

## ABSTRACT

### Exploring Ideologically Diverse Friend Groups among College Students

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Von Berger and Bresslen (2017) define viewpoint or ideological diversity as “an honest consideration of multiple views, often competing for claims that privileges a vigorous or spirited debate of ideologically different ideas which are to be judged on their logical soundness and intellectual merit” (p. 26). In recent years, ideological diversity has become a growing research interest in the higher education field but little research has been dedicated to ideological diversity within peer interactions and friend groups. This exploratory qualitative research study seeks to answer the following question: *How do college students at faith-based universities develop and maintain ideologically diverse friend groups, and what are the perceived outcomes of such friendships?* With the intent to better understand IDFGs in faith-based higher education, this study offers insight as to why promoting ideological diversity and such friend groups is meaningful for student development and the student experience as well as insight for how Christian higher education professionals might go about supporting IDFG-related initiatives.

Exploring Ideologically Diverse Friend Groups Among College Students

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Educational Leadership

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When I reflect on the moments that have led to this, it is teachers and church members, librarians and neighbors, mentors and friends who have shared uncounted hours teaching and loving me. So I say thank you, thank you, thank you to those who I credit with raising me to think critically, act thoughtfully, be a good friend, and most of all—care for others.

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I say the last thank you to my own undergraduate group of friends, each of you—Fools and not, for inspiring that catchy little motto, “Friendship is freedom,” and for inspiring me to spend hours and hours exploring ideologically diverse friend groups among college students.

## DEDICATION

To my own ideologically diverse friend group –  
the Hardin-Simmons University Fools.  
You have made me better



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The quintessential college experience exposes students to new ideas, ways of thinking, and people different than themselves. In college, students' friend groups can positively influence their academic success, sense of belonging, and future life goals or decisions (Astin, 1993; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Hays, 1985). Although students commonly befriend people similar to themselves, a college environment that exposes students to diverse viewpoints regarding culture, politics, and religion can promote ideologically diverse interactions that facilitate a close-knit friend group (Davies & Aron, 2016; Dugan, 2013; Eisenberg, Eggum, & Giunta, 2010). An increasing body of literature discusses the advantages (such as an increase in empathy) and disadvantages (such as conflict) of viewpoint diversity within the broader society and the academy (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2017; Goodman, 2017). Faith-based higher education institutions, specifically, may struggle with promoting ideological diversity because of their faith commitment and likelihood of having a student body with a majority representation of a similar religion (Rockenbach, Hudson, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Morin, & Associates, 2019). Thus, exploring the existence and context of ideologically diverse friend groups (IDFGs) at a faith-based university provides the higher education field with insight not only on the advantages and disadvantages of such groups, but also how insight on how faith-based higher education professionals can further recognize and support ideological diversity as a value of the Christian education (Ream & Glanzer, 2013). This qualitative

research study thus seeks to answer the following question: *How do college students at faith-based universities develop and maintain ideologically diverse friend groups, and what are the perceived outcomes of such friendships?* Further, this study explores how college students become members of IDFGs, how students engage in conflict within such friend groups, and if students in IDFGs can influence the student experience in a manner that promotes the field's aspirations for holistic education (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Denson, Bowman, & Park, 2017). With the intent to better understand IDFGs in faith-based higher education, this study offers insight as to why promoting ideological diversity and such friend groups is meaningful for student development and the student experience as well as insight for how Christian higher education professionals might go about supporting IDFG-related initiatives.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

In recent years, higher education professionals and researchers have given more attention to viewpoint diversity in the college setting. Von Berger and Bresslen (2017) define viewpoint diversity as “an honest consideration of multiple views, often competing for claims that privilege a vigorous or spirited debate of ideologically different ideas, which are to be judged on their logical soundness and intellectual merit” (p. 26). Viewpoint diversity, or ideological diversity (used interchangeably here), can be understood more simply as “the practice of making space for various thoughts, ideas, and perspectives” (Johnson & Peacock, 2020, p. 56). As such, the growing scholarly focus on ideological diversity is directed to two areas, namely faculty representation and curriculum (Von Berger & Bresslen, 2017; Goodman, 2017). Rooted in people’s own identities, thoughts, and experiences, ideologies or viewpoints are formed through interactions with others, including within college student friend groups (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Existing theories and literature reveal that these friend groups typically bond over commonalities, yet we know, at least in part, that IDFGs interact based on their ideological differences (Newcomb, 1962; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Fehr, 2008; Rockenbach et al., 2019). To more robustly understand IDFGs within higher education, we first trace the definitions and benefits of viewpoint diversity outside of higher education. We then briefly explore the research on diversity within higher education – including at faith-based institutions – before providing an overview of the formation and

effects of friend groups therein. We conclude with by sharing potential outcomes of IDFGs based on prior studies.

### *Viewpoint Diversity Outside of the College Setting*

Scholars have explored viewpoint or ideological diversity in other occupational fields such as healthcare, human resources, and journalism. Viewpoint diversity is promoted in the healthcare field because it increases tolerance and acceptance amongst healthcare professionals and with patients (Hernandez, 2014). In human resources, diversity of thought is defined as “achieving different ways of thinking that go beyond simply recognizing differences and responding to them” (Cairns & Preziosi, 2014, p. 2). In the business setting, diversity of thought is promoted through ad hoc group problem solving and meeting where people from every department can offer their ideas, suggestions, and insights (Cairns & Preziosi, 2014; Crano, 2012; Mannix & Neale, 2005). The concept of viewpoint diversity, however, has been discussed most commonly in regard to journalism. Although the discussion about viewpoint diversity in the media focuses primarily on freedom of speech, fair air time, and minimizing political biases, the media industry offers worthy definitions and considerations for viewpoint diversity. In the media, it is assumed that diverse content, or diverse viewpoints, will arise when there are diverse owners and operators, and that viewpoints matter because they are a person’s mental attitude that determines one’s opinions about a subject (Smith, Mayer & Fritschler, 2008; Beadle, 2012). Discussions of viewpoint diversity outside the realm of higher education can help higher education professionals begin to understand and articulate how viewpoint diversity can benefit colleges and universities.

### *Viewpoint or Ideological Diversity in the College Setting*

It is important to distinguish between racial diversity and ideological diversity in the case of this study, as this project focuses on experiences and outcomes from ideologically diverse interactions. Although racial diversity should remain at the forefront of our campus consciousness, ideological diversity offers unique outcomes worth exploring. Many studies that focus on both race and viewpoint diversity refer to Rokeach's (1960) finding that differences in opinions are more important than racial differences in determining liking between groups or individuals (Chambers et al., 2012; Von Berger & Bresslen, 2017). Diverse peer interactions among college students correlate with desired outcomes for a holistically educated person, such as the capacity to think pluralistically and be civically engaged (Antonio, 2001; Hurtado, 2005; Parker & Pascarella, 2013). Other studies show that students who had diversity experiences prior to college have more diversity experiences in the college setting (Hurtado, 2005; Park, 2018). Further, interactions with peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds are positively associated with a sense of belonging to one's college and satisfaction with the college experience (Bowman, Brandenberger, Hill & Lapsley, 2011), both of which have also been theorized to impact a student's academic success positively (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). Antonio (2001) goes so far as to say that socializing across race is the most important college activity for all students. According to Bowman et al. (2011), these diversity experiences, curricular or co-curricular, positively relate to personal growth, purpose in life, recognition of racism, and future volunteering behaviors.

Ideologically diverse interactions and exposure also take place both in the classroom and through co-curricular activities. In the college classroom setting, Goodman

(2017) found that viewpoint diversity has a positive effect on a students' need for cognition, which can enhance a student's motivation to learn and understand alternative viewpoints. However, Goodman's (2017) findings showed that the positive effect only occurred for White students. Like racial diversity studies, this may be because many students of color are more likely to have interacted with diversity, and viewpoint diversity, their entire lives than their White peers. This finding led Goodman (2017) to assert that viewpoint diversity cannot replace racial diversity, but it may still be significant for less racially diverse institutions or groups because viewpoint diversity focuses on political, religious, and social differences. Other studies offer similar findings but demonstrate that co-curricular experiences or friend groups often have a greater influence than the curricular does (Antonio, 2001, 2004). Because social identities, previous experiences, and the current environment influence ideological diversity, both curricular and co-curricular experiences play a role in promoting ideological diversity for all students of every background.

