Balancing Conservatism and Diversity: Participatory Democracy as a Challenge and Resource for U.S. Evangelical Colleges

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In his TV show *Old Time Gospel Hour*, the neo-fundamentalist[1] preacher and political organizer Jerry Falwell often featured promotions for Liberty University, a university providing a strictly evangelical und fundamentalist environment. One of the many shows that featured Liberty front and center was a 1985 episode entitled "Turning America Around." Early on in his televised service, Falwell asked two of his choir members for testimonies about their decision to study at Liberty.[2] Two young women enthusiastically gave testimony and explained confidently what opportunities Liberty offered and how blessed they felt to get an education at a college that helped them not only to earn a degree, but to develop as Christians.

1 The term "neo-fundamentalist" describes a group of evangelical Christians who see themselves in the tradition of the very strict fundamentalist tradition of the early twentieth century. The term "fundamentalist" is a self-description that refers to the belief that what religiously conservative Christians regard as the foundations of their faith — such as a literal interpretation of the Bible — must not be compromised. "Evangelical" is a broader term that includes fundamentalists – thus, fundamentalism is an extraordinarily strict brand of evangelicalism. For a discussion of the different brands of evangelicalism and their development, see Michael Hochgeschwender, *Amerikanische Religion. Evangelikalismus, Pfingstlertum und Fundamentalismus* (Frankfurt, 2007).

2 Old-Time Gospel Hour (OTGH): sermon 0671 "Turning America Around," Video recording, October 18, 1985, min. 11:57-14:02, Jerry Falwell Library, Archives & Special Collection, https://cdm17184.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll9/id/12039/rec/1, accessed December 11, 2025.

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Figure 1. Rev. Jerry Falwell sermonizes to his flock from the Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., during the live broadcast of the "Old Time Gospel Hour", 1981. Courtesy of the Jerry Falwell Library

Lynchburg Baptist College changed its name to Liberty Baptist College in 1976 and eventually to Liberty University in 1984, and its television ads reflected the institution's rapid growth. Moreover, they demonstrate how successful televangelism was as a recruiting strategy. Notably, Falwell did not call on any of the four young men who had raised their hands to give testimony. Instead, by focusing on two women giving testimony, Falwell presented a more progressive picture of his evangelical campus in terms of female representation. Simultaneously, everything Falwell and the choir members said was translated by a sign language interpreter. I argue that Falwell, who is accurately remembered for championing traditional gender roles and whose church had promoted racial segregation for decades, strategically presented his audience with a more diverse college campus throughout the 1980s.

In addition to prominently featuring women and using sign language interpretation during televised events, advertisements for Liberty University usually featured students of different ethnic backgrounds. Its promotional material often presented students from the Philippines or Southeast Asia who declared how grateful they were for the opportunity to study at Liberty.[3] One of the young women giving testimony in the scene described above closed her statement with the words that she knew that Liberty had what she wanted. The scene symbolizes the unlikely success of evangelical

3 Ibid., min. 01:24-01:30.

colleges' embrace of diversity. It is especially noteworthy because Liberty University was such a decidedly conservative place. Of course, Liberty was never on the forefront of promoting diversity, but it is very telling that even such a conservative stronghold made an effort to display its own version of diversity at a time when progressive schools were actively embracing this concept in the 1970s and 1980s.

This article will explore how evangelical institutions of higher education navigated the challenges presented by the civil rights and women's movements and their ideals of participatory democracy. Specifically, I will examine how predominantly white, all-male faculties with conservative religious beliefs responded to calls for greater diversity among their faculty and student populations. I will proceed in four steps and propose two key arguments to help explain the success of evangelical colleges during the latter half of the twentieth century. First, I will provide a short overview of Jerry Falwell's neo-fundamentalist empire and the development of evangelical institutions of higher learning in twentieth-century America. Here, I will also outline why colleges were essential to the evangelical movement as well as an integral part of American higher education. Second, I will show that evangelical colleges demonstrated a surprising openness to engaging in diversity initiatives, actively seeking to increase the representation of women and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Third, I will discuss how these institutions positioned themselves as a religious minority, a minority that should be granted exceptions and accommodations. Consequently, some evangelical colleges started advocating for their proper representation in what they perceived as predominantly secular academic organizations. Finally, I will explain why evangelical colleges' political influence today cannot be understood without taking into consideration their gradual embrace of diversity since the 1970s.

