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EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: VOICES OF BUSINESS STUDENTS AT A PERVASIVLEY SECTARIAN UNIVERSITY

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EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHER

EDUCATION: VOICES OF BUSINESS STUDENTS AT A PERVASIVLEY SECTARIAN

UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This proposed study explores the perceptions and experiences of business students who attend a pervasively sectarian university in the South (MPSU) regarding their perceptions of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility through their experiences on campus and in their academic program. This study will discuss socio-political influences at the national, state, and local levels and examine existing university policies and practices to identify recommendations for organizational change using Lewin's unfreezing model as a theoretical framework.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Sue Carol Brooks, who was one

biggest humanitarians and social justice advocates I have known. Her dedication to the tenets of

equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility motivated me to conduct this research project.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

PSU   Pervasively Sectarian University

MPSU   A Pervasively Sectarian Christian University in the American South

BS   Business School

DIP   Dissertation in Practice

CCCU   Council for Christian Collogues and Universities

DOE   Department of Education

HRC   Human Rights Campaign

IRB   Institutional Review Board

LGBTQIA   Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual

DEI   Diversity, equity, and inclusion

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Statement of the Problem of Practice and Purpose of the Research

One approach for promoting change is to listen to and hear the voices of students (Barnes, 1990). The goal of this study is to highlight the voices of undergraduate business students about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in college and beyond. The study took place at a Business School (BS) at a pervasively sectarian Christian university in the American South denoted throughout this study by pseudonym MPSU. The research questions addressed in this Dissertation in Practice (DiP) were: How do MPSU BS students perceive the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What perspectives and experiences (if any) have motivated their interest in or commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What curricular and co-curricular supports can enhance the learning environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students attending a pervasively sectarian university, MPSU?

The study involved conducting focus group interviews with business students who are enrolled at MPSU. One way to recruit student participants across different courses and student experiences is to reach out to student organizations for assistance. In this study, focus group participants included members of the following organizations: Accounting Society, Entrepreneurship Club, Investment Club, and Service Club. The goal of the focus group interviews was to gain insights into how students make sense of issues related to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibilities more broadly than as compared to their learning in one or two

courses or the classroom within MPSU BS. Topics explored through the focus group interviews include socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, gender, and other disparities in society as well as accounting, management, marketing, and financial reporting business practices as they relate to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility.

MPSU was the setting for this study. This setting was appropriate because potential tensions exist between the university's espoused values and ideals versus the actual diversity of the current and future student body. Like other pervasively sectarian universities, MPSU faces financial pressures to maintain and grow enrollment. In attempting to meet enrollment needs, PSUs may have broadened their marketing, and thereby wittingly and unwittingly, reached increasingly diverse individuals eager for postsecondary educational opportunities but not fully aware of the institution's motivation and faith-based stance toward increasing diversity. Detailed information and official statistics related to the fostering of socially just campus environments are limited, according to Jennifer Stollman, former Academic Director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi. Unfortunately, the harsh reality of living in a campus community where students feel unwelcomed or become victims of violence because of their diverse attributes undercuts the initial, significant investment in educational opportunity made by the student and the larger community. What we do know is this: the students who have left universities for social justice reasons cited danger as the central reason (GLSEN, 2018; personal communication, April 6, 2016).

Coley (2018) cited many examples of why organizational change is generally necessary in universities. Students at secular universities face similar issues to students attending PSUs. (See Coley, 2018.) The pervasively sectarian college environment, particularly for undergraduate Christians, can be restrictive or even marginalizing for students of certain

identities, including feminists (Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Wolf, 2000), individuals of different

ethnic backgrounds other than White (Timeline, 2004), environmentalists (Nixon, 2011),

LGBTQIA (Coulter & Rankin, 2020), international students (Lee & Rice, 2007), individuals

practicing non-Christian faith traditions (Mayhew, 2015), and the formerly incarcerated (Ferry,

2020) to name a few.

MPSU where the study was conducted is a Christian "university recognized for academic

excellence and commitment to the cause of Christ." One of the oldest universities in the state,

MPSU

> seeks to lift up the teachings of Jesus Christ in a premier academic environment at an
>
> affordable price. Our aim is to infuse Christ into every aspect of our culture – in the
>
> classroom, throughout campus life, and in the hearts of our students. (MPSU Admissions
>
> "Mission Statement," 2020)

In academic year 2018-2019, of MPSU's 3,232 undergraduate students, 129

(approximately 4%) were international undergraduate students and 940 (29%) were other-than-

White race. The BS is the largest school within MPSU and has a mission of offering a "quality

business education in a Christian environment," equipping its graduates with "essential business

principles, effective communication skills, and an appreciation for social responsibility and

ethical values" (MPSU BS, "Mission Statement," 2020). The vision of BS is "to be known as a

business school recognized for academic excellence and commitment to the cause of Christ"

(MPSU BS, "Vision Statement," 2020). At the undergraduate level, the school offers degree

programs in business administration, accounting, finance, marketing, entrepreneurship, and

MIS/data management. The distinguishing characteristics of the school include, "ethical

awareness in a Christian environment, interaction between faculty and students, effective

teaching with real-world experience, and exceptional quality and value" (MPSU BS, "Vision and Mission Statements," 2020).

Five focus group interviews of six to seven student members of BS student organizations helped discover insights into how business students experience the curriculum and college-going generally at MPSU, and specifically their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. The interviews explored BS students' thoughts about potential injustices both at the campus and the community level and illuminate areas that may benefit from organizational change to provide opportunities for improved student learning and development. The DiP was motivated by the desired outcome of organizational change so that students would perceive (and furthermore experience) greater alignment between their college experiences, the BS mission and vision, and the BS curriculum to better equip students upon graduation with an appreciation for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility within their future practice.

Professional Positionality and Assumptions about the Problem of Practice

The professional position of the researcher who conducted this study is one of a full-time faculty in BS at MPSU who desires to serve all students and prepare them for critical reflection upon the business profession and to promote equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in practice. The motivation for this study comes from eleven years of observing campus dynamics and shifting student demographics, resulting in an increasingly diverse student body, including students who are potentially at risk for inequitable or unjust treatment, or becoming marginalized within the campus environment at MPSU. Admittedly, marginalization could occur simply because other students, faculty, and administrators lack awareness of the needs of vulnerable individuals, i.e., current and potential students. Although strides have been made with an evolution in the viewpoints of leaders from a stance of preserving tradition as well as social and

intellectual conformity, to a new stance of cultural sensitivity and fostering diversity and inclusive practices, there are still opportunities to expand inclusive policies and practice on the MPSU campus and within the BS.

A review of the existing literature identified a dearth of research publications pertaining to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility on pervasively sectarian campuses and specifically for schools of business (Harper & Griffin, 2010; Kim et al., 2010; Nussbaum & Chang, 2013; Smith & Ota, 2013). This literature review reinforced the need to give MPSU Business students a voice to potentially call for organizational change and to create a ripple effect that further enhances equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility for students in the classroom, on campus, and within the larger community.

Several experiences (including increased enrollment of international students, previously incarcerated students, veteran students, and students of other diversities) in the MPSU BS have emphasized the need for organizational change to welcome, serve, and effectively teach a diverse student body. A recent case study and auto-ethnography of an Asian student's experiences in the MPSU BS reiterated the need for graduates' ethical reasoning capabilities (Ma et al., 2019). The teaching of ethics within a school of business is necessary for graduates to be able to make ethically responsible decisions as they enter the business profession. Within the curricula, ethics education better prepares graduates with a virtuous mindset, enabling them to make responsible decisions as they face ethical dilemmas within the workplace and profession (Ma et al., 2019).

This study includes a discussion of the focus group results and suggestions for further organizational changes within BS to better foster equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility awareness among students and to improve the overall collegiate environment. Through this study, I am hopeful also that the challenges of marginalized business students at MPSU will be

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highlighted to the faculty and school administration. Moreover, students' voices were used to evaluate students' appreciation and conceptualization of BS's mission and vision of teaching ethical values and social responsibility within a Christian framework.

Study Background and Contextual Factors

MPSU is located in a metro-capital city and is a member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The CCCU is a 180-member higher education organization of national Christian universities. It is noteworthy that the Council has obtained religious exemptions from certain provisions of the Title IX Act (20 U.S. Code §1681), a civil rights law banning certain forms of discrimination in educational programs that receive federal funding (20 U.S. Code §1681), for member universities.

Title IX Exemptions

Since Congress's passing of Title IX in 1975, 66 of the 246 requested exemptions to Title IX have been granted to CCCU institutions, including MPSU. Half of those exemptions were granted after 2014 when the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) mandated that under Title IX, colleges and universities may not discriminate against transgender or gay students and must treat students according to their gender identity. In the name of religion, however, CCCU colleges are not compelled to accommodate students with transgender identities in restrooms, locker rooms, and other facilities (Marra & Cromartie, 2016; Mosby, 2016; Williams, 2016; Zylstra, 2016).

In practice, the CCCU Title IX exemptions have legally enabled some PSUs to impede the full inclusion of LGBTQIA students on campuses. For example, universities with these exemptions do not have to adhere to federal laws such as Title IX's requirement that public schools accommodate transgender students in restrooms and locker rooms (a law passed in the Obama administration and revoked in the Trump administration). MPSU filed for a Title IX

exemption request during 2014-2015 when contentious political debates erupted around the proposal of Mississippi's HB 1523, the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act.

The Religious Liberty Accommodations Act

Mississippi's HB 1523 was part of legislation drafted in response to the Supreme Court decision regarding the Marriage Equality Act (Obergefell v. Hodges, 135 S. Ct. 1039, 2015). Although Mississippi had worked to overcome perceptions of its segregationist past through various civil rights initiatives, HB 1523 allowed business services to be denied to adulterers, teenagers who become pregnant out of wedlock, atheists, or non-Christians. HB 1523 opposed democratic equality and protected those in Mississippi who wished to discriminate against particular groups in the name of religion. Mosby (2016) cited this law and form of discrimination as perhaps one of the "most unholy" acts a Christian can do.

In opposition to HB 1523, Montel Williams, a guest columnist for a local newspaper wrote to Mississippi Governor Bryant, "It's 2016. Haven't we learned? It is simply unacceptable to single out and marginalize a group of people. No good Christian would rationalize segregation. HB 1523 is no less deplorable" (2016, p.1). Despite the opposition, Governor Bryant signed HB 1523 into law on April 5, 2016. Bryant tweeted that his rationale for signing the bill was "to protect sincerely held religious beliefs and moral convictions of individuals, organizations and private associations from discriminatory action by state government. . ." (Bryant, 2016).

HB 1523 also mandated that transgender people use bathrooms of their biological birth. This law allows Mississippians to refuse to conduct business with anyone who does not ascribe to the following beliefs: (a) that marriage be recognized as the union of one man and one woman, (b) that sexual relations are properly reserved to such a marriage, and (c) gender terms of *male*

and *female* must only refer to the biological sex objectively determined by anatomy and genetics at the time of birth (Murray, II, 2016). For example, if a Mississippi hotel owner does not condone gay relationships or unmarried individuals lodging together, the owner may refuse services to these individuals based on the hotel owner's religious beliefs.

National corporations with ties to Mississippi vocally reacted to the legislation. Large Mississippi-based businesses and employers such as Mississippi Manufacturers Association, Nissan (approximately 6000 employees in MS), Toyota (with a Mississippi workforce of about 2,000), and Ingalls Shipbuilding (with a Mississippi workforce of about 12,000) as well as national companies such as MGM Resorts and Casinos, AT&T, GE, Coca-Cola, Disney, Delta, and Marvel adamantly opposed the Mississippi governor's endorsement.

Nissan, an employer of nearly 6,000 Mississippians, sent a letter to the governor regarding the bill stating,

> Nissan is committed to providing our employees with an inclusive workplace environment that supports diversity. It is Nissan's policy to prohibit discrimination of any type, and we oppose any legislation that would allow discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. (Carter, 2016, p. 1)

MGM's letter highlighted how such a bill that allows businesses to discriminate against certain groups is sure to hurt local economies (Carter, 2016). Toyota's letter to the governor asking him to veto HB 1523 stated that Toyota

> does not condone discrimination in any form and believes that inclusive treatment of all people is good for the workplace, marketplace, and society as a whole. In our experience, the best ideas come when everyone is equally engaged and valued. (Carter, 2016, p. 1)

Tyson communicated to the governor that while the company values religious freedom, it opposes any legislation that allows discrimination. According to a Tyson spokesperson:

> Our core values call on us to be respectful of each other and our policies prohibit unlawful harassment and discrimination in the workplace involving race, religion, color, age, national origin, veteran status, disability, genetics information, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other protected status…. (Carter, 2016, p. 1)

There was national reaction to the passage of the bill by states and by special interest organizations. For example, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo banned non-essential travel to Mississippi and to other states that have enacted similar legislation (Collins, 2016). The New York Mississippi Society canceled a co-state picnic after the passage of HB 1523. An event formerly used as a major recruiting forum for businesses, the picnic was canceled because of the dismay felt in New York by groups who intended to protest at the event, which is traditionally attended by the states' governors and other officials. According to the New York Mississippi Society the picnic, "has sought to present a positive image of Mississippi without regard to race, religion, or gender orientation" (MBJ Staff, 2016, p. 1). Legislation "makes it difficult to share pride in the state's heritage and diversity. Any such law that discriminates against even a single member of our community cannot be tolerated, and therefore we have decided to stand up for all mankind by cancelling the 2016 picnic in the park" (MBJ Staff, 2016, p. 1).

At a local level, the Mississippi Economic Council (which has 11,000 members from 1,100-member businesses) reacted to Bryant's signing with a spokesperson stating, "MEC opposes efforts that would intentionally or unintentionally prevent Mississippi businesses from implementing and enforcing non-discrimination policies or that would limit diversity and inclusion impacting their customers and employees" (Carter, April 2016, p. 1).

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Based on the public comments of large corporations, employers seek employees who embrace diversity and implement inclusive practices. The combination of Mississippi's passage of the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act combined with MPSU's Title IX exemptions, places MPSU graduates at risk for being stigmatized as persons who condone discrimination and intolerance, impacting graduates' marketability and the scope of future employment opportunities. McGuire (2020) noted for institutions of higher education to hinder business students' social mobility is a direct violation of the principles of equity, social justice, and ethics.