Von Berger and Bresslen (2017) posit that individuals' viewpoints are limited by their own experiences so individuals need to make an effort to understand how people from different backgrounds understand the world around them in order to learn new modes of thinking. They further elaborate: "In seeking out new perspectives, a person's resulting opinions will be stronger, they will become keener observers of the world, and they will recognize that there are always new things they can learn more about" (Von Berger & Bresslen, 2017, p. 42). This argument can also be applied to the academy—if different perspectives and viewpoints are recognized, taught, and encouraged, then both faculty and students will better understand the complexity of the world and be better

informed on a variety of topics and issues (Von Berger & Bresslen, 2017). Much of the scholarly attention on viewpoint diversity in higher education has therefore focused on either faculty representation or curriculum (Von Berger & Bresslen, 2017; Goodman, 2017).

In the context of the student body, Johnson and Peacock (2020) found four themes that students discussed when asked about their exposure to diverse viewpoints: recognition of the “bubble,” (that is, a figurative way to describe being in a geographic or social climate where everyone thinks similarly), intentional steps to break out of their “ideological bubble,” the role of work in “bubble breaking,” and the fuzzy contributions of college to engage in “bubble breaking.” Students overwhelmingly shared that their closest friends shared similar views to them so students had to “break out of their bubble,” or go beyond their closest friends, in order to find people who would be willing to discuss and disagree about political or religious issues. The participants in this study expressed that attending college only had a small impact on their ability to engage with people who held different ideologies, with the notable exception of some honors students or students majoring in social sciences. Thus, Johnson and Peacock (2020) also found that simply exposing students to diverse viewpoints or encouraging them to consume media offering a different perspective was not a sufficient method to develop ideological diversity. Based on existing scholarship about peer or friend group influence (discussed at length below), further research is therefore needed to analyze viewpoint diversity among the student body within organic friend groups. Although Johnson and Peacock (2020) demonstrate the value of talking to college students about their exposure to and awareness of diverse viewpoints, additional scholarship on engagement with ideological

diversity – like in IDFGs – is needed to better understand what conditions contribute to the existence of IDFGs, particularly in a faith-based institutional environment.

### *Diversity Implications in Faith-Based Higher Education*

Faith-based higher education institutions also have a commitment to diversity work, though motivated somewhat differently than secular institutions. Scholarship regarding diversity in Christian higher education, specifically, tends to frame diversity initiatives with a “redemptive” lens that emphasizes diversity in creation and God’s redemptive mission (Abadeer, 2009; Ream & Glanzer, 2013; Glanzer, Cockle, Jeong, & Graber, 2020). However, Christian higher education researchers have noted that racial diversity efforts within faith-based higher education tend to be siloed rather than integrated into all aspects of university life (Glanzer et al., 2020). Rockenbach et al. (2019) discussed a similar reality for ideological or “interworldview” friendships at faith-based institutions where most, if not, all of the diversity work – including civic engagement, public deliberation, and interfaith initiatives – is isolated to one office or department, such as a multicultural office or a spiritual or public life office. However, few if any faith-based institutions’ student bodies are completely made up of students with the same faith commitment as the institution (Rockenbach et al., 2019). Further, scholars suggest that individuals who have relationships with someone of a different religion or worldview are likely to develop positive feelings toward others from that same identity community (Goodman, Giess, & Patel, 2019). Although, faith-based higher education institutions already hold a commitment to diversity work, there is an ongoing need for a richer, campus-wide understanding of why ideological diversity matters and how it can be advanced through peer interactions and friend groups.



### *Friend Groups in the College Setting*

Friendships serve as an integral part of the college experience, as friends have the potential to shape a students' social and academic life. Chambliss and Takacs (2014) narrowed their analysis of how college works to one sentence: "What really matters in college is who meets whom, and when" (p. 16). Moreover, graduating college students and alumni alike note that lifelong friendships are a significant outcome to their college experience (Hays, 1985; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Davies & Aron, 2016). Theologian C.S. Lewis (1960) explained that friendships are not necessary to survive, but rather are "one of those things which give value to survival" through mutual affection, commonality, and companionship (p. 71). Waddell (2002) similarly describes friendship as a "gift," but he further elaborates that friendships also shape one's character: "Friendships influence our attitudes, values, and perceptions. They challenge us, they teach us not to take ourselves too seriously, and they give us hope" (p. 40). These friendships are thus relationships of value between students who share their college lives together because friendships inform students' beliefs and behaviors. For the purposes of this study, we define friendship as prioritized affinity groups of at least two people who mutually feel connected based on shared experiences, common interests, and appreciation for one another.

Foundational scholarship on college friendships demonstrates the positive effects and added values on a student's sense of belonging, institutional loyalty or retention, academic success, and overall wellbeing (Tinto, 1975; Hays, 1985; Astin, 1993). As such, a students' community holds lasting implications for their individual success and the institution's overarching culture (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Dalton & Petrie, 1997;

Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Strange & Banning, 2015). On campus, student life professionals design both the environment and programs to help students make connections and develop lasting friendships (Strange & Banning, 2015; Blimling, 2015). Student life professionals and researchers also assess and study friendship development and peer group interactions, to strengthen the opportunity for authentic friendships to form on their campus (Astin, 1993; Hays, 1985; Fehr, 2008; Fischer, 2011; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Berg, 1984). In sum, friendship not only benefits the individual student's wellbeing or learning, but student friendships can positively impact the entire campus culture and broader society over time (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Chavous, 2005; Bowman et al., 2011; Thakral, Vasquez, Bottoms, Hudson & Whitley, 2016).

College students begin to create a network of potential friends from the moment they step on campus, based on orientation group assignments, residence hall communities, sorority or fraternity recruitment and membership, sports team membership, fine arts groups like choir or theater, and other co-curricular groups (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Dugan, 2013). Various theories offer insight as to what qualities exist in these communities and friend groups, such as frequent contact with a person (Durkheim 1912, 1995; Newcomb, 1962; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Fehr, 2008), commitment to or investment in the group (Wells, 1996; Schroeder, 1993), shared experiences or rituals (Durkheim, 1912, 1995; Newcomb, 1962), homogeneity or attraction (Newcomb, 1962; Fehr, 2008; Cohen, 1983), and shared beliefs or values (Astin, 1999; Newcomb, 1962; Fehr, 2008; Cohen, 1983). These theories, like Lewis's (1960) and Waddell's (2002) conceptualization of friendships, share a central theme: successful communities consist of members who have something in common with one

another. For IDFGs, additional work on how they originate is needed, given that these groups promote and result in member capacity to discuss viewpoint differences with one another, while remaining friends.

Colleges and universities often place emphasis on racial diversity through courses and programming, but there is a growing body of quantitative work that demonstrates how the impact of interracial interactions and friendships exceeds that of coursework or programming (Hurtado, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2010; Bowman et al., 2011; Antonio, 2004). Studies prove that interracial friendships are more effective than curriculum at improving intergroup relations (Poteat & Spanierman, 2010; Davies & Aron, 2016; Thakral et al., 2016; Chavous, 2008; Chambers & MeInyk, 2006), perspective taking abilities (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2017), gains in moral reasoning and critical thinking (Goodman, 2017; Hurtado, 2003), and an increase in empathy (Eisenberg et al., 2010) because of quality interactions, personal conversations, and bonding experiences. Although racial diversity and viewpoint diversity are not commensurate, studies demonstrate that students' tolerance, empathy, and perspective taking skills—all outcomes associated with viewpoint diversity—increase when they are exposed to different ideas, beliefs, and cultural worldviews through peers or friends than when they are exposed to the same viewpoints in a classroom setting (Johnson et al., 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2010). Although germinal scholarship traces how traditional peer groups and friend groups—the circle of students considered to be one's "best friends" on campus (Antonio, 2004)—are formed and negotiated, further research on friend groups that do not fit this mold, like IDFGs, is needed (see Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005; Goodman, 2017).

### *Potential Outcomes of Ideological Diversity within College Friend Groups*

Related to ideological diversity, the concept of perspective taking, or the ability to understand and even take on another viewpoint, is explored in the literature. For example, researchers have applied Bandura's (1977) social learning theory as a conceptual framework when studying the influence of socialization on moral development and perspective taking (Johnson et al., 2017). Here, Bandura (1977) conceptualized learning as a social process through which others influence one's learning as one begins to understand others and incorporate new insights into one's learning. As a result, perspective taking is expected to increase when two people find both similarities and differences and disclose information that promotes familiarity and intimacy in an interaction or friendship. Moreover, perspective taking also leads to increased empathy—the ability to understand other's emotions and perspectives—for members of the other group (Johnson et al., 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2010). Further, Hurtado (2003) found that students are more likely to develop skills for a diverse workforce through interactions with others, including cognitive skills such as perspective taking, social awareness, and the willingness to discuss and solve complex social problems with others (Hurtado, 2003).