I. Jerry Falwell's Conservative Empire

Few religious leaders have stood for a brand of evangelicalism that was as distinctly conservative as Jerry Falwell's was during

the 1980s. In comparison to more moderate evangelical preachers like Billy Graham, Falwell stands out for three reasons: First, he took an extraordinarily conservative stand on all sexuality- and gender-related issues. Falwell's vehement opposition to abortion was a prime example of this. Unlike the Catholic Church, many evangelicals leaned towards a pro-choice stance on abortion in the 1970s. Scholars like R. Marie Griffith have argued that the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on Roe v. Wade contributed to polarization on this issue, causing evangelicals to switch sides.[4] In his sermons and political activism, Falwell took up the question of abortion and styled himself as a Christian crusader who stood up for those who were particularly vulnerable to liberal anti-Christian modernity: unborn Christians.[5]

By hosting his own television show, the *Old-Time Gospel Hour*, Falwell became a leading advocate of televangelism. The influential position of televangelists today has its origins in the 1960s, but it was not until the mid-1970s that television programs began to be perceived as serious competition and a threat to local churches.[6] Like many other successful evangelical organizations, Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church was interdenominational, even though it had originally been a Baptist congregation. In the case of television preachers, overcoming denominational and local boundaries was essential as expensive production costs could only be financed through a broad base of donations.[7] Programs such as Falwell's *Old-Time Gospel Hour* also benefited from changes in the media landscape. They represent the paradox of the media revolution unfolding at that time. Until the 1970s, there had been three major television networks — ABC, CBS, and NBC — which conservatives often disliked. By the end of the 1970s, cable television, which was initially intended to provide TV reception to remote areas, had developed into a very successful competitor of the three major networks. While the same media could now be consumed everywhere in the country, cable television's disparate offerings fostered the formation of particular identities.[8] Given the wide range of cable television offerings, narrow-casting, pioneered by MTV's targeting of younger viewers, proved to be a successful model. Christian for-

4 Marie R. Griffith, *Moral Combat. How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York, 2017), 202.

5 For this article, I reviewed Jerry Falwell's sermons since the late 1970s. They are available online at the Jerry Falwell Library: https://www.liberty.edu/library/. For Falwell's political fight against abortion, see Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right. A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2013).

6 Berit Bretthauer, *Teleevangelikalismus in den USA. Religion zwischen Individualisierung und Vergemeinschaftung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 30-36.

7 Ibid, 19.

8 Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines. A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, 2019), 135.

mats in particular took advantage of the opportunity to produce programming tailored to a specific audience. Despite the difficulty of determining reliable viewer numbers, Falwell boasted in 1980 that his show had over fifty million viewers.[9] Falwell used his media power to generate political influence and build what he called the "Moral Majority," which would become a major player of the New Christian Right – a political coalition that espoused conservative social values, including steadfast opposition to abortion, pornography, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and gay rights.[10]

The connection of certain stations and programs to a fixed target audience can only be explained when further changes in the U.S. media landscape are considered. In addition to the emergence of cable television, the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 is particularly noteworthy in this context. This regulation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had previously required that both sides of a debate always be represented on radio and television. However, conservative radio and television hosts had increasingly disregarded this rule in previous years, and its official abolition contributed to the intensification of media polarization.[11]

In addition to his own TV program, Falwell also founded his own evangelical university. Liberty University emerged as a profoundly conservative place even in comparison to other evangelical institutions. Liberty University and the *Old Time Gospel Hour* were closely connected. Falwell's roughly one-hour program, which had been broadcast since the early 1980s, was not simply a broadcast of his sermons at Thomas Road Baptist Church, but also served as a donation pipeline for both his church and university. Each service was interrupted several times by appeals for donations to his cause, and the ads frequently featured Liberty University.[12] Like other televangelists, Falwell solicited donations by offering special gifts, often religious books. These were usually not available on the open market, suggesting to donors that they belonged to an exclusive religious network. In fact, the television program was deliberately designed as a fundraiser for Liberty. A fundraising expert had come up with the scheme of suggesting to viewers that they themselves were shareholders in the neo-fundamentalist

9 Bretthauer, *Televangelikalismus in den USA*, 23.

10 Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York, 2003), 153.