National Context: The Equality Act

Human Rights Campaign (HRC) leaders indicated that discriminatory issues press into the higher education arena. Leaders have met with university leaders urging and pleading for PSU universities to endorse and sign the Equality Act, a reaction to states passing discriminatory legislation such as HB 1523. The Equality Act seeks to expand the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to establish explicit, permanent laws to protect individuals against discrimination related to matters of employment, housing, access to public places, federal funding, credit, education, and jury service. While many universities have added to their policies that individuals cannot be discriminated against based on sexual orientation and gender identity, they resist signing and endorsing the act. HRC leadership inferred that most of the university leaders support the cause on a personal level and that the institution supports equal rights for all people (R. Hill, personal communication, November 4, 2015). However, the institutions themselves resist being identified as social justice advocates and supporters. The universities do not want to openly sign and support such an act. Privately, administrators indicate support for an agenda of inclusivity; however, they do not wish to make such agendas public.

The previous research that is available in this area is lacking because it has relied on small sample size, limited data, and unsophisticated data analysis and interpretation. Renn (2010) called for more social justice research, as insights gained from analyses of pervasively sectarian organizations (universities, for example) will promote meaningful change. This research could potentially bring about real change--change that would make a difference in students' university experiences and overall lives. Solutions to issues of access, equity, diversity, and student success can potentially be achieved with additional research.

Attention to social justice, equity, and ethical responsibility in higher education is prevalent, especially as enrollment of students from various demographics has increased in recent years (Buenestado-Fernandez et at., 2019; Kim et al., 2010; Loh, 2016). Findings suggest that teaching social justice and ethics classes can deeply impact students' understanding of social justice (Cavaliere et al., 2010; Kleinrichert et al., 2013). As critics increasingly (complain) that business schools focus too much on profit and do not prioritize ethics and the pursuit of moral and social justice, schools must clearly strengthen their focus on ethical responsibility (Cavaliere et al., 2010; Critchfield, 2018). Students, particularly those receiving a religious education, need to be taught to identify and promote social justice issues and act compassionately (Brady, 2010; Vivanco, 2018).

Social Justice Issues Pressing in Higher Education

This issue of racial equality is at the forefront of diversity and social justice advocacy at PSUs (Harris, 2020). Students of color can often feel out of place or discriminated against at private PSUs (Harper & Griffin, 2010). For international students, discomfort can be amplified, particularly in Christian universities where they can be seen, not-as-equal students, but through a "missionary mentality," a mentality to change rather than accept "foreigners" (Kim et al., 2010).

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As many schools pursue greater racial diversity, Christian schools are addressing these issues and pursuing social justice through providing biblical and moral rationale for addressing issues of social justice and diversity (Goodpaster et al., 2018; Huff, 2018; Pike, 2010).

Socioeconomic backgrounds can affect the ability of many students to attend PSUs because many of these schools are private institutions and therefore have higher costs of tuition and attendance. Due to high tuition costs, many view elite private schools as "revolving doors" for upper-class students, only allowing those with money in, making the rich richer and the poor poorer (Dubeau & Mehta-Neugebauer, 2020). Yet many private universities provide students with greater access to opportunities and allow for upward mobility in society (Baum et al., 2018). The pursuit of social justice is of the highest importance in higher education. As private universities work towards achieving equality, issues such as access to private universities along with widening participation of students of lower socioeconomic status are being discussed to achieve social justice for these students (Florea & Horvat, 2009; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014).

For students in the LBGTQ+ community, issues of social justice and equity are at a critical point in higher education more generally, and within PSUs specifically. As the Supreme Court deliberates over what civil rights protections are to be enforced, discussing the needs of LBGTQ+ students in higher education is of vital importance (Brier, 2020).

Dolan (1998) pointed out that while universities embrace social justice advocacy, they remain fearful of becoming organizations labeled for such. For example, Yale University turned down an endowment of playwright and social justice advocate Larry Kramer to establish a gay studies program. Yale has embraced social justice advocacy; however, it does not wish to identify the organization, the university itself, as an advocate institution. Human Rights Campaign (HRC) leaders find similar sentiments when meeting with university leaders in an

effort to get the institutions to sign and to endorse the Equality Act into university policy. University leaders indicated that they want an inclusive and socially-just campus; however, they are fearful of signing and endorsing equality legislation and becoming a labeled campus.

Change can be made on a pervasively sectarian campus to create an institution that is a more socially just and accepting environment. The problem that needs addressing and changing is to challenge identities as the natural, ideal norm and to promote the notion of non-normative individualities (Brooker, 1999). Breaking binaries of heterosexual/homosexual, straight/gay, female/male, woman/man, masculine/feminine, rich/poor, veteran/civilian, etc. in the face of society's labels of what is natural and normal is the goal of promoting inclusion of non-normative identities (Sullivan, 2003). Social justice attempts to dissimilate groups into one plurality, minimizing the stratification of identities (Brooker, 1999) to foster social justice norms of inclusion and equity (Fifield & Letts, 2014).

Britzman (1995) called for the removal of normative practices and labels of normalcy and dominant conceptual order within society. Out of ethical concern for acceptance of mankind, he urged for exploration of knowledge that one cannot even imagine. Even if individuals cannot comprehend or relate to others' characteristics, striving for equity and social justice in higher education environments is a topic that warrants disentanglement. As universities' socially conscious and diverse student populations grow, universities must be prepared to assimilate these students without marginalizing them as oddities of campus. An environment of equality and justice calls for more than tolerance of all to a stance of belonging, therefore removing the notion that some belong (on campus) while others do not belong.

Renn (2010) pointed out that research about social justice advocates and organizations in higher education is rare and that existing research in this area lacks depth. Institutional Review

Boards (IRB), which attempt to protect students (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016), make obtaining student information related to orientation and identity almost impossible to obtain (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). To investigate the college-going experiences of (business) students' perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility to expand the body of existing knowledge further research is needed.

Theoretical Framework for Organizational Change

The overarching research questions of this study are: How do MPSU BS students perceive the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What perspectives and experiences (if any) have motivated their interest in or commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What curricular and co-curricular supports can enhance the learning environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students attending a pervasively sectarian university, MPSU? Learning student perspectives through focus group interviews provided an opportunity to examine current student views, analyze themes, and based on the data, provide recommendations for organizational change at a MPSU. A student who graduates from a PSU should theoretically have an appreciation for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility rather than those values being considered as non-normative or marginalized given the mission statements of most Christian institutes of higher education (Nussbaum & Chang, 2013). Universities can implement missions that include tenets of equity, social justice, and ethics by making intentional efforts to develop students' hearts, minds, and spirits and to create graduates who become productive and employable, socially-just citizens and leaders in the business community (Loh, 2016).

According to Kurt Lewin's Organizational Change Model, people are the agents of planned change. People's driving forces motivate them to bring about change. However, others'

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restraining forces keep them from yielding to the change. Lewin's Organizational Change Model involves three steps—unfreezing, changing, and refreezing (Kinicki, 2008).

During stage one (unfreezing), as people's motivating forces and drive become stronger than their restraining forces, preparations for change must occur. Plans must be made to make the desired changes within the organization. During this phase, change is typically met with great resistance (e.g., reluctance to change traditions, fear of the unknown) that must be overcome for change to occur (Calder, 2013). Lewin's recommended tactics to reduce resistance include communication, training, employee involvement, stress management, negotiation, and coercion. Communication about the status of the change and about the effects of the change should be continuous and clear during the unfreezing phase of organizational change. Lack of transparency about the change is often more bothersome to people than the change itself. During this planning-for-change stage, all parties affected by the change need an outlet to discuss their fears and concerns that will accompany the change. With any substantive change, people require training on how to effectively facilitate and implement the change.   Allowing employees to share their ideas makes them feel inclusive of the change. Since stress often accompanies change, helping employees manage change-related stress is of great importance. Planning for the management of stress is tactical in getting those resistant on board with the change. Negotiation is a tactic to reduce resistance. People want to know their concerns were heard; compromising by giving those resistant to the change something they want to persuade them to support the change is often helpful. There are instances where organizational leaders may apply coercion, viewing an ultimatum or other threat as the only effective way to eliminate resistance.

During the change process (phase two of Lewin's Organizational Change Model), people are exposed to new norms (e.g., new behaviors, new policies, new procedures, etc.). Once the

change has been made, refreezing (phase three) must occur to keep new norms in place. Change is reinforced through feedback and organizational rewards for implementing and demonstrating the change. Lewin's Organizational Change Model is one theoretical framework for examining how schools of business can bring about changes in equity on a pervasively sectarian campus.

The first step to bringing about organizational changes to foster social efficiency, democratic equality, and social mobility and progression of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility is to hear the voices of students and understanding their sectarian college-going perspectives and experiences (Means et al., 2016). The next section will discuss the proposed research methodology.

Research Design and Methods

Research Questions

Research questions were developed utilizing Labaree's (1997) lenses of social efficiency, democratic equality, and social mobility and the critical lens of Lewin's theory of Organizational Change. This study explored the following questions: How do MPSU BS students perceive the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What perspectives and experiences (if any) have motivated their interest in or commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? What curricular and co-curricular supports can enhance the learning environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students attending a pervasively sectarian university, MPSU?

Research Design

A qualitative methodology was employed to gain an understanding of MPSU BS students' perspectives and experiences regarding equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in the program curriculum, on campus, and in the community. This study utilized focus group

interviews as a data collection method. Phenomenological inquiry attempts to understand

people's perceptions, perspectives of a particular situation (Dale & Allen, 1998) and how

subjects interpret their lived experiences to gain understanding of subjects' sense-making and the

meaning they attribute to their experiences.   The focus of this phenomenological inquiry is to

gather information about MPSU BS students' perspectives regarding equity, social justice, and

ethical responsibility in higher education.

*** The Role of Focus Groups in Phenomenological Inquiry ***

Focus group methodology originated in World War II at Columbia University (Lee,

2010). This practice gained traction in the 1980s when Robert Merton popularized this form of

study in sociological and marketing research, specifically exploring knowledge transmission and

diffusion (Lee, 2010). This data collection method pools participant responses gathered through

multiple avenues such as topical debates, questionnaires, and other group activities (Kitzinger,

1994).

The focus group questions sought to discover whether MPSU BS students were aware of

pressing issues in higher education and their subjective experiences related to issues of equity,

social justice, and ethical responsibility in business practices and society in general. Another

objective of this proposed study was to identify the potential marginalization of various students

at the MPSU within the BS. The findings help to determine if the MPSU BS mission and vision

of graduating students who have an appreciation for social responsibility and ethical values are

being met. Based on the focus group data analysis and findings, recommendations for

organizational change were formulated utilizing the lens of Lewin's theory of Organizational

Change.

Participants

Participant selection is an imperative part of the promotion of conversation within the focus group. Finding commonality (e.g., age, gender, area of study) amongst the participants encourages discussion; although, this commonality does not need to be the topic of discussion. The topic of discussion should be a subject that may create debate amongst this homogenous group of individuals. Research shows that the conversation is livelier amongst groups who are already acquainted (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Demographic data related to gender, age, race and ethnicity, academic major, and international status was collected for each participant. (See Appendix B.)

Business students participating in BS organizations at MPSU were recruited using convenience sampling with a goal of holding five focus group interviews of six to eight people each. Convenience sampling is "a sampling strategy where participants are selected in an ad hoc fashion based on their accessibility and/or proximity to the research" (Jager et al., 2017). Although one limitation of convenience sampling can be a limited ability to generalize findings, Jager et al. (2017) argued homogeneous convenience samples have clearer generalizability relative to conventional convenience samples. Participants were recruited by the focus group moderators, student organization members, faculty sponsors, and via email.

Focus groups comprised of MPSU BS students in organizations satisfied the requirement that the participants must be of similar backgrounds and cultures. Focus group participants had the following commonalities: (a) students who shared an interest in pursuing a business career, (b) students who were voluntary members of a student organization, and (c) students who had some level of familiarity with other participants because they, too, were enrolled in the MPSU BS and learned together in curricular and co-curricular activities.

Moderator

The term *moderator* is used in place of interviewer because the role of the moderator is to promote discussion within the focus group, versus interviewing the subjects on the presented topics. A moderator shares the ground rules for interaction, the discussion expectations, and ensures the structured discussion questions are covered within the scheduled focus group time frame (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). While the group moderator is not required to be a professional in the field or topic that is being investigated, the moderator must have a good understanding of the research and able to develop questions and conversation within the framework of the study (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). The moderator should stress the value of participants' contributions and emphasize the moderator's own role as a learner rather than a teacher (Mack, 2005). Accordingly, for this study, the use of a moderator was especially appropriate, given that the principal investor was a faculty member who had or would teach many of the focus groups' participants. To create an atmosphere of peer discussions, rather than teacher-student instruction, a moderator was selected to facilitate dialogue.

The ideal volunteer focus group moderator was an upper-level business student who preferably was a member of the MPSU's Multicultural Student Association, a student organization that aims to provide MPSU students from diverse backgrounds and cultures a safe place to belong and mentor each other. Additionally, the organization promotes diversity and inclusion on the MPSU campus and has a mission to educate the MPSU campus about different cultures. The rationale for recruitment from these resources was to select a moderator who has some knowledge of the research topic and who has some skill with facilitating group dialogue.

The moderator of the focus group interviews was a recent graduate of MPSU where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a minor in Business Administration

degree. She is currently enrolled in the MPSU BS, pursuing her Master of Business

Administration with a concentration in Finance degree. She is a charter member of the

Multicultural Student Association on MPSU campus. Growing up with a Hispanic mother and

White father, she indicated she has a lifetime of awareness of differences in people's lifestyles

and cultures and how those differences affected her. Because of her lived experiences, she

indicated she has a passion for social justice and sees the need to create awareness of injustices.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews took place during the fall semester 2020 on the MPSU campus in

the BS, a comfortable and familiar setting for participants. Participants were informed that their

participation in the focus group interviews was voluntary and that they had the right to terminate

their participation at any time. Participants were informed that their responses would not be

disclosed outside the focus group and that their grades or any other positionality at MPSU or in

the MPSU BS would not be affected by their responses. Participants were asked to complete a

demographic form (see Appendix B) and given a consent form/information sheet that did not

require their signed consent to enhance their confidentiality (see Appendix E). Additionally,

participants were asked to uphold confidentiality of the discussions that took place during the

focus group meetings.

The focus group interviews were facilitated by a moderator and lasted approximately one

hour, with one as short as thirty-six minutes and another as long as seventy-nine minutes. The

principal investigator served as a note taker during the focus group meetings as a source of data

triangulation. Participants were informed that while the note taker and principal investigator was

faculty member of the BS, their participation and comments would not affect the participants'

positionality in the principal investigator's past, current, or future classes or otherwise within the

MPSU or MPSU BS. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Discussion questions are in Appendix A. Appropriate measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the collected verbal data (e.g., recordings and transcriptions have been kept in a secure, locked, and password-protected computer and in the custody of the principal investigator).

