A Dissertation

Entitled

“What is Next?” Gay Male Students’ Significant Experiences after Coming-Out while in College

by

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An Abstract of

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The purpose of this study was to explore the lives of gay students after they had come out in college, because most of the current research stops at the initial coming out experience. Specifically, this study sought to understand how gay students construct their sexual identity and how interactions influence the continuing construction of their sexual identity. D’Augelli’s model of lesbian-gay-bisexual identity severed as the theoretical foundation for the study.

The study employed a qualitative design. Data were collected through open-ended interviews with six gay college students, ages 19-22. Three themes emerged from a cross-case comparative data analysis: (a) continuous and distinct coming-out decisions, (b) expectations versus the reality of coming-out, and (c) integration of sexual identity into overall identity. Coming-out is not a one-time occurrence, but instead a dynamic
process that has been, and continues to be, influenced by the variety of experiences. All participants arrived at college with certain preconceptions of college life. Coming-out introduced the participants to many new experiences and led participants to develop new expectations of college. Throughout their coming-out process, all participants began to integrate their gay identity into their overall identity; integration each participant attained varied.

Results of this study led to four conclusions: (a) a person’s cornerstone, an individual or group from whom affirmation was most desired, seems to have the most profound impact on continued identity development; (b) the size and culture of some colleges create additional identity challenges; (c) positive exposure to gay individuals and culture while growing up may impact the timing of a person’s coming-out, and the speed and depth for identity integration; and (d) a seventh process may need to be added to D’Augelli’s model.

Results of this study have important implications for policy and practice. This study showed there is a strong need for safe classrooms and living environments, gay role models on campus, and a wide variety of support available to gay students. This study confirms that each new experience in the lives of gay students causes ripples of change, and that continued study regarding the experiences of gay students must persist.
Acknowledgements

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A special note of thanks goes out to the participants of this study. Their willingness to be vulnerable, share their stories, and include me in their lives for a short period of time will forever leave an important mark in the history of study regarding what the collegiate experience is like for many gay students.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

David stopped by my office during the spring of 1994. I knew David fairly well as a student athlete, but I got to know him quite a bit better that day. David told me he was gay during his visit. Over the next several weeks, David and I established a fairly close relationship, as he would visit me quite often to talk. I enjoyed our time together as we had much in common, even though David was a student and I was a member of the faculty and a coach.

Upon returning to school in the fall of 1994, I realized that David was becoming much more comfortable and open with his developing gay identity. David was sharing with more and more individuals he trusted on campus that he was gay. Eventually, stories surfaced all over campus that David was gay. While being gay does not usually cause a big stir on campus, it did with David. David didn’t fit the stereotype of a gay male. He was in a fraternity, a varsity football and baseball player, strong and athletic, well liked by everyone, and quite the catch according to many of the young ladies on campus.

David’s visits to my office became more frequent as the school year progressed. Conversations between us focused on ways to deal with the stress David now felt because he was a gay student on campus. David no longer spent much time at the fraternity. He went home on weekends or spent time with gay friends away from campus. His grades, while never stellar, began to drop significantly. David was very stressed. David’s anger
towards those he once considered friends in his fraternity, and football and baseball teams, became more evident. Summer could not arrive soon enough for him to go home.

David did not return to campus in the fall of 1995. I never heard from David again. For me, David’s experience raised many questions about my own coming out experience and what ripple effect my not coming out in college caused in my life. My undergraduate experience was extremely fulfilling, but it was years after I had graduated from college that I came out. I often wonder how different my collegiate experience may have been if I had come out in college. Would my experience have been like David’s, or would it have been even more fulfilling if I had accepted my developing gay identity sooner? I still ponder these questions as I talk to gay students and play an active role on my campus regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. The intent of this study was to try and answer some of my questions about the experiences of gay students while in college.

**Background of the Problem**

The decision to attend college and, if so, which college to attend, is most often the biggest decision young people will make up to that point in their lives. Parents, teachers, friends, desired academic major, or a visit to a prospective institution influence this decision for many adolescents. While external factors and experiences may influence a student’s choice of college, it is the experiences the student encounters while in college that have a lasting impact.

But what is the impact of collegiate experiences on students? Are students affected differently by the variety of experiences they encounter, endure, or create while in college? For gay adolescents who come to explore, accept, and display a gay identity in college, how does the decision to come out in college impact their collegiate
experience? These are just some of the questions regarding the experiences of students within institutions of higher education that, until recently, had few research-based answers (Astin, 1993).

*Lack of research on the collegiate experience.* According to Astin (1993), a significant amount of writing deals with the impact of college (see Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993), so one might be tempted to conclude that a great deal is already known about the collegiate experience. Astin states, however, that much of the existing research on the experience(s) of college is limited in scope, inadequate in design, and outdated. The research, according to Astin, contains data that were not collected simultaneously from students at contrasting institutions; lacks any data regarding the ways in which students change between admission and some subsequent point in time while in college; and fails to include a diverse sample of students. These factors make adequate understanding of the impact of college on students difficult to accurately assess.

In the most significant work of its kind, Astin (1977, 1993) attempted to enhance our understanding of how students are affected by their undergraduate collegiate experience. His research, containing longitudinal data from over 500,000 students from a sample of over 1,300 institutions, is the largest ongoing study of American higher education. Results from Astin’s (1993) research show every aspect of a student’s development is in some way affected by peer group characteristics, and students generally tend to change their values, behaviors, and academic aspirations toward the direction of the dominant influence of their peer group. From the volumes of data Astin collected, he has been able to make the following general conclusion: “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the
undergraduate experience” (p. 398). Astin suggests that while widespread agreement exists among those who study higher education about the importance of peer groups, relatively little information is known about how students are influenced by their peers, and more information is needed on the relative impact of various types of collegiate experiences involving peer groups. Even less is known about how peers influence gay students and the experiences they have in college (Rhoads, 1994).

**Lack of student integration.** The experiences of students with their peers, members of the faculty, and other reference groups, or their levels and kinds of involvement in a variety of campus activities, impact the students’ levels of emotional, social, psychological, cognitive, and overall well being during the collegiate experience. All collegiate experiences influence the individuals’ degrees of academic and social integration within the institution. Integration is the process of incorporating the many aspects of the collegiate experience and assigning their relevance to one’s overall life experience. Generally speaking, the more integrated students are with the collegiate experience, the more satisfying this experience will be for them (Boyer, 1987; Tinto, 1993).

**Student incongruence and isolation.** Tinto (1993) states that lack of quality student experiences while on campus can be caused by two factors: incongruence and isolation. Incongruence is a general mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, experiences, realities, and preferences of a student and those of the institution. Incongruence is often the result of a student’s uniformed or poor decision to attend a college that is unsuited to individual expectations, needs, wants, interests, and desired or anticipated experiences. Many times the external factors and forces that help an adolescent choose a college are not in the student’s best interests since the experiences
the individual encounters, endures, or creates while in college do not seem to fit into the ideology or practices of the institution. Isolation, particularly social isolation, is caused by a lack of sufficient social contact and experiences with other members of the institution. Often, voluntary withdrawal from an institution is due to social isolation and is more a reflection of experiences that occur on campus after entry to college than it is a reflection of what has taken place before entry. The experience of social isolation has been found to be the single most important predictor of eventual departure from an institution.

Tinto (1993) states that for most students, the isolation of college is only temporary since friendships are soon established and students come to feel at home within the collegiate setting. Students who have difficulty meeting people and making new friends, or who respond to ambiguous situations by withdrawing into themselves, tend to have greater difficulty in establishing positive social experiences compared to those whose typical response is to reach out to others. All students must find a group or groups to which to belong. These groups are often referred to as subcultures (Rhoads, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Subcultures serve as social niches and provide students the opportunity to encounter, endure, and create positive experiences in some capacity within the collegiate environment.

_Peripheral subcultures._ Tinto (1993) indicates the college environment has a central and peripheral social and intellectual life. The center, or mainstream, of the institution normally establishes the prevailing climate and culture. The mainstream culture determines the prevailing characteristics, attitudes, values, experiences, and beliefs of the institution. The periphery of an institution is comprised of many subordinate subcultures whose values, experiences, beliefs, and behaviors may differ
substantially from those of the mainstream culture. While all subcultures within an institution have lives of their own, the degree to which each subculture differs from the mainstream culture will vary. Subcultures on the periphery are typically marginal to the power relationships that define campus politics, and they tend to have little impact on the overall climate of the institution and the experiences that occur there. For members of marginalized groups, the centrality of their affiliation to the dominant culture may impact the quality of their experiences within the institution. The farther removed a subculture is from the mainstream of an institution the more marginal this group is to the life of the college and the more likely the students in this subculture will perceive themselves and their experiences as being separate from the institution.

Lack of socialization opportunities. According to Erickson (1963), one of the central tasks of adolescence is to develop intimacy with others. Intimacy occurs through socialization. Adolescents have the strong desire and the need for opportunities to socialize with others like themselves. Until their college years, the experience of most self-identified or discovering gay adolescents is that they must shape their identity alone (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). They find little support and/or socialization from family, friends, schools, and church because of the heterosexist culture in which gays and their reference groups operate. Gay adolescents typically do not have a reference group to which they can turn when they experience prejudice and oppression against either themselves or others around them for being gay. This type of oppression may make the affirmation of a personal identity one of the more difficult challenges faced in their lifetime (Durby, 1994). The lack of social support during childhood for a gay identity forces many adolescents to avoid the issue of their gay identity altogether, or causes them to suppress their gay identity until they are able to find a supportive social
environment in which they can explore and experience their new identity in its totality. Arrival at college may be the first opportunity for self-discovering and self-identifying gay students to socialize openly with other gays.

The collegiate environment may be a more powerful force in the lives of gay students than in the lives of their heterosexual counterparts for two reasons: (a) the prominent role of sexuality on college campuses (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996), and (b) the need for gay adolescents to socialize with other gay students because of the often delayed sexual identity process and previous social isolation felt while in high school (Durby, 1994). According to Evans and D'Augelli (1996), having been cautious and secretive in high school, gay students may presume the collegiate environment is more open and will provide an opportunity to accept and display a gay identity. Most likely, these students will be disappointed because the collegiate environment, like the high school environment, can be oppressive. Research on the victimization of gay students at institutions of higher education shows that 75% of the gay student population on campuses is verbally harassed, 25% of that population is threatened with physical violence at least once, and over 60% of that population has personal safety fears on campus (Evans & D’Augelli). These statistics show overwhelming evidence of a hostile climate for gay students and certainly place gay students on the periphery of the campus culture.

**Harassment of gay students.** Evans and D’Augelli (1996) state that harassment statistics only apply to a portion of gay students. Only students on campus who are openly out with their sexual identity can be surveyed. However, one does not need to be openly gay on campus to be a victim of oppression, hatred, or misunderstanding. *Closeted* gays are also deeply affected when they observe what happens to those gay
students who are out. Many times, seeing the oppression of students who are out and open on campus keeps many gay students in the closet. They are victims of invisibility and are dominated by those who have a heterosexist attitude. Harassment toward gay students causes most gay college students, whether out or not, to alter their behavior in some capacity in order to avoid being victimized further. Being made to change their behavior in order to avoid harassment is another example of the unseen and undocumented experiences of oppression that gay students endure. Verbal and/or physical harassment of gay students in the collegiate environment causes many gay students to feel socially unwelcome within the institution.

**Lack of role models.** Like all adolescents, gay students need role models whom they can admire, look up to, and model themselves after. Due to the degree of harassment that gay faculty (McNaron, 1997) and gay student affairs professionals (Croteau & Talbot, 2000) face, many gay faculty and staff remain in the closet and are not available as role-models for gay students. It is difficult, if not impossible, for gay faculty members or student affairs professionals to serve as role models for gay students when they themselves are not visible within the collegiate experience. This invisibility of many gay students, faculty, or student affairs professionals, due to fear of coming out, makes it difficult to document and to understand the experiences of gay individuals in the many areas of higher education.

**Diversity of gay collegiate experiences.** D’Augelli (1991) found that 54% of gay male college students identify gay friends as the most important people in their lives. He also found that just over 50% of gay male college students participate in institutional gay organization(s), and only 40% of these students state most of their social activities are with this group. Rhoads (1994) found the vast majority of gay students do not identify
with gay organizations on campus. For many gay students, openly gay and politically active gay students on campus serve to divide the gay community. While gay organizations represent a subculture of an institution that could be considered peripheral to the institution’s dominant culture, current research shows the majority of gay college students do not engage solely in activities involving other gay students.

Limited research on the gay collegiate experience. Recently, small minorities of gay students on college campuses are becoming more visible and politically active at their respective institutions in the hope of creating more awareness of gay students and their needs during college. This recent movement by politically-active gay students to gain more visibility on campus has lead to the current trend in higher education research to consider issues relating to gay college students (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson, 2000; Croteau & Talbot, 2000). The information on gay collegiate experiences is sparse, however (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994). Bieschke et al. reported that in an attempt to locate studies dealing specifically with gay college students, they were able to find only nine separate studies. From these studies, the authors distinguished that the research on the gay collegiate experience centered on three themes. These themes are (a) the identity development process, (b) experiences on campus, and (c) health-related issues. Of the studies they classified as dealing with experiences on campus, one study focused on the experiences of gay students in the classroom while the remaining studies focused on the harassment of gay students.

Rhoads (1994) found in a review of literature from 1970-1994 consisting of more than 200 pieces of research regarding gay students, that 77% of the research focused on heterosexual attitudes toward gay students, whereas only 23% of the research focused on gay students’ actual experience in the world of higher education. The research that
focused on gay student experiences addressed ways in which campus environments are 
hostile toward gay students and the ways in which gay students cope with harassment. 
Evans et al. (1998) state that limited attention has been paid to enhancing the experiences 
of gay students on campus. Rhoads states little is known about how gay students endure 
on campus. The lack of research on the collegiate gay experience has, in turn, rendered 
the experiences of gay students on college campuses invisible. 

The small amount of research conducted on the gay collegiate experience has 
typically portrayed gay culture as homogeneous or has addressed gay experiences mainly 
from a white, middle-class perspective (Greene, 1994, 1997; Sauve, 1997; Savin-
Williams, 1998; Wall & Washington, 1991). The assumption that the gay experience is 
rather homogeneous draws its credibility and belief from current heterosexist attitudes in 
society, and also from many segments of the gay community (Savin-Williams, 1998). 
While gay students represent a subculture at the outer fringes, or periphery, of the 
campuses mainstream culture, within the subculture of gay students many differences are 
to be found. Examples of these differences are gender, race, and degree of being out. 
Differences in the subculture of gay students make the experiences of all gay students 
unique and deserving of further investigation. 

Statement of Problem 

Rhoads (1994) conducted the most extensive work to date on the gay collegiate 
experience as he attempted to make visible the experiences of gay students as they came 
out on campus and tried to create a place for themselves within the institution. The 
narrative stories produced from Rhoads’ work have provided much needed insight into 
the experiences of gay college students. His work has served, and will continue to serve, 
as a building block for further studies on the collegiate experiences of gay adolescents.
While there is growing, but still limited, research on the collegiate experiences of gay students, the current research stops at the coming out experience. A key for further research on the collegiate gay experience is provided by one of the participants in Rhoads’ (1994) study when the student states:

There’s a lack of challenge once you come out. “What is next?” When I first started to come out I put a lot of energy into it; I expected it all to be so difficult. I felt as if I committed myself to much more of a struggle for personal validation and it seemed as if personally it came too easily. “Ok I’m out. No big deal.” It seemed like I set myself up for this long struggle that didn’t happen and my only recourse was to move it from a personal level to a political level. If I could do a greater good by serving the whole community, that would be great. I felt as if I had already done it for myself. (p. 114)

The point Rhoads’ (1994) participant makes by asking “What is next?” was the building block of this study, which attempted to add to the growing research and literature on the gay collegiate experience. Rhoads’ work is critically important to the understanding of the coming out experiences of gay college students, but coming out represents only a part of their experience. The intent of this study was to expand the knowledge of gay students’ experiences in college after they have come out and to expand the knowledge on the impact these experiences have on the students’ overall collegiate experience.

Framework of the Study

Work by D’Augelli (1991) on the identity processes of gay men in college has led him to conclude that although they have known for a long time they were gay, the development of a personal identity as being gay is transitional while in college. D’Augelli concluded, and Rhoads (1994) concurred, that the establishment of a gay identity is a life-long process, so the experiences of each student who comes out while in college will be different, unique, and ongoing. D’Augelli’s (1994a) life span model of
lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development is based on a life-long identity process. D’Augelli’s model is not stage theory, such as that suggested by other authors (see Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989); rather his model takes into account, and puts into context, the complex factors that influence the development of gay individuals over the life span. D’Augelli’s (1991) framework for lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity was used as the foundation for this study based on his assumption that developing a gay identity is indeed a life-long process for gay adolescents, as his previous work has shown this to be true.

D’Augelli (1994a) argues that within his model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development, accountability for several broad factors that influence the development of sexual orientation must be analyzed. These factors include changes from birth through adulthood to death; patterns of social intimacy across the lifespan; and links between the individual, significant others, and the environment. D’Augelli refers to these three sets of interrelated variables as (a) personal subjectivities and actions, (b) interactive intimacies, and (c) sociohistorical connections. This research examined all three variables, with the examination of sociohistorical connections focused on campus context only.

Research Question

D’Augelli’s (1994a) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development provided the framework for this study and the following research question: What are significant experiences for gay male students after they have come out in college, and how do they perceive that these experiences are affecting or will affect their continuing coming out process? Asking them to cite experiences, when possible, to support their answers, the following sub questions were used to address the interrelated variables of personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections
in D’Augelli’s model to help gain a better understanding of how collegiate experiences impact the continuing coming out process:

1. How did these students describe their current constructed sexual identity?
2. How did these students continue to construct their sexual identity?
3. How did these students perceive that on or off campus group interactions and experiences have influenced continuing construction of their sexual identity?
4. How did these students perceive that interactions and experiences with faculty, various campus organizations, and age-related peers attending the institution have impacted the continuing construction of their sexual identity?

Significance of the Study

All aspects of the collegiate experience impact students (Astin, 1993), so ways must be found to document the impact and significance of experiences for gay college students after coming out. This study adds to the documentation of gay college students and specifically provides information regarding gay college students’ experiences after coming out. Documentation of the collegiate experience after students’ have come out continues to allow higher education professionals to gain a better understanding of this subculture within the mainstream of an institution.

This study is of particular importance to college student personnel, faculty, and university administrators for several reasons. Research has shown that institutions have the greatest impact on students when an interrelationship and interdependency exist between the intellectual, emotional, and social development of students (Love & Goodsell Love, 1995). Boyer (1987) states that far too often the interrelationship between the intellectual, emotional, and social development does not occur because too much separation exists between the academic and social environments on campus.
However, higher education professionals like to speak about institutions as communities even though the classroom often has little connection to out-of-class experiences. Kuh and Love (2000) state that most institutions also advocate a commitment to diversity in their student body, faculty, and curriculum, but an underlying assumption persists that those who are different from the institution’s mainstream culture need to adapt to the institution. To enhance the diversity of students, faculty, staff, and curriculum programs found within higher education, institutions must challenge this underlying assumption and the policies that flow from it. This study begins to shed light on a variety of environmental factors that influence out students in both classroom and out-of-class activities. Information regarding experiences of out students sheds additional light on whether institutions really do function as communities and provides insight into the ways that various parts of an institution (e.g., students, faculty, administrators, student affairs professionals, or the campus culture) do or do not welcome, care to experience, tolerate, or embrace diversity.

When students are actively engaged emotionally, socially, and intellectually in the academic program and with their peers, a greater understanding and sensitivity develops for individual similarities and differences (Love & Goodsell Love, 1995). An increased understanding of the significant experiences of out students may provide faculty, staff, and administrators insight into the effective policies and practices that will help all students have better experiences during the collegiate years. An understanding of diversity, and a greater sensitivity towards diversity, work toward changing the dominant culture of an institution. These, in turn, may allow all subordinate subcultures to feel more welcome, integrated, and connected within the institution’s mainstream culture.
This study provides valuable information on how peer groups, and the many additional reference groups students interact with while in college, impact the experiences of gay students after coming out while in college. A better understanding of the ways in which peer groups influence the experiences of gay students after coming out also provides insight into how the environment of an institution affects students, within both the mainstream and the peripheral subcultures.

Astin (1993) offers validation for looking at the experiences of gay students who have come out when stated it is necessary to assess the impact of collegiate experiences rather than college as such. He also argues that it is important to obtain longitudinal data on students so a comparison can be made between the time of admission to college and a subsequent point in time during which students change. This study provides a foundation for follow-up studies regarding the continuing identity development and coming out process for gay individuals. This study begins to collect the initial stages of longitudinal data that Astin argues is needed to assess the impact of the collegiate experience on any student group.

Through this study it was hoped that a better understanding of how the experiences they have within the collegiate setting, impact the overall experience of some out students within the institution. The better the experience, the deeper the level of integration, and the stronger the sense of connection to the institution will be (Boyer 1987; Tinto, 1993). A sense of connection is vital to college persistence, to obtaining one’s degree, and to one’s emotional health and well-being. This study does not provide generalizations that can be attributed to all out gay male college students, but it does provide an in-depth and rich look at the lives of the participants involved. Through an in-depth and rich look at some of the lives of out male college students, and the ways in
which their experiences after coming out impact their collegiate experience, this study
adds to the small, but growing, body of knowledge regarding the experiences of gay
college students. It is hoped that this study will serve as a springboard for further
research into the lives and experiences of gay college students.

Definitions

*Age-related peer group interaction.* Social interaction between gay students and
those individuals, ages 18-24, around them either on or off campus, regardless of race,
gender, or orientation.

*Coming out.* The process of proclaiming one’s identity as being gay first
internally and potentially privately and/or publicly to others; this process is ongoing and
is a situation-by-situation decision.

*Coming out experience.* A specific time, event, or place that a gay individual can
pinpoint as telling someone or others that he or she is gay.

*Cornerstone.* The most desired and most important affirmation gay individuals
can seek out and can hope to receive from individuals or groups.

*Gay.* Individuals who designate same sex attraction as a central part of their
overall definition of self.

*Heterosexism.* The assumption that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual
(Tierney, 1992).

*Homophobia.* Fear, misunderstanding, and/or loathing of nonheterosexual
individuals.

*Identity.* The ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and
sameness and to act accordingly (Erickson, 1963).
Identity development. The clarification of patterns regarding interaction in a variety of contexts over time in the development of an individual person (D’Augelli, 1994a).

Marginalization. The oppression of others.

Oppression. The thoughts, words, or actions exhibited toward an individual or group that would suggest the individual or group is inferior to the individual or group displaying such behavior (Smith, 1997).

Out students. Gay students who have disclosed their sexual identity internally, privately, and publicly to others (D’Augelli, 1994a) for a minimum of three months.

Peer group interaction. Social interaction between gay students and those individuals around them either on or off campus, regardless of race, gender, or orientation.

Queer. An identifier of students with various non-heterosexual identity orientation. The term is often used within the gay community to connote a sense of pride and openness about one’s sexuality.

Significant. Having or likely to have special meaning; not to be thought of in terms of statistical significance used in quantitative research.

Self-worth. An individual’s perception of his or her value to society.

Sexual identity development. An individual’s overall conception of self as a sexual being (Cass, 1984b).

Student affairs professionals. The variety of individuals in higher education who work with students outside the classroom and are responsible for helping students succeed in the day-to-day functioning of the collegiate experience.
Subculture. A group of individuals who have a shared meaning that differs in some way from the larger cultural body in which they are situated and that manifests itself through their social interactions (Rhoads, 1997).

Assumptions of the Study

1. Participants were open and honest in sharing their life experiences and did not report "what the researcher wanted to hear."

2. Participants were able to distinguish the event(s) or time in which they came out while in college.

Delimitations of the Study

1. This study was delimited to full-time, enrolled, gay, male, college students who attended small to large midwestern universities and were between the ages of 18-24.

2. The study did not include gay college women.

3. The sociohistorical context for this study was looked at only in terms of the campus context, not the societal context.

Limitations of the Study

1. Participants for this study were not randomly selected, but self-selected, so the findings cannot be generalized to all gay college students, or to the gay students at the colleges at which the participants attended.

2. The type of institution participants came from impacted the experiences of the participants.

Conclusion

Little is known about how college impacts students (Astin, 1993), especially gay students (Rhoads, 1994). David stated in one of our many conversations that he turned to me as a member of the faculty and as a coach because he felt no other connection with
gay or straight individuals on campus. I offered David a haven of safety in understanding some of the issues he was going through because we are both gay and deeply involved in sports. I will always wonder why David left our institution. My conversations with David, and many other gay students since then, raise many questions regarding the experiences of gay students after coming out in college that are unanswered. I hope through this study that answers to some of those questions have started to be found.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The study of homosexuality and issues related to sexual orientation among college students has received relatively little attention in the research literature (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2001). This study was designed to further the understanding of the experiences of gay college students after they have come out while in college, as this particular topic has not been systematically addressed in the literature. Specifically, this study looked at the experiences of gay male students, ages 18-24. The existing literature on the experiences of gay college students provided the context for this study.

Role of Sexuality in Adolescents

Adolescence is a transitional stage in which young people gradually adjust to the growth and development of biological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes within their environment. This transition brings with it many challenges and opportunities, one of which may be the development, acceptance, and display of a gay identity (Jackson & Sullivan, 1994). The development and acceptance of a gay identity is not a sudden awakening during adulthood, but often, it is a series of stages in which children have a vague sense of being different from their peers while growing up (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989). Issues of sexuality become more prominent and important for adolescents as they age because of their desire for more intimate relationships with those to whom they are sexually attracted. This concurs with Erickson (1963) in that one
of the central tasks of adolescence is identity formation and intimacy with other individuals.

Culture and identity are highly interactive and the context of the culture in which individuals find themselves influences the kinds of identities its members will embrace (Rhoads, 1997). The environment, or culture, in which gay adolescents operate plays a central role in the development of a gay identity, especially if this environment is hostile towards homosexuality (Eddy & Forney, 2000; Jackson & Sullivan, 1994; Rhoads, 1997; Troiden, 1989). When the environment, and the interactions that take place in the environment, are hostile toward a gay identity, this hostility may serve as an obstacle to the integration of a positive self-appraisal and a gay self-identity (Jackson & Sullivan, 1994). The stigma of homosexuality affects both the formation and the expression of a gay identity (Troiden, 1989). For individuals who come to accept and display a gay identity during adolescence, an understanding of the context in which negative experiences occur for these adolescents is important to understand since their environment has a direct impact on identity development (Eddy & Forney, 2000).

**Barriers to Sexual Orientation Development**

According to Jackson and Sullivan (1994), the social marginalization of gay individuals by family, friends, schools, and religious organizations may inhibit the social development and acceptance of a marginalized identity in those individuals who display marginal characteristics, such as being gay. This may cause the development and integration of a gay identity to remain dormant or disillusioned by devaluation. This suppression causes the investment in the social and cognitive mastery of the roles and identities of being gay to diminish because a gay identity is not a priority for understanding. Self-suppression completes an effective cycle of repression and
oppression, enduring only so long before the exploration and acceptance of a gay identity must take place.