In sum, current literature includes diversity studies that focus primarily on racial diversity but do not consider viewpoint diversity, studies about friend groups that do not consider viewpoint diversity within friend groups, and studies about viewpoint diversity in higher education that do not consider students' friend groups as a source for improving viewpoint diversity. Although higher education institutions overwhelmingly share the desire for students to engage in civil discourse, improve in critical thinking skills, and

better understand various worldviews (NASPA, 1997; ACPA, 2013), much of the scholarly and practical work has focused only on racial diversity. This important diversity work should not be discarded, but rather expanded, as diversity also functions across ideas and beliefs. These desired outcomes are developed or increased through disequilibrium, which occurs “when individuals encounter perspectives that depart from their own embedded world view and past experiences” (Hurtado, 2003, p. 18; Piaget, 1975). Although disequilibrium can and should occur in the classroom setting, students tend to learn more from, change behaviors because of, and adopt new viewpoints because of disequilibrium within peer or friend interactions (Astin, 1993; Bandura, 1977; Hurtado, 2003). However, based on Johnson & Peacock’s (2020) findings, even students who put forth effort to engage with people who held different perspectives had difficulty at forming close friendships with people who held different views or beliefs. Yet IDFGs do exist in the college setting (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Davies & Aron, 2016). Ultimately, if higher education professionals can better understand the formation and maintenance of IDFGs, and if they can begin to determine what are the outcomes of such groups, then they will be better equipped to offer future students paths toward such groups.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Conceptual Framework

Drawing on both the extant literature and our symbolic interactionist methodological approach, we developed a conceptual framework that includes four components: environment, self, context, and interactions. These elements aim to capture the various aspects of how both ideologically diverse friend groups and the individual students themselves are influenced by their own background and experiences (self), the activities and experiences shared with friends (interactions), and the ideological similarities and differences represented within the friend group (context). Each of these components are not only informed by one another, but also by the overarching environment of the college or university, in light of our sociological orientation to not only individuals and groups, but the social worlds they inhabit (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001).

First, the *self* component encompasses the participant's background, such as social identity demographics, previous education settings and opportunities, and family and high school friend dynamics. Second, the *interactions* element captures the common interests, shared activities, and type of conversations the participant and other members of their ideologically diverse friend group have. Third, the *context of the friend group* facet is informed by both the spaces the friendship exists within and the ideologically diverse nature of said groups. These first three components are represented in the diagram as points of a triangle, with bi-directional arrows in between, to demonstrate the

interconnected nature of their influence (Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001; Astin, 1993; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Finally, the *environment* component encompasses the overarching social setting and culture that permeates the friend group’s primary location. In this research study, the environment is Christian U, a faith-based research university. The *environment* is represented as a dotted rectangle that includes the self-interactions-context triangle to demonstrate that ever-changing macro-environment informs study participants’ experiences within and outcomes from membership in an ideologically diverse friend group (see Figure 1 below for conceptual framework).

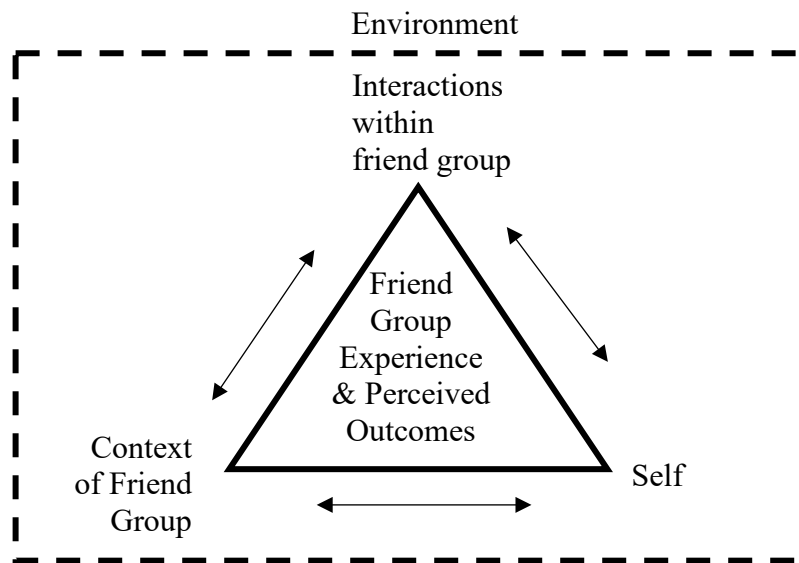


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for ideologically diverse friend groups in the (faith based) college environment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

In this study, we employed an exploratory, qualitative research paradigm and a symbolic interactionist approach to analyze how college students develop and maintain ideologically diverse friend groups, as well as to discover the outcomes of such friendships. Qualitative research emphasizes the social meanings that people attribute to and derive from their lived experiences and interactions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Our research methodology is thus based on an ontology that asserts the social world is continually constructed through human interactions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The interpretative lens of symbolic interactionism orients us to interactions between individuals and small groups, like those among ideologically diverse friends (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001). Such interactions are imbued with social meanings, which are created and re-created through an interpretive process in light of two guiding assumptions: (1) groups used shared symbols, language, or gestures to communicate meaning, and (2) people act differently with different people in different situations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Blumer, 1969). Snow (2001) extended the foundational work Blumer (1969) by suggesting four additional principles, including the principle of interactive determination, which requires the researcher to consider “the interactional contexts or webs of relationships in which [a person or group] are ensnared and embedded” (Snow, 2001, p. 369). In sum, the lens of symbolic interactionism orients us to the meaning-making processes within the “webs or relationships” of students –



namely their ideologically diverse friend groups – while affirming the agency of these students to derive meaning from such interactions and their environments.

*Methods*

Study participants included 11 undergraduate students who self-identified as being a member of an ideologically diverse friend group. We recruited participants first through faculty and staff member recommendations, and then through snowball sampling, a technique that relies on the networks tapped into through an initial research contact (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011)—to recruit friends of the earlier participants. To fulfill the symbolic interactionism approach and to better understand the inner workings of ideologically diverse friend groups, we chose to interview multiple students from some of the same friend groups, resulting in 11 participants who represented 6 friend groups overall (see Figure 2 for participant demographics).

<b>Name (Friend Group)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Bryce (A)	Male	White	Third year
Holly (A)	Female	White	Third year
Katelyn (A)	Female	Biracial	Third year
Becca (B)	Female	White	Fourth year
Lizzie (B)	Female	White	Fourth year
Aimee (C)	Female	White	Third year
Jenna (C)	Female	White	Third year
Josh (D)	Male	White	First year
Sydney (D)	Female	White	Third year
Autumn (E)	Female	White	Second year
Anika (F)	Female	Asian	Third year

Figure 2: Participant demographics.

All participants were enrolled at a single institution, namely a mid-sized, faith-based university which we refer to as Christian U. Christian U was selected because of its institutional faith commitment and denominational affiliation, and the presence of student

organizations that emphasize racial, religious, and political identities and ideologies, as well as the organizational access the researchers had to it.

We conducted single, 60- to 90-minute interviews with 11 participants using a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on participants' interactions and conversations with their friend group. The semi-structured research interview, as part of our symbolic interactionist lens, contributed to the co-construction of knowledge where participants were guided through a series of questions (Appendix A), but were also offered freedom to talk about what was most interesting to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Blumer, 1969). All interviews were conducted over Zoom, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into Nvivo ethnographic software for analysis.

