorant of, or only now awakening to, today’s significant challenges. Some, they feared, were intentionally or unintentionally trying to ignore today’s realities.

Successfully navigating today’s values conflicts will require leadership. That leadership will need to be thoughtful, creative, cunning, wise and aggressive in order to preserve what is unique about the Christian college. Efforts that fail to meet those standards will accelerate the continuing demise of this once preeminent form of American higher education.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In the context of a rapidly changing culture and significant shifts in societal norms, the purpose of this study was to look deeply into one small, but historically relevant, sector of American higher education, the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, and to determine how this sector’s leadership had addressed these changing times and new realities in the light of their historic institutional missions and deeply-held religious values and beliefs. In particular, I wanted to know how they were navigating the increasing number of values conflicts with which they were confronted as societal perspectives on a variety of important social issues have changed, but institutional positions and commitments regarding those same controversial issues have remained relatively the same. This was accomplished by interviewing and analyzing ten current leaders of a select group of these unique institutions of higher education.

What I found were ten leaders (1) who were profoundly committed to the Christian faith, (2) who believed their personal faith was most relevant and applicable to all analysis and decision-making during these fluid times, and (3) who looked to and depended on their faith in navigating today’s difficult decisions. I also found ten leaders who addressed these volatile societal changes from a place of deep commitment and allegiance to institutional mission. These ten were wholeheartedly committed to the reasons for which their institutions were formed, and operated in concert with and were dedicated to the accomplishment of those missions. Accordingly, institutional mission played a pivotal role in all decision-making.
And finally, I found a group of leaders who recognized that they were ill-prepared and had been remiss in not preparing for today’s harsh cultural realities, and who were seeking desperately to identify and to implement a variety of strategies to make up for lost ground. Those strategies were identified and described herein.

In reaching this study’s conclusions, I also identified a sense of apprehension and insecurity among these ten chief executive officers about the future of their institutions and this sector of higher education, and a sense of uncertainty about the ultimate consequences of the values conflicts they are confronting currently. As evidence of that, President Ernst noted:

I want to believe that our culture can be convinced that the Christian college brings significant value to the landscape of American higher education and that the Christian college should be able to co-exist as full educational citizens alongside the community colleges, the private colleges, the state systems and others. But I am honestly unsure of the way forward.

President Ernst went on to caution:

I see this next decade as being very, very significant in terms of whether or not the education academy…our education academy…and whether the United States as a nation, will say we affirm the importance or the value of religious faith and life to the broader culture, and we affirm that in the breadth of institutions that have always been a part of the strength of the American system of higher education, that we can have institutions that are serious about their religious faith, and that incorporate their religious values as a part of their campus life.

In concluding her remarks, President Ernst noted, “we certainly know we are not going to be in any dominant position, but the question is whether there is room in American higher education for our kinds of institutions to be one of the options.”

President Ernst’s hopeful, but candid, remarks echoed those expressed by other presidents interviewed. For example, President Ash shared frankly:

I hope that there will be a sense that in the pluralism of the United States culture, and in the fact that religious liberty still is an important [American] cultural value,
that the Christian college will still be able to be organized and to operate based on their own religious convictions.

President Ash went on to note, however, “I think that there will be less of us, but I am hopeful that those remaining will be a high quality remnant.”

Despite these sobered observations, my study also identified among the presidents a sense of guarded optimism about the sector’s future. For example, President Dell declared, “I think we will find our way into the future, where we can be faithful to our mission, to our identity, and to our Lord.” President James concurred and stated, optimistically, “I believe there is a way forward and a reason for these institutions to exist.”

On that note, and with those expressions of hope in mind, the following recommendations are offered as the insights of these ten leaders regarding navigating the values conflicts that lie ahead for the Protestant Evangelical Christian college. They, hopefully, will serve as an initial navigational chart to the many presidents and institutions just entering these rough seas and to those who are, as yet, unaware of the rough weather that lies just over the horizon.

**Recommendations**

**Faith**

The president of the Protestant Evangelical Christian college who is seeking, on behalf of his or her institution, to navigate the many values conflicts now confronting his or her institution must start by addressing such challenges from a perspective of personal religious faith. In each of the interviews conducted for this study, without exception, these leaders evidenced deep religious faith and belief that they deemed relevant to any and all decision-making, whether values-based or not. For them, to address values-laden
questions of institutional consequence without serious reflection on, reference to, and application of personal religious belief and principles, would simply not be acceptable, and would contravene the very faith they extol.

Accordingly, this study would conclude that presidents of Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges who are confronting values conflicts, must, as an initial matter, look to personal faith and conviction for direction, wisdom and validation of decision-making. It is upon the president’s personal religious faith that all other decisions and actions find their foundation.