At the time the interviews took place, the world was (and continues to be) plagued with a pandemic of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Accordingly, numerous businesses and universities issued stay-at-home mandates to help flatten the curve of the virus's spread. At the university level, classes were transitioned from in-person, face-to-face learning platforms to remote and online transmissions. Despite the challenges this transition has brought, universities, MPSU was committed to the continuation of teaching and fostering learning. MPSU, like many universities committed to helping students successfully continue their education. In a similar accord, this inquiry project continued, despite challenges brought by social distancing and quarantine. The exploration of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility was perhaps even more warranted and further motivated by the outbreak of COVID-19.

The focus groups for this DiP were conducted in a hybrid format, similar to hybrid and virtually livestreamed classes. Participants were recruited through email solicitations (see Appendix C) and scheduled via doodle polls, an electronic scheduling tool for multiple participants (see Appendix D). Focus group interviews were conducted at MPSU BS and were livestreamed via Zoom for virtual participants.   Twenty-three participants met in-person and face-to-face with eight participants joining the conversations virtually. As with online and hybrid teaching and online commerce, the project continued in the face of constraints caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic.   Rather than focusing on the obstacles of distancing that COVID-19

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caused, the hybrid meetings via the Zoom platform allowed for even more accurate capturing of dialogue of the participants. From the hybrid focus group meetings, pressing issues of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility as they related to MPSU BS students during the time were brought to light.

Next Steps

Upon approval of this prospectus and after making revisions suggested by my dissertation committee chair and other members, I submitted the study along with all required materials for approval by both the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the MPSU's IRB. Upon approval of the IRBs, I conducted the qualitative inquiry project employing focus group methodology as outlined above. Participants from the MPSU BS student organizations and moderator were recruited for participation, and interviews took place in August and September 2020.

Data Analysis

Data from the focus group discussions was collected and analyzed. Immediately following each focus group meeting, the principal investigator who served as notetaker during the focus group meetings organized notes from the meeting and composed a summary of the overarching takeaways and tones of the discussion. Zoom recordings of the meetings' discussions were then professionally transcribed. Transcribed data was then analyzed by the principal investigator for repeated themes according to Grounded Theory principles (Dale & Allen, 1998). Qualitative analysis of frequency of themes was conducted. This type of analysis uses inductive reasoning to explore participants' views of reality.   This analysis approach is based on the assumption that meaning is constructed and changed by interactions between people

and that people act on the basis of how they interpret or describe their situation, and, as a result, can lead to organizational change (Hallberg, 2006).

As repeated ideas and concepts emerged, they were grouped into thematic categories. Once data was collected, coded, and analyzed, results were written, along with suggestions for organizational changes to foster a better awareness and appreciation for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among the MPSU's BS students and graduates.

Manuscript 2: Data Interpretation

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

Problem of Practice

The goal of this qualitative phenomenological study was to highlight the voices of undergraduate business students enrolled at a pervasively sectarian Christian university in the American South (MPSU) about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. The study occurred at MPSU which is one of the oldest universities in its state and is in a metro-capital city. MPSU is one of the 180 members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).

Historically, the MPSU student body has been predominantly (63%) female and (71%) White (MPSU, Institutional Data, 2018-19). The composition of the student body is changing due to the confluence of several factors including increased enrollment of (a) international students, (b) previously incarcerated students, (c) veteran students, (d) students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and (e) students with sexual orientation/gender identity other than cisgender at MPSU (including the BS). This increased diversity of the student body emphasizes the need for organizational change to welcome, accommodate, serve, and teach all students.

Although the student demographics are changing at MPSU, the university continues to maintain historically traditional policies of the university. For example, MPSU exercises Title IX exemptions granted to CCCU members and the tenets of MS H.B. 1523, legally enabling religiously affiliated academic institutions to impede the full inclusion of LGBTQIA students on individual campuses.

The combination of Mississippi's passage of the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act combined with Title IX exemptions for MPSU, places the university's graduates at risk for being stigmatized as individuals who condone discrimination and intolerance, potentially impacting their marketability and the scope of their employment opportunities. The value of this study is to learn more about the environment by exploring students' perceptions about potential injustices in the classroom and beyond and illuminating areas that may benefit from organizational change to provide opportunities for improved inclusion, learning, and student development.

Nature of Data Collection and Interpretation

The study involved conducting five focus group interviews with each focus group comprised of six to seven students who were members of MPSU BS student organizations. Group participants included members of the following organizations: Accounting Society, Entrepreneurship Club, Investment Club, and Service Club. The goal of the focus group interviews was to gain insights into how business students experience the curriculum and college-going generally at MPSU, and specifically their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in general and in the field of study.

The five focus group interviews took place in MPSU BS in August and September 2020. Participants were recruited through email solicitations (see Appendix C) and scheduled via doodle polls, an electronic scheduling tool for multiple participants (see Appendix D). Email correspondence was communicated to participants regarding focus group meeting time, at which time they were sent Participants Demographics Form (see Appendix B) and Participant Information Sheet, Consent, and Release of Words Form (see Appendix E). The focus group meetings were conducted in a hybrid format, with a total of twenty-three BS students

participating in-person and face-to-face and eight BS students participating virtually, livestreaming via Zoom.

At the beginning and throughout each of the focus group interviews, the MPSU BS's website was projected, displaying MPSU BS's mission of offering a "quality business education in a Christian environment," equipping its graduates with "essential business principles, effective communication skills, and an appreciation for social responsibility and ethical values" (MPSU BS, "Mission Statement," 2020). Prior to commencing discussion for each focus group interview, the moderator verbalized to participants that confidentiality was primary to the study and reminded the participants that pseudonyms would be used if any of their comments were used in future presentations and/or publications resulting from the study, as outlined in the Participant Information Sheet, Consent, and Release of Words Form (see Appendix E) they had received. Additionally, participants were informed that while the principal investigator and note taker was a faculty member of the BS, their participation and comments would not affect their positionality within the principal investigator's past, current, or future classes or otherwise within the MPSU or MPSU BS. The Student Participants in Investigators' Classes section of the Participant Information Sheet, Consent, and Release of Words Form (see Appendix E) addresses that students of the principal investigator would not receive pressure to participate in the study. Following the Focus Group Outline (see Appendix A), the moderator introduced herself and asked participants to consider and reflect briefly upon the MPSU BS's displayed mission. She then shared that the goal of the conversation was to gain participants' insights to social justice at MPSU BS. The moderator elaborated to the focus group participants that she further wanted to understand their perspectives and positions on social justice at their university, in the practice of business, and within society at large. The initial question posed to each of the focus groups was,

"What do the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility mean to business students in a Christian college context?" Participants were asked to share what equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility mean to them. From there, dialogue flowed organically, with the moderator using Focus Group Outline not as a strict list of questions but rather as reference to guide conversation to probe participants' thoughts around the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility.

Immediately following each focus group interview, the principal investigator who served as notetaker during the meetings organized notes drafted during the meeting and summarized the discussion for overall tone and holistic overarching takeaways from participants' dialogue. The focus group data captured via Zoom recordings during the focus group interviews was professionally transcribed. The notes and transcribed data were analyzed according to Grounded Theory principles (Dale & Allen, 1998) to identify the most frequently repeated themes which emerged during the focus group conversations. Qualitative analysis included identifying key themes and concepts and grouping them into thematic/topical categories. Participant annotations and quotes were then individually identified and sorted into the thematic categories. The findings have served as a basis for recommendations to further support and enhance a culture of learning that fosters equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in members of the MPSU community. Additionally, participant demographics were collected (see Appendix B).

Research Questions

The research questions of this study were: (a) How do MPSU BS students perceive the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? (b)What perspectives and experiences (if any) have motivated their interest in or commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility? (c) What curricular and co-curricular supports can enhance the learning

environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students attending a pervasively sectarian university, MPSU?

Data Overview

IRBs' Approval Process for Data Collection

All required materials to conduct human subjects research were submitted for approval to both the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the MPSU's IRB. The research protocol submitted to the IRBs included the following documents: IRB application; Participant Information Sheet, Consent, and Release of Words (see Appendix E); Participant Solicitation Email (see Appendix C); Participant Demographics Form (see Appendix B); Participant Scheduling Email (see Appendix D); Focus Group Outline (see Appendix A); and principal investigator's and research advisor's certifications of current human research training. In April 2020, the proposed research project was submitted the MPSU's IRB. Later that month via emailed letter, the MPSU's IRB approved the project under expedited review status and granted permission to begin gathering data immediately at MPSU. Approval notice from the MPSU's IRB and the University of Mississippi's IRB's protocol submission were sent to the research advisor who upon review and approval of the proposed protocol certified to the University of Mississippi's IRB that I, the student investigator, was knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human participants and had sufficient training and experience to conduct this specific research project in accordance with the approved protocol. Upon the research advisor's certification of the research protocol and her vouched commitment to monitor and supervise the student investigator throughout the data collection process of this project to the University of Mississippi's IRB, the research advisor's approval and research protocol were submitted to the University of Mississippi's IRB by the student

investigator.   In mid-May 2020, the University of Mississippi's IRB sent via email approval of the application to conduct research with human participants based under exempt determination of 20x-194. In late-May 2020, initial solicitations for participation in the focus groups were sent via email (see Appendix C); and, by August and September 2020, the focus groups interviews took place. To protect human subjects who participated in the study, appropriate measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the collected verbal data (e.g., recordings and transcriptions have been kept in a secure, locked, and password-protected computer and in the custody of the principal investigator).

Participants

   Participant Demographics. This study included a purposeful sample of 31 participants who were current students or recent graduates of the MPSU BS and members of a business-related special interest club—to avoid sampling solely by students enrolled in specific courses. Participant solicitation was limited to MPSU BS majors who were members of BS clubs and organizations. Participants (P) self-identified as to which BS club or organization they belonged, and the principal investigator confirmed their individual memberships with BS organization faculty sponsors. Further, focus group meetings were organized in a manner to group participants by BS club or organization to which the participants belonged, as Ivanoff & Hultberg (2006) showed that conversation is livelier amongst groups who are already acquainted. Focus Groups (FG) 1, 2, and 4 was comprised of members of the Accounting Society. Focus Group 3 included members of two BS organizations--Investment Club and Entrepreneurship Club. And Focus Group 5 participants were members of the Service Club.

The overall demographics included 17 males (55%) and 14 females (45%); 25 participants who self-identified as White (81%), 5 who self-identified as Black (16%), and 1 who self-identified as Asian (3%). (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Participant demographics: Gender and Ethnicity

Baseline characteristic	Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3		Focus Group 4		Focus Group 5		Full Sample	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Gender												
Male	3	50	0	0	4	57	5	83	5	83	17	55
Female	3	50	6	100	3	43	1	17	1	17	14	45
Ethnicity												
White	4	66.7	4	66.7	6	85.7	5	83	6	100	25	81
Black	1	16.7	2	33.3	1	14.3	1	17	0	0	5	16
Asian	1	16.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3

Most participants were ages 21 years or younger (n = 24, 77.4%), followed by ages 22-23 (n = 5, 16.1%) and ages 24 and up (n = 2, 6.5%). Most participants were undergraduates (83.9%) with 2 sophomores, 8 juniors, 16 seniors, and 5 recent graduates (16.1%). (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Participant demographics: Age and Year in Program

Baseline characteristic	Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3		Focus Group 4		Focus Group 5		Full Sample	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Age												
</= 21	4	66.7	3	50	7	100	6	100	4	67	24	77.4
22-23	1	16.7	2	33	0	0	0	0	2	33	5	16.1
24+	1	16.6	1	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6.5
Year in Program												
Sophomore	1	16.7	1	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6.5
Junior	1	16.7	0	0	3	43	3	50	1	17	8	25.8
Senior	3	50	3	50	3	43	3	50	4	66	16	51.6
Recent grad	1	16.6	2	33	1	14	0	0	1	17	5	16.1

Note. In this study, recent graduates earned undergraduate degrees from MPSU BS within one year prior to the focus group interviews and were enrolled in MPSU BS graduate programs at the time of the focus group interviews.

One interesting note about the participants' demographics is that the number of males versus females--55% male and 45% female--does not reflect the MPSU's overall student body composition of 63% female and 37% male. Of further interest would be how the gender

demographics of the focus group participants compare to the MPSU BS's gender composition. However, gender demographics for the MPSU BS's student body were not available for review at the time of this study. Another interesting note about the participants' demographics is that the number of participants who self-identify as White (81%) and who self-identify as other-than-White race (19%) does not reflect the MPSU's overall student body composition of 71% White and 29% other-than-White. Again, of further interest would be how the ethnicity demographics of the focus group participants compare to the MPSU BS's racial composition. However, ethnicity demographics for the MPSU BS's student body were not available for review at the time of this study.

Participant Annotations. Brief annotations of each of the participants follow. The narratives about the participants include a combination of participants' comments, distinctive characteristics and/or demographic data. To maintain confidentiality of participants' contributions to the focus group discussions, pseudonyms substitute to denote identity. A list of participants with demographic information (see Table 3) and a list of participants classified by focus group in which they participated (see Table 4) follow.

Table 3

Participant List with Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Major	Classification
Adam	Male	20-21	White	Finance	Senior
Allen	Male	22-23	White	Accounting	Senior
Amanda	Female	18-19	White	Accounting	Sophomore
Andrew	Male	24 or older	White	Accounting	Senior
Brian	Male	20-21	White	Finance	Senior
Clay	Male	20-21	White	Business	Senior
Edward	Male	20-21	White	Finance	Senior
Field	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Senior
Gabe	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Graduate
Gail	Female	20-21	White	Accounting	Senior

Greg	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Senior
Jack	Male	20-21	Black	Accounting	Senior
Jackie	Female	22-23	White	Accounting	Graduate
Jeffrey	Male	20-21	Black	Accounting	Junior
Jeremy	Male	20-21	White	Business	Junior
Julie	Female	20-21	White	Entrepreneurship	Junior
Kathi	Female	18-19	White	Accounting	Senior
Kiley	Female	22-23	Black	Accounting	Graduate
Marsha	Female	20-21	White	Accounting	Junior
Michael	Male	22-23	White	Accounting	Senior
Olivia*	Female	20-21	White	Finance	Junior
Retha	Female	24 or older	White	Accounting	Senior
Ryan	Female	20-21	White	Business	Graduate
Samantha	Female	20-21	White	Accounting	Senior
Sara	Female	20-21	Black	Finance	Junior
Seth	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Junior
Stone	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Junior
Sue	Female	22-23	Asian	Accounting	Graduate
Tonya	Female	20-21	Black	Accounting	Sophomore
Wright	Male	20-21	White	Finance	Senior
Zack	Male	20-21	White	Accounting	Senior

*International Student

Table 4

Participant List by Focus Group

Participant	Focus Group				
	1	2	3	4	5
1	Andrew	Tonya	Adam	Jeffrey	Michael
2	Sue	Gail	Olivia	Zack	Wright
3	Amanda	Kathi	Brian	Field	Julie
4	Jack	Kiley	Jeremy	Stone	Allen
5	Samantha	Retha	Ryan	Clay	Gabe
6	Seth	Jackie	Edward	Marsha	Greg
7			Sara		

Focus Group 1: Accounting Society Members. The overall tone of this focus group meeting was one of an initial resistance to breach, let alone discuss, the subject of social justice within MPSU BS. Accordingly, this focus group meeting was the briefest of the five.