We used a two-cycle coding process for the purposes of data analysis (see Saldaña, 2016). For the first cycle, we selected Provisional Coding, since our literature review offered strong direction on potential findings. By following Layder's (1998) recommendation to search for "key words, phrases and concepts that spring to mind" when considering an area of study and by using Creswell's (2013) "lean coding" process, we created a coding scheme with 8 provisional codes that reflected the study's purpose, including *friend group structure* and *outcomes of ideologically diverse friend groups* (Saldaña, 2016, p. 168). In the second cycle of coding, we chose Pattern Coding to "identify emergent themes" and attempt to "attribute meaning" to the organized corpus (Saldaña, 2016, p. 235-36). Through Pattern Coding, we were able to identify four major themes that are further explored in the following section. All participants also submitted an original diagram of their friend group with markers designating significant relationships, as well as notations describing various social identities and ideologies for

each friend (Appendix B). Diagrams of members from the same friend group were cross-referenced for analysis. Responses to reflection questions attached to the friend group diagram were coded and including in the overall data set. As an effort to pursue confidentiality, we restricted access to data, used pseudonyms, and generalized other potentially identifying details.

### *Trustworthiness*

Throughout our study design and analysis, we pursued trustworthiness – the measure of scholarly rigor in qualitative research – which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, we included a thick description of research methods, triangulated data collection through the analysis of friend group diagrams, and conducted member checks with participants. Further, to acknowledge and account for personal biases (see Appendix III), the research team engaged in peer debriefing weekly, wrote memos during the interview and coding processes, and organized coding schemes together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Findings

Four themes about the formation, nature, and navigation of IDFGs in the faith-based college environment emerged from our analysis: (1) Doing life together decentralized differences, (2) Members of IDFGs relied on strategies of discernment to navigate ideological differences, (3) The college experience at a faith-based institution complicated ideology and sense of belonging, and (4) Members of IDFGs perceived positive outcomes for self-development, relationships, and their future life. When understood together, these themes offer insight into how college students in IDFGs developed and maintained relationships in a given environmental context and what perceived benefits members of IDFGs gained through these friendships.

#### *Doing Life Together De-Centralized Differences*

The genesis of IDFGs is similar to homogenous friend groups on college campuses, as many study participants told stories of meeting their closest friends in their residence hall or through their academic program. These friendship introductions through the classroom or residential experiences served as a catalyst for engaging in other activities and discovering shared interests, which created greater connections with one another. Over time, participating in recurring activities and daily college student tasks thus became a foundation for deeper life conversations, support, and a willingness to explore their ideological differences.

*Friendships were Fostered by Close Proximity and Shared Interests, which Facilitated Connection*

Living in the same residence hall and taking classes or studying together served as an avenue for friendships to develop. Many participants made friends in a residence hall (Bryce, Becca, Aimee, Jenna, Sydney, Josh, Anika). Others got to know members of their friend group through academic programs, like an honors program or major, and through classes (Katelyn, Holly, Bryce, Becca, Lizzie, Josh, Anika). Some participants also made friends through special interest groups like religious organizations (Bryce, Katelyn, Autumn) and fraternities or sororities (Becca, Lizzie). These friendships tended to develop over time through conversations and shared activities. For example, Katelyn and Natalie, both third-year students, became friends with Tina and Eleanor through an introduction course in their honors program. However, Katelyn explained that they did not become friends with each other instantly: “There was a day after class where we just started talking and hanging out outside the classroom... we got dinner together, and I think it was like the first time that I kind of considered them to be a friend group.” After this initial group outing, Katelyn and Natalie’s friend group began to hang out together regularly. Students described residential or classroom environments as a catalyst for their friendships, but as the friendships were formed, other activities facilitated further connection.

In a post-interview reflection, Holly summarized that “shared interests are what allowed us to form a true friend group.” These activities and shared interests, from attending sport events like Christian U football games (Becca, Bryce, Sydney), to movie marathons starring favorite celebrities (Autumn), to board games (Aimee, Jenna), grew into ritual-like activities that ultimately served as a common thread that held IDFGs

together. More often, however, shared activities were characterized by participants as typical daily occurrences including sharing meals (Bryce, Sydney, Josh, Autumn), going to get groceries (Becca), doing homework together (Becca, Lizzie, Anika), or simply spending time at one another's residences (Lizzie, Katelyn, Holly). However, many participants asserted that the activities themselves were not what was meaningful or special, but rather it was the way activities strengthened friend group bonds over time. Autumn described the "fun stuff" as "meaningful because it leads to more comfort within the harder stuff" and allowed her to "bring up something that I'm struggling with." Sydney expressed a similar perspective: "We've been able to be vulnerable with each other and have deep, meaningful conversations just as much as we can just joke around and talk about nothing." For Becca, it was "doing all parts of life together" like going to the grocery store and studying that led her to "feel really comfortable being vulnerable" with her friends. These seemingly simple activities can enable friends to trust and support one another during hardships.

*Ideologically Diverse Friends Supported One Another through Deep Life Conversations and Difficult Moments*

Some participants, like Anika and Katelyn, expressed that shared activities and interests with their friend groups deepened their conversations and made them more comfortable to talk about mental health issues. Anika described her time with her friends as "meaningful because we can have deep conversations about our life, our careers, and what we're thinking, and our mental health... how it's affecting us." Because of the bond formed through shared experiences, friend groups become a safe place to share about difficult moments with one another. Friend groups can be a support system in moments

of unexpected suffering. During Aimee's second year at Christian U, she had to spend a week in a hospital. Aimee explained that spending so much time together has helped with her friend group support one another:

[My friends] didn't really know why I was [in the hospital]... but they were all there for me.... And there's been some pretty hard stuff that all of us have had to go through individually... and in the times when [difficult] things have really happened, everybody has dropped everything and they're there. And I think the fact that we just spend so much time around each other really helps with that.

Shared experiences and doing daily live activities together not only enabled friend groups to support one another through hard moments, but it gave IDFGs a foundation of commonality that held the group together as they explored their differences and experience disagreements.

*Members of Ideologically Diverse Friend Groups Rely on Strategies of Discernment to Navigate Ideological Differences*

As members of IDFGs began to explore ideological differences, they formed strategies that helped them discern when and how to discuss such topics.

*Strategy #1: Avoid Certain Topics with Certain People*

For some IDFGs, members opted to avoid certain topics with certain people. Bryce describes this discernment strategy as "knowing when to pick your battles," and Jenna explained that "some arguments just aren't worth it." Aimee asserted that "friends that want to stay friends don't discuss [politics]." Becca expanded this axiom, noting that she would engage in political conversations with her friends who aligned with different political thoughts, but she "learned to avoid talking about Trump with some people" because it was not worth arguing or making "someone uncomfortable." Jenna and Bryce both noted that sometimes it's just best to "walk away" from a heated argument. Other

participants, like Lizzie, stopped engaging with friends about certain topics as they escalated: “So, [beliefs about salvation is] something that we kind of have just stopped talking about, because... we just go in loops.... I left the conversation there because I don’t want my beliefs to turn down a friendships.” Avoidance strategies, which pertain to both topics and conversation partners, functioned as a way to manage differences in thought across the friend group.

*Strategy #2: Approach Differences through Appreciative Learning*

Anika described her friend group as wanting to “learn about each other” and one another’s cultures, so they approached conversations about religious beliefs or culture with a sense of curiosity. Similarly, Jenna alluded that many of her friends were willing to approach opposing viewpoints like a “sort of academic debate.” Katelyn, whose main friend group all have different denominational or religious beliefs, further explained appreciative learning approach:

Because [Holly] didn't grow up with religion in her life, it's kind of like a whirlwind for her to learn about all these different traditions, and so... she asked the question, “Why have I never heard of this? What is this?” Then... because our traditions orient around that topic differently, we'll talk about how we approach it.

Holly herself noted that this approach was helpful because if she can understand “where people are coming from” then she can respect their view and it becomes “easier to explain to them your own view once you understand what they think.” By approaching differences with the distance of curiosity and appreciation, students prevented arguments and made one another feel more valued.



### *Strategy #3: Find a Way to Reconcile after Major Arguments*

Since conversations about ideologies within an IDFG is likely to lead to arguments on occasion, members of IDFGs have to learn how to “make up” if the friendship is to continue. Jenna reconciled with friends after a disagreement by softening her communication approach: “[My friend] and I both had different viewpoints of a specific thing that was happening, and she felt like I was belittling her.... I didn’t necessarily change that viewpoint, it was just finding a different way to get that point across without coming across as condescending.” Altering her communication approach helped Jenna maintain her connection with her friend. Sydney also listed communication as a valuable tool for reconciling after a heated discussion to “talk it out and make it work.” Some conversations, however, feel more intense and require apologizing and asking for forgiveness. When Autumn’s friend, Faith, “got mad” at how she voted in the 2020 presidential election and walked away in the middle of a conversation, Autumn felt frustrated and like she “was downgraded to my one belief.” Autumn elaborated, “I felt as if [how I voted] took over my whole identity.... I think I almost downgraded her to that also.” Faith eventually asked Autumn to forgive her and they were able to amend their friendship. Anika explained that her friend group coped with disagreements after “heated conversations” by “coming to each other and apologizing, and tell them where we come from.” Pursuing forgiveness and reconciliation enabled friendships to continue and allowed students to learn from one another. Members of IDFGs were able to maintain friendships by utilizing these strategies to honor differences.