One of the goals of adolescence is to emerge with a secure identity, a positive sense of self, and the capability to develop an intimate relationship with another individual (Erickson, 1968). According to Radkowsky and Siegel (1997), for gay adolescents the development of a gay identity most often takes place without the support of family or friends and often forces gay adolescents to choose from three options in dealing with their pending gay identity: (a) to hide or avoid feelings of being gay, (b) to try to change feelings of being gay towards heterosexual feelings, or (c) to accept feelings of being gay. Personal identity cannot be fully attained until agreement is reached in regards to who individuals think they are, who they claim to be, and who they are in the eyes of others.

Fassinger (1998) states gay students’ sexual orientation places them in a minority group forcing them to pursue two goals simultaneously: (a) dealing with a sexual identity they have previously considered reprehensible or irrelevant; and (b) acknowledging their membership in, and changing their attitudes toward, a largely invisible group that they too had previously considered reprehensible or irrelevant. This sexual identity development relates to both personal and social identities.

**Peer Groups and Socialization**

Hunter, Shannon, Know, and Martin (1998) state that peer groups are very important for adolescents. This importance intensifies the pressure for gay students to conform to a heterosexual point of view in order to find acceptance among their peers as adolescents seek to expand their social networks during college. American society also encourages adolescents to develop an independent identity in which young people come
to understand both who they are and what they want to achieve in life. Therefore, incorporating a sexual identity as a part of this process is central to this independence. These two conflicting enterprises for gay students often leave these students feeling alienated and marginalized (Hunter et al., 1998) and leaves little opportunity to explore a developing gay identity without severe risk (D’Augelli, 1996).

**Collegiate Impact on Sexual Orientation Development**

The development of a gay identity represents a departure from the heterosexual socialization patterns within which gay individuals grew up. This new way of viewing and representing personal identity demands unusual competencies and special strengths as gay individuals must learn to change their thinking while departing from an old identity of heterosexuality and adopting a new identity of being gay (D’Augelli, 1994b). Renn (2000) concurs that the construction of meaning regarding experiences for gay adolescents and their personal identity consists of two basic elements: (a) the unlearning of false theories and paradigms, and (b) the learning of new ones which are often more complex than being heterosexual. These new paradigms become even more complex once the adolescent enters the collegiate environment.

For many gay students, the acceptance, exploration, and display of a gay identity does not occur until college. This is because college often represents the first time individuals are able to explore thoughts and feelings of being gay without the close scrutiny of family and friends (D’Augelli, 1991; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Evans et al., 1998; Gideonse, 1998) and because students may presume that the collegiate environment is more open and will provide a receptive environment in which to accept and display a gay identity (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996). This new identity exploration makes the collegiate environment a more powerful force in the lives of gay students than
in the lives of their heterosexual students due to (a) the prominent role of sexuality on college campuses (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996), (b) the gay adolescents’ need to socialize with other gay students because of the often delayed sexual identity process and the previous social isolation felt while in high school (Durby, 1994), and (c) the pressure to remain closeted reinforced by heterosexual, and many times, gay peers because of the heterosexist environment in which adolescents function (Durby).

In deciding to come out, one of the issues gay adolescents must address is whether or not they fit the societal stereotypes, mainly gender atypical in their behavior and personality, of gay individuals (Savin-Williams, 1998). In addition to providing a challenging environment for the acceptance of a gay identity, college also challenges gay adolescents with the reality of presenting themselves to society as being gay. Part of presenting oneself as gay to varying segments of society is coming out to others. Coming out is disclosing one’s sexual orientation. Coming out begins with self-acknowledgement of being gay and then moving toward telling others that one is gay (D’Augelli, 1994a; Rhoads, 1994; Troiden, 1989; von Destinon, Evans, & Wall, 2000). Due to the pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions in society, and due to the fact that in terms of physical appearance, being homosexual is most often indistinguishable from being heterosexual, coming out (to one’s self and) to others can be viewed as a life-long process (D’Augelli, 1994a; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Lopez & Chism, 1993; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999; von Destinon et al., 2000).

Coming-Out Experiences of Gay College Students

Rhoads (1994) conducted an extensive look at the coming out experiences of gay college students. In his study, Rhoads conducted 40 ethnographic interviews of gay males attending a large state university in the East. His work attempted to shed light on
the experiences of gay students as they tried to create a place of their own within academe. All of the students in his study were self-identified as gay and were out to themselves, campus, or society to varying degrees. Rhoads concluded that coming out is an ongoing process, not a one-time occurrence, and that gay students represent and form a subculture within an institution. Rhoads described a subculture as “a group of people engaged in ongoing social interaction who exhibit similar values, beliefs, and attitudes that create a shared sense of meaning” (p. 122). The collegiate environment is full of various subcultures that represent the institution and the social environment found within it. Rhoads also described what he called a queer contraculture, which, in this case, represented the most visibly out students on campus. A contraculture is “a specific type of subculture, one that exists in opposition to the dominant culture” (p. 122). “Queer” was the self-label used by the majority of students in Rhoads’ study to identify themselves as being gay. Queer implied, among other things, being proud and open about one’s same-sex attraction as well as being engaged in gay/queer politics and feeling a degree of hostility toward heterosexism.

Of the participants in his study, Rhoads (1994) found that 30 students described coming out to others as one of the most significant experiences of their lives. Coming out was a great relief, empowering, or liberating. Six students did not find the process of coming out to be an overwhelmingly positive experience, but none of the students regretted coming out. Rhoads concluded that gay students at Clement University faced three general alternatives resulting from their gay identity: (a) to become involved in the queer contraculture and adopt a queer identity, (b) to become involved in the queer contraculture but resist a queer identity, or (c) to reject the queer contraculture altogether.
Rhoads (1994) stated that the queer contraculture formed the heart of the gay student community, but that the majority of gay students at Clement University did not belong to, or identify with, the queer contraculture. Many gay students believed that visibly active and political gay students tended to divide the gay community at the institution and created more enemies than friends for the gay students there. The study of gay students has received little attention since Rhoads’ study (Evans & Broido, 1999).

In another study, D’Augelli (1991) found that 54% of gay male college students participated in the university’s gay, lesbian, or bisexual organization and, of these students, only 40% indicated that most of their social activity was related to this organization. He also found 57% of gay male college students identified gay friends the most important people in their lives. D’Augelli’s findings provide evidence that the social make-up and interactions of gay students are filled with diversity. Rhoads (1994), too, found evidence for a wide range of social activities in that gay students have different types of social interactions, and that how they presented themselves, what they talked about, and how they acted depended on whether or not they were talking to heterosexual or homosexual friends.

*Ethnic and Racial Diversity within the Gay Collegiate Experience*

While Rhoads’ (1994) work has shed some light on the experiences of gay college students, the sparse research available has typically portrayed the gay culture as being rather homogenous, or has mainly focused on the gay experience from a white middle-class perspective (Greene, 1994; 1997; Sauve, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998; Wall & Washington, 1991). The lack of research conducted on ethnic and racial diversity within the gay community, specifically the gay collegiate community, oversimplifies the lives of youths who are members of a sexual minority. This results in shallow and thoughtless
stereotypes that mask the intricacies of their lives (Savin-Williams, 1998). Generalizations of the gay collegiate experience also compromise the quality of scholarship on this population (Rhoads, 1997).

To address this void in the literature, Wall and Washington (1991) informally interviewed gay African-American, Asian American, and Latin American university students. The authors did not reveal the number of students they interviewed; moreover they stated that their conclusions were more subjective and qualitative in nature. They found that when individuals were gay and part of a racial minority, they often felt that only one aspect of identity can be important. This led to (a) feelings of doubt about who they are, (b) having to choose which part of themselves was more important, (c) finding the best way to deal with a part of one’s identity while suppressing another, (d) an absence of anyone to talk to about personal feelings, and (e) a sense of being misunderstood by both the gay and racial communities to which they belonged.

Dumas (1998) discussed how race acts to determine, or at least influence, the ways racial minorities come out while on campus. Too often, racial minority gay students feel race and sexual orientation occupies two separate spaces, as constructed by mainstream society. This way of looking at identity forces students to choose which group (race or orientation) is more important to them in comparison to others. Dumas argued that being gay is not an additional identity placed on top of being black, but that these identities, as with all other identities, are inextricably interrelated. For gay students of color, it is important to find a place of community on campus.

In his dissertation, Sauve (1997) looked at the coming out experiences of 12 African-American college students. All 12 participants responded that their coming out experience was empowering because it displaced a long held secret. These students also
found a lack of resources and individuals to talk to about their developing gay identities. They also saw themselves as being doubly different from mainstream society in that one of their differences was visible (race) and one was not (sexual orientation). They expressed the feeling that resources, (e.g., family, church, and friends) were in place to help them deal with issues of racial discrimination, but that issues of orientation had to be dealt with on their own because they found the African-American community to be homophobic. Most of the students were very selective in choosing someone to come out to while in college and suggested that coming out beyond themselves and close friends would be unwise and unnecessary. Reasons for this included loss of financial support, fear of rejection from the African-American community, and the possibility of additional discrimination. Experiences of racism within the white-dominated gay collegiate community were common for these students. Within the African-American community, homophobia was widespread both within the collegiate setting and at home. This was mainly due to the religious belief that homosexuality is immoral. Homophobia was the reason that none of the 12 participants belonged to any mainstream African-American organizations on campus.

Despite this alienation, these students retained a strong attachment to their racial heritage. Most of the participants stated that they could move between their two worlds (race and sexual orientation) with competence, although, at times, the sense that they did not belong fully to either group was tiring. For these students, the stress of coming out while in college, and the need to find social outlets compounded the existing pressure to be successful academically and placed additional social burdens on them due to their race.
Oppression of Gay College Students

Exploration and acceptance of a gay identity while in college will most likely cause disappointment by the lack of open-mindedness towards gay individuals in the collegiate environment. It is oppressive. According to Tierney (1992), there are three root problems with the oppression of gay students in higher education: (a) bigotry, (b) ignorance, and (c) silence; all of which tend to condone discrimination and undermine identities. D’Augelli (1998) has argued, in many cases, having to wait until college to explore and accept one’s gay identity represents the first of many types of oppression that gay students face. Years of personal identity development are lost because of the delay in exploring and accepting one’s sexual orientation.

Student attitudes towards gay students. National statistics continue to show that large portions of American society remain unaccepting of gay individuals and unsupportive of their rights (Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997). In this sense, colleges and universities serve as microcosms of a larger society (Obear, 1991). Overt expressions of homophobia are widely perceived as acceptable, so there is little safety from verbal or physical attack (Pharr, 1988). Whitlock (1998) concurred: “Homophobia is so pervasive that many people do not perceive mistreatment of gay and lesbian youth as wrong” (p. 4). A recent study of sexual harassment in high schools found the most upsetting form of sexual harassment was to be called “gay” by others (D’Augelli, 1998). Harassment is likely to continue in the collegiate climate as well. Campus intolerance of homosexuality rates as being more serious than racial or gender tensions at some institutions (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). As the gay population in society, and on campus, becomes more organized, politically stronger, and more visible, gay individuals also become easier targets on campus (D'Emilho, 1992; Evans & Wall, 2000).
Malaney et al. (1997) state the undertaking of national studies regarding specific attitudes of heterosexual students towards homosexual students has not occurred and that institutional climate-assessment research is sparse. (The annual Freshman Survey coordinated by the American Council on Education and UCLA incorporates two questions regarding homosexuality.) The individual institutional studies or multi-institutional studies conducted regarding attitudes of heterosexual students toward homosexual students show the campus climate toward gay students remains cold. Understanding the attitudes of students toward gay students is a critical component in understanding the verbal and physical harassment of gay and lesbian students (Mc Hugh Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997). D’Augelli and Rose (1990) found that in an institutional study of attitudes of heterosexual freshmen toward gay students, that 30% of the students surveyed would prefer a college environment with only heterosexuals. Over half of the students surveyed considered gay men disgusting and believed homosexual activity to be morally wrong. Nearly half stated they did not care about the problems of gay students. Male students were significantly more homophobic than female students and demonstrated greater animosity toward gay men than toward lesbians. The authors concluded that homophobic attitudes among freshmen men may be so common as to be normative for freshmen men. These students expressed more indifference to the harassment of gay students and they evaluated the harassment they did notice on campus as not very serious. Kurdek (1988) found in a study of negative attitudes towards gay students by heterosexual students that 17% of his sample agreed with the 40 negative statements in the study about gays.

In an institutional study of incoming freshmen conducted by Mohr and Sedlacek (2000), the authors found that 19% of the students surveyed did not want to have gay
friends, while 39% of the students stated they would like to become friends with gay students but would anticipate some discomfort in forming this friendship. Male freshmen were significantly more likely than female freshmen to perceive barriers to friendship with gay students, and students surveyed who did not want a gay friend tended to value racial and religious diversity less than other participants did.

Mc Hugh Engstrom and Sedlacek (1997) found in a study assessing attitudes of heterosexual students toward gay students that the magnitude of discomfort by students toward gay students varied across situations; men held more intense negative prejudicial attitudes toward gays, and men held deeper homophobic feelings than female students toward gay men. This study also revealed that even the simplest social interactions with gay students might elicit feelings of anxiety and concern among heterosexual students, particularly against gay male students. In a somewhat positive light, the study also showed that many heterosexual students do not hold extremely intolerant attitudes toward gays. The heterosexual students stated that they may feel discomfort and anxiety, but not repulsion, towards gay students, and most expressed outrage at incidents of physical violence toward gay students.

Faculty and student affairs professionals’ attitudes towards gay students. Faculty and student affairs professionals directly affect students’ lives and attitude development. These attitudes persist long after graduation and are far reaching. Hogan and Rentz (1996) attempted to address faculty’s and student affairs professionals’ attitudes towards gay students using the Index of Attitudes Towards Homosexuals at two midwestern universities. This instrument is used to measure homophobia and classifies individuals into one of four categories (a) high grade non-homophobic (0-25), (b) low grade non-homophobic (26-50), (c) low grade homophobic (51-75), and (d) high grade homophobic
They found that faculty were significantly more homophobic than student affairs professionals, and overall men were more homophobic than women, but that all groups and genders fell under the category of low grade non-homophobic. Male faculty had the highest mean score of 44.46 (low grade homophobic) while female faculty had the lowest mean score of 33.69 (low grade homophobic). These results concur with Mintz and Rothblum’s (1997) assessment that women in higher education, and in particular lesbian women, have had to work so hard to penetrate academe that they are more supportive of diversity and have a better understanding of, and empathy toward, oppression of minorities. Hogan and Rentz concluded that the results of their study indicate that efforts to reduce homophobia in faculty and student affairs professionals may be succeeding.

**Harassment of gay students.** Specific studies regarding harassment of gay students have found the campus environment to be oppressive. Comstock’s (1991) analysis of the victimization patterns for gay students lead him to conclude that gay students are victimized at a rate four times higher than the general student population. Results from the Sexual Orientation Survey administered at Yale, Rutgers, Penn State, and the University of Massachusetts all yielded similar results (Slater, 1993). Verbal harassment occurred for 55-77% of gay students, and 16-25% had been threatened with physical violence. At Yale, only 10% of gay students reported incidents of harassment to authorities (Herek, 1993) and at Penn State only 12% reported harassment to authorities (D’Augelli, 1992). Reasons for not reporting harassment included fear of further harassment and the assumption that no help would come from authorities (D’Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993). In the Penn State survey, 64% of gay students feared for their safety occasionally, while only 28% were never afraid for their safety, and 57% changed their
lives to avoid harassment (D’Augelli, 1992). These statistics show overwhelming evidence of a hostile climate for gay students and certainly place gay students on the periphery of the campus culture.

D’Augelli (1992) stated that results from the study of harassment towards gay students may not be representative of all gay undergraduates because most gay students are less likely to be open in order to avoid harassment. Degree of disclosure strongly affects the likelihood of harassment, and disclosure is under personal control. Evans and D’Augelli (1996) stated that surveying gay students can only occur with those who are out to others on campus. One does not need to be openly gay on campus to be a victim of oppression, hatred, or misunderstanding. Observing gay students who are out deeply impacts closeted gays. Many times, seeing the oppression of students who are out and open on campus keeps many gay students in the closet, victims of invisibility, and under the domination of those with a heterosexist attitude.

The psychological costs for gay students who choose not to disclose their gay identity for fear or harassment are most likely high, leading to emotional stress, social difficulties, and academic problems (D’Augelli, 1992). Evans and D’Augelli (1996) state that harassment toward gay students causes most gay college students, whether out or not, to alter their behavior in some capacity in order to avoid more victimization. Having to change behavior in order to avoid harassment constitutes another form of unseen and undocumented oppression that gay students endure. Verbal and/or physical harassment of gay students in the collegiate environment causes many gay students to feel socially unwelcome within the institution.

The fear of harassment is antithetical to one of the basic tenets of psychological development, freedom from excessive anxiety, as is characterized by Erickson (1968).
D’Augelli (1998) went on to define harassment of gay individuals as sexual orientation victimization (SOV). SOV can be classified into four forms: (a) developmental opportunity loss, (b) self-doubt, (c) institutional victimization, and (d) direct attacks. All four forms of victimization have the potential to increase adjustment difficulties that could result in potential mental health problems for adolescents. According to D'Emillo (1992), hiding one’s sexual orientation leads to doubting one’s self-worth and dignity. In addition, it encourages isolation and detachment from peers, family, and friends as too much familiarity could potentially lead to identity discovery. This often leads to habitual patterns of mistrust and defensiveness.

From her research on the harassment of gay adolescents, Slater (1993) suggested that violence against gay individuals can be both external and internal. This violence can fall into three categories: (a) social/emotional, (b) physical, and/or (c) sexual. External violence includes verbal/emotional/social harassment; physical violence against the individual or his or her property; sexual violence in the form of rape; and the subjection to psychotherapy, behavior modification, hospitalization, or deprogramming against their will. Internalized violence is the result of internal homophobia. Internalized homophobia is individual self-loathing. Internalized homophobia may be even more destructive than external homophobia because it is often invisible and, without warning signs, it erodes the victim’s (i.e., the gay individual’s) self-esteem, self-concept, and ability to function.

*Heterosexism and homophobia in academe.* Another measure of oppression gay students endure in higher education is the omission of discussion or examples of gay individuals in the curriculum (D’Augelli, 1996; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Lopez & Chism, 1993; Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). According to D’Augelli (1996), literature classes that fail to mention the sexual orientation of the author create the assumption the
author was heterosexual. Few history classes cover the gay rights movement and often the only explicit mention of gay men occurs in AIDS education programs. This message may be destructive for gay students and misleading for heterosexual students because it may perpetrate stereotypes that provide the foundation for harassment. Gay faculty, administrators, and staff who are in the closet also send mixed messages to gay students about the value and importance of being open on campus (Tierney, 1992), since being closeted does not allow these individuals to serve as role models for all students, homosexual or heterosexual (Chan, 1996; Renn, 2000; Slater, 1993). Faculty, both gay and heterosexual, also can contribute to oppression of gay students when they take a passive stance on the harassment of gay students in the classroom, are uninformed about sexual orientation issues, or refuse to address these issues in the classroom (Renn, 2000).

Non-blatant issues of heterosexism or homophobia cause gay students to spend energy above-and-beyond energy spent dealing with visible harassment. In a study of how college students use sexual orientation as a method of social categorization, Alberson, Swan, and Emerson (1999) found that bias toward gay men is very similar to bias against ethnic minorities. The expression of bias toward gay men has rapidly become less overt as societal norms are increasingly condemning negative attitudes toward gay men. Like bias against racial minorities, the label of being gay leads to a certain social categorization and the label of being gay causes many heterosexuals to display a bias against gay men. The authors concluded that American college students do not overtly express bias against gay men or ethnic minorities, but more covert negative attitudes are present. This would concur with Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) argument that a more subtle, aversive form of bias often has replaced many of society’s “red necked” displays of discrimination. Due to the harassment gay students may face while
in college, they are required to spend more time and energy than their heterosexual peers dealing with issues of sexual identity and possible harassment (Durby, 1994; Lucozzi, 1998; Renn, 2000). This in turn pulls more time away from academics, extracurricular activities, work, and relationships, and thus has a powerful impact on the collegiate experience.

Living Environments for Gay College Students

Many traditional-aged college students at one time or another live within a residence facility associated with the university, mainly an institutional residence hall or Greek house. Both of these environments have also proved hostile to gay male students. Social fraternities claim that one of the benefits to membership is intimate relationships with other members within the chapter (Hughes, 1991; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998). This may allow gay men to experience the cohesiveness and intimacy of a fraternity, but it may also serve to increase alienation and frustration in attempts to manage perceived conflicts between personal and group values. Many chapter activities, especially social events, are distinctly heterosexual. This leads many gay students to feel that they need to compensate and express an overtly heterosexual orientation in order either to hide their identity or to feel secure in the chapter. Chapters that have openly gay members are subject to vandalism or loss of programming opportunities with other chapters in an effort to avoid “guilt by association.” The association or perception of a chapter as “gay friendly” or as a “gay house” often hurts membership and has even caused the closing of a chapter that saw its membership drop from 60 to 3 members in four years due to this very assumption (“Fraternities Lose National Support,” 1990).

According to Hughes (1991), many chapters silence issues of homosexuality and homophobia in order to avoid external pressures from alumni and the national chapter.
The investment of financial resources by the national chapter in local chapters typically causes the national chapter to respond in ways that preserve the organization, often at the expense of the individual. This type of attitude significantly impacts the experiences of gay fraternity members within the Greek system. Because these institutions are strongly perceived, both within and outside of the fraternity, as insulated communities, oppressive attitudes and behaviors toward gay students and even gay chapter members are allowed and possibly encouraged.

In their book *Out on Fraternity Row*, Windmeyer and Freeman (1998) describe the lives of gay male college students and their experiences within the Greek system. From these personal accounts written in the form of narratives, several general patterns or themes can be recognized: (a) the fear of coming out to brothers because of a perceived threat of isolation, expulsion from the fraternity, or labeling of the house as gay or gay-friendly; (b) the confusion and hurt brought on by hiding their identity; (c) the internal conflict between the principles of brotherhood and individual identity and the damage done to the overall fraternity experience; (d) the pressure to hide being gay by dating or “scoring” sexually with women; (e) the need for acceptance within the chapter as demonstrated by over-achievement within the house, that is, large numbers of gay members serving as chapter officers, committee members, or fraternity representatives on university counsels; (f) the search for other gay brothers within the Greek system; (g) the overall positive experience of most members within the Greek system despite the many issues resulting from their being gay; and (h) the very few instances of coming out to brothers while in college as opposed to coming out to select brothers after graduation and speculation on the collegiate experience one might have had if he had come out while in college.
The experiences of gay male students in fraternities appear to be similar to experiences of gay male students in the residence halls. Living in residence halls provides unique challenges and opportunities for gay students. The attitudes of students living in residence halls are reflective of societal views regarding gay students, which reflect both subtle and overt forms of intolerance (Bourassa & Shipton, 1991). Many times, especially for freshmen, living in residence halls is mandatory and quite often students have one or more roommates whom they do not know (Evans & Broido, 1999). The close proximity of these living arrangements and close social contact present particular challenges. Bourassa and Shipton (1991) state that many issues that affect gay students in residence halls. Assumptions of heterosexuality are very prevalent in the living arrangements for students. While evidence of this attitude can be found in society at large, it is more intense for college students due to close living quarters and the attention paid to sexual identity during college. This heterosexist attitude greatly impacts gay students in their coming out process, their desire for and lack of privacy, their interaction and comfort level with their roommates, their lack of social activities in a heterosexual environment, and the amount of harassment they endure as well as the ways they cope with it. As a result, approximately 80% of gay students decide to conceal their gay identity from their roommates. This, in turn, can create a residence hall system that is unresponsive to the needs of gay students, and may produce a living environment that is not a viable option for them. Gay students’ concerns regarding the homophobic environment of college residential housing facilities concur with Sauve’s (1997) findings in his dissertation in that all 12 of his gay, African-American participants were living off-campus by the start of their second year of school because campus residential life proved to be too stressful and unwelcoming for these students.
In their study of the coming out experiences of gay students in residence halls, Evans and Broido (1999) identified 10 themes for gay students in residence hall environments. These themes were: (a) identification of populations receptive to coming out; (b) particular challenges of coming out to one’s roommate; (c) the various methods used to come out; (d) varying degrees of being out; (e) the perception that individual identity as being fluid created challenges for coming out; (f) the decision to come out and to what degree it was strongly influenced by one’s environment; (g) the motivation to come out resulted from both internal pressure in wanting to build closer and more honest relationships, as well as from external pressure/influence that made coming out either easier or more important; (h) that students had a high level of awareness regarding the complexities of life and how their being gay, coming out, or not coming out, impacted their lives and their relationships with roommates; (i) that students believed there were both advantages and disadvantages to coming out or staying in the closet; and (j) reactions students received after coming out were quite varied.

Evans and Broido (1999) noted that students had to decide to come out to various populations including oneself, other gay or bisexual individuals, and heterosexuals. The perceived reaction of one’s roommate and the rest of the residence hall played a major role in the decision of whether or not to come out. Some students expressed fear of harassment and fear for their safety, hid conversations about their sexual identity from roommates, or experienced positive reinforcement for themselves from roommates after disclosing their sexual identity. At times, students were surprised by roommates’ reactions, while at times they were not since they had “tested the water” first to gain a better understanding of their roommate’s and other residents’ opinions on homosexuality. The majority of methods used in coming out in the residence halls were not explicit, but
subtle messages to convey their gay identity. These messages included using symbols associated with being gay on their clothes, in their rooms, or on their doors. Also, one might discuss his or her life as a gay individual, all the while assuming it was common knowledge. The authors concluded that coming out for gay students is not reflective of stage models found in the literature and that the development of a gay identity does not follow a linear progression. The authors concluded that coming out is more of an assessment of the environment and coming out depends on the circumstances in which students find themselves.

*Theoretical Background for the Study*

Various theoretical formulations have been proposed to understand the complex process of homosexual identity development in stage-like progressions (Cass, 1979, 1984b; Troiden, 1989). According to D’Augelli (1994a), while stage models were helpful in beginning to explore and understand issues of gay identity formation, they are limiting because they assume sexual identity development is a linear process and do not account for the fluidity or changing nature of sexual identities. A linear progression assumes an end, and D’Augelli argues that the process of creating a gay identity is prolonged, noting that sexual and affectional feelings can change in varying degrees throughout one’s lifetime. Due to the complex and changing nature of sexual orientation identity, D’Augelli argues that the gay identity process must be described within the framework of a psychological process that looks at the many complex factors that influence the development of individuals over a historical period of time. This way of viewing individual development allows for the discovery of ways in which various social situations, culture, environment, and history shape individual identity development. This perspective does not make individuals passive recipients of social history but, rather,
active participants in the formation of a life-long identity process. To some degree, D’Augelli argues, we are all shaped by social circumstances and our identity is malleable and transient. To this end, D’Augelli uses a life-span developmental perspective to examine gay identity development. In order to understand the framework on which D’Augelli bases his model, it is important to understand the ideas and concepts of life span developmental psychology that D’Augelli uses in building his model.