Participants were resistant to talk openly and mention sensitive subjects like race. Andrew (P1), a White nontraditional undergraduate student contributed, "It's awkward being White to bring up race because it's such a sensitive topic. I don't want to offend anyone. So, it's easier to just avoid talking about such topics."

Overall, most participants were unable to define *social responsibility* and what it meant to them, despite *social responsibility* being a component of the mission of the MPSU BS. However, there was consensus that the topic was important as evidenced by Samantha, a White female (P5), "Social justice is important, and students should demonstrate that on campus and should be equipped with social justice values upon graduation." As participants considered the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility, some participants reflected on potential injustices they had personally experienced. Amanda (P3), a White female athlete stated, "Some professors judge student athletes as not being able to learn and treat them differently than non-athletes." Jack (P4), a Black male, said he "thinks of social justice from the perspective of race and racial issues." Otherwise, participants struggled to think of potential injustices they thought other students on campus might face. Nonetheless, at the same time, the group collectively expressed a desire to know if other students around campus felt marginalized, recognizing that MPSU is becoming more diverse in terms of student population. Sue (P2), an Asian student who had recently graduated and who virtually joined the focus group conversation, was asked by other student participants about her experience at MPSU. She indicated that "on the Christian campus" she "had always been treated well regardless of her color, gender, or

religion." She indicated that she had not experienced or observed any social injustices within MPSU BS.

Near the end of the meeting, concern was raised if this topic were being discussed because certain students had expressed feelings of marginalization. Andrew (P1) stated, "If we aren't told people have a problem, there's no way for us to know." Seth (P6), a White male student who joined the meeting virtually, added, "Faith motivates our behavior." Amanda (P3) added, "Show love. Being loving is the answer to bring about social justice. And the Bible gives us the best examples of how to love one another." The conversation ended with input from Jack (P4) that it is the responsibility of the MPSU BS faculty to initiate these conversations and talk about pressing issues of social justice and that it is the responsibility of the administration to instill these topics into the curriculum.

By the end of the meeting, the tone transitioned from one of resistance about the topic to one of curiosity about potential injustices on campus and "how to bring about acceptance" and a recognized need to "accept others for who they are, as Christ would," Amanda (P3). Andrew (P1) stated, "Students recognize that faculty are open to communication and inclusion of all (including potentially marginalized students)" and expressed to the notetaker an interest to "continue the conversation later in private."

Focus Group 2: Accounting Society Members. By chance, Focus Group 2 was comprised entirely of females. Relative to Focus Group 1, the conversation was vigorous and lively, and the topic seemed to resonate with the participants. However, despite the participants' expressed passion for social justice and like FG 1, none were able to articulate their definition or meaning of *social responsibility* as it applied to the mission of the MPSU BS. Rather the topic resonated more with the participants in their personal experiences.

Like Andrew, a White male (FG1, P1), Tonya (P1) and Kiley (P4), both Black females, addressed their feelings of awkwardness in discussing sensitive topics, particularly race. Kiley, a recent graduate, contributed, "Black people here are silent regarding the issue (of race). They haven't been treated poorly but are afraid of being labeled as 'angry black women.'" Both Black participants indicated they think it's best to be silent about the issue of race unless they know they are talking to someone who shares their beliefs. They expressed they did not respond to initial solicitations to participate in the focus group because they were "afraid of talking and being labeled as radicals." But both showed great appreciation for a space to be heard. They indicated they have felt silenced. If they knew it was safe to "speak," they would want to. But they don't have that assurance. Kiley stated, "It's easier to float along silently" than it is to bring attention to and talk about racial issues. Tonya chimed in, "Absolutely! I just want everyone to get along." Kiley continued by expressing how "so glad I am conversations are being started and awareness is being created." Jackie (P6), a White recent graduate and peer and friend of Kiley's, became somewhat visibly emotional and saddened by Kiley's sentiment, expressing that she was "unaware that people on campus had feelings of marginalization, especially one of her dear friends" but that she was "glad to be enlightened." To this comment, Retha (P5), who virtually attended the meeting, interjected that "lots of students don't realize how other students have to live," and pointed out MPSU's policies potentially marginalizing gay students. She stated:

> In their handbook, you can be kicked out for being gay or a member of the LGBT
> community; and I think that's absurd. I understand it's a Christian school; but like, you
> know, like for people who are Christian like you're supposed to love others as yourself,
> and that is excluding an entire community of people that can be kicked out for being who
> they are and something that they cannot control.

Kathi (P3), another White virtual participant, while not very vocal, expressed much non-verbal agreement with Retha. Other topics of potential injustices mentioned briefly included the following: treatment of traditional vs. nontraditional (on-campus vs. commuters) students, religious tolerance of students of non-Christian faith, access to education (specifically related to face-to-face versus virtual learners), affordability of learning at MPSU BS, and inequitable treatment of athletes.

Gail (P2), a White student, expressed, "Greater awareness of what other (students) are facing is needed." She expressed the importance of hearing others' perspectives and a need for willingness and openness of students to hear and want to hear perspectives and voices and experiences of their peers, as done in focus group meeting 2. She stated, "Social justice is following God's plan and holding each other accountable. The Bible calls for us to love one another." Kathi (P3), added:

> God has us all here for a purpose, and we have a responsibility to fill. So, I feel like in following God, our responsibility to others is to follow what God has for us. For, as far as like, socially, and being a member of society, I think following God's plan is going to benefit us as well as it's going to benefit others.

Overall, the group collectively agreed that there is a need for the creation of greater awareness of students' marginalized experiences. They expressed that these pressing topics around social justice be better incorporated into classroom and curriculum. They brainstormed that students and the campus need and could benefit from the creation of safe spaces and places for students to leave feedback about how the school is doing and a place to safely and without fear voice (perceived) injustices. But they recognized doing so is not simple. Jackie (P6) stated:

I think that's like a big struggle right now for Christians everywhere is trying to figure

out how to approach this. Like, on one side I'm called to love others, but I don't support

this so it's very, like, I think like all of us are just trying to figure it out.

Tonya (P1) added, "You don't have to support someone to love someone."

Focus Group 3: Investment Club Members and Entrepreneurship Club Members.

Comprised of seven participants, Focus Group 3 had the most participants, two of which joined

virtually—Jeremy (P4), a White male, and Ryan (P5), a White female who had recently

graduated.   Like FG 1 and 2, participants defined *social justice* in terms of their experiences and

their responsibilities as Christians. Sara (P7), a Black female, opened the dialogue addressing

the pressing issue of current racial injustices in society:

In terms of I guess what equity and social justice and social responsibility means to me,

with everything that's going on with, I guess, with rioters and protesters and everything,

seeing what MPSU's response was to that really meant a lot to me because it basically

meant, do they support me and my culture and my community.

In recognition of MPSU's stance on racial equality, Brian (P3), a White male, contributed:

Yeah, I think as a Christian myself, it is our duty to present, to be loving and not distort

that, right, to fit our own view, right? So, what did Jesus say when people were

oppressed, when the rest of the disciples looked down on the Samaritans, right? He

embraced that. He showed them love, right? And so, like our country has not embraced

African American culture for 200+ years, right? So, what is our responsibility as

Christians, White, non-White, no matter what our ethnicity is, what's our responsibility?

And that is to love like Jesus did, right?

Affordability and access to education at MPSU were addressed by Edward (P6), a White Finance major, as he also recognized the university's efforts to promote social justice stating:

> Coming from a poor family, as a Christian college MPSU offers a great scholarship program. It's one of the reasons I would actually come here at all. With that, they provide aid to those who would otherwise not be able to come to college and really kind of set an equal standing for all students coming in. Because college in general, especially private institutions have kind of had the stigma of only the rich get into them sometimes, and I feel like MPSU has done a great job at countering that with all the financial aid they're able to provide people.

Adam (P1), a White male, shifted the conversation to how students should evaluate pressing issues of social injustice, that being one from a Biblical or ethical approach saying:

> It's so important for us to come up with our own viewpoints on these topics but base them on Biblical principles. You know, we can't accept what our parents have told us our entire lives about people, you know. And we can't accept what a lot of people in our community or even our campus tells us just at face value. I think it's so important for us to read our scriptures ourselves or to evaluate ourselves even if you're not a Christian, you might be of another religion or not religious at all. And I think it's just important to know what you believe, you know, and base those principles on that.

To show agreement and support of Adam's statements, Jeremy (P4) chimed in:

> I believe it's our whole goal as Christians to, make choices for ourselves and learn as we go along. We're currently seeing a lot in the news right now with, you know, stuff that is just happening; and we've all seen it's really important that we make those decisions. It's critical.

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The overall tone of the conversation was one of praise for the MPSU and MPSU BS and their efforts to promote social justice. Jeremy stated:

> MPSU does a pretty good job at, you know, teaching you how to be a servant leader. You know, their classes are kind of focused around that in that regard. So, in a way we'll be equipped to make decisions socially and justifiable because we're able to take what we've learned here, and we see it all happening in the real world right now, you know, in the news as we've talked about today.

However, Olivia (P2), the only international student among the focus groups, challenged the authenticity of motives of students advocating for social justice and the university and school's positions posing:

> As much as I do hope it's people's faith that motivates them, I think there's a certain component of image. You know, you feel this pressure to be a certain way, and you tell yourself it might be your faith driving that; but it can be, no, I want to appear this way to the world rather than, this is what I believe, and this is what I follow.

Ryan (P5) added to the conversation:

> Yeah, I agree with that as well, and I heard somebody say something about the MPSU bubble, and it's definitely a real thing. And I think that it's hard if you're not a Christian or if you're just not as extroverted about it or whatever it is. Coming into it can be extremely intimidating, and I think that maybe break up that bubble a little bit, talking about putting some diversity in that. I don't think it's intentional, but when you're surrounded by all those people because that's the majority at MPSU, it's kind of hard for that not to happen. And most of the events that we have, or clubs you can join, or whatever it is are all Christian based, which it's a Christian college so that's to be

expected, but I think sometimes it's harder for other people to find places where they fit in.

  Focus Group 4: Accounting Society Members. Similar to Focus Groups 1, 2, and 3, Focus Group 4 participants conceptualized *equity*, *social justice*, and *ethical responsibility* in terms of their Christian calling. Unlike the other focus groups, the conversation took a broader perspective, rather than honing in on specific potential and observed inequities on campus. Marsha (P6), a White female, opened the conversation by saying:

> I believe that equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility are very important to college students attending a Christian university. Majority of the students that attend MPSU identify as a Christian, meaning that they exhibit characteristics of a Christian. As Christians, we are called to be kind and compassionate to everyone we come in contact with.

Stone (P4), a White male, added:

> I feel like especially from a Christian perspective, you know, we should want to help other people anyway we can, not just, you know, to make as much money as possible but to share a little bit. Not give it all away because we want to help ourselves as well, but we should be able to realize that we need to help other people.

Clay (P5), a White male, continued:

> I think that's a really important part of like running a business of any kind because the community where you're located, they're the ones that are putting into your business and buying your product. And I think it's really important for a business to give back to the community for which it serves.

To add to the Christian business perspective, Zack (P2), a White male, contributed:

I know like in recent decades, the businesses that haven't honored ethical standards like

WorldCom or Enron, those kinds of things. Society has not rewarded them for that. In

fact, they shut them down. Like it's becoming a cultural norm to where we're not going

to reward unethical responsibilities. In fact, we're going to do the opposite. We're going

to put forth the, whatever it is, environmental regulations or accounting standards and

things like that just to make sure that companies are doing what's right by their customers

and society.

The participants felt that issues around social justice were prevalent within the BS curriculum.

Marsha (P6) stated:

These topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility are extremely important

within the BS's curriculum. All business students are required to take Faith and Ethics

(class), as well as Business Communication. The professors do not just teach from a

business standpoint but also from a Christian outlook on life. I believe that the BS works

together with social justice initiatives by better educating their students on social

injustices we face in business today. The BS is sending open-minded and open-hearted

men and women out into the work force.

I mean we, like a lot of our classes, we have Strategic Management, Global

Managements of Business, we have Taxation where we talk about stuff that's happening

like every day, whether political, legal, economic, it doesn't matter. It's affecting every

single one of those classes, and those are three specific classes where you must talk about

and be aware of situations in the world. Like specifically COVID right now, like with

taxes that's massive. It's become very different, and the way people are being treated

because of these things being changed, I think the school does a very good job having

these classes where you must interact with each other and talk about these things. Like

Strategics is kind of an edgy class because it's very abrasive, and you talk about very

uncomfortable stuff even, but it raises awareness in the class. (Field (P3))

Jeffrey (P1), a Black male, offered another example:

And then with the Global Business that class they highlighted issues throughout the entire

world. Like when COVID first hit, I was in that class; and we talked it through, looking

at other companies to try and see what they were doing. Like what their statement was

and how they're taking a stand on COVID and how they were trying to help in the matter.

And how all that ties into business and how each company around the world were all

trying to do a common goal, trying to still make a profit even though there's a pandemic

and how they help out the community and stuff like that.