### *The College Experience at a Faith-Based Institution Can Complicate Sense of Belonging*

IDFGs exist in a variety of environments, but the conditions of an environment can have implications on students' sense of belonging and whether or not they perceive the institution as supporting ideological diversity. Participants discussed the faith-based educational environment, including how it affected their sense of belonging, challenged or complicated some of their own ideologies, and sometimes promoted engagement with ideological diversity.

### *Students Navigated Ideological Belonging at a Faith-based Institution*

Students' general sense of belonging at their institution depends on how various social identities and ideologies are represented and treated on campus. Some participants described Christian U as "super welcoming" (Katelyn) and "really friendly" (Anika) but quickly added disclaimers. For example, Katelyn expressed that she always felt "welcome around campus" but added that she is also "in the majority of a lot of identities on campus." Similarly, Lizzie said she felt "a positive light towards Christian U," but she reasoned that it was because she was "the perfect candidate" for Christian U: "I'm Christian, I'm White, like I fit the mold, maybe except for the [bright-colored] hair.... And so, I have been able to really thrive at Christian U." Autumn also described herself as someone who "fit the mold" then added that she was "hyper-aware that that's not true of everyone." Students' perceptions of ideological belonging were tied to their awareness that the terms of their belonging were not experienced by everyone.

Other participants emphasized the political climate at Christian U in their self-evaluation of ideological belonging. Sydney, who identifies as being "radical far left" on a political spectrum, labeled Christian U as "very conservative," "very White," and "just

like a lot of Republicans.” She reasoned that because Christian U is an expensive private Christian institution in the South with a majority of “very religious” students, many of whom are “politically to the right or center,” it was “kind of difficult to find people who completely agree with me on things.” Bryce, however, shared that it was rare to find people who were also Agnostic, but that he considered himself a “pretty straight up liberal” and there were “plenty of those folks” at Christian U. Meanwhile, Josh, who held more politically conservative commitments, said he had made friends with people who were more liberal than he was, but he had also met people “who kind of think the same” through an organization booth on campus one day. Broad political representation explained, in part, the existence of IDFGs at Christian U because it was common for students to meet peers with different political affiliations.

Several participants, such as Bryce, Katelyn, and Lizzie, also shared a concern that if a fellow student, or themselves, did not “fit the Christian U mold,” that they might have an isolating experience. Bryce explained how Christian U could feel isolating to some students:

I guess I feel like if you fit into this certain characteristic... kind of like White, protestant..., fairly well off financially... then it’s like, “Wow, this place is amazing. I feel very cared for.” That’s kind of the whole Christian U family thing we talk about.... but if you’re not a part of that—then I think [Christian U] can be kind of an isolating place.

Similar to Bryce, Katelyn acknowledged that she had a lot of similarities with the majority of Christian U students, but she still imagined that her experience at Christian U “would be really isolating if she didn’t have a diverse friend group” because “there’s nowhere I fit in on campus because I come from an interfaith background and a multi-ethnic background.” This fragmented sense of belonging at Christian U left students who

do not “fit the mold” perceiving that they had to fend for themselves in finding community who either have similar identities and ideologies or who respect and value their identities and ideologies even if they are different. However, several participants found facets of the educational environment at Christian U that were a resource to help them discover and define their own ideologies.

*Facets of the Educational Environment Supported and Promoted Ideological Diversity*

When it came to finding people with similar values on campus and a place they belonged, several participants pinpointed a specific facet of Christian U, rather than the entire institution. Autumn explained the nuance of sub-cultures through her own college experience:

Sometimes I think I have a really weird view of the Christian U environment because I’m in [the honors program], which is a lot different from the typical Christian U group of people. But then also I’m in the Business School, which I think is a lot more in line with what people assume Christian U is like, and the vibe of it, I guess. So, I think it’s hard for me to say [what Christian U is like].

In a similar fashion, Becca and Katelyn both claimed people could be found who thought similarly, but Katelyn added that “you have to know what you are looking for.”

Bryce, Katelyn, and Holly found solace in a campus-sponsored interfaith group advised by two Christian U staff members. Bryce credited his staff advisors as being the “most formational” in developing his ideological views through group conversations and one-on-one conversations with them. Bryce, along with other participants like Holly, also named their honors program as a place where they felt comfortable talking about ideological differences and viewpoints they personally held. Jenna, who grew up attending a private Christian school but personally disassociated with the Christian faith in high school, shared that when she got to Christian U she was able to “actually ask

questions for once.” Jenna credited lectures from her required Christian Scriptures course and conversations with Aimee as something that “opened up different sorts of thought” and enabled her to “actually get answers to questions that I’d had previously but that had just been hand waved off when I was younger.” Although several participants critiqued Christian U for being a place that was hard to belong if a student does not “fit the mold,” students found some university-related avenues where they could openly ask questions and find a sense of community, both outside of and within their IDFG.

*Members of Ideologically Diverse Friend Groups Perceived Positive Outcomes for Self-Development, Relationships, and Their Future Life*

Participants uniformly perceived positive outcomes as a result of being a member of an IDFG at Christian U. These benefits included an increased empathy (Katelyn, Bryce) and a greater willingness to listen to others explain their viewpoints (Aimee, Jenna). The most significant perceived outcomes included becoming more open to challenge, strengthening their own views, anticipating how these friendships will influence their future relationships and occupations, and humanizing others who hold different views.

*Students Shared Their Beliefs were Broadened and Strengthened*

Anika expressed that having an IDFG had made her “a better person” because she was challenged to “learn from their ideologies and try to fix my own viewpoints.” Several other participants described a similar phenomenon to Anika where having friends who challenged their beliefs sharpened their views. For example, Sydney asserted that “in order to grow, people need to be challenged.” Similarly, Lizzie described being introduced to different ideas as causing you to “think beyond the bubble that you may

have created around yourself” in order to “have a more well-rounded thought process about what you do believe.” Holly elaborated that engaging with friends who have different ideologies not only provided access to more viewpoints, but let her “really consider what they think” and ask questions about their ideology as well as her own “without any judgment.”

Becca found the aspect of challenge in her IDFG to be “the most meaningful thing,” because it helped her accept differences even if she did not necessarily change her own beliefs. Becca also asserted that her friends helped her “understand that it’s okay to disagree with people” and learn to have “a lot more grace for people” who she disagreed with. Katelyn held that the ability to disagree with her friends—and for her friends to disagree with her—was what helped either “strengthen or enforce my beliefs or to change them.” The ability to disagree, challenge one another, and learn from each other was what Aimee identified as a “main advantage” of having an IDFG. In addition to acknowledging that membership in an IDFG influenced their ways of thinking at present, participants also recognized that their strengthened sense of beliefs and deepened knowledge held implications for their futures.

#### *Students’ Perceived Benefits Included Application to Their Future Relationships and Life*

Many participants anticipated that being part of an IDFG in college will be an advantage in their desired occupations (Katelyn, Sydney, Lizzie, Autumn, Anika). Katelyn, who hopes to be a philosophy professor, said that diversity of thought is “the whole point” in philosophy so “having friendships that strengthen my ability to disagree and to interact with beliefs that disagree with mine doesn’t just make my philosophy better, it makes me a better philosopher.” As a future healthcare provider, Anika

acknowledged that she will have “so many patients who are going to have different ideologies,” and her college friend group has helped her prepare.

Careers were only the beginning for how participants’ imagined their IDFGs will be a benefit in their lives. Katelyn and Becca explained that their interactions with friends who have ideological differences would shape interactions they have with people outside of the workplace. Becca identified that wherever she is to end up, “people are going to be different than me, and we’re going to hold different opinions. Whether it’s about, you know, how you’re supposed to treat a patient, or how the President is doing.” Jenna, who does not identify as religious, even expressed that having friends who hold strong Christian beliefs like Aimee had made her not as “prejudiced to the whole organized religion thing,” which could inform some of her future friendships. Holly and Anika both said they will probably have “more diverse friends” in the future because of their college friend group. Students predicted that their IDFG will not only benefit them professionally, but in their civic, social, and religious life, too.