11 Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 151.

12 Previously, and at times concurrently, there was a "cassette ministry" from 1978 to 1982. Recordings of Falwell's church services were mailed out on cassette. A register of these can be found here: Jerry Falwell Library, Cassette Index, Falwell's Ministry, https://liberty.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll9/id/1378.

educational institution through club memberships. Falwell was the first televangelist to use the services of a computer company to tailor advertising to be as individualized and efficient as possible.[13] With his affinity for technology and capitalism, Jerry Falwell was typical of evangelical college founders and of the evangelical college world, which was becoming increasingly diverse since its emergence in the early twentieth century.

II. Evangelical Higher Education in the Twentieth Century

In the first half of the twentieth century, Christian fundamentalist educational institutions existed in their own sphere, disconnected from the secular mainstream. Fundamentalist educational institutions were usually referred to as "Bible schools." When theologians created these institutions at the turn of the twentieth century, they focused on Bible courses, rhetoric, and preparatory classes for missionary work.[14] These schools were not institutions of higher education, as a high school diploma was not a prerequisite for enrollment.[15] Bible schools had virtually no exchange with non-fundamentalist schools, nor did they share any commonalities. However, since even young fundamentalists who did not want to pursue a full-time religious career did not want to study at a secular college, Bible schools gradually began to offer a wider range of subjects and to refer to themselves as colleges or universities. It was only with the rise in (male) college enrollment through the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act ("G.I. Bill") that fundamentalists transformed into the evangelical middle class as we know it today. After the Second World War, evangelical colleges experienced a rush of students, which intensified the desire for official recognition of their degrees. At the same time, evangelical leaders created new colleges that were designed from the outset to offer a broad range of subjects. Since evangelical colleges offered few graduate programs, it was important for students to be able to transfer to non-evangelical universities. Most evangelical institutions therefore spared no effort to become accredited and were successful in this endeavor.[16] Conservative Protestant institutions

13 Michael S. Winters, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (New York, 2012), 89-91.

14 Virginia L. Brereton, "The Bible Schools and Conservative Evangelical Higher Education, 1880-1940," in *Making Higher Education Christian. The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America,* ed. Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps (Eugene, OR, 1987), 119.

15 Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U. Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education*, (Oxford, 2018) 14; Brereton, "The Bible Schools and Conservative Evangelical Higher Education."

16 Laats, *Fundamentalist U*, 158–165.

generally offer numerous accredited bachelor's degrees and a limited number of selected graduate programs. However, the colleges differ greatly in terms of their content. Some offer a wide range of degrees, such as Wheaton College near Chicago, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. Others focus on a select range of subjects, such as psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary near Los Angeles, which opened in the mid-twentieth century.

All institutions mentioned in this article are nondenominational. They are particularly interesting because they bring together young evangelicals from different traditions — such as Baptists and Methodists — who came to identify as evangelicals. Unlike many denominational institutions, they do not have an ethnically homogeneous base.[17] At the same time, they often refer directly to the revivalist movements because they were founded by the leaders of revivalism.[18] Interdenominational colleges are key to understanding the development of evangelicals as a cohesive group in the second half of the twentieth century. The increasing importance of interdenominational colleges, like the rise of non-denominational special-purpose groups highlighted by sociologist Robert Wuthnow, can be seen as a marker of the restructuring of U.S. religious landscape in the second half of the twentieth century.[19]

Evangelical colleges form a significant part of the American educational landscape. Not concentrated solely in the South or in rural areas, they can be found throughout the United States.[20] The 1976 organization of evangelical colleges into the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) was led by institutions in the North and Northeast of the country. It is only in the last three decades that another geographical focus has emerged in the South of the United States. This correlates with demographic developments in the South, which has been experiencing significantly faster population growth than other parts of the country.[21] For the evangelical colleges in the Northeast, which also influenced foundations in the West, the unique selling point of evangelical colleges is that they engage exclusively in teaching and research that is based on their evangelical understanding of faith, that is,

17 Thomas A. Askew, "The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education Since World War II," in *Making Higher Education Christian. The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America,* ed. Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps (Eugene, OR, 1987), 139.