One thing that I really like about our curriculum is the emphasis on ethics. Because, you

know, you're going to school to learn how to do something, but I like that we make all

the students learn how to do it, like, the morally right way. Because, yeah, you can do a

good job on paper, but at the end of the day if you don't make the right decision for your

employees and your customers, then that's not good for you, your business, or the

community that you serve. So, I think that's an important thing that we do here is that we

make sure that all our students that come through take classes that are big on ethics and

they know about social responsibility, all that kind of stuff to make sure that they, once

they get out and start working in the business world, that they do everything the right

way. (Clay (P5))

The participants did recognize that there is room for continued improvement around the

topics of social justice on campus. Stone (P4) stated:

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I know there are a lot of different communities of people. You know, I'm sure there's different religions here that probably feel kind of marginalized. And gay people at MPSU, you know, with the Christian mission that we have, also may feel marginalized as well even though, you know, our Christian message is to love everybody. It would be difficult I could see from their eyes. Obviously, we already talked about how other minorities would feel here. I just think as a college, as a university, we need to realize that there are people that aren't, that don't, come from the same background as everybody else and acknowledge that and reach out to those people as much as we can.

Focus Group 5: Service Club Members. Participants lacked a clear understanding of how to conceptualize or define social justice, as precisely questioned by Michael (P1), a White male:

How would you, or anybody, define *social justice*? Because I think that's like really the important part of how we look at it and how we talk about it with one another. I'm just interested to hear how someone might define that if it's okay to ask.

To which Julie (P3), a White female, responded:

It feels really broad to me. I feel like it means a lot of different things for a lot of different people. But probably the most prevalent right now is racial justice. And that's probably the most important. But I've also seen people use it in terms of like environmental justice, even animal justice--all different spectrums.

Gabe (P5) contributed:

To me, a general definition would be providing equal opportunity and social treatment to people of all demographics. So, it's like being willing to be just as nice to the janitor as

you would the CEO, you know. It's more than just racial but also economical; and it's just kind of, everyone should have an equal opportunity to get a job, like go get help now.

The group recognized the importance of developing an understanding of the topic being discussed, as expressed by Michael (P1):

It's important because everybody's talking about it and thinking about it right now, so you need some kind of, some kind of understanding of what's being said on a macro scale. And I think that's important to have an understanding on those things and to understand what your viewpoint is and how to relate and care for people and speak truth into confusion for people in the midst of a lot of unrest, a lot of tension, a lot of frustration, a lot of anger. It's important as any person; but for a Christian particularly to be able to speak truth and to be loving in both of those, or both of those at the same time.

Wright (P2), a White male, made the point:

But, it's important to know the why before going into these things. Are we doing this because it's what everybody else is doing or it's the trend? Or are we doing this because this is actually something that concerns us biblically?

Michael's comments led into a discussion about the obligation of Christians to be aware of pressing issues around social justice topics. Julie added:

I think, walking with God you learn to see people as God sees them, and He's a respecter of persons. He sees each person individually without any bias or any comparison. So, when you are able to see and value people in that way, that takes away all bias of any sort. Actually, beyond that, just not have any bias, seeing people where there are. Zechariah 7:10 says, 'Do no oppress the widowed, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor,' which says to me, beyond just not treating people differently, being mindful of

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people's afflictions and what could be holding them back by other's people's biases and meet them where they're at there.

After that quoting of scripture above and about midway through the meeting, the dynamic of the conversation shifted, focusing on oppressors and those being oppressed. Michael commented, "I don't largely buy into the Marxist narrative of the world is set up with the oppressed and the oppressor." In response, Gabe added:

I liked your comment about there not being many, not really being oppressors and the oppressed. I think people are far too dynamic to be just put into those two categories. You know, I feel like you're not really oppressed unless you're telling yourself you are. You know, I think it's really easy in life to focus on the disadvantages you have; but, you know, everyone in this room has completely different advantages and disadvantages that we're all going through. We've got some privileges you might have been blessed with but also some you wish you would've had.

Julie added:

Yeah, I agree in that it seems very much like there's more telling people, 'You're a victim, and you're going to be oppressed forever, and you have been oppressed forever' than there actually is oppression. I'm not saying there's not oppression, but I think this drilling of victim mindset in people will never empower them. That will never give them a rise out of it, and that's just going to drive them into anger, and that can lead to destruction of their own lives.

While the conversation and perspectives were quite different from the other four meetings, this, the lengthiest of the meeting, was perhaps the most revealing that development

and continued conversations around these topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility is needed. Julie contributed:

> I think regarding social justice specifically, it's important to be educated on that because more and more businesses are starting to openly take stances and support different social justice movements and the like. So, to enter the workforce to a business that is very open about supporting a social justice movement, and you might not agree or not understand, and that might be a hinderance there. So, I just think as business is integrating itself in social movements, so should our education of business.

Wright questioned:

> Is it our responsibility as a Christian school to take these topics that secularly are being talked about so much to put Christian value on them and line them up with what we believe? Educate our students now, biblically, on how to perceive those so that when we're out there, when we are getting this other information, so we know how to test it.

Gabe contributed:

> MPSU BS does a good job of teaching the business side of ethics; but as far as social ethics in general, I feel like the BS doesn't necessarily talk about it because it might feel like it's not business related. You know; but if it did, I don't know that that would be a bad thing to bring up some social issues because, you know, all of these things have an impact on consumers and producers.

"Maybe we could maybe talk about that a little more in our curriculum," per Allen (P4). *Note*. Focus Group 5 was comprised solely of participants of White race.

Potential Limitations

Potential data limitations impacting the results of this study include acquiescence bias (participants agreeing with the moderator or other focus group participants), sponsor bias (participants being aware that the questions pertained to the MPSU BS they currently or formerly attended and that the researcher is a faculty member in the MPSU BS), and undetected participant bias due to information gaps. For example, the demographic information collected on participants omitted requesting information on socioeconomic status, criminal history, or sexual orientation/gender identity, rendering it impossible to discern if participant bias exists in one or more of these socially constructed categories.

Lastly, the five focus group interviews took place in August and September 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic, necessitating that the focus groups occurred partially virtually (e.g., livestreamed via Zoom) versus entirely face-to-face. In total, twenty-three participants met face-to-face at MPSU BS, and eight participants joined the focus group interviews virtually. This time period was in the midst of national surge phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic where many faculty and students were becoming more accustomed to video conferencing. Because individuals have varying degrees of comfort with video conferencing and differing levels of digital competency, participants' level of engagement in the discussion and their responses could have been impacted by this meeting format. Relative to the participants who met face-to-face, the virtual participants were less engaged in the focus group dialogue. To spur input from those who joined the focus group meetings virtually, the moderator and in-person participants numerously had to directly ask the virtual participants if they wished to add to the conversation. However, because of the Pandemic, and to the positive, student participants may have been more primed to use Zoom and may have known how to better engage in distance formats. To the

negative, the Pandemic may have influenced who participated in the focus groups, eliminating

some potential participants who would have otherwise chosen to participate in the focus groups.

Initial attempts to solicit participants occurred in May and June 2020 when the campus was

operating academically entirely remotely, yielding almost no response from solicited

participants. It was not until Fall 2020 when campus reopened, and some students returned to

the physical classroom and MPSU BS organizations began to meet again in-person on campus

that momentum for participation in the focus groups was gained.

Presentation of Findings

This study integrated two key principles from The Carnegie Project on the Education

Doctorate. The focus groups provided "field-based opportunities to analyze problems of

practice" (Carnegie Project on Education Doctorate, n.d.), and discussion questions centered

around participants' perspectives of the knowledge learned in their program as well as their

personal experiences with issues related to equity, social justice and ethical responsibility.

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis. First, MBSU BS students do not

have well developed definitions of *equity*, *social justice*, and *ethical responsibility* in terms of a

Christian college context. Rather, most conceptualize their understanding around these topics in

terms of observations or lived experiences, typically their own experiences. Second, MBSU BS

students believe Christians have a calling and/or an obligation to treat others inclusively and to

act in a socially responsible and ethical manner. Students repeatedly expressed desires to

emulate Christ's examples of love for all humanity. Conversely, some participants

acknowledged that some students posed as social advocates as an act of self-promotion,

including individuals promulgating the image termed the "MPSU Bubble." Third, MPSU BS

students' perceptions of the MPSU's level of commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical

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responsibility varied, with some respondents expressing the MPSU was not taking active steps to support an equitable and inclusive environment while others felt the campus community welcomed all individuals. There was consistent agreement that while the MPSU BS's curriculum did include information about equity, social justice, and ethics, that it would be beneficial for MPSU BS students for the BS to boost content and to include additional learning opportunities so that upon graduation MPSU BS graduates are well equipped with a skillset to apply information around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility topics in business practices and beyond.

Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility: Defined

The MPSU BS has a mission of offering a "quality business education in a Christian environment," equipping its graduates with "essential business principles, effective communication skills, and an appreciation for social responsibility and ethical values" (MPSU BS, "Mission Statement," 2020). In each of the five focus group meetings, this mission was displayed for students to reflect upon. The initial question posed during each of the focus groups was, "What do the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility mean to business students in a Christian college context?" None of the participants articulated their definition of equity, social justice, or ethical responsibility. Further to this point, in Focus Group 5, Michael (P1) frankly asked, "How would you, or anybody, define social justice? Because I think that's like really the important part of how we look at it and how we talk about it with one another. I'm just interested to hear how someone might define that, if it's okay to ask."

Rather than having well developed formalized definitions of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility, most participants conceptualized these topics through their observations and lived experiences, specifically personal injustices that they had experienced. For a few

examples, Jack (FG1, P4), Tonya (FG2, P1), and Kiley (FG2, P4), spoke to racial injustices they had experienced. Retha (FG2, P5) spoke about gender and sexual orientation injustices she was personally concerned about. And Edward (FG3, P6) spoke about his experiences regarding access and affordability to private education.

Within this theme of MPSU BS students lacking well developed definitions of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility, a sub-theme emerged--a fear or resistance to talk about these sensitive topics. While conversation and open dialogue around these topics could help students develop well defined definitions and appreciation for these topics, many participants expressed resistance to talk about these topics for reasons ranging from fear of being offensive (Andrew, FG1, P1) to fear of being labeled radical (Tonya, FG2, P1; Kiley, FG2, P4) to fear of being kicked out of school (Retha, FG2, P5).

Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility: A Christian Calling to Love

The most common and repeated theme throughout all five focus group meetings was that Christians have a calling to follow Christ's example and accordingly be advocates promoting equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility within the MPSU BS, MPSU campus, and society in general. Within this finding, the most used word was *love, Christ's love*.

The following quotes collectively evidence MPSU BS students' desire to emulate Christ's love for mankind and accordingly adhere to the tenets of social justice: "We do attend a Christian university; so as Christians, we are called to find social justice and care for everyone and love everyone," Samantha (FG1, P5). "I think it's pretty obvious when you just think of the Christian faith in general, our whole encompassing mantra, it's love thy neighbor," Andrew (FG1, P1). "Like the sole purpose, like the sole foundation of stuff is to love thy neighbor. I

think that just kind of boils everything down. If everyone did that, I think the whole world and society would be a lot better," Seth (FG1, P6). Jackie (FG2, P6) added:

> For me, like in the Bible, Jesus says like to love others and love God. So, in social responsibility that's it--as a community, love others… Some things are clearly our beliefs, but we are called to love others no matter what, so I think that's the ultimate show of Christians.

"For people who are Christian, you're supposed to love others as yourself…," Retha (FG2, P5). "We're not the ones who are supposed to judge, according to the Bible. We're supposed to love and accept everyone. Because everyone's got to fix their own problems at the end of the day," Tonya (FG2, P1). "What is our responsibility as Christians, White, non-White, no matter what our ethnicity is, what's our responsibility? And that is to love like Jesus did, right?" Brian (FG3, P3). "Jesus told us in the scriptures to love all people as fellow believers and not even as believers. It says to love you even if you're non-religious because Christ loved them too. He loved us when we weren't," (Adam (FG 3, P1)). Sara (FG3, P7) contributed:

> Now, even though I may not stand for what they (the LGBT community) stand for, I will still support equity. I love my neighbor even though I may not agree with what they agree with. But that's what I mean when I say that they should support it, because we're taught to love.

"Our Christian message is to love everybody," Stone (FG4, P4). "We all need to look at each other as human beings and just love one another, especially here at a Christian college," Allen (FG5, P4). "We offer people that need assistance more assistance, kind of like how Christ helped the poor more than the rich. And then with social justice, just showing everyone the same love that he did," Greg (FG 5, P6).

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Some participants emphasized the importance of authentically emulating Christ's love through advocacy for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility rather than for self-glorification. Brian (FG3, P3) said, "I think that people at this school to a great extent want to be labeled as such (social justice advocates), but actions do not back up with what they're trying to be portrayed as." Adam (FG3, P1), add to Brian's statements, "People talk about the MPSU Bubble…, and that is all playing into that image and trying to climb the social ladder based on your advocacy, when you're not actually advocating anything. You just say that you are."

Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility: MPSU & MPSU BS's Commitment

Focus groups' data revealed varied perspectives of MPSU BS students on the MPSU's level of commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. Some respondents expressed the MPSU was not taking active steps to support an equitable and inclusive environment while others felt the campus community welcomed all individuals. For example, Kiley (FG2, P4) reflected on a time when:

> I went to question some things, and I thought I was walking into the Black Student Union, and I showed up, and it was not the Black Student Union. It was the Baptist Student Union, is that what it's called? I guess I should have looked that up and put that together.

To her point, Retha (FG2, P5), added:

> The University of Alabama has in place the 'safe space,' I think is what its' called. They can go and literally sit and just talk to somebody. And I don't mean counseling, I don't mean anything like that. Like somewhere you can go and have someone you can sit and talk to where if you've had a bad day or you've experienced something, that person can send it higher up and a way to handle the situation whatever else. Just a way that you can

go and actually express how you feel without having the fear of backlash from your professors or anyone that's higher up. Like just somewhere you can go that's completely anonymous that you can talk to somebody about anything you have concerns with. Because I don't feel like we have easy access to someone that we can express concerns to other than like where we're at right now. Like there's nowhere to go that we can express concerns and I wish that there was a place in the business school that we could do that.

To the contrary, Jeremy (FG3, P4) stated:

MPSU really does a good job at embracing…social justice. You know, I see emails that come through quite a bit that really promote that (conversation), which I think is good--being able to give students a voice on campus to talk about issues that we see in society, talk about those problems, and then, you know, have an open conversation back and forth about how we can go about in course correcting that so we don't repeat ourselves or make a mistake, that sort of thing.

Similar positive and negative perceptions of the MPSU's commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility within campus resonated among all focus groups.