*Life span developmental psychology.* According to Baltes (1987), life-span developmental psychology involves the study of both constancy and change throughout *ontogenesis*. Ontogenesis is the life cycle of a person. Behavioral development is a life-long process and is filled with diverse pattern changes that differ for individuals in terms of timing, direction, order, and magnitude. This is referred to as *plasticity of development* and can be used to describe the potential that all individuals have for different forms of behavior or development throughout the life span.

Baltes (1987) states that a multitude of developmental influences impact each individual. He has organized these influences into a tri-factorial model that encompasses what developing individuals encounter during the life span. These tri-factors are (a) age-graded influences, (b) history-graded influences, and (c) non-normative influences. Age-graded influences are similar to what most child psychologists have considered the major source of influence on individual development. Those influences are the biological and environmental determinants that have a fairly strong relation to chronological age. Therefore, they are fairly predictable in their onset and duration and are usually similar in direction for most individuals; age-graded socialization events and biological maturation are examples. History-graded influences also involve biological and socialization events, but these influences are associated with an historical time period. History-graded
influences are defined by the larger evolutionary and biocultural context in which individuals develop. Lerner (1984) states that a strong relationship exists between individuals and society, and that as individuals evolve, this relationship causes changes in society as well. Together, ontogenesis and biocultural change constitute two major systems that influence the identity development of gay individuals. Non-normative influences are characterized by the fact that their occurrence, patterns, and sequences do not follow a general or predictable course for individuals and do not apply to many individuals during ontogenesis (Baltes, 1987).

Central to the theme of life-span development is the concept of plasticity, which is the ability to grow or change (Lerner, 1984). Plasticity signifies that the environment can modify all living organisms. This process allows an individual to modify his or her behavior to adjust or fit into the demands of the particular context in which the individual finds him or herself. This also means that plasticity is not limitless, but that human behavior is influenced by past events, current conditions surrounding the individual, and specific features of an individual’s identity. Change that occurs in individuals is assumed, and a change in one level of an individual will cause changes in all levels of the individual because the life span perspective assumes that human life exists at multiple levels of function, behavior, and being.

Lerner (1984) states that plasticity is not necessarily limited nor constrained, and that an individual may help produce his or her own development through active behavior, by behavioral shaping, or by selecting contexts and/or environments. This, in turn, provides and allows the individual to provide feedback to him or herself. During certain periods of time in an individual’s life, one may not see much, if any, change. This does not mean that plasticity is absent, but that the constancy found in the individual is due to
consistency in the demands or constraints of the individual’s current environment. Until this environment changes, plasticity may not occur. When an individual's social network or group membership remains unchanged, similarities in behavior from one time to the next will be greatest. This may be especially true for insulated individuals, since individuals actively promote their own continuity and take actions to preserve their social network and their social relationship with groups in their current environment.

_model of lesbian-gay-bisexual identity development._ D’Augelli (1994a) has used a life span developmental perspective in his understanding of how individuals come to develop a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. He states:

A model of analyzing the development of sexual orientation must account for several broad sets of factors: individual changes from birth through adulthood to death, patterns of social intimacy across the lifespan, and linkages between the person, his or her significant others, and his or her proximal and distal environments. (p. 318)

D’Augelli believes that a gay identity is socially constructed through the life span (i.e., ontogenesis) by the variety and degree of the social circumstances found in the environment. To address how individuals can and do change (i.e., plasticity) during the life span of sexual identity development, D’Augelli formulated a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development. This model is based on the assumption that gay identity development is not formed in sequential stages usually achieved by adulthood and then enduring throughout the life span, but that the individual goes through a series of processes. These processes can and will vary from individual to individual. For this reason, D’Augelli’s model of lesbian-gay-bisexual development will serve as the theoretical foundation for this study. Since college represents a dramatic period of change for most adolescents, particularly those individuals who come to develop, accept, and display a gay identity, D’Augelli’s model can encompass the variety of individual
differences in college students and their personal identity development. Particularly, this model is based on, and incorporates, the complex factors that influence the development of a gay identity over the course of ontogenesis.

An analysis of D’Augelli’s (1994a) model of lesbian-gay-bisexual identity development regarding sexual orientation incorporates three broad factors. D’Augelli states there is a link between these factors, which also encompass changes over the life span. The factors are: (a) personal subjectivities and actions, including how individuals feel about their sexual identities, as well as their sexual behaviors, and the meanings attached to these behaviors over the course of their lives; (b) interactive intimacies, including the social influence of significant others on the lives of gay individuals, mainly family and age-related peers, and the meanings attached to these social interactions; and (c) sociohistorical connections, including the social norms, expectations, policies, and laws found in various geographical locations, as well as the values and meanings assigned to homosexuality by various cultures during particular time periods. For this study the examination of sociohistorical connections will focus on only one aspect of societal context, that being the campus context.

*D’Augelli’s sexual orientation identity processes.* In his model, D’Augelli (1994a) presents six identity processes that individuals may go through in developing, accepting, and displaying a sexual identity as being gay over the course of one’s life span. These processes are (a) exiting a heterosexual identity, (b) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status, (c) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity, (d) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring, (e) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status, and (f) entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community.
Within his model, D’Augelli (1994a) asserts the need of gay individuals to exit the heterosexual identity that has been established for them socially since birth. This need to create a gay identity is life-long. This task is difficult because a heterosexual identity is not considered socially constructed, but is viewed as natural by a heterosexist society. In developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status, an individual begins to develop a sense of personal stability that summarizes one’s thoughts and feelings as being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. D’Augelli adds that since sexual orientation is fundamentally social in character, a developing lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity begins to take place upon sharing with others (e.g., coming out) one’s sexual orientation. Coming out is a life-long process and ideally one’s social network will be affirming to this identity. In becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring, telling family members of one’s sexual orientation takes place. D’Augelli argues that developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status is the process of developing same-sex dyadic relationships, which often proves difficult due to the invisibility of lesbian or gay couples in our culture. Entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community involves the development and commitment to some political and social action. This process generally includes understanding how one’s sexual identity has lead to oppression and a commitment to resisting it.

In all, D’Augelli’s (1994a) six identity processes account for the complex factors that influence the development of individuals over time in the various contexts they find themselves. Examining sexual identity development from a human developmental perspective allows variations among individuals to be discovered as they move in time through various social situations, cultures, and history. This perspective also provides an understanding of the fact that individuals are not passive recipients of social history, but
creators of their own circumstances. This is especially true for gay individuals because gay individuals have to shape their own development out of necessity due to the heterosexist culture in which they live. There is no normalized and routine social process or practice for being gay. D’Augelli’s final argument for using a life span perspective in looking at gay identity development is made clear when he states:

Any model of sexual orientation that does not address the influence of heterosexism, homophobia, and disenfranchisement will provide unintended corroboration for oppression. A life-span human development model can, in principle, mitigate this by its simultaneous analysis of exogenous and endogenous variables over time. This approach reflects complexities of lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives and allows analysis of how these lives will change in the future. (p. 331)

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented an overview regarding what little is currently known about gay college students (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2001). A review of the literature has shown that many adolescents wait until college before beginning to explore, accept, and display a homosexual identity (D’Augelli, 1991; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Evans et al., 1998; Gideonse, 1998) and that that the collegiate environment presents many challenges and successes for gay students as they come out during college (D’Augelli, 1991, 1996; D’Emillo, 1992; Dumas, 1998; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Evans, & Wall, 2000; Fassinger, 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Rhoads, 1994, 1997; Sauve, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998; Wall & Washington, 1991). While there are limited studies that have looked at gay college students (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994), questions remain unanswered regarding the experiences of gay students after they have come out in college. Given that there is so little research available on gay college students, any study looking at gay college students will add to the small, but
growing, body of knowledge in this area. Since no specific studies have been found dealing directly with the experiences of gay students after coming out, the present study examined the experiences of gay students after coming out in college and what these experiences meant to these students in order to try and build on the existing research about gay college students.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This study was designed to further the understanding of the experiences of gay college students. Specifically, this study examined the experiences of gay students after they had come out in college, as this particular topic has not been systematically addressed in the literature. The study was done qualitatively, using a phenomenological methodology. The source of data collection was interviews.

Study Design

*Rationale for qualitative inquiry in collegiate settings.* The purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the participants’ perspectives on events (Marshall & Rossman 1995), not to generate theory or to make generalizations attributable to a larger population. Because I sought to explore the meanings gay students give to their lived collegiate experiences, this study was conducted as a phenomenological study. Phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon studied is the experiences of gay students after they have come out in college. Phenomenological study is appropriate when looking at interactions; studying a problem that includes perceptions of participants; looking at how participants experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participant’s experiences (Creswell). Phenomenology “is based on the premise that human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all interpretations and
Theorizing” (p. 86). This study sought to understand how gay students make sense of their world and experiences.

This study did not seek to describe the norm, but to gain knowledge from those who varied from the norm (Manning, 1992). Gay students represent a subculture within institutions that varies from the norm of institutional life, and out students, in turn, represent a subculture of gay students who vary even more from their closeted gay counterparts. Discovering and describing some of the intricacies and complexities of the gay collegiate experience through the participants’ own voices provided valuable information regarding the meanings gay students give to their college experiences due to their sexual orientation. Whit (1991) states that qualitative methods enable the researcher to discover, describe, and understand ordinary events, behaviors, thought processes, and the meanings given to experiences, in depth, as they occur, from the perspective of the individuals involved. This study discovered how some gay students go about understanding the world in which they live, as well as some of the contexts that influence individual behavior patterns.

Because the study of gay students has received little attention in the research (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans at el., 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2001), qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because theories explaining the behavior of participants being examined are not readily available (Creswell, 1998). Since little is known about the gay collegiate experience, this study allowed the “voices” of an under-represented minority, in this case gay college students, to be heard. In hearing their voices I began to gain a better understanding and appreciation for their experiences within the collegiate setting. Greiger (as cited in
Sauve, 1997) concurs that qualitative research gives a voice to individuals or groups who traditionally have not been listened to or heard.

Open-ended interviews were used to begin understanding the gay collegiate experience. These interviews allowed the participants to give an unqualified assessment of their collegiate experience. This study did not contain established a priori categories into which students had to fit their views, so participants were free to choose aspects of importance upon which to comment. The resulting data were richly descriptive and faithful to the context in which students shared their stories. This descriptive data helped increase the knowledge and understanding of the complexity of the gay collegiate experience for me, as well as for student affairs professionals.

The strength of this study is that it asked participants to reflect on their lives at the present moment, specifically about their school experiences, thus generalizations were not made. Instead, rich, in-depth narratives were developed that provided information on the lived experiences of some out students while in college. Insight gained from this research also provided additional information into D’Augelli’s (1994a) sets of interrelated variables concerning (a) how personal actions are impacted by being out and the meaning students give to these actions, and (b) how one’s interactions with others are impacted by being out.

Emergent design. When the researcher “does not know what he or she does not know” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 209), a more open-ended approach to the study must take place. This study, therefore, was an emergent design rather than a priori. Lincoln and Guba argue that it is not possible to expect qualitative inquiry to describe a design in terms of anything other than a broad-based approach before the study is undertaken, but that it is also foolish not to expect that elements of the design will become clearer as the
study progresses. The design of the study emerged as I actively engaged in continuous data analysis.

In an emergent design process, when adjustments to the design are caused by newly discovered knowledge during the interview and analysis process, the over-riding research question of the study continues to guide all emerging questions and design changes. “Indeed tolerance and ambiguity may well be the most important personal characteristic the naturalist investigator must possess” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 211).

Site Selection

Participants were sought from various private and public institutions of higher education that were within 150 miles driving distance from my home. This distance was broad enough to encompass a variety of private, public, large, and small institutions, which added to the richness of the data obtained. Participants came from a variety of institutions due to snowball and maximum variation sampling that took place. The type of institutions participants came from may have impacted their experiences, but because this study did not look at the context of these experiences (i.e., public versus private, large versus small, rural versus urban), limiting the type of institutions from which participants came did not take place.

Participant Characteristics

According to Creswell (1998), participants in a phenomenological study must “be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences” (p. 111). For the purpose of this research, all participants were (a) self-identified as gay, homosexual, or queer, which defined for this study is an individual who designates same sex attraction as a central part of his overall definition of self; (b) male; (c) enrolled full-time as a student at a college or university; (d) between
the ages of 18-24; (e) students who did not come out to others until they were in college; and (f) self-identified as out for a minimum of three months.

While it is important to look at the experiences for both out male and out female college students, this study focused on the experiences only of out male college students, as differences exist between how men and women socialize within peer groups.

According to Nardi (1999), research has shown that women’s friendships can be described as face-to-face whereas men’s friendships tend to be side-by-side. Women are more likely to spend time with peers with whom they can confide and share feelings. Men are more likely to spend time with peers with whom they can share activities and interests. It will be left to further research to explore the experiences of out female college students.

The purpose of this study was to look at the significant experiences of gay students after they have come out while in college; therefore, it was important to include students who were actively engaged in their collegiate experience in both classroom and out-of-class campus activities. For this reason, only full-time enrolled students were included in this study. This was done in order to maximize the opportunity for significant experiences that have occurred related to campus involvement, not just to work, family, or other non-collegiate experiences.

This study explored the experiences of gay students after a significant event and change (coming out) had taken place for them while in college. This study meant to further Rhoads’ (1994) examination of the coming out experience of gay college students and begin to follow and document the progression for gay students after coming out. For the purpose of this research, out students were defined as gay students who have disclosed their sexual identity internally, privately, and publicly to others (D’Augelli,
1994a) for a minimum of three months. Sampling only students who came out in college and who had been out for three months allowed the participants to distinguish how the college experience had changed for them, if any, since coming out.

Additionally, this study included only male students between the ages of 18-24 who did not come out until college. This criterion was established for three reasons. First, college students ages 18-24, regardless of sexual orientation, are more likely to have had homogenous life experiences up to this point in time, so gay students ages 18-24 who have just come out represent a subculture of college students who have had a recent and significant variation in life experiences compared to their heterosexual collegiate peers. Second, gay students ages 18-24 represent a study population most likely to have just come out due to the delayed sexual identity acceptance often caused by the close scrutiny of family, church, school, and friends during high school (Durby, 1996; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996). Third, the age requirement for being in the study is a unique and important characteristic compared to an older age group of gay individuals who have come out. Older gay collegiate students may have additional life experiences that could have impacted, compounded, and influenced feelings, thoughts, and actions of the coming out process caused by these experiences and longer periods of self reflection.

Sample size. The goal of this study was to describe, not generalize, the complex lived experience of out gay students within the collegiate setting. Therefore, the experiences of these students, not the number of students who experience them were most important (Creswell, 1998; McCracken; 1988). Student experiences vary greatly. It was important to hear the unique experiences that out students had, therefore the number of participants was determined as data were collected, with the goal of maximizing diverse perspectives. Data collection resulted in a total of six participants in this study. While
quantitative researchers may shudder at the thought of a sample so small, it is important to remember that the out college students under investigation are not representative of the larger gay society, or even the gay collegiate experience.

**Participant Sampling**

Finding participants in the general college population who meet the stated criteria was initially difficult because this study included sampling a “rare population.” A rare population refers to members of a social group who are difficult to locate (Grinnell, 1993). Locating a rare population can best be achieved through purposeful sampling strategies (Creswell, 1998). Purposeful sampling of participants in this study took place through snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling.

*Snowball sampling.* Snowball sampling identifies individuals who know other individuals who can provide in-depth and rich information desired for a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Snowball sampling in this study helped me find the “rare population” who met the study criteria. I used personal, professional, and organizational recruitment strategies to find participants. I asked gay students who I knew, who did not meet the criteria for participating in the study, to aid me in recruiting participants by giving copies of my study description to other gay students they knew. I also asked various professionals in higher education (e.g., faculty members, student personal administrators, counseling or health care professionals) to contact and provide the study description to participants they believed met the study criteria and might have had an interest in participating in this study. Also, I attended two lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual (LGBT) student organizational meetings on college campuses and asked students attending those meetings to help me recruit participants for the study. I explained the purpose of this study at a LGBT meeting and asked members if they knew any students...
who met the study criteria and who they believed might be interested in participating. If a student, or students, attending the LGTB meeting knew potential participants, I gave them a written description of the study and asked them to give the written description of the study to potential participants.

The written description of this study (see Appendix A) listed the requirements for participating in the study, the voluntary nature of the study, what the information obtained from interviews was to be used for, as well as confidentiality information on how identities would be protected. The written description included my email address and phone number and asked interested participants to contact me via email or a phone call. Having potential participants contact me regarding their participation in the study helped ensure that students did not feel pressured to participate in the study by those giving them the study description or by myself. I did not know any potential participants, or their names, until they contacted me.

Once a potential participant contacted me, he and I set up a mutually agreed upon meeting time and place for a first interview. At that meeting we (a) discussed the nature of the research project, (b) signed the consent form explaining the voluntary nature of the project, (c) discussed how the participant’s identity would be protected, (d) discussed how the research would be written up and given back to each participant in the form of a narrative description, and (e) arranged a time for the first interview to take place. At the conclusion of the meeting, if a student felt comfortable in conducting the first interview, we began the interview immediately. If a student attending the LGTB meeting met the study criteria and expressed an interest in participating in the study, I gave him a written description of the study and asked him contact me via email or phone after the meeting to ensure he had read the written description of the study and was still interested in
participating. All potential participants who contacted me, and through screening were
determined to meet the criteria for inclusion in this study, participated in a first interview.
After first interviews were completed maximum variation sampling took place.

*Maximum variation sampling.* Maximum variation sampling allowed the
documentation of diverse variations between participants and helped identify common
themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examining substantial differences among the
experiences of out students within the collegiate environment allowed me to document
“variations that [had] emerged in adapting to different conditions [and] to detail the many
specifics that give the context its unique flavor” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 200-201).

After the first interview, I asked each participant to help me locate additional
participants who may have had an experience different than his own. Examples of
differences I sought included race, living environment, level of campus involvement, or
the quality of experiences. While many differences were found in participants, the hope
of finding racial and/or ethnic differences did not occur; all participants were Caucasian.
Finding participants with as many varied experiences as possible allowed me to search
for alternative explanations in the variety and complexity of experiences for gay students
since coming out. Marshall and Rossman (1995) state that the search for alternative
explanations is important because alternative explanations always exist. By identifying
and describing alternative explanations, I was able to demonstrate how the explanation
offered in my data analysis was the most plausible of all.

*Data Collection*

Data were gathered using interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain
a better understanding of the experiences, and the meanings given to those experiences,
for gay students who have come out while in college. Interviews were the appropriate
form of data collection for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998). Interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to talk about the inherent complexity of social interactions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) between the various subcultures with which they interacted and the environments in which they found themselves.

**Pilot study.** A pilot study was conducted with one student who met the criteria for the study to ensure that the pre-study interview questions were adequate to provide the descriptive information sought in this study. The pilot study participant was found using social network connections that I have with gay students and professionals on various campuses.

The interview protocol used to conduct the pilot study was reexamined at the conclusion of the pilot study to determine if it was appropriate. As a result, the original list of 20 questions was changed to four open-ended questions that addressed the four research themes of this study. Focusing on themes instead of individual questions allowed participants to direct the conversations to topics of their choice rather than break up the conversation with focused questions that might have led participants in a different direction. These four open-ended questions were: (a) experiences/interactions with individuals that were important for the participant before coming-out, and how, if any, these experiences/interactions changed after coming-out, (b) how one-on-one or group experiences/interactions may have impacted sexual identity development, (c) how one-on-one or group experiences/interactions impacted level of “outness” while in college, and (d) perceptions and feelings regarding current sexual identity. The thematic format facilitated conversation and avoided the discontinuity caused by disjointed interviewer questions.
The pilot study also allowed me to test the audiotape instrument, practice my interviewing techniques, and address any unforeseen areas of concern that might arise during the interview, which needed to be addressed prior to interviewing participants.

First interview. The goal of the first interview was to have the participants talk about their coming out experience while in college (see Appendix B). This interview lasted around 30 minutes. While the intent of this study was not to look at the initial coming-out experience of gay college students, this initial interview (a) provided background information regarding previous experiences of these students prior to coming out and during coming out; (b) began to build rapport and trust between myself and each participant; (c) allowed me to ensure that each student had not come out prior to college, and that each student had indeed come out to a significant enough population since coming to college to be included in this study; (d) helped me locate additional participants, and (e) laid the groundwork for a second interview, which provided the primary data to be analyzed for this study. Using data obtained from all first interviews, I determined which participants provided the greatest variation in their collegiate experiences since coming out and contacted those individuals to participate in a second interview. I sent individuals not interviewed a second time a copy of their transcript from the first interview and a letter thanking them for the participation.

Second interview. The goal of the second interview was to obtain deep and rich descriptions from participants regarding their significant experiences since coming out and the meanings they gave to these experiences. This was accomplished by conducting a long interview (see Appendix C). The long interview lasted anywhere from 70-130 minutes. Marshall and Rossman (1989) advocate using long interviews because such
conversations allow the exploration of the interviewee’s subjective experiences that may be too complex for quantitative methodology.

When interviews are used as the sole way of gathering data, the researcher should have demonstrated through the conceptual framework that the purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the participants’ perspectives on events; that is, that the subjective view is what matters. Studies making more objective assumptions would triangulate interview data with data gathered through other methods. (p. 81)

*Dependability, credibility, and trustworthiness of interviews.* The long interview used in this study offered a useful way of obtaining large amounts of data quickly, and, more importantly, gained valuable access to a participant’s perspective on the phenomenon under study. Interviewing gave me the flexibility to discover and clarify emerging themes by following a participant’s train of thought during the interview process and obtaining the participant’s view on what mattered and was most important to him. All this increased the dependability of the data received. The dependability of the research assures the reader that the data collected and analyzed are reliable and are a true representation of each participant’s story.

Credibility for the data obtained from the interviews demonstrated that inquiries were conducted in a way to ensure that a topic was accurately examined and described (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Credibility for the examination of significant experiences for out students occurred due to the length of the interviews with each participant. This prolonged engagement with the participants allowed the participants to tell their stories regarding their significant experiences since coming out in college and added to the richness and depth of the data collected.

Trustworthiness for the data obtained was a continual process of addressing my personal bias as a gay individual. Continual reminders to myself of not getting “too close
of participants’ stories occurred regularly during the interviewing and narrative-writing process. During the first interview, I shared my coming-out story in order to help build rapport between each participant and myself. Keeping the focus on the participants’ stories, not my own story, occurred because the heart of data collection for this research occurred during the second interview. A list of interview questions approved by experts in qualitative and LGBT research helped keep the focus of the second interview on the participants and allowed participants to take conversations in directions they wanted go, not in directions I wanted to hear. My voice can be heard during the short introduction to each narrative analysis where I describe each participant through my own eyes. This brief introduction to the narrative is followed by a discussion that addresses the research questions and provided supporting quotes to verify the analysis I make about the lives of each participant.

The second interview questions were developed based on D’Augelli’s (1994a) sets of interrelated variables concerning (a) how personal actions are impacted by being out and the meaning students give to these actions, and (b) how one’s interactions with others are impacted by being out. Content validity of the interview questions was established by soliciting feedback from a panel of experts in the field of sexual orientation study. From this feedback, questions were added, deleted, or altered, in order to provide interview questions that most appropriately answered the research question.

The second interview was conducted at a time and place that was convenient for both the participant and myself. Participants received the interview questions via email, four or more days prior to the second interview. Interview questions were open-ended so as to encourage the participants to take the conversation in directions that were
meaningful and pertinent to their own lived experiences. I conducted all interviews.

Interviews were audiotaped with permission from each participant for later transcription.

After completing a second interview, it was transcribed and analyzed to determine themes. Due to the emergent design of the study, it was important to complete the analysis of the second interview prior to proceeding to the next participant interview. This procedure occurred until new themes no longer emerged from data collection and analysis.

Protection of the Participants

Protection of the participant’s identity and personal well-being occurred with the utmost care in this study. I accomplished this through the following precautions: (a) potential interview questions were sent to a panel of sexual orientation experts prior to conducting participant interviews to ensure that all interview questions were appropriate for this type of research and specifically addressed the research questions posed for this study; (b) I did not know any potential participants’ names until they made initial contact with me. By contacting me, this ensured each participant’s interest for participation in this study; (c) participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point in time either during data collection or data analysis; (d) interview questions were sent to participants via email four or more days prior to either the first or second interview in order to allow each participant time to reflect on his potential answers to questions asked during the interview process; (e) prior to conducting an interview I obtained the name and contact information of an appropriate office or individual at the participant’s institution to which I could refer the participant after a completed interview. Referral was to occur if the participant or myself felt this would be helpful for the participant in dealing with any issues discussed during the interview process. No referrals took place, and (f) all write-
ups regarding this research used pseudonyms of both the institution and the participant to help protect the participant’s identity.

Field Procedures

Interview setting. Interview times and locations were convenient to both the participant and myself. The setting for the interview was an environment in which the participant felt comfortable and was quiet enough so audiotaping of the interview could be conducted without background noise. The interview setting was also somewhat “isolated” so the interview could be conducted without interruption. Campus locations were used in five participant interviews; a coffee shop was used for the sixth interview. All locations were chosen to help minimize distractions and interruptions. Prior to beginning the interview, the participant was allowed to ask questions. The participant was also asked to sign an informed consent document. Participants were made aware that they could stop participation in any interview, or the study itself, at any point if they no longer felt comfortable participating.

Additional data collection. Field notes were written during the interview. Information was written down regarding my impressions of the participant’s level of comfort in sharing his experiences, expressions of body language, or other information that seemed relative to the study. Follow-up questions for the current interview or for future participant interviews were also noted.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1995) state that data collection and data analysis go hand in hand. This is to enhance the discovery and emergence of important themes and patterns as readily as possible after each interview. Transcription occurred immediately after each first interview. All first interviews were conducted prior to beginning any
second interviews. Second interview participants were chosen based on maximum variation sampling.

At the conclusion of the second interview a verbatim transcription of the interview took place. Transcription of the interview began the process of “bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111). This verbatim transcript ensured the dependability (i.e., reliability) of the data collected. Units of data were developed through horizontalization (Creswell, 1998). Horizontalization is finding significant statements from the transcripts on how the individual experienced the phenomenon of significant experiences after coming out in college. Hand coding was used to identify emerging themes from the data. By identifying both a priori and emerging themes, this type of data analysis avoided simplifying social phenomena and instead began to provide insight and understanding of the resulting interactions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) of gay students and the meanings they ascribed to these interactions. After each data analysis, the interview questions were re-examined to see if they needed adjusting to help further explore a priori or emerging themes from future participant interviews.

Based on the current literature on the gay collegiate experience, data analysis began with several a priori categories (see Table 1). An analysis of each participant and the themes that emerged from his interviews was written up as a narrative description. This description was a summary regarding the meanings of collegiate experiences for each participant. Writing a narrative description allowed me to retain the individuality of each participant, while at the same time provided a readable and descriptive picture of each individual and his experiences in college. This narrative report gave the reader
greater insight into the participant’s life and a deeper sense of who each individual was.