#### *Students Perceived an Increased Capacity to Recognize Humanity over Ideology*

Aimee explained that it was helpful for her to remember that her friends were more than ideologies:

I think there’s a lot more to being a person than just believing in something.... And I think that one of the best things about my friend group is that... whether it’s religion or politics or anything else.... we’re able to recognize and kind of mesh with and understand all those different facets of being a person.

Sometimes this reminder to view friends as more than their ideologies prevented arguments from arising, and other times it helped participants deescalate a disagreement. A disagreement Autumn had with her friend, Faith, left her feeling “downgraded” and

like she was no more than a single political vote. Aimee shared that she had made a conscious decision that her friends, like Jenna, are more important than their religious beliefs or sexual orientation, even if her own Catholic faith did not condone some of their theology or relationships. Both Autumn and Aimee came to the realization that their friendship mattered more than the belief, and that people are more than an ideology. Bryce noted that, of course, you can Google a definition of an ideology, but by being in an IDFG, “you’ll learn why people have those ideologies,” which “creates a lot more empathy for people you disagree with” when you understand the background and experiences that inform a certain viewpoint. Similar to Bryce, Katelyn explained that actually interacting with people who had perspectives she had only learned about before in an “intellectual way” helped her develop a “personal friendship based in love and based in mutual respect.” Katelyn, who identified with progressive political thought, shared that being in IDFGs has allowed her “to interact with conservative thought in a much more meaningful way and not in an attacking kind of way.” Katelyn concluded with an explanation of how ideologically diverse friendships helped humanize a belief or viewpoint: “When you're able to put the face of someone you love in front of a belief, you're so much less likely to view that belief with such an antagonistic perspective, which was how I was doing it before.”

In sum, membership in an IDFG – which were formed much like homogenous friend groups – required discernment of topics, conversation partners, and contexts. The outcomes of IDFGs included personal, professional, and social benefits.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion

These findings offer insight into how IDFGs are formed and maintained, as well as what perceived values members of IDFGs gain from such groups. Previous research has proven the significance of peer influence on the college experience (Astin, 1993; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Hays, 1985). This study reveals how IDFGs further contribute to a student's sense of belonging, holistic development, and increased appreciation for people with ideological differences within the faith-based college environment. We examine these contributions through the four components of our conceptual framework: self, interactions within the friend group, context of the friend group, and the environment of Christian U.

#### *Self*

In our conceptual framework, the *self* encompasses the participant's social identity demographics, previous education experience, and family and high school friend dynamics. Whereas previous studies demonstrate that intergroup friendships (that is, relationships between people of different social identity markers and even various ideologies) can generate more comfort, trust, and openness to multiple perspectives, as well as empathy from the individual (Davies & Aron, 2006; Thakral et al., 2016), Goldstein (2013) found that this type of friend group and these potential outcomes were more likely to occur for college students who had pre-college friendship experiences with differences across religion, social class, and sexual orientation. Although this particular

finding does hold true for some of our participants (Autumn, Becca, Bryce, Holly, Katelyn), others expressed value in their college IDFGs because the majority of their high school friends and peers were so similar to one another (Aimee, Anika, Jenna, Sydney). Importantly, our analysis revealed that participants from both of these categories still perceived similar outcomes from being in an IDFG, including an increased appreciation for other ideological beliefs and a strengthened sense of their own beliefs.

IDFGs can have a strong influence on students' perception of their own development (Rockenbach et al., 2019). Anika's assertion that her IDFG had made her "a better person" and Katelyn's claim that her IDFG strengthened her beliefs underscore that ideologically diverse friends can both challenge and affirm one another's character and beliefs. Similarly, findings from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) highlight that ideologically diverse or "interworldview" college friendships not only shape intergroup attitudes, but that these friendships also "have the power to influence students' inner development and core features of their self-understanding and personal identity" (Rockenbach, et al., 2019, p. 6). Rockenbach et al. (2019) further explained that these "interworldview" friendships led to individual students' ideologies being "informed by a thoughtful and responsible examination of their own beliefs through engaging others' diverse—and sometimes conflicting—views" (p. 10). Students' backgrounds and experiences, then, should be considered alongside both the *interactions within their friend groups* and the *context of the friend groups*, elements to which we now turn.

### *Interactions within Friend Group*

The *interactions within a friend group* component includes common interests, shared activities, and type of conversations the participant and other members of their IDFG have together. IDFGs, like intergroup friendships, possess “openness to multiple perspectives, empathy, and motivation to bridge differences” (Thakral et al., 2016). An IDFG—in its very existence—reduces prejudice and increases empathy (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2010). This finding holds true for the participants in our study. Although many experienced disagreements over conflicting ideologies and beliefs, participants also demonstrated an eagerness to learn from one other from the beginning of their friendships (Josh, Aimee, Katelyn, Holly, Bryce, Becca, Anika). The IDFGs represented in our study are also perceived to be generally supportive friend groups, where friends show up for one another during difficult moments and care for one another as they navigate typical college stressors. Weisz and Wood (2005) found that college students who perceived that their friends were supportive of their important social identities were more likely to remain friends in the future. Based on the dynamics of the IDFGs in our study, it is likely that this finding about social identities could be similar for ideologies. Ultimately, participants reflected on the difficult topics and conversations traversed within their IDFGs, differences which were bridged through personal postures and shared life together.

### *Context of Friend Group*

In our framework, *context of the friend group* involves both the spaces the friendship exists within and the ideologically diverse nature of said groups, which can influence members’ experiences and outcomes. Higher education researchers agree that

social interactions and friendships greatly matter for the college student (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Dugan, 2013; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Astin 1993). This was the case for our participants, as each participant articulated why the friend group was meaningful to them. For example, Anika said her friend group was meaningful because of the conversations they could have; Becca found meaning in the ways her IDFG challenged her own beliefs; and Katelyn shared that her IDFG helped her see other worldviews with a less antagonistic perspective. Previous studies have also shown that if these college social interactions exhibit diversity, they are predicted to influence student learning (Bandura, 1977), future workforce skills (Hurtado, 2003), and a variety of desirable characteristics including empathy and perspective taking skills (Johnson et al., 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2010). Here, participants in our study explained that the IDFG had enhanced their education (Katelyn, Anika, Aimee, Josh), contributed to their future workplace skills (Katelyn, Sydney, Lizzie, Autumn, Anika), and increased other desirable traits such as empathy (Bryce, Katelyn), willingness to listen (Aimee, Jenna), grace for others (Becca), and capacity to see people as more than their ideology (Aimee, Autumn, Jenna, Bryce, Katelyn, Lizzie). Although IDFGs were formed much like homogenous friend groups, the interactions therein were perceived by members to produce a variety of personal and social benefits largely related to the ideologically diverse nature of their friend group.

The concept of social cohesion can also help to explain the *context* of these IDFGs. Social cohesion refers to the bonds between members of society or groups, which includes “trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help” (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006, p. 290). As such, social cohesion can be applied to the macro-

level (society) or interpersonally, among members of a groups – like IDFGs. At the interpersonal level of social cohesion, Alleman (2008) explains that, as a group feature, cohesion “ebbs and flows with environmental and interpersonal change,” and is generated through social relations and existing structures (Alleman, 2008, p. 25). Participants in our study used social relations to both develop and maintain their friendships, as well as articulated a deep sense of belonging in relation to their IDFG.

### *Environment*

The *environment* is the overarching social setting and culture that permeates the friend groups’ primary location, Christian U in our study. Because we understand that participants’ experiences and viewpoints are constructed both through human interactions and through the world around them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), it is important to account for the influence the environment has on the participants in our research study. Broadly, higher education institutions promote civil discourse and exploration of various worldviews (NASPA, 1997; ACPA, 2013). At Christian U, campus lectures, courses, political organizations, multicultural organizations, campus programming, and a campus-sponsored interfaith group contribute to these field-wide goals, but in a way that often still groups likeminded students together (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). For example, Katelyn, Holly, and Bryce were interested in interfaith interactions, so they sought out participation in the campus interfaith group. Moreover, other institutional characteristics including campus climate, size, student body, policies, and opportunities to experience ideologically diverse interactions “shape students’ opportunities for and choices about making friends,” as do residential living arrangements and the culture of specific academic programs (Rockenbach et al., 2019, p. 6; Canute, 2016). Our analysis revealed

that participants in our study made the majority of their friends either through living in the same residence hall or by sharing a class or major, fortifying these findings.