There was consistent consensus among the focus groups that the MPSU BS's curriculum did include information about equity, social justice, and ethics. However, it would be beneficial for MPSU BS students for the BS to boost content and to include additional learning opportunities so that upon graduation MPSU BS graduates are well equipped with a skillset to apply information around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility topics in business practices and beyond. "Social responsibility in business is very prevalent in the MPSU BS curriculum. I think it's cool they (they BS faculty) do such a good job of specifically talking about social responsibility as a businessperson and on ethics as a businessperson," Brian (FG3,

P3). "We go into it (practice) knowing more, I think, about ethics than most colleges would give us. I don't know if any other public universities even talk about that in their curriculum," Adam (FG3, P1). "Our curriculum emphasizes ethics. You're going to school to learn how to do something, but I like that we make all the students learn how to do it, like, the morally right way," Clay (FG4, P5). "Our curriculum does a really good job at talking about social responsibility and ethics in almost all my classes," Julie (FG5, P3). But "maybe that (social justice) is something we can be more intentional about integrating and finding a way to fit it in to more classes," Wright (FG5, P2). "Maybe we could maybe talk about that (social justice) a little more in our curriculum," Allen (FG5, P4). Gabe (FG5, P5) acknowledged the importance of academic preparation prior to entering the business profession and starting a career by saying:

> Those are things (a skillset to apply information around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility topics in business practices and beyond) you need to establish in school before you leave and go to the workforce. There's going to be a lot of pressure to alter them to fit your current environment (business field).

Overall and collectively, participants notedly expressed a need and desire to continue conversations in the MPSU BS around the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility for reasons including creating enhanced learning opportunities for MPSU BS students and creating safe outlets for expressing and freely voicing injustices MPSU BS experienced to yield change, fostering a more socially just MPSU and MPSU BS environment. "I think we could use that (relatively small campus size) to our advantage to have some of the conversations about social justice and stuff that we need to have," Seth (FG1, P6). To the theme of Christian students being called by Christ to show love, Jackie (FG2, P6) expressed that "having conversations like this" is an "effective way to show love and win people for Christ"

perhaps more so than "like reading and studying from the Bible" and making them go to Chapel that "gives off a vibe of like hell and being righteous." Organizations like "the Multicultural Student Association…opens the door for, you know, more open conversations to where we can address certain types of (social justice) issues," Clay (FG4, P5) implying that the MPSU BS could establish a similar organization for MPSU BS students.

To address each of the research questions presented in this study, findings are organized by participant responses as they relate to the research questions. Each of the three research questions follows.

Research Question 1: How do MPSU BS students perceive the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility?

Participants articulated a consensus that equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility are important, and linked to the perception that as a Christian, an individual is called by Christ to uphold these principles, "The point is you need to accept everyone. That's what Christians are supposed to do whether the other person is in the wrong or the right," Andrew (FG1, P1). In the same focus group, another participant mirrored this perspective:

> In a Christian university, I think that it would mean just treating everyone how God would treat you and how God would treat everyone else. And you don't have the right to make a decision on how someone should be treated just because you don't agree with anything that they do. (Samantha, P5)

This concept of a religious obligation or calling to treat others in an equitable, just and ethical manner to uphold Biblical teachings and tenets of Christianity was echoed throughout the discussions, "We use the scriptures, we use the Holy Spirit to tell us, Is this right or wrong? Is this ethically appropriate for me to do in this business? That is our motivation" (Adam, FG3,

P1). "Motivation to do the right thing is Scripture and Christ's example. Scripture teaches against injustice and rather promotes justice. Therefore, Christians have an obligation of promoting justice...that's how Christians should behave" (Wright, FG5, P2).

A related theme was deliberately acting in ways that the individual felt Christ would want them to act as His representative. For example, an FG 4 participant noted, "I think as Christians and being a Christian school, like, we're all motivated to do things, um, the morally right way and in an ethical manner because, um, how Christ would want us to represent him" (Clay, P5). Similarly, a participant in FG 3 remarked:

> You know, we're doing it for Christ and His glory, not for our own advocacy or not even for the social issues at hand, we're not even doing it for them or the people who are affected by these social injustices. We're doing it for His kingdom, for His glorification, not our own. (Adam, P1)

Research Question 2: What perspectives and experiences (if any) have motivated their interest in or commitment to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility?

Participants had a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Some participants felt these principles were important, and that it was positive others were taking action, but they were not personally involved in advocating for equity, social justice and ethical responsibility.   For example, Jack (FG1, P4) remarked, "They (the Multicultural Student Association) are actually out there doing something and leading and that's really encouraging." Jackie (FG2, P6) identified an internal conflict they felt between their personal beliefs and the tenets of their religious faith, "Like, on one side, I'm called to love others, but I don't support this (referring to someone who has a sexual orientation other than straight) so it's very, like, I think, like, all of us are just trying to figure it out."

Other participants had life experiences that spurred their commitment to uphold the tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. A female participant shared occasions where she felt they had experienced gender inequality within the MPSU BS: "It's no secret that in some of my classes it's predominantly guys, and my professors have a tendency to speak directly to them when it comes to tough business matters" (Sara, FG 3, P7). Sara cited "unconscious gender inequality" in the academic environment and noted, "there's no policy you can put in place to make my professors teach a certain way...sometimes it's just so ingrained in whatever community or society that you're in a quick change just will not happen overnight."

Other participants admitted they had experienced some form of inequity, but they choose to remain silent as a means of self-preservation, or protection of others, "It (racism at the MPSU) is something that you do not talk about....I never want to become that angry black woman. I don't want to be the one who makes everything a race issue" (Kiley, FG 2, P4). Kiley further lamented, "I know that in order for me to go on I need to keep my opinions in check no matter how I feel about them....Sometimes there is a race side of it, and you have to function and keep your feelings in check." Another FG 2 participant Tonya (P1) acknowledged she has also kept silent out of fear. She shared, "The stuff that's happened is very unspeakable...I don't like talking about it....I ain't going to cause upset with everything else happening....I don't want anybody to look at me, like...that's a mad black woman." (Gail, FG2, P2) reported friends who were gay being "literally terrified someone could find out" and that they would then be expelled from the MPSU. As Retha (FG2, P5) remarked, "(the MPSU) is excluding an entire community of people that can be kicked out for being who they are and something that they cannot control."

FG 2 had some discussion about the dichotomy between tenets of Christianity and MPSU's blanket policy on sexual impropriety (see below). Retha (P5) explained to the group,

"If you look up [MPSU's] student handbook it tells you they have the right to dismiss you from campus if they discover or find out that you are participating in homosexual activities." In response to this comment, other students expressed feelings of uncertainty about MPSU's alleged stance against same sex relationships. Tonya (P1) opined, "I think that's [the policy] absurd. As a Christian university you should, whether it's wrong or not, as a Christian, you should support every group of people. Because at the end of the day...we're supposed to love and accept everyone." Others agreed, "I think that's what's wrong with the world right now….yes, some things are clearly our [Christian] beliefs, but we are called to love others no matter what" (Jackie, P6). To clarify, the MPSU student handbook's blanket clause on "sexual impropriety" states:

> Consensual Sexual Activity: Consensual sexual activity includes, but is not limited to participation in, advocacy for, or appearance of engaging in premarital sex, extramarital sex, or homosexual activities, or other sexual expression that may conflict with the Christian identity or faith mission of [MPSU].

In contrast to the theme of implementing actions that are equitable, just, and ethically responsible was a counter theme of individuals overtly supporting these principles as a method of self-promotion and to bolster their personal image, "Image is a big thing for me. I may not like the person that I'm still being good towards...I do it honestly for personal gain because I know that me being ethical now will help me in the future" (Sara, FG 3, P7). A second participant in FG 3 Edward (P6) stated, "Everyone wants to be labeled as an advocate...it makes you seem like a better person...as far as labeling goes, everyone wants it…I think there's more of a tendency to [want to] be seen as something more than be something." Olivia (FG3, P2) concluded, "you feel this pressure to be a certain way and you tell yourself it might be your faith driving that but it can

be, no, I want to appear this way to the world rather than this is what I believe, and this is what I follow."

Other participants revealed they espoused principles of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility to promote their image in conformity with cultural norms. Participants described the seeming "MPSU Bubble" around the campus community, using a familiar phrase for the college experience—but in this case, with the added burden of upholding Christian beliefs and values and social practices that include equity, social justice, and ethics. Ryan (FG3, P5) affirmed the "MPSU bubble," noting that it is "definitely a real thing...it can be extremely intimidating, and I think that maybe breaking up that bubble a bit (would encourage diversity)." Adam (FG3, P1) concurred, People talk about the MPSU Bubble and that kind of thing, and that is all playing into that image and trying to climb the social ladder based on your advocacy, when you're not actually advocating anything. You just say that you are." Field (FG4, P3) aptly noted that students often claim to be a social advocate "for the sole purpose of you want (sic) people to like you." Field elaborated stating, "There's no way to read minds" and that it was difficult to "tell what people's true intentions are." Field admitted a preference to lead and not follow because it was challenging to discern who is "stepping up" and who is a poseur, "Image at MPSU is a problem to me…that's my two cents." Marsha (FG4, P6) in concluded:

> MPSU students are a very tight knit community, and they hold each other to a higher standard...I think it could also have a 'monkey see, monkey do' effect. Doing the 'right' thing around here seems to also be the popular thing to do. You are an outcast if you do not exhibit these qualities (equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility).

These pressures participants expressed are much like those of the environment at many other private liberal arts colleges—as well as dealing with pressures are a part of the developmental

tasks of young adulthood. At MPSU however, there are the added pressures of Christian identity.

Research Question 3: What curricular and co-curricular supports can enhance the learning environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students attending a pervasively sectarian university, MPSU?

Based on participants' responses, the MPSU BS is teaching content pertaining to equity, social justice, and ethics. These concepts are relevant to students entering a business profession, and participants indicated they want to be well-equipped for the workforce with an understanding and appreciation of these principles. Stone (FG4, P4) affirmed, "Well, I think MPSU BS really does put its money where its mouth is. It really does emphasize, you know, ethical decision making." Gabe (FG5, P5) acknowledged the importance of academic preparation prior to embarking on a business career noting:

> Those are things (a skillset to apply information around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility topics in business practices and beyond) you need to establish in school before you leave and go to the workforce. There's going to be a lot of pressure to alter them to fit your current environment (business field).

The third focus group provided meaningful comments regarding how MPSU BS was educating students about equity, social justice, and ethics. Jeremy (P4) remarked, "It's something they take seriously and something they (faculty) do a great job at is making ethical leaders, making ethical decisions...I'm really impressed with what they've done." Ryan (P5) felt faculty were role models for students noting, "The teachers in the BS really live it. They show us every day how to make those decisions that are ethical and morally correct. So, I think that's huge too, to have not only people who are teaching you, but living it as well."

Existing curricular and co-curricular supports participants found helpful in learning these tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in MPSU BS included the BS's curriculum's content as well as a campus-wide organization and BS symposium. Eight participants among the five focus groups discussed faculty's inclusion of ethics in course content. Four participants cited courses' content included discussion of topics around equity, social justice, and social or ethical responsibility. Two participants discussed the helpfulness of the MPSU's Multicultural Student Association in helping MPSU BS learn about social justice. And one participant pointed out that the MPSU BS's annual week-long Faith, Service, and Ethics symposium helped bring to campus real-world insight and business leaders' experiences with the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility.

Participants suggested ways to affect organizational changes to curricular and co-curricular supports to enhance the learning environment for fostering equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility among business students. While participants acknowledged their courses MPSU BS touch on equity, social justice, and ethics, the consensus was that the MPSU/MPSU BS could expand existing learning opportunities and weave the content across the broader curriculum. Kiley (FG 2, P4) remarked, "There's (sic) some areas that the voice of social responsibility, I think that it could be louder. I think sometimes we shy away from the conversation." The discussion regarding social justice in FG 1 included a comment from Seth (P6):

> I think the teachers could definitely use a lot of examples that we see today to teach us….I mean some of the stuff that's happened is pretty obvious, like, who is in the wrong. I think the teachers could definitely instill that in some of their curriculum and teach us about that.

Other ideas included the creation of a MPSU social media account that promotes

awareness of issues related to social justice, including discussions regarding equity, social

justice, and ethical responsibility. Other ideas included creating learning experiences that

encourage application of these concepts and tenets that are presented and taught in course

content through (service learning) projects and other assignments.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative inquiry project yield several implications that suggest the

MPSU would benefit from strengthening the connections between the MPSU mission statement,

the MPSU BS mission statement, and the curriculum. For example, participants occasionally

used insensitive language during focus group discussions and seemed unaware that their diction

could be interpreted as biased or insensitive. I have not attributed the examples to a specific

focus group or participants to keep the participants' identities confidential. Examples of

participants' lack of awareness included the use of the term homosexual instead of gay; the

perspective that Christians are morally superior to non-Christians; using pronouns such as "they"

to refer to individuals who are part of a different ethnic or religious group; and suggesting a

segregated worship center for non-Christian students, to name a few. These examples suggest

that members of the MPSU community could benefit from educational opportunities to learn

neutral language and to explore diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The focus group interviews further demonstrated that participants felt the concepts of

ethical responsibility, equity, and social justice were important to implement in their personal

and professional lives, but they struggled to articulate how to apply these principles in their daily

lives. While participants concurred that MPSU strongly championed Christian values, several

individuals noted they felt the campus community was ambivalent when it came to social

advocacy. Other participants affirmed they had not given thought to these issues and that engagement in campus-wide conversations were something important and necessary.

The inquiry process revealed that MPSU could take steps to promote equitable, just, and ethically responsible practices. For example, MPSU could develop a statement about the institution's position around nurturing a diverse and inclusive community. In doing do so, MPSU could form a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committee to serve as an advisory role to MPSU administration for development of a DEI strategic plan for implementation of initiatives to promote and enable an inclusive environment for faculty, students, and staff while championing organizational change. Initiatives may include but may not be limited to the provision of counseling services for students; the implementation of a bias intervention team for reporting incidents; and development of curricular and co-curricular interventions for exploration of DEI topics in "safe spaces" to foster an inclusive intellectual, academic, and social community.

Summary

This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) sought to explore the perspectives of business students enrolled at a pervasively sectarian university located in the southern United States (MPSU) about the importance of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. A qualitative, focus group interview design with 31 participants sought to learn more about students' interest in advocacy for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility and their ideas about potential curricular and co-curricular supports to enhance the learning environment relative to these issues.