Each narrative documented the unique experiences of each participant.

Table 1

*A priori themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who knows</td>
<td>What individuals or groups has the student told that he is gay.</td>
<td>a  Evans &amp; Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1994; Sauve, 1997.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why share</td>
<td>Why did the student choose to tell these individuals or groups he is gay.</td>
<td>a  Evans &amp; Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1994; Sauve, 1997.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Environment</td>
<td>The impact that being out has in one’s living environment.</td>
<td>c  Bourassa &amp; Shipton, 1991; Evans &amp; Broido, 1999; Hughes, 1991; Sauve, 1997; Windmeyer &amp; Freeman, 1998.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>With who and where are socialization opportunities taking place.</td>
<td>e  D’Augelli, 1991; Hunter et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Sauve, 1997.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outcomes

| Anticipated | What outcomes have occurred for the student since coming out he did anticipate. | f  Rhoads, 1994; Sauve, 1997. |
| Unanticipated | What outcomes have occurred for the student since coming out that he did not anticipate. | f  Rhoads, 1994; Sauve, 1997. |
| Psychological | What are psychological issues for the student since coming out.       | g  D’Emillo, 1992; Durby, 1994; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Lucozzi, 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Renn, 2000; Sauve, 1997. |
Cross case comparative data analysis occurred between all participant interviews. This interactive process was accomplished by taking newly identified themes from the most recent interview and going back through previously conducted interviews to see if this newly discovered theme was present in previously completed interviews as well. This interactive process of reexamining all interviews took place each time a new theme was discovered in the data. Cross case comparative analysis between participants allowed the identification of common themes across the diverse experiences of participants and examined alternative explanations. The cross case comparative data analysis was written up in the results section of the study according to the common themes that emerged from data analysis.

In phenomenological study, verification of the data is largely the result of the researcher’s interpretation (Creswell, 1998). Non-identifying quotes from the transcripts were included in each narrative description to verify and support my interpretation of the data and add to the credibility of the study. This type of verification also addressed the confirmability, or objectiveness, of the data collected through the coding of transcripts, and the use of non-identifying quotes to retain individuality in the development of common themes.

Treatment of the transcripts and narrative analysis took place with the utmost concern for the well-being and confidentiality of each participant. A guarantee of remaining anonymous could not happen, but the use of non-identifying quotes as well as pseudonyms for each participant and the college he attended occurred in all narrative descriptions and results discussion.

One method of verification in qualitative study is to have participants review the transcripts for credibility. For this study, giving transcripts to participants only occurred
if (a) a participant wasn’t selected for a second interview; the first interview transcript was given back as a small token of appreciation for initial participation, or (b) clarification was needed due to background noise or some type of interruption making the taped interview impossible to transcribe.

I gave narrative descriptions back to the participants for their comments to ensure the confirmability, or objectiveness, of the study. When I gave back the narrative description to each participant, I asked him to verify the accuracy of individual and institutional sociohistorical contexts in the narrative description. I also asked each participant to verify the accuracy of my interpretation of the his story. Based on feedback from each participant, corrections for context accuracy took place as needed. Participant feedback on the narrative analysis was important because it allowed each participant the opportunity for his voice be heard throughout the whole study.

Limitations of the Methodology

Due to the nature of this research, some participants may have wanted to pull out at some point in the study due to their unwillingness to continue to discuss their collegiate experience(s) since coming out. The potential for withdrawal from this study would have limited the type information I would have been able to receive from participants; this did not occur. I asked for volunteers who self-selected to be in this study. Participant self-selection might have served as a limitation regarding the type of out students who were willing to participate and may have left some areas of the collegiate experience for out students unexplored.

The power relationship between each participant and myself might have limited the initial information and continued feedback I received from each student. Based on personal bias caused by my own life experiences as a gay individual, as well as my
theoretical understanding of sexual identity development, there may also have been
differences between the participant’s frame of reference and his interpretation of his life
versus my interpretation of his life (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

To address the methodology’s limitations, I asked each participant to refer my
study to another individual who had a very different experience than his own since
coming out. Seeking a maximum variation in the sample was a method to help reduce
the chance of leaving various aspects of the collegiate experience unexplored. I tried to
lessen the power relationship between each participant and myself by conducting two
open ended interviews with each participant in an attempt to build rapport and allow each
participant to carry out conversations in a direction he wished to go. Building rapport
and allowing each participant to carry out conversations in a direction that was
meaningful to him allowed each participant to gain a sense of power.

**Conclusion**

Through purposeful sampling and two interviews with each participant, the data
collected provided a rich source of information for analysis. Transcription, unitization,
horizontalization, and cross case comparative analysis allowed a priori themes and
emergent themes to be verified. Narrative descriptions of all participants allowed the
richness and fullness of the experiences of gay male college students to be heard. A
results section from cross case comparative analysis was written based on themes
emerging from the data and the interpretations of the data that I made. This type of
analysis has begun to answer some of my questions that David and his experience within
higher education raised for me several years ago. Additionally, this research may raise
additional questions about the gay collegiate experience that can serve as a spring broad
for future research into the lives and complexities of gay college students. This research
may also help increase and enhance our understanding of the gay collegiate experience after coming out as these students continue to develop their life-long sexual identity.
Chapter 4

Results

The study of homosexuality and issues related to sexual orientation among college students has received relatively little attention in the research literature (Bieschke et al., 2000; Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans et al., 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2001). This study attempted to further the understanding of the experiences of gay college students after they have come out while in college, as addressing this issue has not systematically occurred in the literature. Specifically, this study looked at the experiences of gay male students, ages 18-24.

Identification of Interview Participants

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, all participants had to establish the initial contact with the researcher concerning their willingness to participate in this study. Several strategies were used to locate participants and encourage them to participate. E-mails containing a one-page description of this study were sent to officers of 15 LGBT campus organizations asking them to promote participation to their membership. This strategy yielded Kurt and Todd. Each of these two participants was asked to help identify additional study participants. This strategy led to Sam’s participation. Jake was identified through attending LGBT organizational meetings on two campuses where I asked potential participants to contact me. Josh and Jarrod were located with the help of the organization PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) through word of mouth from their membership to potential participants.
Initial Contact with Participants

When a potential participant contacted me about his willingness to participate in this study I sent him a copy of the study description, and asked him to verify or re-verify that he met the criteria for participation. Great care was made in verifying eligibility of study participants. Fifteen interested participants were rejected outright because they did not meet all the criteria. Two additional participants completed the first interview and were later rejected because they did not meet the criteria. A high rejection rate occurred because many potential participants had learned about the study from word of mouth and had not received a copy of the study description or the study criteria. Several other potential participants had read the study description and, even though they knew they did not meet the study criteria, still wanted to participate. Each of these rejected participants stated they wanted their story to be heard, and even though they were not a part of this study, three of them e-mailed me their coming-out story and what this experience was like for them while in college.

Participant Characteristics

All participants were white even though an attempt to maximize variation did not produce any racial or ethnic diversity. Five of the six participants grew up in the Midwest, with Todd hailing from New York. Todd discussed on more than one occasion how the environment of the Midwest is very different than the environment of New York City. He stated the Midwest is more conservative and more intrusive into other people’s business. All but Todd were out to their families, and all but Sam and Jarrod’s families were either immediately or by the time of the interview supportive of their son’s gay identity (see Table 2). Todd was not out to his family because he anticipated a negative reaction from his parents.
Table 2

*Participant Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Racial Background</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>Year in College Came Out</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Out to Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Small, Private</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Large, Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Medium, Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Medium, Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Small, Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarrod</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Medium, Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Small = under 3500 students; Medium = 15,000-25,000 students; Large = over 35,000 students; Participant’s family found out about their son’s orientation from someone other than their son

Year in college for the participants varied from first to fourth, and coming-out in college for the participants began as early as three weeks into the freshmen year for Josh to as late as the third year for Todd (see Table 2). All participants but Jarrod had spent at least one year in the residence halls. Jake still lived there, Todd now lives in a fraternity, and everyone else lived off-campus. Jarrod never lived on campus because he lives at home and commutes to school everyday.

Everyone but Sam seemed immediately at ease during the interviews. Sam took the majority of our time together to feel comfortable in sharing his story. I attributed his uncomfortableness to the distrusting environment in which he grew up, as he talked of it often during our interview. No participant appeared to hold back information as all participants answered every question, or follow-up question, asked during the interview.
Institutional Characteristics

All of the institutions attended by the participants were located in the Midwest. One institution was located in a very small town, four institutions were in metropolitan areas, and one institution was located in a large urban area. Each institution had one or more LGBT organization on campus and five of the six institutions listed sexual orientation as a part of their institutional nondiscrimination policy.

Interview Protocol

Each participant contacted me via e-mail regarding his willingness to participate in this study. I followed up with a phone call or return e-mail to set up a date, time, and place that was convenient for the first interview. One interview took place off-campus at a local coffee shop, while all remaining interviews took place on the participant’s campus either at the library or in a classroom. All of the interview settings were private and free of interruption during the interview.

First interviews lasted 10-15 minutes each. Two potential participants were eliminated after the first interview because they did not meet the criteria. For participants who met the study criteria, a second interview date, time, and place was determined at the conclusion of the first interview. Second interviews ranged from 40 to 130 minutes in length.

During transcription and data analysis, if clarification was needed on any part of the interview, I contacted the participant via e-mail to obtain this additional information. Three of the interviews needed clarification and each participant e-mailed the information I sought. After all data were collected or clarified, individual narratives were written on each participant. Each written narrative was shared with the appropriate participant for
additional clarification or comments. Factual clarification made by participants was incorporated into the narrative. Non-factual clarifications were not incorporated into the narratives. Two participants never responded back, three participants expressed excitement and appreciation for their narrative description, and one participant disagreed with the interviewer’s assessment in parts of his narrative. This disagreement may be explained by the fact that interview had taken place six months earlier and much had changed in the participant’s life since the interview.

Data Analysis

Cross case comparative data analysis occurred between all participant interviews due to the emergent design of the study. This interactive process was accomplished through hand-written coding. Hand coding resulted in nine categories, initially. These nine categories were then analyzed for common themes and patterns. This examination resulted in the emergence of three strong themes: (a) continuous and distinct coming-out decisions, (b) expectations versus the reality of coming-out, and (c) integration of sexual identity into overall identity. Each theme also contained several subthemes. This chapter provides individual narratives and an overview of the findings from each of the three themes, and their subthemes.

INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

Todd

Initial e-mail contacts and phone calls to Todd led me to believe our time together would be something special. I was right. Todd has a quick wit, a lively personality, and a warm smile. Todd is also very ambitious, as indicated by his double major in biology and religion, with a focus on bioethics, and minors in both writing and Spanish. Todd’s ambition to attend Yale Law School after graduation influenced his decision to do his
undergraduate work at Hollow University, a private liberal arts institution of 2000 students. Hollow offered Todd the best financial aid package of all the institutions he considered, and because he wanted to be debt-free when he began law school, Todd chose to attend Hollow. He is the only child of what he described as very affluent parents who are now divorced.

First Awareness of a Gay Identity

Todd doesn’t remember a specific point in his life when he realized he was gay, but he did recall early on that he was different from other boys his own age. In middle school, he once kissed a boy and in high school he engaged in sex with men, however, he never associated those activities with being gay. Todd believed that this behavior was just a phase he would outgrow: “I’ll get married and I’ll have a wife and three kids and a dog.”

Upon arriving at Hollow, Todd tried to reaffirm a heterosexual identity for himself through actively dating and engaging in sex with women. As a freshman, participation in this type of heterosexual activity was fairly easy because it was encouraged, even expected, within the social environment of Hollow:

There’s this tradition at Hollow called fresh meat, which is [where] the freshmen class [goes] on little rampages and sleeps around, and so I expected that I had to take part in that. Then I joined a frat and my house was the good guy house. . . . They tended to be the ones that had the most sex, but they didn’t get a bad reputation for it. . . . They’re nice guys and so I assumed I had to take part in that . . . so my older brothers were taking me out to bars with fake [ID’s], introducing me to girls, and I was expected to take one home. I was a pledge, that’s what I did.

Todd soon realized that he did not enjoy dating women or participating in sexual activity with women. “I didn’t like it, and I knew it. . . . This should be every male’s dream, but I’m not [enjoying this], and there’s a problem.” Even though Todd was becoming more
and more uncomfortable with the mask of heterosexuality, he continued to take part in heterosexual activity at Hollow even into his sophomore year.

*Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity*

The conflict between Todd’s developing gay identity and his fraternity’s expectations of heterosexual behavior from its members created tremendous stress for Todd as he struggled with which identity he should display. Todd eventually reached a point at which he could no longer suppress his gay identity. As he began to accept himself as gay, he began to embrace, rather than hide, his emotional and physical attractions toward men. Todd’s journey toward an acceptance of his gay identity resulted from what he described as his fraternity’s “homoerotic environment”:

> You are living in a house with a bunch of men all the time. . . . Brotherhood is the romantic part of [a] homosexual relationship. . . . It puts you in this environment where you’re surrounded by other men who feel safe to be emotional, and it is kinda a double-edged sword because here they are expressing themselves in ways societally they can’t. . . . You get to see this side of them, and that is very personal.

This homoerotic environment quickly moved Todd to accept his gay identity because he realized, “they weren’t just my friends. I was attracted to some of them, and that confirmed for me [that I was gay].”

Todd’s journey progressed further upon meeting Nate. Todd met Nate while Todd was recruiting fraternity members in one of the residence halls. Nate was a freshman and Todd immediately felt a sexual attraction toward him. They “clicked immediately.” Not only did they click as friends, Todd also felt “palpable sexual tension within three seconds of knowing each other.” Nate soon pledged Todd’s fraternity and the “palpable sexual tension” took the form of an inseparable friendship.
While both Todd and Nate knew they shared more than simple feelings of friendship, their relationship didn’t progress beyond this point for quite some time. The catalyst that moved their relationship to a new level was the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Some of Todd’s family members and friends lived in New York and/or worked in the World Trade Center, and he became an emotional wreck when he learned of the disaster. Nate supported Todd and helped him endure the very difficult hours during which he tried to contact his family:

Nate took care of me the whole time. [He was] very supportive. . . . That was the first time obvious sexual feelings were displayed for each other . . . Inside I was, like, “Okay, he just kissed me.” . . . That added significant stress [and] made me realize what was going on internally. I had to start thinking about my emotions . . . I realized that the girl I was dating, it was crap. It wasn’t a real relationship, so I wasn’t investing in her at all, and I didn’t like her . . . I began to realize that my feelings were stronger for Nate and that I preferred men and that that was who I was becoming, or had been.

Although Todd could acknowledge to himself that he was gay and that a relationship existed between him and Nate, the idea of coming-out publicly tormented him. Todd attributed this to the conservative environment of the student body at Hollow. Their closed minds toward alternative lifestyles made the advancement of his gay identity difficult:

[Hollow is] not as liberal or as open as what I’m used to [being from New York]. . . . They don’t want to see it; they don’t want to know that it happens. They don’t want to know that people are dating, except if they do, it’s this sick gossip thing. They don’t want to be exposed to it. This is wholesome family loving, we all get drunk and sleep with each other, but heterosexually. . . . Nobody’s out at Hollow. I can’t stress that enough.

**Coming-out in College**

To deal with the stressful issue of acceptance created by his new, rapidly developing gay identity, Todd turned to individuals from whom he anticipated the most
support, mainly faculty and administrators at Hollow; he had found most of them to be very open and accepting of similar situations. Specifically, Todd appealed to gay faculty members for advice. Upon telling his gay, Spanish language professor that he had just come out and that he now found himself feeling stressed about his decision to come out, this faculty member offered acceptance, support, and advice. Furthermore, he encouraged Todd to continue coming-out to his peers on campus because he felt Todd’s visibility, level of involvement, and popularity could begin to change the conservative environment of Hollow’s student body. Todd was apprehensive about doing this, but upon further advice from another gay faculty member, Todd’s willingness to show his gay identity on campus grew.

Aside from the encouragement he received from gay faculty members, Todd’s popularity and strong ties to several important campus peer groups seemed to give him additional strength for coming-out to his closest peers. Todd continued outing himself during his junior year by telling his closest peer group, his fraternity brothers. Out of respect for the bond that he shared with his brothers, Todd told each one individually and later characterized the experience as “one of the most emotionally and physically exhausting things I’ve done.” Their responses were mostly supportive and came as a pleasant surprise to Todd. “My house is really accepting of it; way more than I thought they would be.”

The initial acceptance that Todd found from the majority of his brothers reassured him, but after coming-out, Todd encountered strong opposition from a few of them. This opposition left Todd deeply hurt and confused about his identity because some of the most homophobic remarks and actions came from brothers who were themselves closeted. One of these was Nate. Todd and Nate had ended their relationship, mainly
because Nate could not accept his own gay identity and no longer felt amorous toward Todd. The inability of his closeted peers to come out themselves or at least to offer support left Todd frequently confused about his own identity.

Inability to find someone to date at Hollow compounded Todd’s internal struggle. Todd was not attracted to the few gay students who were out. His closeted peers would sometimes want to hook up for a “trick” (i.e., a one night sexual encounter), but Todd refused to date anyone who was still in the closet, as he had had enough of that experience in his relationship with Nate:

I meet these people all the time at parties, and I used to think that there were three gay people on campus, but then I decided there were three out people on campus. . . . Then there was this whole little clan of clandestine gay men on campus. Then I decided they are all sexual predators. Finally, I realized that they weren’t, but they live on this campus.

The dating environment at Hollow was discouraging because Todd felt pressure from both his heterosexual and homosexual peers to stay in the closet:

If you are a 20-year old male, you have this incredible sex drive, and here you are told you have to have sex with women. If you are gay, that is probably not going to be the most satisfying relationship that you can probably have, so you are kept in the closet.

Trying to integrate his gay identity into the social environment of Hollow was emotionally exhausting. While Todd tried not to show the frustration or hurt caused by failed relationships on campus, failure in relationships left an obvious and lasting impact on him and his overall identity. Occasionally during our interview, his voice and gaze trailed off, or he sighed deeply when remembering relationships. Through all of his dating experiences, however, Todd continued to confront his internal battle with his identity, as he refused to go back into the closet. “I’m not just going to go back in the closet. I’m not going to change who I am.”
Continued Integration of Sexual Identity

Todd continued to integrate his gay identity into his overall identity by coming-out more and more at Hollow. He sought additional support from a variety of individuals and groups on campus. When he felt discouraged about coming-out, he turned to support mechanisms that he could not find on campus, such as his best friend in New York who he could talk to about being gay. “I got away from it once in a while. I could call my friend Pat in New York and be like, ‘Pat let’s talk drag queen for a while because I’ve had enough of Midwesterners.” This support bolstered Todd’s resolve to continue his coming-out process.

Todd never sought support from his parents, however. He still has not come out to them for fear of rejection. Even though Todd is not out to his parents, his gay identity causes considerable stress in his relationship with them. Todd’s father continually prods him about marrying and having children in order to carry on the family name. This remains a strong point of contention between them. Todd has told his father he does not intend to marry. Indeed, the concern for keeping the family name alive is so intense that Todd’s father even suggested a sexual relationship between Todd and a lesbian couple in order to create children, as long as the children bear his family name.

Stress from the integration of his gay identity also comes from Todd’s mother and her religious beliefs. She is a Baptist, and she worries that her son is becoming too liberal, referring to him as “the crazy liberal kid.” The two have many conversations about religion and homosexuality. Todd is sure his mother knows he is gay even though he has not come out to her. Todd is more willing to discuss homosexuality with his mother than his father because she offers indirect affirmation of his gay identity. “You’re my child, and I love you no matter what.” This phrase typically comes with the
qualifying “but,” so Todd’s apprehension of outing himself to his mother still exists. He tends to blame her for the apprehension, saying that he doesn’t want to endure “the headache of listening to them babble about God.” Todd, however, is always willing to talk with others about religion and homosexuality when the opportunity presents itself.

Todd’s acceptance of his gay identity does not conflict with his religious beliefs. Because of his religion major, he joined most of the religious organizations on campus from which he found a considerable degree of acceptance and affirmation. Not surprisingly, Todd discontinued his involvement with the few organizations that did not support his gay identity. He considers himself a Christian and does not believe homosexuality conflicts with Biblical teaching. Todd’s senior thesis, on the topic of homosexuality and the Bible, explored alternative interpretations of various scriptural passages that many religious leaders have used in arguing that homosexuality is a sin. It also examined many passages that might be interpreted as supportive of gay individuals.

Throughout his years at Hollow, reinforcement to continue integrating his gay identity into his overall identity gained momentum each time Todd found support from others for being gay. Each affirmation increased his willingness to come out to others, and this, in turn, provided additional reinforcement, thus creating a domino effect. Reinforcement of his gay identity brought Todd to the point at which he started coming-out to others who might or might not have known him. The uncertainty of coming-out to strangers meant less predictability in the reactions Todd received; but, he worried less about the negative reactions as he grew more comfortable with his gay identity. The evidence of his comfort level with his identity showed in Todd’s method of outing himself to the campus as a whole; he made out with a guy at a campus party. That type of gay sexual activity was, and still is, taboo at Hollow, and word about Todd spread
rapidly. “I went to a party with one of the secret societies, and I ended up, I kissed a guy while I was there . . . That took care of that, and they [the campus] all knew.”

Todd stated he was now comfortable enough with himself that he didn’t care what students on campus thought of him; but he was angry toward his heterosexual peers and the non-accepting environment of Hollow. This anger increased his aggressiveness in trying to force others to accept him and his gay identity. “For a long time I was very ugly [emotionally]. I pushed very hard with my friends, I wanted them to accept completely, everything at once, right then . . . I was shoving rainbow banners down their throats.”

Todd’s aggressiveness did not reflect his overall identity, and eventually he realized he could not force others to accept his gay identity, nor was it a very effective strategy for promoting an alternative lifestyle:

That wasn’t the way to do it. It took me a few weeks, months . . . to realize that. I began to understand that. It was a reaction to all the stress that had built up. Coming-out released it . . . There was this sort of prideful, arrogant, “You’re going to accept my lifestyle or else,” attitude that came with it. I kinda burned it out. I returned to my older, wiser, everybody comes to talk to me and I have an opinion about anything persona. . . . I’ve always been outspoken, but I was very outspoken about [being gay] and IT was what I wanted to deal with. I wanted to fix all of campus, because that is how I act.

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Todd has a solid grasp on the progression that he has made with his sexual identity development. He perceives his own sexual development as non-linear. While he is familiar with Cass’s stages of homosexuality, Todd has experienced his own self-defined stages through which he has seen himself and others pass in their development as gay individuals. Todd described five of these stages, recalling individuals who fit into each of the five categories:
There’s the “Oh I like him, but I don’t really like him.” Then there’s “Oh I like him, but I don’t want other groups to know I like him.” Then there’s “Oh I like him and want to have sex with him, but I don’t want other groups to know about it.” Then there’s “Yea we had sex, and I’m going to tell the world.” Finally, there’s “Who cares?”

Todd definitely sees himself in the “who cares” category at this point in his life.

Due to his sexual awareness and openness on campus, Todd often serves as a resource person and ally for closeted students on campus. He enjoys assisting other gay students in their journeys toward acceptance. Recalling a time when he assisted a student who had just come out, Todd stated, “It’s neat that I get to be an ally and not just a gay man for once.” Although he didn’t name it or acknowledge it as such, Todd’s recognition of this behavior could be the beginning of a sixth stage. It appears that he has yet to understand that being gay is only a part of his overall identity, because most of his academic, social, personal, and professional relationships still seem to revolve around the fact that he is gay. At this point in his life, Todd is content to immerse himself in environments that relate mainly to gay issues, identities, or agendas.

Creating environments that are gay-friendly currently is very important to Todd. Graduation is coming soon, and he fears the loss of the acceptance that he fought so hard to achieve. Todd wants the environment of his fraternity house and Hollow itself to change permanently so that it is more accepting of gay students now, and in the future. In an effort to change the homophobic environment at Hollow, Todd initiated a program called *Safety Zone*, with the purpose of promoting a safe environment for gay students within the academic and social environments of campus. Todd wanted closeted and out students to be free to seek support from faculty and administrators when dealing with sexual orientation issues. Creating a safe environment on campus meant educating faculty about the needs of gay students. Todd hoped that making Hollow’s faculty and
administrators aware of the needs, concerns, and developmental challenges facing gay students, faculty and administrators would, in turn, be able to influence students and their attitudes toward orientation issues.

Much like the positive changes Todd has seen in himself as he deals with his sexual identity, he reported that positive changes are happening within the campus environment at his institution. “It’s getting back to campus culture in just a few short months . . . . Students are more accepting. The issues are getting dealt with, and there aren’t people living in fear.” Even though Todd will soon graduate and leave Hollow, his sexual identity progression has helped him change the environment of both his fraternity and the campus itself. This progress did not come without its struggles though as Todd battled internally with himself often, as well as with many of his peers. Through his continued resolve in creating a better environment for both himself and other gay students on campus Todd has been able to reach a point where he is secure in his identity. His security in himself has also helped educate other students, faculty, and administrators at Hollow on some of the needs, wants, and desires of gay students found there.

Josh

Josh’s appearance immediately reminded me of some of my own college friends. I always called them granolas, and I couldn’t help but think the same thing of Josh. He dressed in very causal and comfortable attire, but what really made Josh stick out was his “chops.” They were large, but not neatly trimmed or manicured. This, strangely, seemed to be stereotypically non-gay. Josh looked like he could be working for the National Park Service in some remote mountain range, or just getting back from a Green Peace mission to save the seals.
Josh’s physical appearance was very fitting for a student at Central State University (CSU), an institution of 40,000 students where Josh described the campus culture as very accepting of differences. Josh came to CSU for several reasons. Initially, he wanted to major in music and pre-med, and CSU was one of the few institutions that would allow him to pursue a double major. Also, he wanted to attend a large university and have a chance to get away from his home state of Wisconsin. Josh is a very social individual so the unfamiliarity of CSU didn’t bother him at all. In fact, he relished the newness of the CSU experience. “I really like throwing myself into new situations.”

Josh will be heading into his junior year at CSU this fall and has since changed his major to pre-veterinary medicine.

As I learned during my time with Josh, his self-acceptance and his very carefree, this-is-who-I-am attitude matched his physical appearance. He has a look of comfort with his own individuality. I found evidence of Josh’s comfortableness with life and the direction in which he is heading, throughout our conversation. For Josh, this comfortableness with himself started at a very early age.

First Awareness of a Gay Identity

Josh’s growing up experience in Wisconsin set the stage for his acceptance of a gay identity. His parents are scientists and he has an older brother. Josh’s parents are quite liberal and they exposed their children to a variety of experiences, in addition to fostering in them a strong sense of respect for diversity. Josh realized in fourth grade that he had a physical attraction to men that other boys his own age did not have:

Actually the time that I realized that I was attracted to men, although I wouldn’t say that was the time I wasn’t attracted to women physically, would be when I was in fourth grade. . . . my parents and my brother and I were . . . watching a movie. It was Men at Work, with Emilio Estevez and Charlie Sheen, and there’s just this certain scene when I realized that I was very attracted to the both of them. At that point . . . I sorta realized I had
an attraction [to them] and I knew that wasn’t exactly what [other boys feel]. . . . Not all men have an attraction in the way I was feeling. At the time I had already known what it is to be gay, and what it is to be bisexual, but I didn’t relate the feelings to myself at the time.

Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity

It wasn’t until tenth grade that Josh finally came to accept himself as being gay. From then on he did not date women. To avoid some of his confusion over his developing gay identity, Josh took a very active part in school projects and organizations during the remaining years of high school because he “didn’t want to deal with thinking about it.”

Coming-out in College

Josh came out three weeks after his arrival at CSU and his coming-out story is unique. Josh was watching TV with Alisa, one of his newly-found friends, and she commented about the clothing store at which Josh used to work: “The only men that enjoy working at [The] Gap are gay men.” “Well, not all of us enjoyed it,” Josh replied. What makes this coming-out story unique is that Alisa assumed ever since she’d met him that Josh was gay and she felt that he was quite open and out with his gay identity. In reality, Josh’s acknowledgement of his gay identity to Alisa was the first time he had ever come out beyond himself. When Alisa learned this a few weeks later “she was pretty excited.” It meant a great deal to her that she was the first person with whom Josh shared his identity.

The fact that Josh could come out so casually to Alisa and not need to spend time talking about the significance of it, makes his story unlike any other coming-out story I heard during this study. Coming-out to others was a major life event for other study
participants. The acknowledgement of his gay identity as part of a normal conversation reaffirmed the high level of comfort Josh has with his identity.

Because of his membership in the Unitarian Universalist Church, Josh understood at a very young age what it meant to be gay and he accepted gay individuals as a normal part of his life:

The Unitarian Universalist Church is very accepting. That’s pretty much what the religion is based on. . . . We had a lesbian minister for eight or nine years. . . . Then a gay man minister . . . everything is just very accepting. Probably throughout my life I met the most LGBT people through the Unitarian Church, including on campus . . . so just the fact that I was exposed to that type of thing at such a young age was probably, it probably affected the fact that I [came out], how open I am about myself, how open I am [and] accepting of other people . . . The fact that I met all these different people before I was 10 years old I think helped me a lot.

The influence of the celebrity Cher, whose daughter is a lesbian, also helped Josh understand and accept his gay identity very early on in life:

My mom brought me to the Belief Tour in eighth grade. . . . This was when I was still confused as to who I was, what I was going through. She’s very open about how she is a very stereotypical gay icon. This was the first time I ever saw a performance where somebody that was a famous person was comfortable saying things like this and stuff like that. . . . The fact that I saw Cher up there saying stuff, “I’ve been to many gay birthday parties,” “I love gay men,” and “The drag queens would be pissed at me if I didn’t have eight wigs in a show.” . . . Just seeing stuff like from somebody as famous Cher . . . I think was very helpful for me in tenth grade coming to terms with myself.

Coming-out for Josh may not have been a life-altering event because he had experienced cultural diversity, including gay individuals, his whole life. Since coming-out, Josh has transitioned through several gay identity processes because his CSU experiences also have fostered an affirming environment for him. While at CSU, Josh has been very active in a variety of LGBT organizations and events, and has had the opportunity to take several LGBT courses. Through that coursework, Josh has become
aware of LGBT history and the struggle those individuals have had to create the rights and acceptance he enjoys today. His study provided exposure to various coming-out models, which in turn enhanced his understanding of his own coming-out process.

Shortly after coming-out at CSU, Josh felt the strongest part of his overall identity was his gay identity. This perception planted him in an identity-pride stage. Being very open and out was important to Josh because he was searching for a place and membership in which he felt unique:

I was looking for something to be. Being white, male, middle class puts me basically into every majority group that there is, so I think that there was a point in time where I was looking for some group to identify with and [I was] looking for something that would make me unique above everyone else. Being gay became my source of pride.

Josh still perceives himself as being in a strong identity-pride stage, but he now views his gay identity as only a part of his entire self.

I’m come to the point where being gay is only part of who I am. I also look at myself as a CSU student, a veterinary technician, musician . . . [and] feminist. What’s become important to me now is not that people know that I’m gay, but people know that I’m gay and am all these other things. . . . What I’m trying to do with all my friends is to not relate [to] me as their gay friend but as their friend.

Josh evolved to this point because he increasingly recognized that everyone around him was starting to view him as “gay Josh.” Josh realized that he didn’t want to be the token gay male with his friends or in topics of conversation. “I would say that when I realized what I was to everyone else was gay Josh, was when I realized that’s not what I want to be, just gay Josh . . . I felt as if that really wasn’t really what I was.”

Both Josh and his friends needed time, however, to recognize and adjust to this transition in his overall identity. Through relationship building with all of his friends, Josh has been able to establish that being gay is only part of his identity. He takes care to
ensure being gay is not the topic of conversation with friends unless it is relevant to the discussion:

I try to make it very evident. I’m a very talkative person, so in all my conversations I try with everybody that I’m talking to, to not have gay be the center of conversation, or pre-vet the center of conversation, that’s a main thing to me. When I’m talking to people I’m both.

Josh has discovered that his increasing comfort with his gay identity and its incorporation into his overall identity has enhanced relationships with those most important to him.

I will notice that what has happened to me since I’ve started making conscious efforts to do this is that I’m becoming closer friends with [a variety of individuals]. I went from a stage where I was very close friends with a lot of straight women and maybe a couple of straight men, no gay males, to a stage where I [was] friends and I would only hang out with gay men. Now I’m certainly out of that stage and I have my closest gay friends, and then I have actually quite a few straight male friends right now. I notice that when people see that I’m not friends with just gay men they sorta distance me from an identity of just gay male . . . People will tend to not look at me as being gay Josh.

Even though Josh no longer sees being gay as the main focus of his individual identity, Josh is out and open in every situation: “I’m out in every situation I’m in. I see no reason not to be out in any situation, which I think is important to me at this point.”

Josh is willing to discuss LGBT issues with anyone who will listen. He is a member of a CSU organization that speaks about LGBT issues to various classes at CSU as well as to other off-campus groups. Although he is only 5’6”, Josh is not afraid to confront homophobia when he encounters it. This aggressiveness in addressing homophobia even spurred him to confront, all at one time, seven or eight university football players who were much larger than he.

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Today Josh sees himself as a well-rounded individual with a multi-faceted identity. Due to his childhood experiences and exposure to diversity, Josh has
experienced a society that is very open to differences and diversity. His collegiate experiences have provided additional validation for this view. While Josh is still very proud of his gay identity, he now realizes it is not his total identity, just a part of it. He is looking forward to veterinary school and eventually opening his own practice in New York City where he can be proud not only to hang up a rainbow flag in his office window, but to live in a society that he experienced as child, one of acceptance and respect for differences and diversity.

Samuel

Samuel, Sam as he prefers to be called, approached me shyly in the lobby in the library at Central City State University (CCSU). He appeared to be nervous to meet with me, as he kept looking around. It was as though he was afraid someone would see him, let alone realize that the two of us were meeting to discuss his life as a gay student. My initial assessment that Sam was uncomfortable in meeting me gained credibility as we headed to a classroom for our first interview. He followed me at a distance gave short answer to my rapport-building questions; he seemed to be very reserved.

Sam is attending CCSU because of his desire to get away from the conservative and rural environment in which he grew up. Sam liked the idea of attending CCSU because the university is several hours from home, quite large (over 20,000 students), one of the most diverse in the state, and located in one of the largest cities in the state. Sam’s hometown of Middleburry, where his older sister and parents live, is in a very rural part of the state, but is also the largest city in that part of the state because of its location on a major river. Sam’s parents are pillars of the community because they own a large gas station with which people in his hometown are familiar.
First Awareness of a Gay Identity and Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity

Looking back at his life, Sam stated he now knows that he was always different from other boys, but that the feeling of being different really didn’t settle in until he reached high school. During his senior year of high school, Sam told his sister he was bisexual. Even though Sam considers himself gay, he stated he was bisexual “just like every other gay man does.” He anticipated her support, because the two have a cousin who is a lesbian, and several of his sister’s friends are gay. Sam described his sister’s response as a mother’s response, not a sister’s. Her lack of support both surprised and hurt him and their relationship “totally changed” after he told her he was bisexual.

Coming-out in College

Sam came out as gay to his best friend from high school during Thanksgiving break of his freshmen year at CCSU. Her reaction was one of acceptance, which surprised Sam as he was not anticipating this. Sam generally does not expect much societal acceptance for his gay identity, and with good reason. Much of the environment in which he has found himself since coming-out has not affirmed his gay identity. Even though Sam understands that he is gay, his constant battle with his non-affirming environments leaves him struggling internally, not only in displaying his gay identity to others, but in accepting himself as gay.

It appears that Sam’s internal struggle relates to many of his initial coming-out experiences. Anticipated support groups, mainly family, have not accepted or reaffirmed Sam’s sexual identity. His family’s refusal to accept it seems to have stunted Sam’s continued identity development. It appears that he constantly focuses his energy on gaining their acceptance even before gaining his own. This lack of support from family has left him deeply hurt and feeling a void in his life:
They have not been supportive at all. It’s very hard. . . . When I came out to my parents they were like “Don’t flaunt, don’t describe it, don’t talk about it. You can’t do this [to us]. Don’t talk about it, not around us, not around any of the family.” They’re very conservative. We own this business that everyone knows about in [Middlebury], so everyone knows my parents [Bob] and [Marsha]. They own the [One Stop], the Gas Station out by exit six, out in lower [Southview]. Everyone knows about it, and everyone [would say] “Oh, you’re their son.” I’ve never talked to my parents about it, but I know they don’t want [others saying] “Oh my God, their son’s gay.”

His family’s lack of acceptance has left Sam torn between wanting to spend time with the family he loves and wanting to avoid environments that do not affirm his gay identity. When Sam does go home, he finds an uncomfortable environment that continues to cause him a great deal of stress and emotional torment:

It’s just so hard to describe the feeling that . . . I get when I go [home]. . . . I can’t be myself when I go home and I don’t want to be there because of that. Then again, I sit here [at college], and some days I’m like “Man I just want to go home.” I want to call Mom. I want to tell her what’s going on in my life . . . I can’t . . . I have to be a totally different person when I talk to her and it’s very hard.

Few of the environments in which Sam finds himself affirm his gay identity. Many of his experiences in the residence halls at CCSU, in his workplaces, and in the company of former high school friends have not been positive. Since coming-out, these negative experiences have left him expecting homophobia in most of his environments, with little power to battle it. “I just put [my first roommate experience] in the past. I knew it would happen. . . . Everyone else just kinda blew me off. . . . It kinda hurt, but I was like, ‘You know what, these guys are all assholes and it’s part of life.’” Sam does not actively confront homophobia and even appears to be homophobic himself at times, “I’m like, ‘Oh man I can’t be myself. I’m scared to be myself. I don’t want to be rejected. I don’t want to be made fun of.’”
Continued Integration of Sexual Identity

Sam struggles to integrate his gay identity into his overall identity, usually retreating to the closet when he meets individuals for the first time because he fears rejection. If, and only if, Sam feels certain of the individual’s acceptance, will he start to be open with his gay identity and personality. Sam has found that this strategy is the best way to find acceptance, even though he knows the closet compromises his overall identity:

I don’t know why [I go back in the closet]. . . . I just do it. I think because I want them [to accept me]. I don’t want to scare them away. I want to show them that being gay is okay. . . . I act differently because I want [a new co-worker] . . . to know that [being gay is okay]. I just want him to accept me, I guess. I guess it comes back to the accepting factor.

His deep need of acceptance by others, even when he is with individuals who know he is gay, makes him quick to compromise his sense of self. This often forces Sam to take part in activities that he doesn’t necessarily enjoy:

They know I’m gay. They know about me, but they’re cool. . . . They always like to . . . go to the straight club, and I’m like “Okay, let’s go.” I’m always like “Let’s go.” I never drag them to my place.

Sam also takes care not to risk losing any of his friends, so he tends to engage in activities with them individually. Sam fears that if his friends meet, they may dislike each other, which in turn may cause them to dislike him. Sam does not share personal problems with his friends or turn to them for help in his struggles because rejection scares him. It is a fact he recognizes but knows will not change soon:

I don’t tell them [friends] a lot of things because I don’t want them to think, “Oh no, why’s he like that?” . . . I don’t know why I’m scared to do that. I’ll hang out with one person one day, then another person another day, but I won’t ever mix the two together. I think because I have so many friends who are so different I’m scared to mix them together because I’m so scared that they are not going to get along.
At times, Sam has tried to integrate his gay identity into his overall identity but this strategy appears to have backfired: “I usually almost always out myself to [the] whole public and they [friends] are like ‘Oh my gosh, don’t ever do that again.’ I’m like, ‘Do you have a problem with it?’” Even though Sam previously felt comfortable outing himself in public with his gay peers, he now tends to distance himself from his gay peers when in public; thus, he escapes attracting attention to his gay identity: “Now I notice I do the same. I do the opposite around certain people, and I’m like, ‘Oh my God, don’t do this.’” It is as though Sam’s journey toward self-acceptance has stalled, and due to the many negative responses he has received since coming-out, it appears that he has regressed in his coming-out process despite occasional affirmations.

Sam has quite a few gay friends off campus, and even his roommate during his second year in the residence hall was accepting of Sam’s being gay once he learned of it. One of Sam’s bosses at work is gay-friendly; he spends quite a bit of time talking on-line to gay individuals; and the few professors in whom Sam has confided have responded positively. Even though Sam has been able to find various support systems for his gay identity, they are not enough to affect progress in his development; moreover, he continues to struggle daily. “One day I’m like, ‘Look at me, I’m a gay man.’ The next day I’m like, ‘Oh my God, don’t look at me, I’m straight.’”

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Sam realizes that he is much happier when he is out and open with his gay identity, but this is still difficult for him. “I try. I tell myself [to] act like yourself, be yourself. You’re happier if you act like yourself.” As difficult as it has been for Sam to integrate his gay identity into his overall identity, he does perceive himself as better off and more self-accepting since he came out. “I’ve definitely changed since I’ve come out.
[I’ve changed] for the better. Every day that goes on, the more I accept myself.” Sam seems to view his being gay more as an issue of acceptance than of personal identity. He offered further proof of this belief. “I accept myself for being gay . . . I gotta still accept myself for how I act so I can act that way all the time.” To Sam, acting “that way all the time” means displaying his gay identity. He knows many individuals who can display their gay identities and be accepted. That is the direction in which Sam would like to progress.

Sam believes that full integration of his gay identity will happen someday through the influence of “the paths I take in life.” While Sam boldly predicts his evolution into a more openly gay individual, many personal and professional challenges lie ahead for him. He desires to be a special education teacher and he is well-aware of society’s distrust of gay teachers. His mother’s homophobic remarks strongly reinforced this: “You’re going to teach kids. You better not touch a kid.” These comments hurt Sam, yet he still believes strongly in his ability to be a good, and an openly gay, teacher. Sam sends mixed messages however. “I’m not going back in the closet when I teach. It’s just, I’m going to make sure they see me as a teacher [first].” Sam’s decision not to return to the closet when he enters the job market after graduation will be difficult because there is little evidence that he is currently moving forward in displaying his gay identity.

Sam’s experiences with negative perceptions of gay individuals make him distrust most people and cause him to withdraw into himself when he faces identity challenges or problems. He understands that holding in his emotions and dealing with his problems alone are not healthy strategies, but considering the hurt he has suffered from people he thought he could trust, this reaction is understandable:
Internal affirmation of his gay identity will continue to be difficult for Sam if he continues his current pattern of withdrawing from others in order to solve his problems. He appears to be caught in a repeating cycle that prevents him from advancing toward self-acceptance and displaying his identity. Finding additional support from other individuals or groups for his identity would appear to go a long way towards helping Sam address his internal struggle. Where this support will come from remains to be seen.

Kurt

Kurt appeared to be a very energetic young man as I watched him bounce across the street towards the coffee house where I was waiting for him. My initial impression of Kurt was correct, as his voice was bubbly and he had a smile that seemed exceptionally large for someone only 5’4”. Even though I towered over him, Kurt didn’t seem to mind. He eagerly followed me to the back conference room for our interview and had no problem making small talk with me.

Kurt is finishing his junior year at Flatlands College, a large-size university of over 20,000 students located in a fairly small city. Kurt comes from a unique family in that he has full sisters, half brothers and half sisters, as well as stepbrothers and stepsisters. Kurt spent most of his childhood with his mom and two full sisters, because his parents divorced when he was in elementary school.

Although initially Kurt could not articulate a reason he chose to attend Flatlands except that it was close to home, the true reason surfaced during our interview. While growing up, Kurt attended Flatlands’ athletic events where the cheerleaders’ tumbling
fascinated him. As a child, Kurt declared that he was going to be a cheerleader at Flatlands someday; his prediction is now a reality. He is a Flatlands cheerleader for football and the men’s and women’s basketball teams. Kurt enjoys tumbling at every available opportunity.

First Awareness of a Gay Identity

Kurt can remember as early as the first grade that he liked boys, but he assumed it was a phase common to boys and that he would “grow out of it. . . . Everybody always goes through this. Everybody has these feelings.” As confirmation of his belief, Kurt dated girls throughout high school, and his most serious relationship even reached the point at which he and his girlfriend engaged in sex. Afterwards she told Kurt she loved him. “I realized right then that I had no emotional feelings for her whatsoever so I had to break up with her. . . . That is when I started my coming-out process.”

Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity

Kurt had the opportunity to develop positive feelings about being gay before his coming-out because his best friend came out to him during her freshman year in high school. The two often went to a local gay bar to hang out. Socializing with gay individuals helped Kurt realize that he too was gay and that there was nothing wrong with it. “Seeing the people were actually happy, normal, having a good time, dancing, and [knowing] you don’t have a third arm if you are gay” affirmed Kurt’s acceptance of his own gay identity.

Coming-Out in College

Early exposure to gay individuals and gay culture allowed Kurt to come out as a freshman in college. He came out to his mom at the end of his first semester at Flatlands and her positive reinforcement was a crucial part of his desire to continue coming-out:
She was okay with it. . . . “You’re my son; I love you no matter what.” I came back [to school] and I was . . . out. Everyone in my life is going to know. . . . My mom knows. My mom was accepting. That’s all that matters . . . she was that person that was “I love you no matter what,” and I’m like “Well then, screw everybody else.”

After coming-out to his mother and finding her to be accepting, Kurt rapidly came out to his extended family, except his father, during the rest of the semester break. They, too, were all very accepting.

Other persons’ initial acceptance of his gay identity was very important to Kurt. He indicated that had these experiences been negative for him, he might have stopped coming-out. This fear of rejection explains why Kurt did not initially come out to his father, and why he grew timid about continuing the coming-out process once he returned to Flatlands: “Okay I’m gay. Are they really going to like me or are they not going to like me?”

*Continued Integration of Sexual Identity*

To increase his self-confidence for additional coming-out experiences, Kurt has turned to individuals and organizations from which he expected support, mainly, his lesbian friend from high school; his cheerleading coach; and Flatlands’ LGBT student group, *Perspective*. Kurt confided in his cheerleading coach because she had always reaffirmed differences in others, even before Kurt came out to her and the squad: “‘You never know who might be gay.’ That just really sticks in my mind. She was just there to stop people from saying, ‘Hey that’s so gay,’ or whatever.” That differences should be accepted mattered deeply to Kurt because he had to overcome not only the stereotype of being gay, but the stereotype for being short as well because he is 5’4”. His coach’s support, whether for his gay identity or his height, gave him comfort. “She was just there; she was there [for support].”
Kurt also turned to Perspective for help in dealing with his developing gay identity. In addition, the group gave him a chance to make many new gay friends and a chance to be active in promoting LGBT issues on campus. Initially, after coming-out, activism was an integral part of Kurt’s gay identity:

I was very much into LGBT rights and activism, very much into activism. . . . When I first came out I tried to be really big into the gay community. I was like, you must be humongously gay, you need to be active, [and] you need to be into activism 24/7.

Being active and being “humongously gay” lead Kurt to become an officer in Perspective and to attend LGBT conferences. In his sophomore year, Kurt was the primary organizer of a state LGBT conference held at Flatlands.

As Kurt grew more comfortable with his gay identity, he continued to come out to various individuals and groups from whom he could not predict a response. One of these individuals was Kurt’s father:

I’m my dad’s only son with my mom. I think it was just that last bit of, well if I do disappoint him and if he wants to kick me out of his life, I’m not really ready for that yet.

Eventually, Kurt’s father began to suspect his son’s orientation; so, he e-mailed Kurt stating, “A father’s love is unconditional. If there’s anything you need to tell me, it’s not a big deal.” At last, Kurt felt comfortable enough to come out to him. Kurt’s father turned out to be very accepting of his gay son.

In general, most of Kurt’s unpredictable coming-out experiences were positive. One, however, hurt bitterly. This homophobic experience involved his five roommates during their second year at Flatlands. It hurt him because Kurt’s roommates had been very accepting of his gay identity since his freshmen year; therefore, the homophobia that surfaced halfway through their sophomore year took him by surprise. Kurt had gone to
Jamaica with his boyfriend for a week. When he returned, his roommates asked him to move out:

They seemed very cool at first. I lived with them all the way up until February until they all sat me down and they’re like, “Well, we can’t handle the fact that you are gay anymore. Could you please move out?” That was the worst experience of me coming-out ever . . . I was very surprised and shocked because I was . . . friends with all of them, except one. There’s always that one bastard roommate, but obviously I was the one in this case to them, but I was friends with all of them. I talked to all of them on a daily basis. It just shot me in the heart. I had no idea [it was coming].

Kurt moved out and lived with a gay friend to finish out the school year. For his junior year, he lived off-campus with friends from the cheerleading squad.

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Kurt seems to have a very solid understanding of his gay identity, of where he has been, of where he is currently, and of how he would like others to perceive him. Kurt may be evolving beyond the point at which he focuses only on his gay identity. Although he realized that his involvement with Perspective was very important in the acceptance of his gay identity when he first came out, he now feels he has reached the limit of what Perspective can offer him in terms of his overall identity development:

Coming-out it was just like, “Oh my God there are other people who are gay.” It’s just unreal. That’s definitely what I used [membership in the Perspective] for [as it] was a support mechanism . . . I think actually at a lot of universities that you have your LGBT organization and it is very good for people who are just coming-out, trying to discover themselves, trying to meet their network of friends. Then you are there for a couple of years and then . . . you need to try something else. Me and a whole bunch of people we just moved on. We’re still on the mailing/email list. We still come to some of the big events, but it’s not something I’m an officer in. It’s not something that I make sure I’m at every meeting.

Now, Kurt himself senses the expansion of his own identity:

When I first came out it was like “I’m gay” and that’s all I am [to others] and that’s all I saw myself as well. Now I can be something else other
than gay. It’s really nice because I can go hang out with people. . . . Being gay is not the reason we’re hanging out . . . It’s sorta nice to get away from the gay lifestyle every once in awhile and the gay drama and just go hang out with the straight cheerleading drama or my other friends.

In addition, he believes that being active and visible can include a variety of behaviors:

Now, I think that me being active in the gay community is having my boyfriend, walking down the street, holding his hand, showing affection to my boyfriend [and] wearing the rainbow necklace. Nothing makes me feel better walking down the street and you see somebody else with a rainbow necklace, or you see another gay couple who are just holding hands or a little hug right there [in public]. I think that’s being just as active as some people who are out there with signs picketing.

Due to all the affirmation of his gay identity, Kurt does not hesitate to come out in whatever situation he finds himself. His own self-acceptance and his willingness to come out does, however, create mixed emotions in him. While Kurt understands the importance of coming-out as a chance to educate others about gay issues, it has grown annoying because of the need to answer the same questions repeatedly:

Once you tell somebody you are gay . . . you get all the same stories, all the same questions, “What did your parents say, blah, blah, blah?” [I] just want to have a tape recorder like this one [points to the dictation machine] and just play it. . . . It is a good conversation starter. . . . It’s a good icebreaker, “Alright, go ahead ask me the questions, which ones do you want to know?” So . . . it’s sorta good because I always feel I have the chance to educate somebody about everything, but in the other sense it’s like just “Shut-up.”

Kurt’s decreasing enthusiasm for talking to others about life as a gay individual was apparent even in our interview; he stressed several times that his stories were not interesting. His apparent boredom with the subject allowed only short responses to my questions and little elaboration unless asked. Perhaps Kurt was trying to indicate that I too was spending too much time and energy on his being gay, and not on his overall identity. The monotony of being viewed as “just gay” by other people frustrates him and he wishes others would focus on his overall identity.
Current Sexual Identity Perception

Today Kurt sees himself as a part of a larger society:

I see myself as somebody who’s just living my life. I’m not gay Kurt anymore. I’m just Kurt. I’m just going to live my life for myself . . . Granted I still think it is important to be active, to fight for some rights, but . . . it’s not as big of an issue, as big [of a] deal to me as it used to be . . . I just see myself as living my life for me.

Kurt seems to be pretty happy living his life for himself right now, and the support he has received from others for his gay identity has allowed him to feel comfortable in whom he is. Integrating his gay identity into his overall identity continues to be a challenge though due to the continued coming out that Kurt feels he has to do far too often. He looks forward to the day when others will see him as he sees himself, just a man trying to live his life motto: “You have to do what you have to do to make yourself happy.”

Jake

Jake was just finishing his freshmen year at Brickyard University when we met. Jake is the type of individual whom people tend to notice immediately because he is tall and good-looking, he has a unique hair style, and he dresses well. Jake found himself at Brickyard, a private university of 3000 students, because he procrastinated in his college decision-making process and because Brickyard was the only small institution in the state that offered his desired major. Jake is the older of two sons and lives with his parents in a very large city. Jake is close to his mother and considers her the breadwinner of the family because she is an engineer. Jake’s father owns his own business.

First awareness of a Gay Identity and Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity

Jake recalled sexually experimenting with one of his male friends when he himself was five or six years old and having a crush on this friend. From then on, Jake
knew he was gay and the battle to hide his true identity continued until he finally started coming-out years later.

During his freshmen college orientation, Jake met the president of the Brickyard LGBT organization, Allies, and he felt increasingly confident that he would be able to come out once he arrived at college. Jake looked forward to joining Allies. Upon his arrival at Brickyard, however, he did not attend the first meeting because he was too afraid. Jake finally e-mailed the president of the organization: “I don’t think I can do this right now. I just do not feel like I’m comfortable enough with myself.”

Coming-out in College

The development of Jake’s gay identity lay dormant for some months until he happened to meet a classmate who was a member of Allies. The student told Jake how much fun it was to be in the organization and this conversation gave Jake the courage he needed to attend the next meeting: “I knew right then and there this is where I needed to be.” Once he became an active member of Allies, Jake’s identity development resumed.