However, the protestant evangelical nature of Christian U complicated the experiences of members of IDFGs. For example, participants in our study shared that it could be hard to make friends for students who did not “fit the mold” – including political and faith commitments – at Christian U (Autumn, Bryce, Katelyn, Lizzie). Yet, students also acknowledged that there were facets of Christian U that supported and promoted ideological diversity, such as the honors programs and the campus interfaith group. Thus, the overarching Christian U *environment* influences the *self* by reinforcing already existing student backgrounds and experiences as well as contributing to the students’ beliefs and knowledge; impacts the *context of IDFGs* by supporting ideological or viewpoint diversity in spaces on campus; and informs the interactions within IDFGs through living experiences, academic programs, campus activities, and various organizations.

#### *Interactive Nature of Framework*

The interactive nature of our conceptual framework elements further reveals how each the experiences and perceived outcomes of IDFGs. For example, the juncture of *context* and *interactions* is meaningful because ideological diversity is both understood as part of an IDFGs’ makeup and as something that affects the interactions members of IDFGs have with one another. As part of Aimee and Jenna’s IDFG *context*, several friends held different religious or nonreligious beliefs, which in turn affected their *interactions*, such as the type of conversations they were able to have about faith, politics, and social issues like LGBTQ+ support. Thus, both the *context* and *interactions* of Aimee

and Jenna's IDFG influenced their friend group experience and their individually perceived outcomes. In sum, the backgrounds, experiences, and contexts of IDFGs should be understood in whole, to fully capture the interactionist influence of these elements in relation to ideological diversity and to friendships.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Implications For Practice and Future Research

Insights from this study provide higher education professionals with knowledge about how IDFGs at a faith-based institution are developed and maintained, as well as what members of IDFGs perceive as outcomes of such groups. These findings demonstrate that IDFGs, despite differences, are formed based on commonalities and maintained through strategies members of IDFGs use to navigate ideological differences. In addition, these findings reveal that members of IDFGs perceive an impact on their own self-development, strengthening of personal beliefs, future careers and relationships, and capacity to recognize other peoples' humanity over their ideologies. Within the faith-based higher education institution, some members of IDFGs identified their friend group and certain facets of the university (such as the honors program and interfaith group) as a place where they belonged. These outcomes and experiences should be desirable to the Christian higher education professional, and therefore it should be a goal to initiate campus-wide efforts for more students to experience IDFGs. Rockenbach et al. (2019) emphasize that college and university educators have the ability to shape conditions on their campuses to further support IDFGs, so that more students have the opportunity to participate in IDFGs.

Our study affirms that students are making friends through residence halls, campus activities, and classes. This should be encouraging to higher education professionals because already-existing efforts or interests have contributed to the



formation of IDFGs; however, our findings can also serve as a challenge to utilize these spaces and programs to further implement initiatives that encourage ideological diversity among more student groups. Based on our findings and Rockenbach et al.'s (2019) research, we suggest faculty and staff at faith-based institutions imitate the conditions of initiatives and spaces that have already proven to be promoters of IDFGs for new initiatives and spaces, such as honors-like courses that explore a wide range of beliefs, cultures, and opinions; interfaith community groups; and residence hall programming where a variety of students can meet and bond through casual hall programming. Within these curricular or co-curricular efforts, Christian higher education professionals must ensure that these programs and initiatives are working toward helping students cultivate an interest in and value of ideological diversity. With this in mind, administrators must set an expectation for IDFGs to be woven into the campus culture, which can begin with a simple challenge for all students to befriend at least one person with a different ideology than themselves during their first year of college. Much of this could be implemented in already existing spaces at faith-based institutions such as orientation programs, chapel lectures, first-year seminars, and residence life learning outcomes. However, in order to model the value of IDFGs, staff and faculty should also be encouraged to seek out their own ideologically diverse relationships—both professionally and personally. Although ideological or viewpoint diversity does not replace other forms of diversity such as racial diversity, it should be understood as a campus value and expectation.

Limitations of this study include interviewing participants from a single institutional site and having friend groups represented by multiple or single friends but

not the whole friend group. Additionally, only students who were current members of IDFGs were interviewed. Future research should center on comparing IDFGs from faith-based institutions and state institutions, interviewing entire friend groups (even potentially through a recurring focus group interview structure), and intentionally diversifying participants across social identities and various demographics in order to gain a more robust understanding of IDFGs. Moreover, studying students who left IDFGs may shed light on the limits of ideological diversity among college friends.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusions

It is clear from our participants' experiences as members of IDFGs that IDFGs in the faith-based higher education campus environment have the potential to enhance students' sense of belonging as they participate in daily activities together and navigate controversial conversations, broaden and strengthen students' beliefs, and ultimately further develop students' capacity to understand the humanness of ideologies. Our hope is that Christian higher education professionals will consider our participants' experiences as a reason to further support viewpoint diversity efforts, so that more students may experience IDFGs and similar perceived outcomes. Ream and Glanzer (2013) assert that diversity in the Christian university is not meant to just implement tolerance, but rather serves as "an appreciation for the manner in which the image of God is present in all members" (p. 122). Diversity, then, ultimately offers a more robust understanding of what it means to be human: "we need others" and "they need us," including our ideological differences (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 122). In light of the ideological divisiveness at a macro-societal level in the United States in 2021, this study also offers insight for how IDFGs can be a source of healing by emphasizing friendship across ideological differences among college students – a pathway also available to the Church and broader society.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about the people in your closest friend group?
  - a. Who are your friends? What are the names or descriptors of the people in your friend group?
  - b. How did you first meet the members of your friend group?
  - c. How did you become friends?
  - d. What interests, activities, or experiences do you have in common with your friend group?
  - e. Did any of the people in your friend group know one another before coming to college?
  - f. Are there any significant relationships or dynamics in your friend group such as two friends who are siblings or two friends who are dating?
  - g. Are there individuals in the group you are closer to, or spend more time with outside of the group? If so, are these particular friends similar or diverse from you?
2. How does your current friend group compare to your high school friend group?
  - a. What is meaningful about these similarities and or differences?
3. How do you and your group of friends typically spend time together?
  - a. What types of activities do you and your friends participate in on campus?
  - b. What types of activities do you and your friends participate in off campus?
  - c. Have you taken any classes with your friends? If so, what classes?
  - d. Have you seen ways that your activities together have changed over time? If so, how? Why do you think that is?
  - e. What is meaningful about the things you do with your friend group?
  - f. Who do you interact with the most in your friend group? Who do you interact with the least in your friend group? Why is that?
4. What do you and your friends usually talk about?
  - a. What are two or three of the main topics you and your friends have talked about most often in the last six months?
  - b. To what extent do you talk about politics with your friends? What are these conversations like?
  - c. To what extent do you talk about religion with your friends? What are these conversations like?
  - d. What would you say influences the conversations you have with your friends? (classes, experiences, news, etc.)

- e. Are there topics or issues that you never or seldom talk about with your core group of friends?
  - f. How do the conversations you have with your friends make you feel?
  - g. What do you think these conversations say about your friend group?
  - h. To what extent do you discuss the topics or issues that come up in conversations with your friends with other people in your life?
5. How would you characterize the Baylor environment?
- a. To what extent is it easy to find friends who share your values or viewpoints?
  - b. In what circles or places on campus can you share your views fully? In what ways, if at all, do you censor your own views or values?
  - c. To what extent do you feel comfortable or confident in sharing your views or values at Baylor in class? Outside of class?
6. What does the phrase “viewpoint diversity” or “ideological diversity” mean to you? (As a note, viewpoint diversity and ideological diversity can be used interchangeably.)
- a. What are some specific examples of ideologies you and specific friends hold?
  - b. What, if any, parts of your life growing up were ideologically diverse or promoted ideological diversity? Please explain. (family, neighborhood, church, school, etc.)
  - c. What does an ideologically diverse friend group look like to you?
  - d. What is meaningful about an ideologically diverse friend group?
7. In thinking about diverse values or views, how would you describe the types of viewpoints held by you and your friends?
- a. How did you discover that your friends held these values or views?
  - b. When you first started hanging out, did you perceive your friends to be different from you? Would you say they seem more or less different now?
  - c. Would you say that you and your friends have differing views within a similar ideology (For example, in the context of religion, two people could both identify as Baptist but disagree on some theology.)?
  - d. Or would you say that you and your friends have differing views because you identify with different ideologies altogether (For example, in the context of religion, one person could identify as Christian Baptist and one person could identify as nonreligious.)?
8. Can you tell me about a time you and your friends disagreed about a particular topic or viewpoint?
- a. What topic or issue did you disagree about?
  - b. How did you and your friends resolve or process the disagreement?
  - c. What feelings or emotions did you experience during the disagreement or its resolution?