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis. MBSU BS students do not have well developed definitions of *equity*, *social justice*, and *ethical responsibility*; but, rather, most conceptualize their understanding around these topics in terms of observations or lived

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experiences, typically their own experiences. Second, Christians have a calling and/or an obligation to treat others inclusively and to act in a socially responsible and ethical manner. Participants repeatedly expressed desires to emulate Christ's examples of love for all humanity. Conversely, some participants acknowledged that they posed as social advocates as an act of self-promotion, including individuals promulgating an image they termed the "the MPSU Bubble." Lastly, opinions about MPSU's level of inclusiveness varied with some respondents expressing that MPSU was not taking active steps to support an equitable and inclusive environment while others felt the campus community welcomed all individuals. There was consistent agreement among participants that the MPSU Business School (BS) did include information about equity, social justice, and ethics in course content. Participants further agreed that it would be beneficial to boost content and to include learning opportunities for deeper application of the information to practice.

This study provided valuable insights into students' views of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility through their curricular and co-curricular experiences in a business school in a religiously affiliated academic institution. These findings may have some transferability to other undergraduate business school environments at pervasively sectarian higher education institutions. The ability to interpret the results for an academic program setting could be heightened by increased depth of interviews with students enrolled in business classes at other Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) or similarly sized Christian universities in the South with a business school. The study could also attempt to recruit a more diverse participant base. Additionally, focus group interview settings may "silence" marginalized identities. Individual interviews with students from marginalized identities may give a more balanced viewpoint of this issues in action. Since establishing and building relationships are the

best venue for this type of exploration, I would recommend, perhaps, going much deeper, by conducting an ethnographic study of the MPSU BS student environment, keeping in mind the importance of participant confidentiality given potential institutional policies and repercussions. A survey of the institutional policies on DEI would also provide insights into common practices across Christian academic communities regarding equity and social justice. A secondary study of researching faculty perceptions of these topics and the instructional methods they utilize to integrate the concepts of equity, ethics, and social justice into their courses would provide information on current practice and potentially highlight gaps in the curriculum that if addressed, would strengthen an inclusive institutional culture as well as enhance student preparation for entering the workforce equipped to be socially and ethically astute business professionals.

Manuscript 3: Implementation and Dissemination Plan

Summary of the Problem of Practice

Problem of Practice

The goal of this qualitative focus group interview study was to highlight the voices of undergraduate business students regarding their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. The study context is a Business School (BS) at a pervasively sectarian Christian university in the American South MPSU and is one of the 180 members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).

Historically the MPSU student body has been predominantly female and White. The composition of the student body has changed due to the increased enrollment of (a) international students, (b) previously incarcerated students, (c) veteran students, (d) students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and (e) students identifying LGBTQ+, including in the School of Business (BS). This increased diversity of the student body emphasizes the need for organizational change to welcome, accommodate, serve, and teach all students.

Although the MPSU student body has changed, MPSU continues to implement a policy on sexual impropriety that uses the term "homosexual" and further defines same-sex sexual activities and sexual activities outside of marriage as improper. Furthermore, MPSU exercises Title IX exemptions granted to CCCU members and has tacitly approved the tenets of MS H.B. 1523, legally enabling religiously affiliated academic institutions to impede the full inclusion or otherwise continue to marginalize students with non-binary gender and sexual identities on CCCU member campuses.

The combination of Mississippi's passage of the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act combined with MPSU Title IX exemptions, has placed MPSU students and later, graduates, at risk for being stigmatized as individuals who condone discrimination and intolerance, potentially impacting their marketability and the scope of their employment opportunities. The value of this study is exploring MPSU BS students' perceptions about potential injustices in the classroom and beyond to learn more about the MPSU and MPSU BS environments to illuminate areas that may benefit from organizational change to provide opportunities for improved inclusion, learning, and student development. Kiley (P4) from Focus Group 2 voiced, "This conversation (about social justice) is needed, and that's something that's difficult as far as during our current situation. We need to take it apart and have an honest conversation about it and other people." Participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for participants who shared their marginalized experiences and perspectives, illuminating areas where change around social justice is warranted. Near the end of Focus Group 2, Jackie (P6) expressed, "I just appreciate this honest feedback (about others' marginalized experiences)."

Data Collection and Interpretation Processes

The study involved conducting five focus group interviews with each focus group comprised of six to seven students recruited from the membership of BS student organizations at MPSU and yielded a total of 31 participants. After the research proposal for the study was approved by the MPSU IRB and the University of Mississippi IRB for human subjects research, email solicitations for participation in the study (see Appendix C) were sent to BS students who were members of the Accounting Society, Entrepreneurship Club, Investment Club, and Service Club. Focus group meetings were scheduled via doodle polls (see Appendix D) and conducted in August and September 2020. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, focus group meetings were

conducted in a hybrid format with a total of twenty-three participants in-person and face-to-face during the meetings and a total of eight participants virtual, livestreaming the meetings via Zoom. The goal of the focus group interviews was to gain insights into how MPSU BS students perceived the curriculum and college-going generally at MPSU, and specifically their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility.

To gain an understanding of participants' views of reality, qualitative data collected during the focus group interviews was analyzed for repeated themes according to Grounded Theory principles (Dale & Allen, 1998). Initially after each focus group meeting, the principal investigator who served also as notetaker organized notes from the meeting and wrote summaries that included themes, tones, and points of special interest that arouse during the meeting. Each meeting was recorded via Zoom, and the verbal data was transcribed verbatim. The completed transcripts were then reviewed intensively by the principal investigator for frequency of repeated words and ideas. The repeated themes and concepts were grouped into thematic/topical categories. Participant annotations and quotes were then individually identified and sorted into the thematic categories. Themes that emerged from data analysis and participant annotations and responses were further evaluated in terms of the research questions of this study. The findings served as the basis for recommendations to further support a culture of learning that fosters equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility at MPSU and MPSU BS.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to explore the perspectives of students who attended a Business School (BS) at a pervasively sectarian Christian university in the American South (MPSU) and identify potential strategies that may enhance a community that supports for diversity, equity, and

inclusion as well as ethical responsibility. The data was gleaned from discussions in five focus

groups with a total of 31 participants (17 males, 14 females).

Themes

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis.   First, MBSU BS students do not

have well developed definitions of *equity*, *social justice*, and *ethical responsibility* in terms of a

Christian college context. Rather, most conceptualize their understanding around these topics in

terms of observations or lived experiences, typically their own experiences. Second, MBSU BS

students believe Christians have a calling and/or an obligation to treat others inclusively and to

act in a socially responsible and ethical manner. Overwhelmingly, Christ's examples of love for

all humanity revealed this calling to participants. Conversely, some participants acknowledged

that some students posed as social advocates as an act of self-promotion. Third, MPSU BS

students' perceptions of the MPSU's and MPSU's BS levels of commitment to equity, social

justice, and ethical responsibility varied. Some respondents expressed that the MPSU was not

actively taking steps to support an equitable and inclusive environment while others felt the

campus community welcomed all individuals. There was consistent agreement that while the

MPSU BS's curriculum did include information about equity, social justice, and ethics, that it

would be beneficial for MPSU BS students for the BS to boost content and to include additional

learning opportunities so that upon graduation MPSU BS graduates are well equipped with a

skillset to apply information around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility topics in

business practices and beyond.

Research Questions Addressed

Participants agreed that equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility are important, and

linked to the perception that as a Christian, an individual is called by Christ to emulate His

examples of love for all humanity. Additionally, life experiences motivated several MPSU BS students' interest in or commitment to uphold the tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. Existing curricular and co-curricular supports participants found helpful in learning these tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in MPSU BS included the BS's curriculum's content as well as a campus-wide organization and BS symposium.

Implications

The findings of this qualitative research study had several implications that suggest MPSU would benefit from strengthening the connections between the MPSU mission statement, the School of Business mission statement, and the curriculum. Participants occasionally used insensitive language during discussions and seemed unaware that their diction could be interpreted as bias (e.g., multiple participants used the term homosexual instead of gay). This suggests the MPSU community could benefit from educational opportunities to learn neutral language and principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Another implication was that participants felt these concepts were important to implement in their personal and professional lives, but they struggled to articulate specific methods to apply these principles in their daily lives. While participants concurred the MPSU strongly champions Christian values, several individuals noted they felt the campus community was ambivalent when it came to advocacy for social positions. Other participants affirmed they had not given thought to these issues and that campus-wide conversations were something important and necessary.

Improving Practice to Enhance Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility

The implications from this inquiry project suggest that MPSU would benefit from examining the MPSU mission statement, MPSU policies and publications, as well as hiring and

admissions efforts to increase recruitment of students, faculty, and staff applicants who reflect the general population and to ensure the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups including but not limited to individuals with disabilities, diverse ethnic identities, and socioeconomic disadvantaged, to name a few. To enhance inclusivity, MPSU should charge the newly created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion task force (composed of MPSU faculty, alumni, and students) to collect data, analyze findings, and report the findings and associated recommendations to the MPSU community with transparency.

Another recommendation based on the findings is to develop educational modules for faculty, staff, and students on topics such as the use of inclusive language, unconscious or implicit bias, intercultural awareness, and tenets of social advocacy. Content centered around DEI in a Christian context could be incorporated into existing student orientation activities. Additionally, the university could intentionally incorporate topics around the tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical awareness into its required chapel classes or a new student orientation course or program in which all students are required to enroll. Further, a course could be developed and incorporated into the university's core required classes with content centered around promoting awareness of pressing issues of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility on campus and beyond.

An emergent initiative led by the Inter-varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) highlights a promising opportunity for enhancing inclusivity at MPSU. The purpose of the IVCF is to "establish and advance at colleges and universities witnessing communities of students and faculty who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord: growing in love for God, God's Word, God's people of every ethnicity and culture, and God's purposes in the world" (IVFC, "Our Purpose", 2020). During fall 2020, five faculty members from four different academic programs at MPSU

along with the IVCF Area Coordinator coordinated a "monthly anti-racist, small group study session." Each one-hour session involved a discussion based on an assigned reading, film, or other media and the topic list included racial differences, historic contexts of racism, and raising student awareness. Perhaps, such discussions will be used as a springboard for on-going conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion among various stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni. Numerous students who participated in the focus group meetings expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their voices through conversation. The university, hearing students' expressed interests and desires to have a place to express their voices safely and comfortably, could create safe spaces for students experiencing or witnessing social marginalization or otherwise needing to share their voices. MPSU should review or create free speech policies and practices that would enable students to share their voices openly within the created safe spaces.

Additionally, MPSU should work to create allies and good models across campus whereby initiatives or programs could be shared for a collective or co-sponsorship approach. For example, the university could work with its School of Education and the Department of Psychology and Counseling to offer in-person and telehealth mental health counseling for faculty, students, staff, and potentially members of the community who are struggling with marginalization, social injustices, or other mental health issues. It is especially important for the counseling services or programs made available to enhance access to services be comprised of counselors of color or those from other marginalized populations. Access to established clinics offered by other universities within the state such as the University of Mississippi's Clinic for Outreach and Personal Enrichment (COPE Clinic) as well as established networks of Christian counselors may enhance this access without great expense (Clinic for Outreach and Personal

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Enrichment, n.d.). MPSU should inform MPSU students free mental health counseling is available to them through the COPE Clinic and other community or state-based resources, giving additional attention to enhancing the visible representation of diversity in the counselors and counseling services presented.

MPSU would benefit from identifying a role model, peer university that has done exemplary work implementing practices to enhance equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. Such peer institution could serve as a benchmark for MPSU's organizational change. The benchmarked university could be a good institution for campus exchanges—virtual and in person, post-COVID. Identifying and communicating with such a peer institution could help break the "MPSU bubble" and help administrators, faculty and students/student leaders see what others do and heighten MPSU's efforts with a stronger vision or end goal in mind.

At the MPSU BS-level, recommendations are made. The first is that administration and faculty could review the curricular content to evaluate strategies for furthering the principles of equity, social justice, and ethics. One such strategy for enhancing the curriculum could be the BS's implementation of common reading experiences with readings' content intentionally selected to help students learn about and reflect upon the tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. Authors of the readings could be invited to speak to MPSU BS and other students across campus. Additional attention must be given to enhancing the existing content through the application of these principles within a business setting, including the increase of experiential service-learning opportunities to optimally prepare students for working in a global workforce. By enhancing the availability of experiential learning, MPSU BS students will likely develop increased exposure to a greater range of persons and situations as well as develop empathy for pressing issues in practice around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility,

creating an uptick in their moral development. By partnering with organizations serving socioeconomically underprivileged individuals, BS students could experience clinical and service-learning opportunities such as tax accounting students preparing basic tax returns; entrepreneurship students brainstorming, creating, and developing business plans; and marketing students working with such organizations to create and enhance marketing plans to foster awareness of such organizations' services to those in need amongst the community. These types of experiential learning activities would benefit both students and members of the community who are in need. The BS must continue and enhance supplementing the co-curriculum through support for student organizations and invited speaker events that highlight different viewpoints and expertise on social responsibility and ethical decision-making.

The findings of this study provide opportunities for the researcher to cultivate a professional identity as an advocate for DEI practices as well as participate in tangible actions that support personal values and promote growth as an educational leader and change agent. One example is to reflect on the characteristics of a scholarly practitioner, engage in reflection of current course content and instructional strategies, and examine what revisions can be made to encourage students to utilize learned knowledge to "name, frame and solve problems of practice" (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, n.d.).

The plan for dissemination of findings includes applying for publication in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal for Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, *Journal of Education for Business*, or *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and researching appropriate conferences to apply for a presentation. Lastly, the researcher plans to explore grant opportunities to conduct additional research and to develop virtual educational modules for faculty, staff, and students with content focused on equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility.

Summary

Review of the Problem of Practice and Rationale for Inquiry

The goal of the focus group interviews was to gain insights into how students studying business make sense of issues related to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibilities within a pervasively sectarian campus environment. The rationale for this inquiry was to highlight the voices of undergraduate business students about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility to explore the potential tensions between the university's espoused values and Christian ideals versus the real, lived diversity of the MPSU community.

Theoretical Framework

The research was informed by Lewin's Organizational Change Model, which posits that people have the drive to initiate change, but that external restraints can hinder the change process. The results of this study indicate the MPSU has begun the "unfreezing" stage, meaning, that MPSU is beginning to identify areas that may benefit from change and methods for education/training to initiate the change process (phase two of Lewin's model). It will be imperative that MPSU also develop clear outcome measures and methods for evaluation of the implementation of proposed changes, in advance of phase three, "refreezing."