Mission

The president seeking to navigate today’s values conflicts must remain true to institutional mission. This study confirmed that for the president of the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, careful adherence to and support of institutional mission were critically important to successful navigation of today’s values conflicts. Without exception, these professionals and their institutions exist to carry out education in a different way, and that is to educate in a manner that integrates the Christian faith into each class’s subject matter. For these leaders and their institutions, there is no reason for the institution to exist if it is prevented from offering education in a manner acceptable to its religious tenets.

The presidents I interviewed for this study each recognized the foundational importance of institutional mission to the continued success of the Protestant Evangelical Christian college. As students of American higher education themselves, each was aware that American higher education today is replete with stories of institutions who at one time held the Christian faith central to who they were and why they existed. They also
were aware that many of those institutions changed over time as missions became secularized, as mission statements were amended, and as the Christian faith began to take a back seat to other educational purposes, philosophies, and endeavors. To them, the lessons for this discrete group of institutions is clear: if you mess with mission, you are messing with the institution’s foundational reason for being.

For the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, then, as confirmed by this study, institutional mission must be treated with great care and deliberation, as it is the key ingredient to what makes the Protestant Evangelical Christian college unique and special in the American higher education landscape. Indeed, it is the institution’s only “reason for being.” As many participants suggested, minor changes “around the edges” of mission may be acceptable to update language or to clarify meaning, but amendments to central, core provisions regarding the Christian faith and guiding religious principles of an institution should be taken only with great care. Such amendments were deemed an initial step in a journey to lost meaning.

Of central importance to maintaining mission in this specific context were deemed to be institutional hiring standards. Participants underscored the fundamental importance of hiring people who wholeheartedly support the religious mission of the institution. Failure to do so, according to the presidents, would result in internal conflicts that weaken institutional commitment to mission. Participants recommended that federal and state legislative activities and judicial decisions be monitored carefully to ensure hiring standards were not implicated in a way that might impede or foreclose mission.
Education

The president seeking to navigate today’s values conflicts should focus on education. Participants acknowledged a serious lack of knowledge and sophistication among their various constituencies regarding many of the hot-button social issues currently confronting their institutions. Whether talking about trustees, faculty members, students, parents or other supporting constituencies, the lack of knowledge regarding topics currently at issue, and regarding religious and institutional positions on those topics, was deemed to be cause for significant concern.

Intentional and consistent efforts to educate these various constituencies was, therefore, deemed essential to navigating successfully the many values conflicts currently evident. Several presidents noted planned educational activities at each trustee meeting, ongoing discussion groups for faculties and students, special guest speakers invited to campus to speak on hot-button topics, and special orientation sessions for new faculty, as examples of education efforts currently underway. Those efforts and others were viewed as essential to maintaining Christian mission and purpose, as they informed various constituencies across the institutions regarding the effective intersection of faith, changing cultural values and social mores, and institutional reason for being.

As participants noted, education cannot and will not resolve many of the issues confronting today’s Evangelical Christian college, but it will make such resolutions more feasible and, in so doing, support Christian institutions in reaching their larger, mission-centered goals and purposes.
Engagement

The president seeking to navigate today’s values conflicts must focus on re-engaging with the academy-at-large and with American culture generally. As noted by several of the participants, the past tendency of the Christian college to operate as an entity unto itself, separate and distant from the rest of the academy, has now proven to be problematic. The sector’s self-imposed isolationism, over the last fifty years, has left it with few defenders and supporters at a time when assistance would be most helpful in furthering religious mission.

Participants noted the need for the Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges, and Christian colleges generally, to make strong efforts to re-engage with both the academy and with the culture. With respect to the academy, participants recommended that Christian colleges and their leaders make efforts to build relationships with faith-based and secular colleges and universities, participate in associational activities, be full participants in accreditation organizations and activities, and participate in key legislative activities regarding higher education. With respect to government, these institutions should build relationships with government officials on both sides of the political aisle, invite government officials to campus, and participate in legislative processes when appropriate and helpful to the sector.

Regarding engagement with secular American society generally, the greatest need expressed was simply to communicate better with the general public. Of specific importance, participants recommended that efforts be made on the part of Protestant
Evangelical Christian colleges to communicate the value of the Christian higher education degree and experience, and the benefit to society of ensuring the availability of the Christian college option.

**Housekeeping**

The president seeking to navigate today’s values conflicts must ensure that their institution’s socially-relevant institutional policies and procedures are well-considered, carefully drafted, and consistently applied and implemented. This study identified the need for many Protestant Evangelical Christian colleges to shore-up many of their internal policies and procedures with an eye to making them more helpful to the institution if, and when, confronted with values-driven conflicts. Prior to this day of heightened scrutiny, many of these institutions had paid little attention to many of the social issues now receiving wide public attention. As a result, many policies and procedures, if they existed at all, now require significant thought, clarification, and amendment so that they effectively address the issues of the day with clarity and potency. This is especially true in an era of heightened skepticism regarding faith-based or faith-influenced institutions and their policies and procedures.