- d. What have you taken away from dealing with conflicts in your friend group?
9. How do people in your friend group manage or interpret opposing opinions?
  - a. In what ways does your friend group react to differing points of view or values, if at all?
10. Have you ever changed your mind based on a conversation, interaction, or disagreement with a member of your core college friend group?
  - a. What did that dialogue or interaction look like?
  - b. Did you change your mind during that conversation or later on?
  - c. Did you tell your friend that you changed your mind on the matter you discussed? If so, how did you tell your friend?
    - i. How, if at all, has this changed your friendship?
  - d. When you talk to friends who think differently than you about a topic, how does the conversation go? What is your role in these conversations?
11. How have some of your viewpoints or values changed throughout college thus far, if at all?
  - a. Who or what has influenced your developing or evolving viewpoints, and how?
  - b. How have your close friendships influenced your viewpoints?
  - c. What other factors or people have influenced your viewpoints? (such as peers, classes, faculty, staff, religion, family, etc.)
  - d. How have these people or experiences contributed to you valuing viewpoint or ideological diversity?
12. What are the advantages of having an ideologically diverse friend group? What are the disadvantages, if any?
13. How has having friends with differing viewpoints affected your college experience?
14. How might having friends in college with differing viewpoint affect your life post-graduation, if at all?
15. What personal characteristics or values do you think you have developed as a result of having ideologically diverse friends?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your friend group or your viewpoints that I may have missed?

## APPENDIX B

### Friend Group Diagram Instructions

Please create a diagram of your friend group using the example and key provided on the following page as guidance for the structure and what should be included.

- Draw a circle for yourself in the center and identify your circle by using two red circles.
- Draw circles for each friend in your immediate friend group and write their name in the top of the circle.
- Denote who your close friends are by using red lines.
- Denote if you consider any of these friends as your “best friend” with two red lines.
- Denote the people in your immediate friend group by connecting them with green lines.
- Denote if you consider any of the people in your immediate friend group “best friends” with one another with two green lines.
- If any of your friends have close friends who you do not consider a part of your immediate friend group, please draw smaller circles, connect them to the appropriate friend with a black line, and write “FOF” inside the circle. (If you recall mentioning any of these “friends of friends” by name in your interview, you may write their real name.)
- Denote your friends’ social identity markers by writing out descriptors either in the appropriate circle or clearly next to the appropriate circle. Social identity markers may include religion/denomination, political affiliation, gender, race, nationality, academic major, organization member, etc.

### Reflection Questions

Please submit your friend group diagram along with written answers to the following reflection questions to [sarah\\_patterson1@baylor.edu](mailto:sarah_patterson1@baylor.edu).



1. Did you discover anything new about yourself or your friend group while drawing your friend group diagram? If so, please elaborate on what you learned.
2. Based on your diagram, do you see any patterns that might explain why you are friends with the people you are friends with?

## APPENDIX C

### Researcher Positionality Statement

The quintessential college experience involves students being introduced to ideas, ways of thinking, and people far different than themselves. Although it is common for students to befriend people similar to themselves, exposure to diverse viewpoints regarding aspects of human life such as culture, politics, and religion can occur within a student's close-knit friend group (Davies & Aron, 2016; Dugan, 2013; Eisenberg, Eggum, & Giunta, 2010). Existing higher education literature provides evidence that college students' friend groups can positively impact their academic success, sense of belonging, and future life goals or decisions (Astin, 1993; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Hays, 1985). An increasing body of literature discusses and demonstrates the costs and benefits of viewpoint diversity within the broader society and the academy (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2017; Goodman, 2017). Through my qualitative research study, I seek to explore how ideologically diverse friend groups within the college environment develop, engage in conflict, and benefit the student experience while simultaneously serving as a means to the field's aspirational outcomes for holistic education (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Denson, Bowman, & Park, 2017). This study will likely include participants of different social identities and backgrounds than my own, so it is important for me to consider my position in relationship to the study and participants in order to be aware of my own biases and improve trustworthiness of the overall project.

## *Identities*

Social identities help people reflect on how they see themselves and make sense of their interactions and belonging within different groups and the broader society. Social identities include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and religious beliefs (Patton, Renn, Guido, Quaye, Evans, & Forney, 2016). Other demographic factors such as regional upbringing and educational background may influence how a person expresses certain identities (Patton et al., 2016). It is also important to note that social identities and demographic characteristics do not affect a person's way of viewing and interacting with the world in a solitary fashion. Rather, a person's social identities and demographic characteristics often inform one another and intersect to influence how a person makes sense of their own lived experiences (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, it also matters to consider my own identities and demographic characteristics through the lens of intersectionality.

I am a 23-year-old white American cisgender female. I was raised in a middle-class household by two parents in rural west Texas. My family attended a Baptist church, and I continue to identify as a Christian and participate in a local Baptist church. I tend to align more with progressive viewpoints on most political topics. I attended public K-12 school, but I received a bachelor's degree in English from Hardin-Simmons University, a small private Baptist institution, and am currently pursuing a master's in Higher Education and Student Affairs from Baylor University, a larger private Baptist institution. These identities and characteristics have influenced the way I understand reality and engage with others. Some identities such as my race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion,

and educational background provide me with privilege as a member of the dominant culture within the United States. I do not actively have to consider my race when running errands or applying for jobs. I have never worried about if I will be able to afford basic needs like food. I have never been excluded from an event or group of people due to my religious beliefs. My identity as a female, especially in the context of a conservative-leaning evangelical religious culture, has made me face more obstacles in the form of gender stereotypes or expectations. However, when considering intersectionality, the unearned privileges I have from other identities far outweigh any discriminatory disadvantages I have faced thus far in my life as a female.

As I select participants for my study, interview participants, and analyze data, I will need to continually consider how my own social identities and demographic characteristics are influencing my interactions with and analysis of my participants and their lived experiences. For example, if a participant discloses their religious beliefs, I do not want to automatically assume something about other nonreligious viewpoints they hold based on biased generalizations. Similarly, if a participant is a person of color and grew up in a different geographic region than I did, I do not want to assume anything about their viewpoints or overall lived experiences based on my own limited knowledge of issues of race and culture or knowledge of a specific geographic location. It will be important for me to ask considerate questions that encourage and allow the participants to share their own thoughts and feelings about their lives, especially in regard to how various identities or characteristics have formed their experiences. It also matters that I consider how my questions might be perceived by someone who holds any or several different identities

than myself, so as to not make participants uncomfortable or wary of the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

### *Friend Groups*

Since my study centers on college students' friend groups, I need to consider how my own undergraduate friend group experience could influence my research and potentially create additional biases during the research process. During my first semester of college, I found my core friend group mainly by spending time in my residence hall lobby and continually eating meals in the campus dining hall. This friend group consisted of 15 to 20 people who consistently showed up to play board games or card games, crowded too many chairs around a dining hall table to share meals together, and added letters and mementos to a time capsule we buried at the end of our first year. Our conversations while playing games or eating lunch frequently centered around controversial religious or political topics. We discovered early on in our developing friendships that we brought a variety of diverse viewpoints to the table. However, our curiosity seemed to bond us together rather than prevent us from developing deeper friendships throughout our four years as students.

Although the participants in my study will be undergraduate students from Baylor and not Hardin-Simmons, there is still a possibility that I might project my own experiences, thoughts, or feelings onto participants. It will be important for me to consider my own undergraduate experience as separate from the experiences of my study's participants even though my personal experiences have sparked my interest in ideologically diverse friend groups. To do this, I will be clear about the research purpose throughout the

research process so that the exploratory nature of the qualitative study can be as organic as possible. However, based on my own experiences and relevant literature, I do hope to find qualitative data that demonstrates some of the realities of ideologically diverse friend groups and furthers the field's knowledge of how the outcomes of these friend groups can benefit higher education broadly and individual college students holistically.

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