18 One may think of Liberty University, Fuller Theological Seminary or Moody Bible Institute.

19 Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion. Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), 100-132.

20 Timothy L. Smith counted several hundred evangelical colleges as early as the mid-1980s. Timothy L. Smith, "Introduction. Christian Colleges and American Culture," in Carpenter and Shipps 1987, 3.

21 Rich Ostrander, "The Southernization of the Evangelical Mind," in *American Evangelicalism. George Marsden and the State of American Religious History*, ed. Darren Dochuk, Thomas S. Kidd and Kurt W. Peterson (Notre Dame, IN, 2014), 358-360.



Figure 2. Wheaton College welcome sign. Photo: Kenneth C. Zirkel. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=50626834, CC BY-SA 4.0.

a literal understanding of the Bible.[22] By contrast, the evangelical character of institutions in the Southern States was and continues to be expressed primarily in extracurricular activities and, of course, in the social control of the evangelical college community. Coordinated efforts to export the conservative "integrative" model to the South have been evident over the past three decades.[23] Liberty University can be seen as a pioneer of this development in the South. Overall, the evangelical university landscape illustrates that conservative Christian religiosity is not a phenomenon that can be attributed solely to the so-called flyover states but one that highlights the interconnectedness of evangelical institutions throughout the country and draws both its dynamism and its conservative core from areas not exclusively in the Bible Belt.

Overall, after 1945 evangelical colleges in the United States shifted from being perceived as religious institutions separate from the mainstream higher education system to becoming more integrated into academic and professional contexts. This transformation required diversifying their curriculum and implementing reputable academic degrees, as well as obtaining accreditation and recruiting professors, some of whom had graduated from prestigious Ivy League schools. However, unlike most other U.S. universities, evangelical colleges did not see themselves as part of the

22 The idea that Christian colleges should teach all subjects based on faith can be traced back primarily to the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Ibid., 362.

23 Ibid, 263-70.

so-called liberal consensus in the post-World War II era. On the contrary, they continued to view themselves as bastions of cultural conservatism. Thus evangelical colleges played a significant role in the postwar era of college expansion and received support from government programs, while also maintaining a commitment to teaching and research rooted in the biblical principles epitomized in their statements of faith.

III. Embracing Diversity

All evangelical colleges and universities prominently feature a statement of faith. Wheaton's statement of faith – originally written in 1924 and in today's version adopted in 1992 – can be seen as a typical example. Wheaton College remains a flagship institution in the evangelical college world,[24] and its statement of faith is reflective of this status. The statement emphasizes "that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God and inerrant" and that all human beings were born with a sinful nature because Adam and Eve sinned by rebelling against God. Sin in general features prominently in the statement – and not just in a metaphorical way. Wheaton stresses that students and teachers believe in "the existence of Satan" and other "evil powers."[25] The statement of faith is not merely an abstract notion, rather it "defines the biblical perspective which informs a Wheaton education."[26] This means that at Wheaton as well as at all other evangelical colleges, all subjects – be it biology, geography, history or English literature – are taught from a distinctly evangelical perspective. The statement of faith forms the backbone of evangelical colleges in every conceivable way.

In the first decades after the Second World War, joining an evangelical institution, whether as professor or as student, typically meant one had to commit to the strictly evangelical convictions laid out in the institution's statement of faith. Unsurprisingly, the statement of faith turned out to be a significant challenge when evangelical colleges began to strive for accreditation from secular academic institutions. Fuller Theological Seminary in

24 Adam Laats, "Brave Sons and Daughters True. 1960s Protests at the 'Fundamentalist Harvard'," in Roger L. Geiger, Nathan M. Sorber and Christian K. Anderson, eds., *American Higher Education in the Postwar Era, 1945–1970* (New York, 2018), 146–169, 149.

25 https://www.wheaton.edu/about-wheaton/statement-of-faith-and-educational-purpose/, accessed December 11, 2025.

26 https://www.wheaton.edu/about-wheaton/community-covenant/, accessed December 11, 2025.