**Leadership**

The president seeking to navigate today’s values conflicts must exhibit leadership qualities and attributes unique to the times and effective in addressing the current social issues presented. As noted earlier, the issues confronting the Protestant Evangelical Christian college today are extraordinarily difficult and are likely of first impression in American society. They involve deeply-held religious convictions. Effective navigation of these issues requires leadership of exceptional quality and skill.
Although some presidents questioned whether such leadership is widely evidenced among current Protestant Evangelical Christian college presidents, the presidents were uniform in their opinion that today’s Christian college president must be an individual who is firmly grounded in his or her Christian faith, whole-heartedly in tune with the religious mission of the institution, and committed to putting the institution first over personal needs and desires.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The values conflicts that prompted this study are unlikely to go away. Although some would argue that recent election results may temper some of the pressures currently confronting the Protestant Evangelical Christian college, the fundamental misunderstandings between a rapidly changing culture and its accompanying social norms, and the slowly-evolving Protestant Evangelical Christian college appear to be somewhat set in stone. Accordingly, additional research on related subjects is warranted.

One idea for further research would be to study the flexibility of mission. At what point do minor changes and adjustments to a mission statement gut the original founding principles and goals of the institution? The countless American institutions who started out as faith-based institutions, but who now are thoroughly secularized, would be fertile ground for such a study. In addition, such a study could also analyze the reasons formerly faith-based institutions chose to secularize. This might provide Christian institutions valuable insight into their own decision-making with respect to institutional mission and values.

Another idea for additional research would be to address similar questions to members of Boards of Trustees around the nation to see how they view the cultural,
governmental, and values-based difficulties currently confronting their institutions. This study focused on institutional presidents as they, likely, are the most knowledgeable regarding these issues and have the most immediate impact on the Christian college. Members of Boards of Trustees, however, as employers of the president and as ultimate institutional authorities, could provide valuable insight on these same issues, but from a different perspective.

And finally, a third idea for research would be to look more closely at how a chief executive’s personal religious beliefs influence personal, professional and institutional decision-making when confronted with values-based conflicts that present personal conflicts to the chief executive. Although the interviews for this study approached such issues, that was not the focus of this study.
APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol Questions

1) In the historical context of American higher education, and, more specifically, the historical context of American Christian higher education, do you believe Christian institutions of higher education today are facing unusually difficult and unusually significant challenges to their religious beliefs and institutional missions?

2) Do you believe your institution’s historic faith-based mission and its ability to operate in accordance with its historic religious beliefs, values, and principals are at risk due to societal change and increasing governmental regulation?

3) If so, why do you believe your institution is at risk?

4) If so, what specifically are the risks and challenges facing evangelical Christian higher education today?

5) If so, which of these risks and challenges faced by Christian higher education today are most significant?

6) Are the risks and challenges facing evangelical Christian colleges today sufficient to threaten institutional survival?

7) What will be the consequence of failure to address these risks and challenges?

8) What are the greatest impediments to addressing such risks and challenges?
9) What specific strategies have you used, or are you contemplating using, to successfully address these risks and challenges?

10) What specific leadership skills are required to successfully navigate these risks and challenges?

11) What influence do church or denominational positions, beliefs, or authority have in your decision-making?

12) How do your personally-held religious beliefs influence decision-making with respect to these risks and challenges?

13) What flexibility do you have to revise or modify institutional mission?

14) Are Christian institutions of higher education adequately addressing the risks and challenges currently confronting them?

15) How would you describe the future of evangelical Christian higher education?

16) What changes, if any, will evangelical Christian higher education have to make to remain viable and relevant in the future?

17) Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of evangelical Christian higher education as we currently know it?

18) Please describe the evangelical Christian college of 2035.
19) Are there any other comments that you would like to make regarding this research topic?

Follow-up Questions Submitted by Email Dated March 6, 2017

1) As a higher education leader, and in the context of the difficult world and rapidly changing culture in which the Christian college now operates, on what 5 things (people, skills, faith and belief, resources, training, etc.), do you most rely in your decision-making to navigate confidently the difficult conflicts that confront you and your institution?

2) As a Christian who is a leader, and in the context of the difficult world and rapidly changing culture in which the Christian college now operates, on what 5 aspects of your faith, religious belief and/or religious practice do you most rely in your decision-making to navigate the difficult conflicts that confronts you and your institution?
REFERENCES


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