Initially, Jake came out only to individuals who were sure to be affirming. These included members of Allies, his parents, his closest friends, and selected members of Brickyard’s faculty. Jake suspected that coming-out to professors who weren’t accepting would jeopardize his grades in their classes. Each affirmation, however, strengthened Jake’s confidence in coming-out to others as well as his confidence in becoming more active and visible. He shared his experience of telling his first faculty member he was gay:

That was just the greatest thing in the world. That gave me more confidence to do more things . . . If this [positive affirmation] happens then I can do this with other people, so I went around [to] other teachers I wanted to tell [and] get more comfortable with.
Even though Jake received significant positive affirmation of his gay identity during his initial coming-out process, telling others outside his close support group was still a challenge. His uncertainty of how people would react left him scared. In addition, Jake feared having too much interaction with his heterosexual peers because he didn’t like the pressure of having to act straight and he assumed they would be “weirded out” if they discovered he was gay. As the school year progressed, Jake began to take more chances on outing himself to people on campus. In most instances, he continued to receive positive affirmation:

This school has really surprised me, actually. Coming here, I don’t know what I was thinking. I know I procrastinated a lot and I ended up here mainly because of [my major] and I realized like WOW this is going to be the most conservative [school]. It’s church affiliated. It’s private. Why in the world am I coming here? I’m asking for a beat down. Right away it was just like things seemed nice.

Not all his experiences at Brickyard were affirming. Some extremely homophobic reactions in his residence hall have caused him internal struggles about being more open with his gay identity and confronting such severe homophobia. Internal struggles were evident throughout our interview because Jake’s desire to be more open is often contradicted by his actions:

My little outness will get more and more to the point where most everyone is probably going to know on this campus. I want everyone to know. I don’t want another person thinking I’m straight. . . . I’m not brave enough to turn around and tell them they don’t need to be calling me that [fag]. . . . I want to. I’m probably going to get to that point. . . . I’m getting there. . . . I’m trying my hardest not to hide [being gay] as much as possible because if I hide it I’m just giving in to [the] hateness. . . . the homophobia.

Even though Jake continued to come out as the school year progressed, internally he still worried about when to display his gay identity. Being open and out seemed to be influenced by the environment in which he found himself.
Continued Integration of Sexual Identity

The search for winning his internal battle has led Jake to a variety of support groups he hopes will enable him to develop a more positive gay identity. Allies has been very important to Jake in supporting his gay and overall identity. “Within the group we’ve all told our stories and we all connected in that way . . . We have each other’s backs now. We have the support we never grew up with.” Jake has also found strong support in PFLAG. Affirmation of his gay identity from heterosexuals means a great deal to him. His parents are supportive of their gay son, but “they’re still going through their stages right now, so it’s hard.” Seeing PFLAG parents offer love and support to their gay children excites Jake. It offers hope that more heterosexual acceptance will follow for him too:

I’ve never seen so many straight people love a person for who they are in my whole entire life . . . I could relate to the straight people and they could relate to me. I could relate to other gay kids and it was just wonderful. That was the greatest, one of the greatest experiences I’ve had this whole year.

At the present time, however, he harbors doubt that complete acceptance of himself will occur:

I just can’t understand why someone would hate someone so much on something that shouldn’t be that big of a deal. Love is love. Love is not straight love. It doesn’t say straight love. . . . I mean love is love. You love people. Whatever you want to love is whatever you want to love . . . I don’t understand why people can go around and dictate other people’s lives. It’s just dumb.

Added to Jake’s apprehension is frustration over privileges enjoyed by his heterosexual peers, especially in terms of relationships, that are not allowed to him. Jake’s first serious boyfriend caused him considerable stress because Jake felt that they
had to follow heterosexual norms and therefore hide their relationship. The experience resulted in fear, confusion, and jealousy of his heterosexual peers:

That was really my first relationship. It was my first relationship where I could be who I was . . . Finally I got what I had been fighting for. I got to be with someone I liked but we still had to hide everything. . . . We couldn’t even hug because everyone was around . . . I’m jealous of straight couples because they can walk around campus and hold hands and stuff like that. That makes me sad when I see that . . . That’s a setback everyday when I see that.

Because positive affirmation for being gay in “the straight world” is difficult to find, Jake often sneaks away to the state capital and its gay ghetto district. The escape to and immersion in gay culture are very affirming for him and serves as a model for his ideal society:

[It is] a place to go to be yourself fully. . . . I haven’t felt I had to worry about anything there. Being around other gay people is wonderful too. I can relate to them so much, and I like doing that. It’s just a fun place to be. For a kid my age, that’s all I wanted to have was fun. I could never have fun, the fun I wanted. I always had to have straight fun. . . . It’s just a place I could go and that’s me. It feels like me and it feels like stuff I like to do . . . I don’t feel the pressures of straight society . . . I feel like it’s an open, open place, and you can just be who you are.

Acceptance of his gay identity has finally allowed Jake to become part of the gay community and he now realizes just how many gay people there are in society:

When I came out, one of the first things I noticed is how many people you realize who are gay. You come out and then everyone finds out and then they are all coming up to you “You’re gay too?” and they don’t even know. I came out to [my friend] and then he was like, “Oh since you are out to me now I can tell you everyone else who is.”

Jake truly enjoys his membership in gay culture, but he still finds it frustrating that more visibility and acceptance of the gay community cannot be found:

[At] times I feel like it’s [gay culture] an underground world . . . Sometimes I feel like that’s what we are, an underground world because . . . we do have to go around the straight world to be who we are.
Jake is tired of hiding his identity and is tired of the lesser degree of acceptance that gay individuals receive.

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Jake’s passion for and resolve in changing societal perceptions is shaping his current aspirations and have made him very active in support of gay rights. Currently, Jake is deeply involved in Allies, PFLAG meetings, and a gay youth group for high school students back home. He is also trying to start a Gay Straight Alliance at his former high school. Jake’s involvement in these organizations helps him realize that he will become more visible and more comfortable with his gay identity. Comfort in himself will prevent him from avoiding situations or changing his behavior when confronted with homophobia.

Jake’s activism has changed him and he understands that he has evolved into a stronger gay individual during this past school year:

It’s been a huge year for me. I have to tell you that right now a HUGE year . . . Well, everything that’s happened to me this year has progressed me to be more who I am, even the hateful [experiences], even the scary parts of it . . . I have so much passion for this now . . . because I now realize how oblivious I was when I was trying to hide it in the closet.

Through all of his involvement, Jake hopes to make a positive difference. In fact, he feels he has lost too much time already:

I hear a lot of people say that change comes in a younger generation. I’m at the young generation, and I don’t want to waste my time anymore than I have too. It took me 18 years to realize that I’m okay for who I am, and I don’t want to waste another single day of that time. It really sucks. I feel like I’ve lost 18 years of my whole life. I want to cry. I want to cry. I mean it’s horrible. No kid should lose their childhood because they are suffering from something they shouldn’t be suffering from because some stupid misconceptions that [have] been guided through centuries and centuries of hate. It’s just dumb. It shouldn’t be here.
It appears that part of Jake’s hurt, anger, and frustration toward “straight” society stems from the fact that he has only recently come out to himself and to others. Because Jake has been out such a short time, he hasn’t yet lived much of his life as a gay man and so he continues to focus on his past instead of his future.

Jake’s desire to change society toward more accepting attitudes even has him struggling with his academic major. While Jake felt certain when he started college that he would enter the medical field, his future profession is no longer clear:

I do feel like a role model, and that’s one of my biggest goals. I want to become a leader of this whole movement. . . . That’s why I’m conflicting with my major right now. It’s hard because gay rights [is] my passion. I feel like it could be my life, but I don’t see the money.

Chances are that regardless of Jake’s chosen profession, he will make a very positive difference in the lives of gay individuals. His internal struggle to be more visible with his identity has lead him to becoming more active and involved in LGBT issues and in trying to help other LGBT individuals like himself. His activism has in turn increased his exposure to positive aspects of gay culture, which has helped him become more comfortable with himself. This comfortableness in who is will help Jake in whatever his future profession is and in his continued efforts to change societal perceptions of gay individuals.

Jarrod

I recognized Jarrod immediately when he walked into the library at Wetland’s College, even though we had not officially met. His flamboyant appearance gave him away. After our introductions, I soon found out his personality matched his appearance, for he was very animated and energetic throughout most of our interview. Jarrod is
majoring in interior design and only recently transferred to Wetlands, an institution of
23,000 students located in a small city. He had spent two years at Tradewinds
Community College because admission there did not require him to take the Scholastic
Aptitude Test or American College Test. Later, he transferred to Wetlands because it is
one of only two institutions in the state that offers an interior design major and because
he could continue to live at home. Jarrod lives with his parents. He has an older sister
who is married and has two children. Jarrod’s parents are executives for one of the
largest employers in the state and he considers them to be “very status quo.”

First Awareness of a Gay Identity

Jarrod remembers that he always felt different while he was growing up, but it
wasn’t until junior high that he realized that feeling different meant he was gay. At age
13, he experienced the physical aspect of being gay when he engaged in sex with a male
friend; however, Jarrod did not understand the social and emotional aspects. Because he
didn’t know anyone who was openly gay, and because he feared his parents would find
out, his gay identity lay dormant until he started college.

Initial Acceptance of a Gay Identity

The freedom of college life offered Jarrod the chance to explore his gay identity.
Although he was not yet out to himself or to anyone else, he began attending meetings of
Tradewinds’ Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) once classes began. “I wasn’t even technically
out yet to myself when I started going. It took me a good month or so to finally get
comfortable enough to come out.” The group had approximately 30 members and
consisted of students from on and off-campus, as well as several students who attended
college elsewhere.
Coming-out in College

Attending the GSA meetings prior to coming-out was “nerve racking” for Jarrod because he feared he would encounter someone who knew him and would tell his parents. The various coming-out stories of GSA members allowed Jarrod to become increasingly comfortable with his gay identity. He felt it would only be a matter of time before he himself came out. After many weeks of attending the meetings, he finally felt comfortable enough to come out to the group:

I came out to my group [first]. I guess it was just the fact that I had to get comfortable first of all saying I was gay and that I had to get comfortable telling other people that I was gay.

A few weeks later, Jarrod started coming-out to his friends and select family members.

Continued Integration of Sexual Identity

After coming-out, learning about gay culture was very important to Jarrod. This was a challenge for him because the sexual tension he felt in the local gay bars told him they were not the best avenues for immersing himself in gay culture. To offset his experiences at gay bars, Jarrod turned to members of the GSA in order to learn more about gay culture and about strategies for feeling more comfortable in coming-out. The GSA helped him create a positive gay image for himself. “What [membership in GSA] meant to me was finally being comfortable with myself.” Additional learning came through purchasing and reading books on gay-related issues. The Internet also proved to be a valuable tool because he was able to communicate with a variety of gay individuals, to ask questions, and to make new friends.

As Jarrod become more comfortable with his developing gay identity, he became very active in a variety of LGBT issues and organizations. By the end of his freshmen year, he was president of the GSA at Tradewinds. Because he had only recently come
out, Jarrod understood the importance of an organization such as GSA for students who were either questioning their sexuality, or had just come out. This understanding inspired him to implement a monthly discussion group on various topics that affected the gay community. These discussion groups were helpful in learning about gay culture. Topics included coming-out, what it is like to be gay at school/work, safe sex, aid for victims of hate crimes, other available support groups, and ways to start a support group.

Attendance at these discussion groups was high for both LGBT and heterosexual students because professors often assigned students to attend the discussions or gave extra credit to students who did.

Another example of Jarrod’s activism included contacting every institution of higher education in the state, over 50 in all, to see how many of them had policies of non-discrimination based on sexual preference and/or orientation. Jarrod did this to build support for having Tradewinds add a non-discrimination clause to its charter, an experience that resulted in a new network of friends and support. Unfortunately, the effort was unsuccessful. Tradewinds’ Board of Trustees (BOT) could not understand the importance of this issue to LGBT individuals and, because they were not legally required to add this to their charter, the BOT voted down his request.

At Wetlands, Jarrod is serving as a “senior advisor” for the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Educational Network (GLSEN). He is willing to offer advice to the various GLSEN student groups, but he is not willing to be an officer or lead group projects because “I did my presidency. It’s someone else’s turn.” Wetlands has seven LGBT organizations and it appears they could use someone with Jarrod’s leadership ability because he doesn’t see much progress, organization, or cooperation between the GLSEN organizations. “They really don’t do too much together as a group.”
Several experiences, aside from LGBT activism, have moved Jarrod toward the integration of his gay identity into his overall identity. He started dating after he came out, and this enabled him to understand himself better:

Every person I’ve dated . . . each had an impact in my life. . . . When I first came out, I had no experiences [in] gay society and I had no idea of what the “tricks” of the trade [were] . . . I was very naïve. . . . Mark Sr., . . . basically taught me more of who to watch out for. When someone says this they really mean this; all the little hidden factors of [gay culture]. Matt . . . more or less taught me how to be more outgoing and not give a care what people think. Mark Jr., . . . taught me more of the political aspects that I never realized . . . Tony . . . more or less taught me the sophistication of the gay society, the crème de la crème.

While Jarrod has learned a great deal from his dating experiences, he also took the initiative to learn as much about gay culture as he could on his own. As a sophomore at Tradewinds, Jarrod wrote a paper on gay culture for a psychology class. To do this, he immersed himself into every aspect of gay culture he could find. He spent hours talking to individuals of all ages, races, and sexual preferences to find out as much as he could. Thus, he progressed in and understood more fully his own gay identity because, “not only was I learning about gay society, I was learning about myself and saw what I was doing.”

Unlike the times after he first came out, Jarrod can now go to a gay bar and feel at ease. He understands the environment around him and what others are trying to get from him:

It’s really fun and it gives me a great deal of confidence knowing that I can walk into a bar [and] I can pinpoint everybody and tell you who and exactly what they are trying to do and what they are trying to get.

His deep immersion into gay culture has allowed Jarrod to surpass his friends in understanding the many aspects of being gay. Though most of Jarrod’s friends have been out longer than he, he feels “I’m more knowledgeable because . . . I went out there. I talked to people. I found out what they were looking for.” This sense of maturity has lead Jarrod to socialize with a new group of friends. The friends he made after coming-
out eventually became too immature for him and he outgrew their “gay drama” so, he advanced to a new group of older and more mature individuals. Jarrod enjoys socializing with an older crowd, even though he still feels like a “father figure” and tires of all the advice his new friends ask of him at times:

I’m probably the only 23 year old on the entire planet who has 28 children who are older than him. There’s a lot of times we’ll go the club and I just feel like I’m the father figure and it gets annoying because I’m there to have fun. I know they are fully capable of taking care of themselves, but [because of] the fact . . . I know all this they’ll come up to me and [ask advice]. . . . I’m like, “Why don’t you find out for yourselves.” . . . I know they’re more than capable of handling their own problems. They don’t run to me for every minor little thing [like my former friends did].

Over the past few years, Jarrod’s comfort with his gay identity has increased. While he would previously be willing to hide his identity because of the uncertainty of some of his environments, mainly the classroom, it is very rare now that Jarrod hides his identity from anyone. He has been very aggressive in confronting any homophobia he faces. “If I have had a problem I’ve dealt with it. My manner is to make the other person look like a complete idiot, just a horrible person, not me.”

Jarrod does not think that homophobia was part of his coming-out experience, but he contradicts himself when he describes how he was outed to his parents. Jarrod was outed to his parents (he still is unclear how) instead of coming-out to them. Their reaction was extremely homophobic - so severe, in fact, that he feared for his physical safety. His sister shared this fear because she called the police prior to the confrontation and asked them to stop by the house. His mother was “in hysteria” and his father was “ready to explode or have a heart attack, one of the two.” When the police finally arrived, they too feared for Jarrod’s safety and they escorted him from the premises, telling his parents he would be staying with a friend for two weeks.
The confrontation with his parents was so difficult that Jarrod still remembers the date: June 22, 1999. “It’s a little anniversary for me,” and to judge from the tone of his voice as he described that day, it is an anniversary of pain. Talking about this experience still causes Jarrod considerable stress. His very lively personality became subdued and quiet, and his lower lip often quivered throughout the discussion of his parents. Jarrod’s parents remain homophobic and have a very difficult time accepting the fact they have a gay son. “It’s just one of those things we don’t talk about and I don’t bring it up.”

Current Sexual Identity Perception

Today, Jarrod considers himself very open with his gay identity. Telling anyone who asks that he is gay, as well as holding hands with his boyfriend in the local shopping mall, are just everyday experiences now. After surviving the emotional torment of the experience with his parents, an open and carefree attitude toward his identity seems logical because few situations could be more painful. Due to his research into gay culture, Jarrod understands where he has been with his identity, where he is with it currently, and where he would like to go. He no longer plays the “gay role.” He is tired of it.

The gay role is just knowing what you got, flaunting it to get what you want regardless of the other person’s feelings. I have to confess I have done that. . . . I’ve done the gay role and I’ve made a game out of it. [Today] I tell everybody I’ve been there. I’ve done that. I have been the played. I have been the player. I’ve done the tricks. I’ve done the relationships. It’s like a bore to me now. The whole thing is a bore . . . It’s time to get serious now. I had my fun. . . . My goal now is to actually find someone to settle down. I know that is kinda odd for a 23 year old to say, but that’s what I’m looking for.

Due to his very quick and deep immersion into gay culture, Jarrod has progressed with his gay identity at a rate that seems to be much faster than that of others who have been out as long as he has been. His rapid education about what it means to be gay and about
gay culture has helped shape how he sees himself today and where he would like his future to take him.

Conclusion

Each participant had very different stories to tell and all participants except Sam were very eager to share their story and have their voice be heard. Sam felt more and more comfortable in sharing his story as our second interview progressed, and by the end of the interview Sam also seemed relaxed in sharing his story. Some stories made me laugh, while some stories made me want to cry. All stories were remarkably insightful as each participant was able to look at his own life and talk about how coming out has changed him, for better or worse, as well as where he thought his life journey might continue to take him as an “out” individual on campus and in society. Stories seemed to be influenced by the institution the participant attended, as well as by how much or how little support participants expected to, and did, receive for being gay after they started coming out.

The six institutions the participants attended seemed to be as varied as the participants themselves. Each institution seemed to play a vital role in the initial coming out for participants because all participants turned to various parties at their respective institutions for support in coming out. Institutional environments of acceptance varied from the closed mindedness of Hollow, where the institutional culture strongly encouraged gay students to remain in the closet, to the openness of CSU, where being gay didn’t seem to attract anymore attention to students than it did for other student differences found on campus. All participants found various forms of acceptance within the student body, faculty, and administrators at their respective institutions, while various forms of rejection were also found at all institutions.
Who the participants turned to in coming out varied as each participant sought out individuals or groups from which he anticipated the most support. Most participants found more support than rejection for their coming out, with Sam being the only participant who seemed to struggle in finding support from others for being gay. Coming out was not a one time occurrence for participants and continued coming out brought a full range of emotions in participants from fear for their physical safety, to acting as if coming out and stating that one was gay was as normal as breathing. Some participants were able to move beyond the homophobia they faced and to continue to focus on the positive acceptance they have received. Other participants’ experience of rejection of their identity left them questioning whether it was worthwhile to continue to come out. How participants viewed each of their coming out experiences influenced future coming out experiences. The discussion of the three themes found in participant stories is presented below. These three themes are: (a) continuous and distinct coming-out decisions, (b) expectations versus the reality of coming-out, and (c) integration of sexual identity into overall identity. Each theme also has several subthemes that are presented.

Continuous and Distinct Coming-Out Decisions

After their initial coming-out experiences, all participants continually found themselves in new environments and situations in which they had to choose whether to come out again or not. Each time participants chose to come out again, they viewed the disclosure as a separate and distinct coming-out experience. Each coming out had a different meaning and level of importance for the participants and impacted their sexual identity development to varying degrees. These distinct coming-out experiences brought positive or negative reactions from others, which, in turn, engendered additional challenges for the participants. The reactions participants experienced after each coming-
out decision are labeled (a) affirmation of participants’ gay identity, or (b) rejection of participants’ gay identity, which will be referred to as homophobia. Challenges incurred as a result of coming-out again are labeled as (c) coping strategies for dealing with homophobia and for dealing with one’s developing gay identity. An in-depth discussion of each topic is presented.

**Affirmation of Participants’ Gay Identity**

Affirmation of the participants’ gay identity meant that they received positive reinforcement from those around them either for disclosing or displaying their gay identity. Participants stated affirmations brought varying levels of emotion. In deciding which others to tell, participants choose a variety of individuals, or in Jarrod’s case, a group.

While the decisions of whether or not to come out varied from individual to individual, there was a common theme among the participants in initially outing themselves to others: they sought individuals or groups from whom they anticipated the most support. Everyone but Todd turned to age-related peers for anticipated affirmation. Sam, Jake, and Kurt turned to their best female friends from home; Josh turned to one of his newly found friends at CSU; Jarrod came out to the GSA at Tradewinds; and Todd sought out gay faculty members at Hollow.

All participants found their initial coming-out experiences in college to be positive and affirming of their gay identity. Affirmation came from a variety of sources, and initially the participants turned to a variety of people from whom they hoped to receive affirmation. Affirmation came from individuals and groups the participants knew, such as faculty and administrators, peers, and cornerstones. Cornerstones represented individuals or groups that were the most important sources of affirmation.
each participant could receive. At times, complete strangers offered affirmation. Frequently affirmation was inferred from non-verbal cues and subtle behavior found in different situations and settings. Regardless the source or form, each affirmation was important to all participants.

The disclosures were emotional for every participant, but the level of emotion varied just as each situation varied. Emotions ranged from “surprise” for Sam to “relief” for Jake, to “cool” for Todd, to none at all for Josh. To deal with the emotional cost of coming-out again in the future, all participants developed their own strategies for deciding to come out or not, since each situation would be different. The initial positive affirmation participants had received, in addition to their desire to learn more about gay culture and meet other gay individuals, led all the participants to continue coming-out. Coming-out, however, presented all participants challenges.

Each separate coming-out experience offered the participants various challenges in terms of their personal presentations as a gay individual and in their searches for affirmation. These challenges included whom to tell, when or when not to come out again, and how to deal with the emotional rollercoaster that every new coming-out presented. The participants hoped for acceptance, but quite often anticipated and prepared for rejection.

**Challenges in Coming-Out**

For participants, affirmations for initial coming-out experiences still caused them different degrees of uneasiness and hesitation toward future coming out decisions. Although participants felt initial individuals or groups they were going to tell would be supportive of their gay identity because of the relationship each participant shared with them, participants still prepared themselves for rejection. Todd still struggled with his
decision to come out to his fraternity even after several gay faculty members advised him that coming out to his fraternity would be successful. Both Sam and Josh resisted advice from friends to tell their roommates they were gay. Jake still hesitated to talk to the university chaplain about an event Allies wanted to co-sponsor with the chapel committee although his friends told him that the chaplain was supportive of gay students. Kurt feared that people would not like him once he started to come-out. Eventually, all participants continued to come-out despite their reservations or fears.

Much like their initial strategy in seeking out supportive individuals and groups for their first coming-out experience, all participants continued to seek out supportive individuals and groups for their additional coming-out experiences. Participants avoided telling others whom they feared would not be identity affirming. This was true even of Josh, who appeared to be the most secure and accepting of his gay identity. Several participants also avoided situations and environments where they felt their sexuality would be questioned. Early in the school year, Jake wouldn’t eat with his heterosexual friends or go out with them for fear they would discover that he was gay during conversation with him and that this discovery would leave everyone involved feeling awkward. Sam stopped going home as often as he had before he came out because of the looks and stares he received from former classmates or townspeople who were beginning to question his sexuality.

The ability to decide which individuals and groups to come-out to was important for the participants because they only wanted affirmation for their gay identity. Loss of control in the choice of whom to tell, or under what circumstances to come out, was a looming fear, especially if rejection might occur. The fear of rejection was realized in both Jarrod and Sam’s stories because they were outed in an environment they did not
choose. Being out before they were ready, especially because they experienced rejection for being gay in both instances, caused them considerable emotional strain. Both situations involved being outed to family.

Anticipated rejection may have been caused by general expressions of homophobia that participants had heard or seen, or it could have been a defense mechanism to prepare each participant for the pain of potential rejection. Sam spoke often of anticipated rejection in a variety of environments. Jake often worried that others would view his homosexuality as immoral and he feared repercussions because of what others believed: “I know of friends in other colleges where teachers have been mean and they don’t approve of it [being gay] so they’ll give them bad grades.” When Jarrod walks into a classroom, even one he’s never been in before, he can sense whether the climate is hostile or open towards gay individuals:

I can walk into a class personally and within the first five seconds I know if I’m going to be comfortable or not. . . . There are a couple of classes that I walk into [and] I’m like, “Oh my God, I could be in serious trouble here.”

The anticipation of rejection elicited conflicting emotions regarding the desire to continue coming out versus the desire to avoid rejection and the homophobia that could occur.

For all participants, the fear of rejection was eventually outweighed by the desire for affirmation, the need to meet other gay individuals, or the need to make their true orientation known to others. Participants continued to come out regardless of the uncertainty in the type of responses they would receive. Revealing his gay identity to the first person outside his closest gay friends was nerve-wracking for Jake:

I was really scared because this was the first person outside of [my] friends that I was going to tell. She was like, “I don’t care. I’m totally supportive of you.” . . . It was wonderful. . . . She was the first really
straight person on campus that accepted me for who I was. That was great.

Partway through his first semester, Jake also started attending Allies meetings even though he was afraid to do so earlier in the school year. He stated he finally reached a point at which his desire to meet more gay students on campus overcame his fear of others discovering his orientation. Todd decided to tell his whole fraternity he was gay despite knowing that several of his brothers were openly homophobic. Kurt eventually told his fellow cheerleaders he was gay even though he knew most of the male cheerleaders were homophobic.

_Inferred Affirmation_

Affirmation for participants was often inferred either through the actions of strangers or through the signs and symbols participants found in their different environments. Vocal or indirect acceptance of differences from strangers was important enough for participants to mention. Jarrod, who is very open and out with his gay identity, enjoys holding hands with his boyfriend while at the mall. He enjoyed recalling a moment when a heterosexual couple around his own age was walking in the mall, and upon seeing Jarrod and his boyfriend holding hands, the heterosexual male commented, “That’s so disgusting.” The young man’s girlfriend immediately slapped her boyfriend and reprimanded him for his comments. Jarrod could not help but savor the moment.

Quite often, affirmations were subtle or non-vocal and had a positive influence on participants. Sam has seen a rainbow flag flying in one of the faculty office windows on campus and he someday hopes to find out whose office it is. “There’s one window that has a gay flag in it. . . . I want to find out whose it is . . . it was just nice to actually see that on the university.” Kurt enjoys seeing others in society acknowledging their gay
identity, as he finds this very affirming of his own gay identity: “nothing makes me feel better walking down the street and you see somebody else with a rainbow necklace, or you see another gay couple who are just holding hands or they just [have] a little hug right there.” No matter where the affirmation came from, participants felt it was important and they continued to seek affirmation from those important to them and from the environment around them.