Pasadena, California, was one of the first evangelical institutions that achieved accreditation in a field that hitherto had been considered strictly secular, namely in clinical psychology.[27] To understand the pioneering role of this comparatively small theological seminary, it is important to mention that Fuller took a progressive turn in the 1960s. Its founder and namesake, Baptist minister Charles E. Fuller, had long been known for his fundamentalist views. But Fuller Theological Seminary was a joint venture of Fuller and Harold Ockenga. A Congregational minister and prolific author, Ockenga, who was a generation younger than Fuller, took a more conciliatory approach and gave more prominence to immanent – as opposed to transcendental – problems than would have been conceivable from a traditional fundamentalist point of view that focused more prominently on the afterlife. Instead of focusing on eschatological questions, he was more interested in how Christians should navigate in this world.

While the financial resources for establishing the school came from Fuller, Ockenga played a key role in determining the institution's orientation. For the first 15 years, the seminary's direction was controversially discussed within the institution. Some of the staff belonged to a progressive evangelical wing, while others were of a stricter fundamentalist orientation. When Fuller's assets began to dwindle in the 1950s — partly due to his own mismanagement — the institution became more dependent on financial backers who often held strictly conservative views. But despite both external pressure and heated discussions within the seminary, the institution eventually took a more progressive path. This became apparent in the 1962 decision to appoint a progressive evangelical, David Hubbard, as president, who paved the way for a psychology program that would gain accreditation from a secular scientific association.[28] Additionally, following in the spirit of a more inclusive evangelicalism, the National Association of Evangelicals concluded in 1963 that government financial aid should no longer be considered a threat to the evangelical college sector.[29]

The American Psychological Association (APA) accredited Fuller's program in clinical psychology in 1972. In this first-ever

27 For a complete analysis of Fuller's psychology program, see Sophia Egbert, *Religion und Psychologie. Forschung und Lehre an evangelikalen Hochschulen in den USA, 1945-1998* (Cologne, 2026).

28 George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism. Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1995); Darren Dochuk, "Reforming Fundamentalism," in *American Evangelicalism. George Marsden and the State of American Religious History,* ed. Darren Dochuk, Thomas S. Kidd and Kurt W. Peterson (Notre Dame, IN, 2014), 398-417.

29 Axel R. Schäfer, *Piety and Public Funding. Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2012), 152.

accreditation of an evangelical psychology program, Fuller resolved the fundamental(ist) issue with an innovative maneuver. From the APA's perspective, the statement of faith remained a problematic issue that would not be resolved even after multiple rounds of negotiation. The association objected to the statement of faith for two reasons: first, it was perceived as an obstacle to freedom of research, and second, the association saw the potential for religious discrimination against teachers and students with a different religious background or no religious affiliation at all. Within the evangelical community, however, the statement of faith was essentially equivalent to religious accreditation for staff members. It was Fuller's way of signaling unmistakably that the seminary's students could pursue their studies with all the benefits of a secure, evangelical framework. Therefore, for Fuller, dropping the statement in exchange for professional accreditation was unthinkable. But without professional accreditation, career opportunities for graduates remained poor. To appease the APA, Fuller decided in 1972 to drop accreditation for students – but kept it for staff. This was a huge sacrifice for the evangelical institution – coupled with the hope that the problem would now be permanently resolved. When this was not the case and the APA brought up the matter again in 1979 when Fuller needed to renew accreditation, key figures at the seminary were prepared to consider legal action if reaccreditation was denied. The following struggle for reaccreditation in 1979 and 1980 revolved around recruitment and enrollment practices and a conflict about whether the APA or Fuller were engaging in "religious discrimination." While Fuller called the APA's refusal to accredit the seminary discriminatory, the APA considered Fuller's selection of staff and students based at least in part on their religion a discriminatory practice.