Review of Findings

While MPSU BS students do not have well developed definitions of *equity*, *social justice*, and *ethical responsibility*, they expressed that they believe their tenets are important. They expressed that Christians are called by Christ to emulate His examples of love for all of humanity. Further several MPSU BS expressed that their lived experiences and personal dealings with marginalization motivated their interest in and commitment to uphold the tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. Participants emphasized the importance of

advocating for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility authentically from a Christ-like, love-motivated position rather than from a position of self-promotion. Participants' viewpoints on MPSU's and MPSU BS's level of commitment to foster equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility varied.   Some participants felt MPSU was taking active efforts to foster DEI within the campus community while others felt MPSU's efforts promoting DEI could be better and more intentional. Consistently, participants agreed that MPSU BS's curriculum incorporated the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in courses' content. Participants expressed that MPSU BS students could benefit from additional content around these topics, and MPSU could offer additional learning opportunities implementing the tenets of equity, social justice, and social responsibility, for example through service-learning projects. Existing curricular and co-curricular supports participants found helpful in learning these tenets of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in MPSU BS included the BS's curriculum's content as well as a campus-wide DEI organization and BS' annual Faith, Service, and Ethics week-long symposium.

Overview of Recommendations

MPSU-Level. Leaders and administrators of MPSU should examine MPSU mission statement and MPSU policies and publications to ensure that they reflect language considering social inclusion. The university should strive to increase recruitment of students, faculty, and staff who reflect the diverse population of the university, intentionally working to ensure historically underrepresented groups are included. MPSU Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion task force should continue its active efforts to gather data, analyze, and communicate findings transparently to the MPSU community. Leaders and administration should work to develop educational modules to help train and educate faculty, staff, and students on topics such as the

use of inclusive language, unconscious or implicit bias, intercultural awareness, and tenets of

social advocacy. The university could intentionally incorporate topics around the tenets of

equity, social justice, and ethical awareness into its current core required chapel classes.

Alternatively, another course could be developed and incorporated into university's core required

classes, teaching about equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility on campus and beyond.

MPSU should continue to work with IVCF to promote continued conversations about

DEI on campus, evidenced by numerous students' expressed interests and desires to have a place

to express their voices safely and comfortably. The university's creation of safe spaces on

campus could facilitate an avenue for students wanting to share their voices.

The university could work with its School of Education and the Department of

Psychology and Counseling to develop and offer in-person and telehealth mental health

counseling for faculty, students, staff, and potentially members of the community. In the

meantime, the university should make students aware of other counseling programs currently

available to them, such University of Mississippi's Clinic for Outreach and Personal Enrichment

(COPE Clinic) (Clinic for Outreach and Personal Enrichment, n.d.).

MPSU BS-Level. Administration and faculty should review curricular content to

evaluate current inclusion of the principles of equity, social justice, and ethics and consider areas

where these principles can be further integrated into the curriculum. The BS could implement

reading requirements centered around and focused on the tenets of equity, social justice, and

ethical responsibility. Students would benefit from applying the principles of equity, social

justice, and ethics in a business setting, potentially accomplished with MPSU BS students'

participation in and completion of service-learning projects. MPSU BS must continue its

commitment to and enhance the co-curriculum through support for student organizations and

invited speaker events with intentional focus given to topics on social responsibility and ethical decision-making.

Next Steps

Implementation of recommended changes at the MPSU and MPSU BS levels will ideally lead to improved MPSU and MPSU BS policies and DEI practices. In terms of Lewin's Organizational Change Model, MPSU and MPSU BS have begun the "unfreezing" stage, identifying areas that may benefit from DEI practices. The next steps for MPSU and MPSU BS include developing clear outcome measures and methods for evaluation of the implementation of proposed changes, in advance of phase three, "refreezing."

As principal investigator, I continue to commit to develop a professional identity as an educational leader and change agent who advocates for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility and promotes DEI practices in business higher education and practice. To encourage knowledge diffusion, I will explore peer-reviewed journals and conferences to identify venues for disseminating the findings of this study. Further, I will continue to research and engage in academic discussions to determine efficacious strategies to promote equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility, not only in a pervasively sectarian business school, but in the global academic community.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

Appendix A
Focus Group Outline

       This focus group outline of open-ended questions was used to guide conversation and discovery of PSU business students' perspectives on equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. The following questions are not an exhaustive list of questions and topics but rather a guide intended to probe PSU business students in order to gain their insights and perspectives.

       Initially the moderator introduced herself and shared that the goal of this conversation was to gain insights to social justice on pervasively sectarian campuses. The moderator elaborated to each participant that he wanted to understand their perspectives and positions on social justice at their university, in the practice of business, and within society at large.

1. What do the topics of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility mean to business students in a Christian college context?
2. How important are these topics within the School of Business's curriculum?
3. How important are these topics to Christian college graduates entering the professional practice of business?
4. What motivates a Christian business professional to adhere to values of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility?
5. What pressing issues of social justice is the business profession facing about which Christians should be concerned?
6. How do social justice initiatives and the Christian mission of the School of Business and the University work together, if at all?
7. What inequities and instances of social injustice might some students face in the School of Business?
8. What policy changes or action plans (if any) could enhance social justice awareness among administration, faculty, staff, and students in the School of Business?
9. To what extent do students in the university and the School of Business want to be labeled/identified as a social justice advocate?
10. We are at the end of our prepared questions. What other comments would you like to offer about what we have discussed today?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS FORM

Appendix B
Participant Demographics Form

1. Indicate your gender
    a. Female
    b. Male

2. Indicate your age.
    a. 18-19
    b. 20-21
    c. 22-23
    d. 24 or older

3. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?
    a. No, not of Hispanic or Latino origin
    b. Yes

4. Indicate your racial identity. Select one or more that apply.
    a. White
    b. Black or African American
    c. American Indian and Alaska Native
    d. Asian
    e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
    f. Some other race; please specify race or origin. _____

5. Indicate your major.

    _____

6. What is your classification as a student?
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Other; please specify _____

7. Are you an international student?
    a. Yes
    b. No

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION EMAIL

Appendix C
Participant Solicitation Email

Subject line: Focus group opportunity

Hello:

As a member of a School of Business student organization, you have the opportunity to participate in a focus group. You will be participating out of kindness and, perhaps, curiosity of how a focus group works as they are used often in business research. Each participant will receive a $5 iTunes card for participating in the focus group.

The focus group explores the perceptions and experiences of business students who attend a pervasively sectarian university (a private school that incorporates religion into the majority of its curriculum) regarding issues related to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility; both at the campus "micro" level and the community "macro" level. The goal of the focus group is to hear the voices of undergraduate business students about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in college and beyond.

The process is not complicated. We will meet in a group of six to eight students. A moderator will ask approximately ten questions to lead the discussion. The entire process will take approximately one hour. In the wake of COVID-19, the meeting will take place virtually using Zoom conferencing application.

The comments you make may be used for doctoral research and subsequent publications. The meeting will be recorded. However, your name will not be included in any research or publication. At the beginning of the meeting, you will be asked to provide some general demographic information and read an informational sheet on a Google Doc form. Upon submission of your demographics form and after reading the informational sheet, you will enter the focus group. Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw consent or terminate your participation at any time.

Please email me back directly at vpoole@mc.edu if you are interested in participating in the focus group. If you respond that you are interested, a link to Doodle online scheduling will be emailed to you.

Thank you for your time and potential interest in academic research, specifically participating in this focus group.

Brooks Poole
Instructor
Mississippi College School of Business
Clinton, MS 39058
Email: vpoole@mc.edu

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT SCHEDULING EMAIL

Appendix D
Participant Scheduling Email

Hello:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group for my research project which explores the perceptions and experiences of business students who attend a pervasively sectarian university (a private school that incorporates religion into the majority of its curriculum) regarding issues related to equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility; both at the campus "micro" level and the community "macro" level. The goal of the focus group is to hear the voices of undergraduate business students about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in college and beyond.

Here is a Doodle link for online scheduling; please check all of the times that you are available to participate in the online focus group meeting http://www.doodle.com/. As soon as I have a group of six to eight students that can meet at the same time, I will email you with a date, time, and zoom room link for the focus group meeting.

The meeting will last approximately one hour. Each participant who completes the focus group will receive a $5 iTunes card.

The comments you make may be used for doctoral research and subsequent publications. The meeting will be recorded. However, your name will not be included in any research or publication. Through Google docs, you will be asked to read an informational sheet and complete a participant demographics form at the beginning of the meeting. Upon submission of your demographics form and after reading the informational sheet, you will enter the focus group. Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw consent or terminate your participation at any time.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate. Please email me with any questions you have.

Brooks Poole
Instructor
Mississippi College School of Business
Clinton, MS 39058
Email: vpoole@mc.edu

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET, CONSENT, AND RELEASE OF
WORDS

Appendix E
Participant Information Sheet, Consent, and Release of Words

Project Title: Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility in Higher Education: Voices of Business Students at a Pervasively Sectarian University

Investigator	**Advisor**
Brooks Poole	Amy E. Wells Dolan, Ph.D.
School of Business	Department of Higher Education
Self Hall 103B	49 Guyton Drive
Mississippi College	The University of Mississippi
(601) 925-3885	(662) 915-5710
vbpoole@go.olemiss.edu	aewells@olemiss.edu

By entering the Zoom meeting for this project, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older and am consenting to participate in the project described on this information sheet and am granting permission for a release of my words.

Description
The goal of this study is to highlight the voices of undergraduate business students about their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility in college and beyond. Focus group interviews of six to eight student members of business school student organizations will help discover insights into how business students experience the curriculum and college-going generally at the pervasively sectarian university (PSU), and specifically their perspectives of equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. A moderator will ask open-ended questions to guide conversation and discovery of PSU business students' perspectives on equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. The focus group questions are intended to probe PSU business students in order to gain their insights and perspectives through lively conversation and dialogue. No consensus is required or expected; instead, participants should feel free to express their experiences and perspectives whether or not other participants in or out of the focus group share the same or similar experiences and perspectives.

In the wake of COVID-19, focus groups will be conducted virtually, similar to online classes and will be conducted via Zoom conferencing application. To ensure the accurate capturing of dialogue of the participants, the meeting will be recorded. The moderator at the beginning of the session will remind participants that the session is going to be recorded. The focus group will last in duration approximately one hour.

Participants will not be asked for their names or any other identifying information.

Significance of the Study
The interviews will explore business students' thoughts about potential injustices both at the campus "micro" level and at the community "macro" level and illuminate areas that may benefit from organizational change to provide opportunities for improved student learning and development. The desired outcome of organizational change is that students will perceive (and furthermore experience) greater alignment between their college experiences, the School's mission, and the School's curriculum so that they are equipped upon graduation with an

appreciation for equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility within their field of professional practice.

Cost and Payments
The focus group take approximately one hour to complete. Out of gratitude for subjects' participation, the principal investigator will give participants a $5 iTunes gift card.

Risks and Benefits
Focus group participants often feel good about having the opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives, especially when doing so may potentially yield enlightenment that fosters social justice progression. Participants may also gain personal and professional insights from participating in the focus group. However, participants may feel uncomfortable with some of the issues around equity, social justice, and ethical responsibility, specifically the potential marginalization of students or groups. The investigator foresees no other risks to participants as a result of their participation in the focus group.

Confidentiality
Comments from the focus group may be included in future presentations or publications. However, participants' names or other identifying information will not appear in any presentations or publications that result from the focus group. Pseudonyms will be used if comments appear in any presentation or publications.

Additionally, participants will be asked to uphold confidentiality of the discussion that takes place during the focus group meeting. Appropriate measures will be implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the collected verbal data (e.g., recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a secure, locked drawer and in the custody of the principal investigator).

Right to Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this focus group, and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the focus group and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell the moderator or investigator and exit the meeting. You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer. Whether or not you choose to participate or to withdraw will not affect your standing with the School or University.

The investigator or moderator may terminate your participation in the focus group without regard to your consent and for any reason, such as protecting your safety and protecting the integrity of the focus group data.

IRB Approval
This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent
I have read and understand the above information. By completing the focus group, I consent to participate in the study.

Student Participants in Investigators' Classes

Special human research subject protections apply where there is any possibility of undue influence – such as for students in classes of investigators. Investigators can recruit from their classes but only by providing information on availability of studies. They can encourage you to participate, but they cannot exert any pressure for you to do so. Therefore, if you experience any undue influence from your instructor, you should contact the IRB via phone (662-915-7482) or email (irb@olemiss.edu) and report the specific details. You will remain anonymous in an investigation.

VITA

V. Brooks Poole
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Education

2015-present Ed.D. Candidate, Higher Education, School of Education, The University of Mississippi, University, MS
Dissertation working title: *Equity, Social Justice, and Ethical Responsibility in Higher Education: Voices of Business Students at a Pervasively Sectarian University* (anticipated defense: Spring 2021)

2003 Master of Taxation, School of Accountancy, The University of Mississippi, University, MS

2002 Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, Accounting, Mississippi College, Clinton, MS

Academic Honors and Awards

2013 Outstanding Teacher of the Year, Mississippi College School of Business

2007 Outstanding Graduate Student, University of Mississippi

2002 Outstanding Senior Accounting Major, Mississippi College

2002 Perry Academic Award for outstanding scholastic achievement, Business Administration, Mississippi College

2001 Outstanding Junior Accounting Major, Mississippi College

2000 MSCPA Education Foundation W. Hamp King Award, Outstanding Academic and Collegiate Leadership

Professional Experience

2009-Present Instructor, School of Business, Mississippi College, Clinton, MS
Undergraduate Courses Taught:
Principles of Accounting, Federal Tax Accounting of Individuals
Graduate Courses Taught:
Financial Accounting Theory, Taxation of Business Entities

2016	Visiting Lecturer for Auburn University, Hubei University of Economics, Wuhan, China
2004-2009	Graduate Instructor, School of Accountancy, University of Mississippi, University, MS
2003-2004	Staff Accountant, Haddox, Reid, Burkes & Calhoun, PLLC, Jackson, MS

Leadership and Service

2018-present	Assessment Committee, Mississippi College
2016-present	Faculty Development Committee, Mississippi College
2011-present	Institutional Review Board, Mississippi College
2013-2015	Faculty Council, Mississippi College

Publications

Poole, V. B., & Corso, T. F. (2019). Higher accounting education's responsibilities to society. *Business Education Innovation Journal, 11 (2)*, 141-151.

Holland, J. H., Hatcher, W., & Poole, V. B. (2018). Social entrepreneurship in Trujillo, Peru: The case of Nisolo. *Community Development (Columbus, Ohio), 49*(3), 312-323. doi:10.1080/15575330.2018.1462837

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