Affirmation from Desired Support Groups

Affirmation from one’s cornerstone. The most common experience among all participants was that at varying times in their coming out experiences they turned to an individual or group whose acceptance of their gay identity was the affirmation they wanted most in their lives. I refer to this critical affirmation as the “cornerstone” because it provided the foundation for additional self-acceptance and laid the groundwork for additional coming out experiences in environments where responses could be very uncertain. Each participant needed a cornerstone and chose this vital form of support with great care. If a participant anticipated rejection for his gay identity from his desired cornerstone, he sought out a substitute cornerstone instead. Having a cornerstone who accepted each participant was critical to continued identity development and positive feelings of self-worth because the cornerstone served as the most critical affirmation each participant could receive for his gay identity.

Exactly who served as the participants’ cornerstones varied. Parents served as cornerstones for most participants, but when participants feared rejection from their family for their gay identity they found an alternate cornerstone. Josh, Kurt, Todd, and Jarrod all found solid affirmations from their cornerstones; Jake’s cornerstone seems to be getting more supportive as time passes; and Sam has suffered severe rejection by his.
For Sam, Josh, Jake, and Kurt, their cornerstones were their families, particularly one or both parents. Affirmation from his mother was all that Kurt cared about: “My mom was accepting, that’s all that matters.” Josh’s parents were immediately supportive of him when he came out. Jake deeply values his relationship with his parents and for their support of his college education: “I respected [my parents] enough . . . and I didn’t want to hide it behind their backs anymore.” Jake’s parents accept his gay identity, but they still have some issues to work through and Jake admitted that this has been difficult for him at times as he Jake verified how important acceptance from his parents is for him when he talked about going to a PFLAG conference: “There were PARENTS GLALORE! I mean they were coming from everywhere . . . and they were just so supportive. I’ve never seen so many straight people love a person for who they are in my whole entire life.”

Sam’s cornerstone was also his family, but he was the only participant who was rejected by his cornerstone. As detailed in his narrative, this rejection has caused Sam great stress and emotional pain and has left him spending less time with his parents, while at the same time causing him to spend considerable emotional energy trying to find affirmation from them:

some days I’m like “Man I just want to go home.” I want to call Mom. I want to tell her what’s going on in my life . . . I can’t . . . I have to be a totally different person when I talk to her and it’s very hard.

Todd and Jarrod found their cornerstones outside of their families because they both feared rejection from their parents. Because he chose to come out to all his fraternity brothers, Todd’s cornerstone was a large group rather than an individual or family. Telling his cornerstone resulted in 33 separate coming-out experiences for Todd because he told each brother individually. The experience exhausted him because of the
significant uncertainty he faced from 33 separate responses. Todd told each brother individually due to the respect and kinship he felt for everyone instead of outing himself during brotherhood: “I wanted to handle it on a personal basis because . . . I knew them all so well it was a personal enough relationship that they deserved one-on-one interaction.” Even though he knew that not everyone in his house would accept his gay identity, Todd anticipated and received enough affirmation from the majority of his brothers that coming out to his fraternity was worth the time and energy. They still accepted him as their brother.

Jarrod chose his gay peers in the GSA at Tradewinds as his cornerstone. Throughout his interview Jarrod continually expressed how important the GSA was for him because of the support he needed to help him deal with the intense homophobic environment he faced living at home. The GSA was also the only place he initially knew other gay individuals existed, and he sought out their support to help him develop positive feelings about his developing identity.

*Affirmation from faculty and administrators.* For many participants, one of the largest areas of concern in coming out rested in the academic environment of their respective institutions, mainly with faculty and administrators, although most participants expressed that faculty should indeed be open to all students in their classes. While Todd was the only participant who had initially turned to faculty members in coming out on campus, all participants shared the relative importance on finding affirmation from faculty and/or administrators. They agreed that it meant a great deal to their overall college experience. Individual responses to coming out again in the classroom were as subtle as Sam writing about being gay in a paper; as vocal as Kent, Todd, and Jake
speaking openly in class about being gay; and as controversial as Josh and Jarrod being
guest speakers in classes.

Todd, Jake, and Sam shared that revealing themselves to faculty and/or
administrators was one of their most challenging coming-out experiences because they
feared grade repercussions from professors who might be homophobic. They were all
very relieved to find support in their academic coming-out situations. The professor for
the course in which Sam eventually outed himself required individual conferences with
each student. Sam’s individual conference regarding the paper that revealed his gay
identity terrified him:

I was really scared to go into the conference with him because I didn’t
know how he was going to take it, what he was going to say to me, how he
was going to treat me . . . he treated me like he treated everyone else. . . . I
walked out . . . lighter; I felt better.

Both Jake and Todd, who attended relatively small private institutions, also had
positive interactions with administrators on their respective campuses. Jake received
strong support from the Dean of Students regarding a homophobic situation in the
residence halls, and Todd spoke openly of his gay identity with several administrators at
his institution. The President of Hollow went out of his way to locate Todd and reiterate
his support of Todd and all gay students at his institution:

He wanted to make sure that I knew that any time I faced discrimination
he had a zero tolerance policy. If I felt threatened, walk right through his
door anytime and he would see me right away. He would take care of it.
That was just a neat experience when I think about it.

All but two coming-out experiences with either professors or administrators were
positive and affirming of the participants’ gay identity. For several of the participants,
coming-out seemed either to enhance their relationships with professors or to improve
their academic performance. Todd found his relationships with professors oddly different in a positive way after he came out to them:

Professors who found out I was gay . . . for them it completed something. It explained a part of my personality or something. . . . My coming out enhanced, but it didn’t change the way I acted, or change the way I related to people, [but] it seemed to change some of the people that related to me.

Jarrod received encouraging comments in a creative writing class regarding a poem he had written about two men who had fallen in love:

Compared to your other assignments you did a lot more writing with this assignment than you did with the other ones. I actually felt you opened up more in this paper than you have in your other papers. I seriously think you need to stick with stuff like this; stuff that involves your life instead of trying to make up stuff that doesn’t.

While no participants stated that the affirmation they received from professors and administrators was the most important that they sought when coming out, the academic environment of their respective institutions was the only environment where all participants found support for their gay identity.

Affirmation from peers. Whether it was anticipated or not, affirmation from peers, both gay and heterosexual, was very important for all participants and affirmation quite often surprised the participants. All participants stated that support from gay peers was extremely important in either learning more about their gay identity, dealing with the day-to-day issues of being gay, or dealing with any homophobia they faced. Affirmation from gay peers allowed several participants to feel comfortable in helping other gay students deal with the many challenges their newly developing identity was presenting them.

Both Jarrod and Josh helped counsel closeted students in classroom-type settings, because they were often guest speakers in various classes at their respective campuses.
They enjoyed doing this because they wanted to send an affirming message to their closeted peers. These presentations allowed closeted students to hear about various aspects of gay identity, coming-out, or gay culture without the fear of outing themselves in class because they could simply sit and listen to the various conversations taking place. Both Jarrod and Josh observed that very few closeted students asked questions during these presentations, but frequently a closeted student would stay after class and ask additional questions in a more private setting.

Unlike Josh and Jarrod, Todd and Jake were able to work individually with several closeted students and they found that these experiences affirmed their gay identity. After helping a closeted student who was contemplating membership in the LGBT organization at Brickyard, Jake characterized the experience as: “I feel like I progressed [him]. I feel like I helped him a little. That makes me feel good.” Because Todd was so visible with his gay identity on his close-minded campus, many closeted students turned to him for help. Todd found those experiences to be very fulfilling: “It was neat personally. It was the coolest experience because I got to be his support and I was the first person he came out to. . . . he really honestly thought he was the only gay person at Hollow.”

While participants may have expected acceptance and affirmation from their gay peers, they did not always expect affirmation from their heterosexual peers. Nevertheless, heterosexual affirmation was important. Jake tended to hang out with women during his classes because he found them to be “more accepting of [his gay identity].” Kurt had many conversations with students about being gay and found that the majority of students accepted him. During one of Josh’s many engagements as a guest speaker on LGBT issues, a female student rose to defend him against some
homophobic statements: “I think that the way you dress, the way you cross your legs, and the way you carry yourself is just a show of your class and how well you respect yourself.”

More unexpected heterosexual affirmation presented itself in participants’ living environments. Affirmation happened for Sam when his second-year roommate learned Sam was gay. Sam was very concerned about his roommate’s reaction and immediately questioned him: “Do you have a problem . . . what’s the deal? You need to fill me in.” Sam was very relieved: “It’s your life.” I was like [deep sigh]. It was just a big sigh of relief.” While Todd anticipated mainly acceptance in his fraternity, verbal support, empathy, and thankfulness in sharing surprised him: “Dude that’s tough, that’s really awesome [you told us]. We’re glad you are being who you are.”

All participants found varying degrees of acceptance from their distinct coming-out experiences and this affirmation helped them choose to continue to come out to more individuals and groups. For most participants, each affirming response strengthened their confidence in revealing their gay identity to others, even to those whose reaction would be unpredictable. Each additional coming-out experience, however, led to increased instances of homophobia. Homophobia presented the participants with the challenge of how to cope with the rejection of their gay identity.

*Rejection of Participants’ Gay Identity*

Rejection of the participants’ gay identity meant participants experienced negative reinforcement or feedback from those around them. This rejection, or homophobia, came from a variety of sources and each participant experienced homophobia at varying levels. Homophobia also presented emotional challenges to all participants. For many participants, homophobia came from individuals and/or groups whom the participants
knew, and quite often expected support from, such as family, peers, or faculty. Often the homophobia was inferred through indirect verbal messages or through subtle behaviors directed toward participants. At times, participants experienced heterosexism that could also have been perceived as homophobia because it made participants feel uncomfortable.

**Homophobia from Family**

For all participants, the most painful forms of homophobia they experienced came from individuals who were important to them or from individuals whom they felt should have supported their gay identity, not rejected it. The most obvious support group who rejected participants was family members. Todd did not tell his parents he was gay for fear of their rejection and anticipated homophobia. Jarrod’s and Sam’s parents reacted homophobically to the news that their sons were gay. Jarrod’s parents’ severe negative reaction required police intervention to ensure his safety:

> I was not only afraid of violence from my dad, I was afraid that they were going to throw me out, and not let me have access to anything, freeze my accounts so that I have no money . . . basically a lot of yelling. My mom wasn’t doing nothing but crying so my dad was yelling and arguing with me about how do I know I’m gay, why I’m gay, why am I attracted to men, what about AIDS . . . “We can never be seen with you. Don’t ever expect us to accept it.”

The situation didn’t improve much when the police arrived:

> Finally the police show up [and] come to the door, so dad opens the door. Dad’s acting all comical, “Oh, we’re having a little issue, everything’s fine” [The police are] still like, “We still need to come in.” Mom is in hysteria. I’m freaking out. I have 9-1-1 programmed on my cell phone to hit send.

> After taking Jarrod outside to talk to him, the police decided it was best for Jarrod to leave the premises:

> They take me outside. They’re like, “Okay, what’s going on?” “Well, my parents just found out I’m gay first of all,” so here I am telling the police this. . . . “Yea, your dad’s a little pissed.” I’m like, “You think!?!?”
They’re like, “Is there somewhere you can go?” I’m like, “Yea.” They’re like “Okay.” I’m like, “They’re not letting me go. They’re not letting me go anywhere.” They’re like, “Well, they have no choice. We’re going to escort you off [the premises].”

Jarrod was gone for a period of two weeks, and to this day, when the issue of his gay identity comes up between Jarrod and his parents, it immediately becomes very tense. Sam’s parents were also very homophobic when they learned Sam was gay. This homophobia has hurt Sam deeply and has left him torn between his love for his family and his gay identity:

Of course, I like to go home. Who doesn’t like to go home? They’re [my] parents. . . . They gave birth to [me]. They raised [me]. They taught [me] about life. They cared for [me]. They still care about me, and they give me everything in the world. They’re my parents. I could never stop loving them, but it’s so hard to go home and actually love them . . . you could just feel the looks that they give me, “Oh why [is Sam gay]?”

When Sam goes home, he finds an uncomfortable environment that continues to cause him a great deal of stress and emotional discomfort. Ironically, neither Jarrod nor Sam wanted their parents to know they were gay because they anticipated their parents’ rejection. Both of them were outed to their parents from other sources.

Homophobia from Religious Individuals and/or Groups

Frequently, individuals and groups felt their own homophobic words and actions were justified toward participants because they believed being gay is immoral. This was especially true in several religious experiences of some of the participants. Because Todd was a religion major at Hollow, he belonged to the majority of religious organizations on campus. Shortly after he came out, Campus Crusade for Christ members wanted to lay their hands on Todd and pray that God would heal his “sexually perverted soul.” Needless to say, Todd ended his membership in this group. Green Cross, another religious organization that was strongly aligned with environmental protection, became
very divided over Todd’s gay identity. Many in the group strongly opposed Todd’s membership because of it, while another large segment of the membership supported him. Todd’s gay identity was so controversial that the group eventually disbanded and has not met since.

Shortly after they started dating, one of Jake’s boyfriends, Greg, convinced himself, based on his Baptist upbringing, that homosexuality was wrong. He tried to convince Jake of this belief, and because Jake was very attracted to Greg, the two started to attend church together:

That’s when I started attending church with him and [I] thought I should change and all that other stuff. That was sorta depressing. That was really depressing because I never want to feel confused like that again. . . . It was just a horrible, not a fun time [in my life].

_Homophobia in the Living Environment_

Homophobia from college peers also was very painful to participants, especially when it came from peers who participants felt would accept their gay identity. The most common form of homophobia that all participants experienced came from peers in their living environments. Everybody but Jarrod lived on campus at their respective institutions at some point, and everybody who lived on campus experienced homophobia more than once in their living environment. The harassment and homophobic behavior of Jake’s floormates became so severe during his freshmen year that his best friend e-mailed the Dean of Students because she feared for his safety. Jake met with the Dean of Students and found support from her, but Jake never turned to his resident assistant for help because he sensed homophobia in him as well: “From the start he didn’t want to talk to me. I could tell. He would try to talk to the other guys. . . . I just never felt
comfortable to go to him. . . . I didn’t know who to tell.” As detailed in their narratives, both Sam and Kurt experienced homophobia in the residence halls as well.

The majority of Todd’s fraternity brothers accepted his being gay, but the few who didn’t were very vocal and aggressive in their homophobic behavior toward him:

I had to fight. I was called names, creative ones too. I have never in my life heard such compound insulting phrases before. It hurt me. I cried and I was upset and I was like, “I’m not just going to go back in the closet. I’m not going to change who I am and my coming out isn’t going to make the fraternity gay,” which is what they were concerned about.

What hurt Todd even more than the most homophobic reactions, was that they came from two closeted house members. Everyone in the house knew these two brothers were gay and the homophobia Todd faced from them left him confused:

I mean that’s been a challenge. All the homophobic people in my house live on my floor and two of them are gay themselves. . . . I’d watch him [one of the closeted brothers] and I’d just be like, “How am I causing [you any harm]?” But it was he can’t face himself.

This homophobia also left Todd frustrated with his closeted brothers:

It was just a bizarre situation . . . I just kinda sat there and I was like, “I was the one who fought to get this right and who fought to shut up the people who are going to attack you too and not only did you not support me when I was going through it, now you are enjoying the right that I fought for while you are attacking me for it.” I was . . . not so happy with that one.

Todd endured homophobic remarks in front of his whole brotherhood during a house meeting regarding the upcoming pledge class. One of the pledges was suspected of being gay, and during the meeting, several brothers stated their dislike for gay members. “Kick them out; we don’t want gay people. . . . Once you get one, all of the sudden more will come.” Todd felt that he was being treated as if he were a plague on this fraternity and that the plague could be cured only by banning all gay members.
Todd also experienced homophobia from his fraternity brothers that left him very frustrated because the homophobia he experienced sent conflicting messages about what sexual behavior was acceptable or unacceptable to display within his fraternity. In Todd’s fraternity it was common, even expected, to bring female dates back to the house for sexual activity. If, and when, Todd brought a guy for the same type of sexual encounter, it immediately became a strong point of tension for many of his brothers. One of Todd’s brothers was a conservative Southern Baptist who strongly disapproved of Todd’s bringing guys home for sex: “I swear to God he thought our house was going to be struck by lightening or fire and brimstone if gay sex happened in that house.”

Moreover, misunderstandings of gay sexuality caused tension within the fraternity quite often. Some of the brothers had misperceptions of Todd:

I began to understand why it was so uncomfortable for them. All of the sudden this was [a] group of brothers and there was one that could be judging them sexually. It was unnerving [for them]. That was it. It was this idea that I’m going to be in the shower and [I] am going to rape [them] . . . so I had to fight this. . . . It was difficult to try and abate them.

This attitude was also prevalent during house functions when bringing a date was an expectation. Whenever Todd brought a guy, it was not well received by some. “I’ll bring Matt or Kyle because I’m not going to make out with a girl and they get really weird and uncomfortable. They’re just like, ‘Oh my God, he brought a boy.’”

Homophobia in the Classroom

Even though most participants believed interactions with students and professors in the classroom presented the greatest uncertainty in the acceptance or rejection of their gay identity, participants also felt the classroom was an environment that ought to be open and accepting of them. As it turned out, the interactions with professors in and out of the classroom were some of the least homophobic social situations in which
participants found themselves. Todd was the only participant who experienced homophobia from professors. It occurred on two separate occasions. In a creative writing class in which Todd had written a story about two men who fall in love with each other, Todd discovered his professor’s reaction was very homophobic:

I don’t, I can’t even grade this. My response is to give it a “D” and tell you to rewrite it and make one of them a woman, but that’s obviously very homophobic of me. I don’t know how to handle that so I’m just handing it back to you and saying find a different professor to read it.

The professor’s response was very difficult for Todd to handle, not only because it was homophobic, but also because he respected this professor very much. “He is an excellent writer . . . His craft is excellent, so it made it really hard for me because I respected him.”

In an epidemiology course, Todd became very uncomfortable by the way the professor was presenting certain material to the class. The material was information on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the professor always provided examples of gay men with STDs, implying that gay men were sexually promiscuous:

I had this class on epidemiology and mostly we talked about STDs. . . . I didn’t want to have sex after that class ever again: anal herpes, nasty things. Everything that he showed, we would see a slide on gonorrhea or something, and then he would show us three or four slides of it expressing itself on the human body. He always made sure that there was a gay man every time. He would point it out. We’d see three slides and the third slide would be “This is the gay man.” Here’s three more slides and “This is the gay man.” After a couple days of this I kinda asked him: “Gee, does every gay man have gonorrhea and herpes?” He [responded], “I think it is important that they know about it.” . . . I’ve never really been uncomfortable in a class before, and I was REALLY uncomfortable there because there were three students and the other one was my boyfriend.

Ironically, Todd and his boyfriend broke up not too long after this course ended.

Unrecognizable Forms of Homophobia by Participants

At times the homophobia was not blatantly obvious to participants. While Jarrod did not identify an incident he had with the Board of Trustees (BOT) at Tradewinds as
homophobic, this experience was important enough to mention as an experience that frustrated him. During Jarrod’s tenure as president of Tradewinds’ GSA, his organization tried to have the institution add sexual orientation and sexual preference clauses to its charter. Jarrod, several members of the GSA, as well as a few gay faculty members, met with the president and the BOT in an effort to convince them to include these two terms in Tradewind’s nondiscrimination clause. The BOT struggled in understanding the difference between sexual orientation, sexual preferences, and the term “sex.” They believed that because the charter already stated Tradewinds does not discriminate on the basis of sex, it made it unnecessary to change policy. The BOT believed that the charter already provided enough protection for gay students. They also refused to change the clause for legal reasons. Jarrod noted, “It wasn’t required by law that they had to do [it so] they didn’t feel the need to.”

If the BOT situation is put in the context of homophobia as defined in this study, “misunderstanding . . . of non-heterosexual individuals or issues,” by this definition, Jarrod’s frustration was caused by homophobic behavior of the BOT. Jarrod’s frustration could then be interpreted as a response to a homophobic situation, even though his understanding of this issue was one of misunderstanding between himself and the BOT.

Heterosexism

Even though heterosexism is not the same as homophobia, it often had the same effect as homophobia because heterosexism made several participants feel very uncomfortable and caused them considerable emotional stress. Neither of Todd’s parents knows he is gay, and one side of Jake’s family is unaware of his being gay. Relatives not knowing about either Todd or Jake’s gay identities had negative consequences for both of
them. Todd is an only child and his father’s fears of no grandchildren had Todd and his father arguing often.

Jake’s relatives often chide him about not dating:

This summer I have to tell my other side of the family. I’m really scared about that. . . . I saw my Grandma on Mother’s Day this weekend and of course she brought up “Any new girlfriends?” It’s hard now. It’s even harder than it was like [when I was] younger.

Jake feels it is harder now to hide his gay identity because of the expectation to date women in college and marry soon after graduation:

They want me to find that special one. They have bets running on Kelly [best friend from high school] being my wife and it’s difficult [sighing]. So that’s why I want to tell them as soon as possible because I cannot take them asking me that question anymore because it’s hard. . . . It’s hard.

Due to the heterosexism Jake is facing from some relatives, he is preparing himself emotionally to tell them this summer that he is gay. While he is nervous to come out to his relatives, he feels the benefits of eliminating the familial pressure caused by their assumption that he is straight is worth the risk of coming out again.

For all participants, no matter where the homophobia came from, or the form in which it was delivered, each homophobic experience presented them with the challenge of how to cope with the homophobia they faced and how to deal with the rejection of their gay identity. At the same time, they faced the challenge to accept themselves as being gay as their identity continued to develop.

*Coping Strategies Used for Dealing with Homophobia and for Dealing with One’s Developing Gay Identity*

Every time participants had to decide to come out again or not, the results of their decisions presented them with challenges of coping with the resulting emotions and outcomes. Participants all needed and developed coping strategies for two separate, but
related issues: dealing with the various forms of homophobia and dealing with their
developing gay identity and their continued acceptance of this identity. An overview of
strategies used by participants follows.

*Coping Strategies for Dealing with Homophobia*

Every time participants chose to come out, they faced homophobia and/or various
forms of rejection. Participants found different coping strategies to deal with each
homophobic situation they encountered. Their methods were not always the same
because the particular situation or environment in which participants found themselves
greatly influenced strategies they used.

*The chameleon effect.* At times, all participants stated they had hidden, or would
hide, their gay identity in order to avoid homophobia or rejection. Hiding one’s gay
identity will be called the “chameleon effect” because participants tried to blend into the
environment around them so as to avoid drawing attention to their orientation. One of the
biggest reasons participants engaged in the chameleon effect was fear of violence against
themselves. All participants mentioned at least once during their interviews that at times
they feared for their physical safety because they were gay. The fear of physical harm
caused participants to leave or avoid situations in which their personal safety was at risk.
If they could not avoid or leave a situation, they hid their gay identity in order to reduce
the risk of physical violence against themselves. This strategy seems to have worked
because no participant has experienced a physical assault against himself. For Josh,
Jarrod, and Kurt, fear for their safety seemed to be the only reason they would consider
hiding their gay identity.

Participants also used the strategy of hiding their gay identity in reaction to
homophobic comments or actions. Participants did this because they did not want to
experience homophobia (in forms other than violence) that might have occurred if they had come out in that specific situation. Hiding one’s identity was particularly prevalent in the classroom. Some participants did not reveal their gay identity if they did not feel the classroom environment would be accepting of them. The decision to disclose their orientation in the classroom seemed to depend on the environment the professor established. Jarrod would evaluate each of his classes to determine if it was safe to be out:

As for teachers that I had, some of them I was really discrete with. I didn’t discuss anything. I was the quiet one in the corner. . . . some of them, I felt they had a problem with homosexuals and that’s why I kept quiet.

Jake was initially hesitant to come out in any of his classes at Brickyard because of horror stories gay peers told him about their own coming-out experiences at their respective institutions. Jake’s fear was reinforced in his chemistry class when his professor mentioned his belief in Biblical teachings rather than evolution theory on the first day of class. Because of Jake’s perception that many Biblical teachings do not condone homosexuality, he feared coming out in that class.

Todd noticed that many gay students at Hollow lived double lives; they were in a constant state of flux between being gay and trying to act like a heterosexual, “People are not willing to accept that [individuals] are gay if they are popular. You can’t be both, so they’ve chosen to be popular. They are just very, very quiet about their sex lives.” Todd found a double life especially true of gay male athletes at Hollow. This double life led many gay student athletes to sneak around and socialize with other gay individuals without being discovered, only to have to don the mask of heterosexuality in order to play sports and have the acceptance of their teammates:
I know which football players are gay [because] some of them have told me. I have friends who have slept with some of them. They’re still afraid of [being found out]. Their choice is football or men and they choose football.

Todd practiced this double life well into his junior year at Hollow. He stated that after coming out, he often struggled with himself about whether he had made the right choice in coming out because none of his closeted peers seemed willing to follow his lead. Many of his gay peers told Todd that seeing his struggles kept them in the closet; they did not want to experience the same homophobia.

While all participants occasionally chose to hide their gay identity in order to avoid a potentially homophobic situation, Sam was the only participant who hid his gay identity every time such a situation presented itself. Additionally, Sam’s numerous retreats to the closet seemed to be more a desire for acceptance than a fear of homophobia, as his desire for acceptance seemed to drive most decisions he has made: “I want people to like me. . . . I don’t want to be rejected. I don’t want to be made fun of.”

Hiding one’s gay identity did not come without an emotional price. It caused great internal strife for several participants. This internal conflict was due to the fact that participants realized that hiding their gay identity meant they were essentially giving in, and thus contributing to, societal homophobia. As noted in their narratives, this struggle has been particularly evident in Sam, Todd, and Jake.

Confronting homophobia. When participants chose not to go back into the closet and hide their gay identity, the most frequently available coping strategy for the homophobia they have faced was confrontation of the homophobic individual or group. Everyone but Sam mentioned that they have used confrontation and have found it to be an effective tool.
Confronting homophobia empowered Todd, Josh, and Jarrod and helped them feel more comfortable with their gay identity. When members of another fraternity called Todd’s friend a fag while walking by their house, Todd confronted the group and they stopped the name calling: “They all backed down. It was really nice and that was a good feeling.” Josh had a similarly empowering experience when he confronted a group of seven or eight CSU football players regarding comments they were making about him and gay individuals in general. The football players obviously didn’t expect Josh to turn on them and they stood in complete silence while Josh lectured them for several minutes. All of the players happened to be of a racial minority, and Josh made sure they understood why it was important for all minority groups to band together and be supportive of one another:

Me being 5’6” wasn’t really intimidating, although I walked right up to them. . . . I went through this whole spiel about why we’re hanging up [rainbow] flags . . . and how I support them as African American men and I find it hard to continue with that type of support when they’re not supporting me . . . I [lectured] to them for about five minutes [while they stood there]. . . . I think they were sorta scared of me because I don’t think they really expected me to turn around and attack them with words like that. . . . That was pretty fun actually.