In the end, Fuller resolved the issue by partially accommodating the APA: They accepted that the statement of faith for students was gone for good and they accommodated the APA by diversifying their staff with regard to gender and ethnicity while keeping the statement of faith for professors and administration.[30] This was acceptable for the APA, that had made clear – even when it had

30 Stefanie Coché and Sophia Egbert, "The Rise of Evangelical Psychology. Establishing Clinical Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary," *Isis* 116, no. 3 (September 2025): 534-545, here: 540-543.

voted against Fuller's first attempt for accreditation in early 1972 – that the Association had no general reservations against an evangelical psychology program. On the contrary, the APA committee noted – here paraphrased by Fuller: "there was a higher percentage of graduates relating their services to the needs of churches than would be found among other institutions. They considered this to be a strength. The report noted the unique attempt of the program to relate psychology and theology."[31]

The APA did not object to a program tied to a very specific religious worldview. But they were concerned that the statement of faith prevented equal access for different student groups. The APA's efforts to promote diversity in the 1970s resulted from educational reforms in response to the civil rights and women's movements. In the wake of these social movements, greater attention and effort were directed toward achieving equality and equal rights within the United States' higher education system. The 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Higher Education Acts as well as the enforcement of Title IX after 1972 added new legal expectations for equal opportunities that were being enforced in the 1970s.[32] As a result, Fuller kept the statement of faith as a requirement for staff but abolished it for students, thereby (nominally) opening the school to Catholic, Jewish, and other non-Protestant students. Women had been allowed to study psychology at Fuller from the very beginning, even if very few did so at first. In preparation for APA reaccreditation in 1978/1979, Fuller took steps to hire a more diverse staff in accordance with APA guidelines, specifically recruiting women and people of color. Subsequently, Fuller created scholarships for minority students such as the H. Newton and Suzanna Malony Scholarship for ethnic minority students in the School of Psychology.[33] This strategic turn to minorities also made financial sense, because evangelical colleges, like many other smaller colleges, faced market pressures and financial constraints: Compliance with the diversity notions of the APA helped to maintain accreditation and accreditation made it easier to apply for founding. The only other way to deal with market pressure was to lower the costs. Lowering the costs was difficult for evangelical institutions because their

31 H. Newton Malony and Hendrika Van de Kemp, *The Early History School of Psychology* (Pasadena, CA, 1995), 115.

32 Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State. The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century*, (Princeton, NJ, 2012), 4.

33 Jeffrey P. Bjorck, "Remembering H. Newton Malony: Pastor, Psychologist, and Integration Pioneer," *The International Journal of the Psychology of Religion* 30, no. 4 (2020): 350.

personnel costs were already very low. In general, the faculty at evangelical colleges earned less than faculty at non-evangelical schools and professors maintained a high teaching workload.[34]

Overall, the APA's accreditation of Fuller's psychology program in 1972 had a signaling effect. In this psychology degree program, attendance of theological courses was mandatory, and the course content needed to align with a conservative Protestant understanding of the Bible. Although Fuller was increasingly perceived as a comparatively "progressive" evangelical institution in the 1970s and 1980s, the evangelical community regarded its accreditation as a significant and valuable precedent. It now seemed more likely that the APA and other professional institutions would sign off on programs at other evangelical establishments. Since then, many evangelical colleges and universities, including more conservative ones, have successfully obtained accreditation.

IV. Embracing Minority Strategies

During the 1970s, evangelical academics in the field of psychology were quick to present themselves as victims of discrimination within the public higher education system. They adopted strategies of the civil rights and women's movements, who had previously exposed exclusionary practices in academia.[35] Evangelicals suggested, for example, that the APA should officially list religious affiliation for each of its members. They also claimed to promote what they called "religious diversity." When Biola University, a private Christian evangelical university near Los Angeles, sought accreditation in the early 1980s, it was obvious that Biola had learned from Fuller.[36] The application for accreditation of the school's psychology program by the APA includes this passage:

> It was the observation of Rosemead's [Biola's school of psychology] founders that most quality doctoral programs do at least a minimally adequate job of helping students develop a sensitivity to individual and cultural differences in areas such as age, race, sex and social background, but that very few programs even attempt to address the area of religious interests, background and diversity.[37]

34 Laats, *Fundamentalist U*, 242.

35 On the significance of victim status in identity politics, see Svenja Goltermann, *Opfer. Die Wahrnehmung von Krieg und Gewalt in der Moderne* (Berlin, 2017), 171-246.

36 For a complete analysis of Fuller's psychology program, see: Sophia Egbert, *Religion und Psychologie*.

37 Application for Accreditation to American Psychological Association for Doctoral Training Programs in Professional Psychology, 38. Rosemead had been founded as an independent evangelical school of psychology in 1968 but later merged with Biola University in 1977.

Evangelical schools were more than ready to embrace identity politics, realizing that they could use the concept for their own goals.[38] And indeed, by the 1980s evangelical schools no longer consisted of a predominantly male student body, as advertised in Falwell's fundraising efforts for Liberty University – a place far more conservative than Fuller or Biola. Liberty was far from being at the forefront of the diversity movement, however. On the contrary, even in the evangelical sphere, Liberty stood for extraordinarily conservative viewpoints in almost every regard. Against this backdrop, it is even more noteworthy that even this bastion of conservatism made an effort to display some kind of diversity. Since then, evangelical colleges have become notably less white. One indicator of this is the language of instruction. Today, Fuller offers degree programs in Spanish as well as in Korean.[39] As many colleges do not require their students to sign a statement of faith, they are no longer exclusively Protestant. At Azusa Pacific University in California, for example, there are roughly 600 Catholic students, most of whom have a Latin American family background.[40] This development is connected to the sizeable Hispanic population in the Los Angeles area and reflects the fusion of Protestant and Catholic academic movements.[41] Catholic Hispanic students studying at evangelical institutions might be a factor in the overall conversion trend toward Protestant evangelicalism among the younger Hispanic population.[42] One of the reasons for Catholic Hispanics to choose evangelical institutions of higher learning might be a common set of moral core values. This would imply that social policies are more important than differences of faith.

As in secular institutions, women began to outnumber men in some disciplines. However, evangelical colleges never endorsed the reform processes that made such changes possible. They have remained steadfast in their belief that there is only one "correct" way to understand the world: through a Christ-centered evangelical

38 Identity politics gained importance in the political sphere under Richard Nixon. Joe Merton, "An Ethnic Presence in the White House? Ethnicity, Identity Politics, and the Presidency in the 1970s," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50 (2020): 418-435. For the history of conservative identity politics and on the competition of different forms of identity politics, see Jürgen Martschukat, Alexander Obermüller, and Lisa Patt, "Umkämpfter Sex, umkämpfte Demokratie. Konkurrierende Identitätspolitiken in den USA seit den 1970er-Jahren," *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 20 (2023), no. 3: 426-454.

39 https://fuller.edu/centro-latino/, accessed March 2, 2026; https://fuller.edu/korean-studies-center, accessed March 2, 2026.

40 Nathan Foster, "Are Catholic Students Welcome at APU?," in *ZU Media Student Voice of Azusa Pacific University* (April 2, 2018) https://zunews.com/2018/04/16395/, accessed December 15, 2025.

41 Stefanie Coché, *Religiöse Erweckung und Irdische Macht. Religion und Demokratie in den USA* (Hamburg, 2025), 421-437.

42 Protestants (including evangelicals) are the second-largest faith group after Catholics, accounting for 21% of Hispanic adults. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latinos-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/.

lens. The appropriation of participatory democracy principles at evangelical colleges has, in numerous respects, anticipated the inclusion of non-white communities into a wider cultural conservative framework. Inter-ethnic conservative coalitions are characterized less by references to race than to common beliefs regarding family values and gender dynamics.[43] Accordingly, evangelical colleges remain strongholds of traditional, binary gender roles. While they have embraced a multiracial identity and promote women's higher education, they still demonize feminism, homosexuality, and transgender people. Against the backdrop of diversity initiatives, evangelical scholars actively lobbied in secular academic associations such as the APA to shield their communities from accusations of discrimination. In 1991, one of Wheaton's professors of psychology, Stanton L. Jones, told his colleagues at the prestigious evangelical school:

> I will be taking leadership in a divisional response to the APA on recent proposed changes in the ethical codes for psychologists which may present real difficulties for religious schools since they articulate so forcefully the unacceptability of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. If such an ethical change were thoroughly enforced, this could be used to strong arm religious schools into hiring practicing homosexuals or losing their accreditation. It is vital that Division 36 (Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues) responds to this matter at this time. Responding through the Division 36 would put us in a stronger position than responding just as a religious program.[44]

Conclusion

The acceptance of some kinds of diversity at evangelical colleges foreshadowed the multiracial evangelical coalition that backed Donald Trump in the presidential races in 2016, 2020, and 2024. Black, White, Asian, and Latino evangelicals did not stick to the established political alignment that had historically tied Black and Latino voters to Democrats but instead prioritized shared beliefs about abortion, gender roles, and LGBTQ+ issues that had been shaping increasingly ethnically diverse evangelical college campuses for decades.[45]

43 On the Republican Party's appeal to Latino voters, see Paola Ramos, *Defectors. The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What It Means for America* (New York, 2024).

44 Wheaton College, Buswell Library, Special Collection, Dean of the Graduate school Records, Box 19, Folder 23, Memo August 23, 1991.

45 Groundbreaking on the topic of multi-cultural conservatism: Angela D. Dillard, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now? Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York, 2001).

Evangelical colleges did what other conservative organizations and institutions did, too: Under legal and cultural pressure, they appropriated progressive talking points and used them for their own advantage. This development had parallels in the industrial sector, where conservative organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) strategically acquiesced to progressive legislation in the 1960s and 1970s. Historian Jennifer Delton has shown that the notoriously conservative NAM encouraged members to hire nontraditional factory workers, such as women, the disabled, and people of color.[46] At the same time, evangelical colleges strategically continued their well-established policy of colorblindness. First introduced by conservative Southern Protestants in the mid-1960s as a way to continue segregating their churches, the central argument of the colorblindness policy is that a better and more equitable relationship between Black and white Americans could only be achieved through Christian-motivated personal rapprochement, disregarding skin color, and under no circumstances through structural, legal, or political measures.[47] Although the evangelical institutions' turn toward minorities has to be understood in relationship to systematic legal pressure, this did not mean that evangelicals abandoned their core belief in God-guided interpersonal relationships. Institutions like Fuller stand for a multi-cultural evangelicalism, yet they still prefer government not to interfere in their business.

It is important to understand that evangelicals are not a monolithic block. In early February 2025, Wheaton alum Russell Vought was confirmed as the director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Before his appointment, Vought had been a leading figure within the controversial Project 2025, the plan for a second Trump Administration issued by the Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank. It was not only religious outlets that reported on conflict among Wheaton staff and alumni over whether to cheer Vought's appointment. Even the *New Yorker* featured a story titled "A Fist Fight Over Donald Trump at the Evangelical Version of Harvard."[48] This recent friction within the evangelical collegiate community is just the tip of the iceberg. The past decade

46 Jennifer A. Delton, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

47 Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause*, 1865-1920 (Athens, GA, 1983), 125.

48 Emma Green, "A Fist Fight over Donald Trump at the Evangelical Version of Harvard," *The New Yorker*, February 18, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/a-fistfight-over-donald-trump-at-wheaton-college-around-russell-vought, accessed December 15, 2025.



Figure 3. Marriage Equality Decision Day Rally in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, June 26, 2015. Photo: Elvert Barnes, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marriage_rally_(19186805251).jpg

has fractured conservative Christians deeply, as it did evangelical colleges. Many of them are trying yet again to reconcile different brands of evangelicalism. Fuller and Wheaton are, for example, continuing to grapple with LGBTQ+ issues. Unsurprisingly, Liberty University is stricter in this regard than Wheaton or Fuller. For example, Liberty University has recently fired a transgender employee arguing that Liberty University, as a Christian employer, has an absolute right to employ only people who adhere to its doctrinal statement.[49] Wheaton College even has a center to help students who are "navigating personal experiences with their sexual orientation and or gender identity"[50] – of course with the overarching aim to reconcile those students with the biological sex they were assigned at birth or help them live a celibate life. However, it is remarkable that at some evangelical colleges there are openly queer students, a phenomenon that is very likely connected to the gradual embrace of diversity at evangelical institutions of higher learning since the 1970s.

49 https://wset.com/news/local/liberty-university-cites-first-amendment-and-religious-freedom-in-firing-transgender-employee-seeks-dismissal-ellenor-zinski-title-vii-lawsuit-september-2025, accessed March 3, 2026.

50 https://www.wheaton.edu/life-at-wheaton/student-development-offices/student-wellness/refuge/

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