Participants who confronted homophobia seemed to have a fairly consistent strategy they used to address homophobic remarks. Jarrod tried to find ways to embarrass those who were attacking him. Jake and Todd tended to be very emotional. Josh seemed to take a calmer approach and tried to explain why homophobia is not an appropriate action. Regardless of the method or strategy used, confronting homophobia was quite important to those participants who mentioned it.
Coping Strategies Used for Dealing with One’s Developing Gay Identity

Aside from handling the homophobia they encountered, the participants used various coping strategies to help them deal with the many emotions and consequences each coming-out experience presented them in terms of developing and accepting their gay identity. The most common coping strategy used was talking to other gay individuals, including gay individuals the participants knew, such as gay peers or older gay individuals, and gay individuals they did not know, such as gay individuals on-line. For all participants but Sam, talking to other gay individuals also meant actively participating in either LGBT organizations or LGBT activities.

Talking to gay peers was vital for each participant in helping him deal with the homophobia he often faced, but, more importantly, in helping him deal with the variety of emotions that resulted from the challenges his gay identity presented. Kurt found the support of the LGBT group at Flatlands, and his involvement in that group was critical for him in understanding the many emotions he experienced:

There’s this thing called Thursday nights where it’s a support group. You just go and talk about your problems. . . . That really helped me out because I got to see other people’s problems . . . that was really good for me just coming out and seeing, “Hey, you are going through the same thing.”

Jake, Jarrod, and Sam experienced the same type of identity support from their respective institutions’ LGBT groups as well.

Aside from involvement in their campus LGBT groups, the most common way all participants found opportunities to talk and meet with their gay peers was socializing at the gay bars. While gay bars provided an opportunity to meet many gay people at one particular time and place, the support or reinforcement the participants sought for identity challenges was seldom found there. The conflicting realities of being around other gay
individuals and the confusion many of the participants felt in going to gay bars will be discussed in depth in the section entitled “Expectations Versus the Realities of Coming-Out.”

While gay peers were very important for all participants, talking to older gay individuals who had been coming out for many years was important to several participants. The advice of individuals who had been out longer reassured the participants that what they were going through was part of a normal coming-out process. Kurt was able to turn to his advisor:

> A lot of times I would go to into his office and we would just sit there and talk. We’d just talk about school and then we’d talk about our lives in general because he’s almost fifty . . . so it is interesting to get his perspective on the whole gay experience and my perspective. We’ll sit there and talk forever.

Todd also turned to a gay faculty member at Hollow shortly after he came out because he was looking for guidance in dealing with his conflicting emotions. In addition, his grades were dropping. The professor was understanding and supportive of Todd: “He gave me a hug and we sat down and he’s like . . . ‘This is a very important part of your life right now.’ He had all this advice for me.” Jarrod also thought it was important to get the advice of individuals who had been coming out for a long time. He interviewed gay individuals from all different backgrounds in order to help him understand gay culture. By observing and talking to other gay individuals, Jarrod learned many valuable lessons: “I guess as I was doing this [interacting with other gay individuals], not only was I learning about the gay society, I was learning about myself.”

Talking to individuals via the Internet also was a valuable tool and resource in coping with the development and acceptance of one’s gay identity. Todd has an on-line
journal where he often talks about the many challenges and emotions he faces as a gay individual:

My online journal is my sanity. It’s a live journal, an on-line free site I update at least daily. I add pictures, etc. It allows others to read my journal entries . . . and comment on what I’ve written. . . . It lets me meet other gay college guys and frat boys. [It] gave me a little sense of community. It also introduced me to [my] friends at Hollow [regarding] how I felt. . . . I’ve posted everything in my journal, and it’s become a very small cult hit among a few kids. I get about 150 hits a day now, [as well as] regular posts and comments. It [has] helped me build a feeling of community and it [is] a place where I [feel] safe talking about how I [feel].

Sam also uses the Internet as support because he dislikes turning to his friends when he experiences difficulty with his identity:

I’m one of those people that is really scared to go to people for parent advice. I like to do things on my own. . . . I shut people off until I can handle it again. . . . I don’t know if it’s a trust issue or what because it’s so hard to trust people these days.

However, the very anonymity of the Internet gives Sam the courage to talk about his problems and ask for advice from others: “I do hear advice . . . when I get on line and I talk to older people.”

For Jarrod, the Internet offers him a chance to meet new friends:

The internet was basically finding more gay people . . . to become friends with. I know each of my friends have a totally different outlook on what it is to be gay, so I wanted to get all the experiences and learn all the varieties of being gay. . . . I have friends in almost every country now that are gay and it was nice . . . for me to find out what it is like to be gay in different countries.

Whatever the reason, the Internet was a valuable resource and tool for all participants in dealing with issues related to their developing identity, and for accepting this identity. Through a variety of venues, whether talking to other gay individuals or joining in gay-related activities, all participants began to feel more comfortable with, and to understand, accept, and display their own gay identity.
Expectations Versus the Realities of Coming-Out

During their interviews, participants related their feelings and experiences regarding their perceptions of coming out compared to the realities. Their stories involved experiences within the collegiate setting and also off-campus within the larger gay community. At times, participants made assumptions about coming out in a specific environment and found that the environment had expectations of them as well. This was often the case in the collegiate environment. Some participants had no expectations and so were free to react as the situation unfolded. This was particularly true for coming-out experiences that occurred off-campus within the larger gay community.

Sometimes expectations matched reality; sometimes they did not. When expectations did not match, participants faced the challenge of reacting to situations for which they were not prepared. In general, the more closely positive expectations mirrored reality, the more likely participants were to continue to come out and/or display their identity. The more that positive expectations contrasted with reality, the more confused participants became about their gay identity. Confusion put in doubt participants’ desire to continue coming-out as well as their understanding of appropriate behavior for any given situation. Personal expectations versus the realities of coming out in the collegiate environment and within the larger gay community are presented.

The Campus Experience

All participants stated that they came to college with certain perceptions of life as a college student. No participants had preconceived ideas of what college would be like for them as a gay college student, but all participants provided examples of how they developed expectations after they started coming out. Their individual reaction to campus experiences after coming out were shaped by their vision of what college was
supposed to be, by institutional expectations, and by context. Reinforcement of, or confusion over, one’s identity occurred with each new coming-out.

*LGBT Organizational Expectations and Realities*

Institutional LGBT organizations seemed to be as varied as the participants and the institutions themselves and they impacted each participant’s sexual identity differently. While no participants stated they had initial expectations of their respective LGBT organizations, several of them described the reality of their involvement with the groups. Josh did not use or need CSU’s LGBT organizations to help him come out. Instead, he became involved because the group suited his desire to be visible and because it actively promoted gay rights and issues. Josh said that it is often difficult for gay students who are just starting to come out at CSU to find support in LGBT organizations on campus:

> It’s not the easiest on this campus to . . . meet the type of people that are closeted. I’ve noticed the gay community on campus basically is orientated towards the people that are out, the people that are comfortable with homosexuality. We don’t see the people that are closeted as much coming to meetings.

This perception of CSU’s LGBT organizations differs from Kurt, Jarrod, and Jake’s perceptions of their respective LGBT organizations. All found their organizations to be very helpful in their initial coming out process. Kurt stated Flatlands’ LGBT organization helped him to meet new friends and to understand he was not alone. “It is very good for people who are just starting to discover themselves [and] trying to meet their network of friends.” Jarrod initially chose to come out to the LGBT organization at Tradewinds and he explained that this involvement was the primary reason he started feeling comfortable with his identity. One of the reasons Jake joined Brickyard’s LGBT
group was the strong sense of community and support it offered him and others during some of the difficult times they suffered when coming out at a small, religious campus.

*Impact of Expectations and Realities on Sexual Identity*

If participants had positive expectations for coming-out and found that expectations matched their reality after coming-out, this seemed to allow better experiences to occur, as well as deeper identity integration. For Josh and Jarrod, expectations of the collegiate experience did not change after they came out. They had anticipated a positive experience, and after coming out, their overall experience was still positive. Even though both of these participants experienced instances of intolerance on their campuses, they continued to describe their respective institutions as very open and accepting of gay students. Their institutions’ acceptance of differences allowed them to feel free and open in displaying their identity.

When participants anticipated a negative reaction for coming out, but instead found positive reaction, this tended to increase expectations for a positive collegiate experience. Both Jake and Kurt stated they were initially skeptical of the campus attitudes towards gay students, but the openness Jake has found has helped him display his identity more than he had anticipated. Kurt has been very visible with his identity on campus because he has not experienced much homophobia either. He has been critical, however, when describing the overall environment of Flatlands towards diversity: “Flatlands likes to say that they are diverse. That’s what they strive [for], but they are not. . . . No, we’re a conservative, white, middleclass school . . . who likes to say we’re diverse.” This is very frustrating to Kurt because he believes society is becoming more accepting of gay individuals and diversity. While he feels Flatlands is fairly accepting of gay individuals, Kurt does not feel that Flatlands embraces other aspects of diversity. To
illustrate his frustration, he described the backlash that the recent decision to overturn sodomy by the Supreme Court in Texas as being similar to Flatland’s overall attitude towards diversity: “In our nation we are moving up in diversity, but [at] Flatlands it is one of those places that I think should be in Texas holding us back. . . . We’re a hick town that should be joining the KKK.” Kurt said this because he has been on other campuses where he has experienced more diversity and an even greater acceptance of gay students.

When participants expected a positive collegiate experience, but instead found a harsh reality of rejection for being gay, this created the largest number of negative experiences and caused the most damage towards integration of their identity. Sam chose to attend CCSU because he assumed a large institution of over 20,000 students would provide an open and accepting environment. He felt CCSU would be a place where he could be himself, especially because it is the most racially-diverse institution in the state: “College . . . this is time for me to be myself, not to worry about [being gay].” Most of Sam’s experiences at CCSU have shattered that expectation so he constantly struggles over whether or not to display his gay identity. The negative experiences Sam has endured at CCSU have led him to expect homophobia anytime he displays his gay identity. Whenever Sam has a positive experience on campus, he reflects nostalgically on his previous expectations: “This is how college is supposed to be . . . open minded people.”

Todd’s expectations and realities appeared to fluctuate significantly according to the environment in which he found himself due to the many conflicting messages from the campus environment at Hollow. The administration has proved to be very open but the student body is very close-minded. Even with these mixed signals, Todd makes a
consistent effort to be visible with his identity at all times, but such a large variation in
the amount of acceptance or rejection directed toward him causes frequent internal
struggles over whether or not to continue displaying his identity. The lack of acceptance
from other students for gay students often leaves him questioning whether he is even
truly out on campus: “Nobody’s out at Hollow. I cannot stress that enough. Even I’m
not really [out]. I can tell people I’m gay and they are like that’s fine, but you are still
going to date girls . . . You can’t be gay here.”

Todd’s interactions with closeted gay students at Hollow only reinforces his
perception that no one is really out on campus. Because Todd is determined to be visible
with his identity on campus, several closeted students have turned to him as a resource in
dealing with their own developing gay identity. Due to Hollow’s homophobic
environment, most gay students keep their identity a secret; thus many of them have a
false impression of just how many gay students are on campus. Many individuals who
have turned to Todd feel as though they are the only gay students on campus, when in
fact there are many. Additional coming-out for these students (beyond talking to Todd)
does not seem likely because others like themselves are not visible on campus. Once
again, Todd blames Hollow’s environment:

They are absolutely terrified because the people who are out on this
campus are either very sexually promiscuous and have a bad reputation or
are very flamboyant and have an equally bad reputation. There are not
straight acting leaders. There aren’t successful members of the campus
community that are open about their sexuality. They just don’t [come
out]. It’s like [their sexuality] gets pushed aside.

Todd explained that, ironically, the failure of more gay students at Hollow to display their
identity often leaves him feeling as though he is the only gay student on campus, even
though he secretly talks to gay students all the time. Although Todd often feels very
alone, he described with great emotion his resolve to stay visible regardless of the environment.

*Experiences in Gay Culture*

Coming out, for participants, was an introduction to a new culture, that being gay culture. While all participants stated they had certain expectations of the collegiate experience, no participant had preconceptions of what life in the larger gay community was going to be like. Josh was the only participant who even mentioned that he had any extensive exposure to gay culture during his childhood. The process of meeting other gay individuals and learning what life is like as a gay individual, or can be like, was a challenge for most participants. Many experiences with gay individuals did not match individual expectations and this made acceptance of a gay identity difficult at times. Through continual exposure to gay culture, all participants began to understand the range of differences found in gay culture. Participants began to act and react appropriately in whatever situation they found themselves. Reinforcement of or changes in individual expectations of gay identity occurred with each new situation.

Coming out did not immediately allow participants to understand what it meant to be gay or what it meant to be visible with their identity. Socialization into gay culture was a slow process because it took time for participants to meet other gay individuals. Todd described himself as a “Newbie” because he had to learn the lingo and what he called appropriate behavior around other gay individuals. Sam described the difficulty in starting to come out: “Obviously when you first come out it’s not going to be like everyone welcomes you in and you just step in and you are part of gay culture.” Todd, Jake, and Kurt discovered with relief that they were not alone, that there were quite a few gay individuals to be found on campus and in society. Kurt described part of his coming
out experience as: “It was like ‘Oh my God, there are other people who are gay.’ It’s just so unreal.” Todd illustrated his life as a gay individual at Hollow by describing the way many of his gay peers felt when they came out to him: “He was so excited not to be alone . . . that there were [gay] people, lots of them. He wasn’t going to be alone. He wasn’t going to be one of three . . . he was going to be one of many.”

Jake’s realization that much of gay culture is a hidden, underground world, tempered his excitement in finding other gay individuals. Other participants reflected this same sentiment. A big part of the “underground” and “hidden” experiences for most participants was going to gay bars. Most of them viewed gay bars as a necessary way and the easiest way to meet other gay individuals. Also, the bars provided opportunities to learn about various aspects of gay culture. Todd described the secretiveness that surrounded the gay bar near Hollow and its purpose for the gay students:

It used to be that you found out other Hollow students were gay because there is one gay bar in [town]. The gay Hollow students went there. They didn’t just go. They would drive three blocks past it, park in a parking lot by a straight sports bar and then sneak down the back alley to go to [the gay bar]. They were so absolutely terrified that somebody . . . would see them and that they would get beat up.

While socialization with other gay individuals was very important to them, most participants did not view gay bars as the best way to learn about what it means to be gay. Many of their initial experiences at gay bars were not overly affirming of their identity, and society in general attaches a stigma to bars of any kind. Jarrod stated that visiting the bars in order to learn about gay culture was not a very good idea:

If you are just coming out and your main concern is learning what it is to be gay and what the gay society is about, the clubs and bars are probably not the best place to go to. In my personal opinion, 8 out of 10 are looking for a hook-up that night and probably the remaining two, one is either there to basically have fun and the second is probably looking for a life
mate so the odds of finding someone who will actually take the time to talk to you and answer any questions are slim to none.

Jake stopped visiting gay bars to learn more about the culture; instead, he has been going to dance or hang out with his current group of gay friends. Jake now understands the wide range of diversity among gay individuals and the bars themselves, but when he first started to come out, he felt “that’s all I had for awhile and it scared me.” The bars scared Jake because they caused him, and a few other participants, confusion and discomfort with their identity. Participants did not like the socialization and activities going on there, especially before they understood the diversity within gay culture. Jake’s first experience at a gay bar took place at a very promiscuous and sexually aggressive one. This initial experience confused him and his understanding of what it meant to be gay. Also, it scared him to think that the bar was reflective of the entire gay culture and thus his future as a gay individual:

The first time I walked in a club I had four guys come up to me and say “Do you want to go on the couches back there and make out?” . . . [You] see 50-, 60-year old men in there on ecstasy walking around and they will grab your ass and grab your penis. . . . I don’t want to turn out like that. I was like I don’t even know if I can be a part of this. I knew I was gay, but I didn’t like the scene.

Jarrod provided further evidence that gay bars are not the best places to socialize if you have just started coming out. Newly-out individuals face the strong possibility of others taking advantage of them. For Jarrod, there was a learning curve he had to endure:

In the beginning I was very naïve so when I saw people that were very attractive and they were coming up to me and talking to me I thought that maybe there was going to be something there. The next thing you know you are going home having a one night thing and then you never hear back from that person again.

Through continued visits to a variety of gay bars, participants discovered that there were many different types of bars that to cater to every variety of style within gay
culture. After participants began to understand those cultural varieties, visiting the bars became an opportunity for socialization and support for several participants; they would visit bars that were reflective of their personalities. Kurt was somewhat embarrassed to admit that going to the gay bar on Tuesday nights was very important to him: “I don’t want to say I need going to go to the bar for support. . . . When I don’t go on Tuesday, my week is shot. It’s because I didn’t get to spend time with my friends.” The bar that Kurt normally visits is a very laid-back type where most individuals go to socialize, not to watch sports, dance, or pick up individuals for sex.

Other ways participants learned about gay culture included reading the coming-out stories and experiences of other individuals, as well as talking on-line to those who were willing to offer advice. Jake found his visits to the largest gay ghetto in the state were a means of reinforcing his expectations of what a gay lifestyle could be and of what his future might hold. This part of the city offered him not only gay bars, but shops, homes where many gay people lived, and an environment conducive to public displays of gay love and affection. Seeing gay individuals participating in day-to-day activities that Jake himself enjoys encouraged him. Through interactions in a variety of situations, participants slowly became aware of the many facets of gay culture. Each new experience enriched their understanding of what it meant to be gay and provided clues for living successfully in both a heterosexual and homosexual world, at college, and in society as a whole.

Integration of Sexual Identity into Overall Identity

With their first coming out experience, participants started on a journey toward the outward public display of the incipient integration of their gay identity into their overall identity. Participants described this journey as ongoing. Their stories illustrated
that this journey is a dynamic process that has been, and continues to be, influenced by
the variety of experiences they encounter. Most experiences have helped participants
move forward in understanding, displaying, and integrating their gay identity, while a
few have caused them to regress. Participants appeared to be in different phases of
integration, and integration was influenced by several factors.

**LGBT Membership**

With the exception of Sam, all other participants stressed that belonging to their
respective institution’s LGBT organization was very important to them in accepting their
gay identity initially. Membership in these organizations allowed participants to progress
toward a deeper integration of their identity because it allowed them to meet other gay
individuals, find acceptance from others, and begin to understand what it was like to be
gay. Moreover, everyone but Sam evolved beyond membership in their LGBT
organizations to activism regarding LGBT issues or agendas. Activism was very
important for participants because it satisfied their need for acceptance from other gay
individuals and activism allowed participants to continue to integrate their gay identity
into their overall identity.

**Dating**

Jake, Jarrod, and Todd also mentioned that dating and sexual experiences had a
positive impact on the integration of their identity. Jarrod admitted that dating helped
him because when he first came out he was very naïve about what being gay really
meant. Each of his five boyfriends was able to help him learn about different segments
of gay society, which in turn has helped him integrate his identity more deeply into his
overall self. Jake’s first boyfriend was very important in helping him accept his identity
more fully. Jake felt having a serious boyfriend helped move him forward in his coming-
out journey because it was the first relationship in which he didn’t need to pretend to be someone else. Even though having a boyfriend was wonderful for Jake, it was a challenge to shake off heterosexual ideologies of human relationships: “It was really scary at first. . . . I was just scared I had to follow these rules, I guess you could say, but they were all straight rules that I had heard from all the straight people.” For Todd, the assumption of sexual promiscuity in his fraternity forced him to address, accept, and integrate his sexual orientation at a much faster pace than he felt comfortable with because he did not enjoy dating or engaging in sex with women.

While never directly saying that dating was important for his gay identity integration process, e-mail correspondence with Sam throughout this study seemed to validate the importance that dating can have on the level of integration. Sam would periodically e-mail me during the study either to answer my follow-up questions, or just to stay in touch. Over the course of this study the focus of Sam’s e-mails changed from the difficulties of being gay at CCSU, to the pleasures of life now that he was dating again. Acceptance he had found from another gay man seemed to offer validation for Sam that being gay was normal and that he could be loved as a gay individual.

*Seeking Opportunities for Self Education*

All participants shared stories or experiences about trying to educate themselves on what it meant to be gay. This self-education served as an important tool in learning more about gay culture and for integrating their gay identity into their overall identity. Self-education was important even when some participants, mainly Todd and Jake, occasionally found confusing information or messages about life as a gay individual. Shortly after coming out, Jarrod challenged himself to learn as much about gay society as
he could. As discussed in his narrative, Jarrod accomplished this by going to a variety of gay bars and talking to a wide spectrum of gay individuals.

Jarrod’s rapid integration of his identity has already caused him to move on to his second group of gay friends because he feels he has progressed beyond his first set:

I’m on my second group of friends. My first group of friends, they came to me [and] asked me for advice. They asked me my opinion. I’m a very blunt and honest person. I told them what I [thought], not what they wanted to hear. They turn around and back stab me and then if something went wrong they blamed me so [I said,] “You know what, you’re done. All of you are done. You want your own drama, fine. I’m tired of it. Don’t drag me into it anymore.” They were all people that were my age, maybe a year or two older.

Jarrod is now happy to have a new set of friends who are older and more mature. His new friends are on a similar level of integration as he is and seem to cause him less grief and fewer problems with gay-related issues.

Like Jarrod, Jake also turned to gay bars in an effort to learn more about what it meant to be gay, and although initially did not like what he found there, soon realized that gay bars were only a small part of gay culture. As Jake became aware of the diversity within gay culture, his level of integration deepened because he began to find other gay individuals like himself in society.

Since he started coming out, Todd has also progressed in accepting and displaying his identity. He attributes part of this success to reading a great deal of literature on gay identity development theory; thus he is very familiar with Cass’ five stages of homosexuality. The literature helped him and he now has his own version of Cass’ stages of identity development. Josh is also familiar with identity development theories because he enrolled in several LGBT courses at CCSU. LGBT courses increased his understanding of the stages of gay identity and through classroom exposure, Josh realized
that integration of his gay identity could evolve to a point at which both he and others did not need to view him as “just gay.” Being gay could be a part of his overall identity.

*Individual Assessment on Current Integration Status*

All participants were able to discuss to varying degrees how they currently viewed the level of integration of their gay identity into their overall identity. Levels of integration ranged greatly, from almost always going back into the closet for Sam, to realization that being gay is just a part of their overall identities for Josh and Kurt.

Sam has integrated his gay identity the least of all the participants, yet he still feels he has made a positive progression in his identity development since he has started coming out, even though he feels gay one day but the next day he does not. Display of his identity relates to his desire to be accepted, and depending on the situation he is in, the outness of his identity varies. This constant battle is difficult for Sam because he realizes he is slow to integrate to a level of individual comfort at which he can show his gay identity all the time. Sam dislikes this about himself and he hopes he will be able to evolve over time into a more open individual because he does not want to repeatedly retreat to the closet for the remainder of his life. He also realizes that part of his ideal scenario in accepting and displaying his own identity includes his friends and associates’ positive perceptions of him. Currently, Sam feels others focus too much on his gay identity. He hopes that in the future, others will view him as a good teacher. He seems focused on becoming a very good teacher as a means of distracting attention from his gay identity: “That’s my future hopes. That’s what drives me every day.” Sam believes that if he is accepted as a being a great teacher, he can also be accepted as being gay.

The other five participants are at much deeper levels of integration compared to Sam. Even Jake, who is the most recent participant to come out, stated that since his
initial disclosure, all of his subsequent experiences have carried him forward. He even stated that the hurtful experiences have helped him integrate his identities. Negative experiences have forced him to battle internally and determine why it is so important for him to continue to move forward and achieve a level of individual integration where he is willing to display his gay identity at all times. Jake feels he is surrendering to the ignorance of other individuals if he does not display his gay identity at all times. He also comprehends how easily the public can fall prey to misconceptions of gay life because he felt the same way not too long ago. Jake also desires to display his identity at all times because he wants to be a role model for younger gay individuals, something he cannot do if he hides his identity.

Like Jake, Todd also hopes to move others towards an acceptance of gay individuals. To this end, both Jake and Todd continue to involve themselves in a variety of gay-related activities and agendas and, at this point in their lives, they both see activism as a large a part of their identity. Todd still faces challenges in displaying his identity because of Hollow’s environment; but, as he continually stated throughout our interview, he will not return to the closet. Unlike Jake and Todd, Jarrod no longer sees activism as a large part of his identity, even though the majority of his social relationships are with gay individuals and groups.

Kurt and Josh have seen themselves progress through the largest variety of changes since they started coming out. After their initial comings-out, both Kurt and Josh viewed themselves as just gay, and they were quite certain others around them viewed them this way as well. The image of “just gay” emerged because most of their social activities were related to gay issues and because the majority of their friends were gay. Involvement in a variety of activities has led to many changes for both Kurt and
Josh and for their own self-images because they now view being gay as just a part of their overall identity. No matter at what stage each participant was in accepting and displaying his identity, all participants realized that acceptance and integration of their gay identity into their overall identity was an ongoing processes for them.

Conclusion

Coming-out in college was not a one-time occurrence for participants. It was a constant and continuous decision that caused ripples of change in their lives. With each decision to come out again, participants continually faced a new set of rewards and/or challenges since their decision would result in acceptance or rejection by others. Participants normally revealed themselves to those parties who would most likely accept them. Each new affirmation encouraged participants to come out to parties whose responses would be more unpredictable. Eventually participants seemed to reach a point at which they wanted to tell their cornerstones about their identity. The cornerstone was a group or individual whose acceptance meant a great deal to the participant due to the close relationship between them.

All participants also experienced rejection or homophobia to varying degrees. Some, such as Kurt and Josh who had integrated their gay identity the deepest into their overall identity, were able to endure the situation and move beyond the homophobia they were experiencing. Todd and Jake often struggled with homophobia because it made them rethink their decision to continue coming out; but, each of them expressed the determination to continue coming out. Sam most often retreated into the closet when homophobic situations developed. The homophobia Sam has experienced has caused more damage to his gay identity than to any other participant’s because he has not integrated his gay identity into his overall identity much at all.
All participants arrived at college with certain preconceptions of college life. Coming-out introduced the participants to many new experiences and each participant had to develop new expectations of college life as a gay student. At times, expectations matched reality, and at times they did not. The closer positive expectations were to reality, the deeper the integration of the participant’s gay identity into his overall identity. Negative expectations that resulted in a negative reality caused the most hurt and damaged the participants’ resolve to continue coming out. Positive expectations that resulted in a negative reality impacted each participant differently. The more affirmation a participant had received from previous experiences, the more likely he was to move past the negative experience. Those participants, who had received little affirmation from previous experiences, often considered retreating and did so at times out of fear of more rejection.

In addition, coming out introduced all participants to a new culture. Most participants had experienced little exposure to gay individuals or gay culture prior to coming out, so learning about life as a gay individual was exciting, and often challenging for them. Participants most often turned to their gay peers on campus or to gay bars in order to meet other gay individuals and learn about the many aspects of gay culture. Talking to individuals on-line, as well as reading gay-related books, increased their understanding. Participants were slow to learn that there are many differences to be found among gay individuals, and until this realization occurred, participants often received conflicting messages about life as a gay individual.

Throughout their coming-out process, all participants began to integrate their gay identity into their overall identity. The level of integration each individual attained varied. Sam had integrated his gay identity the least because he continually retreated into
the closet whenever he encountered any type of hostility. Jake, Jarrod, and Todd were very focused on their gay identity and were very active in promoting it. Todd and Jake wanted the focus of their identity to be on the gay aspect of their lives. Jarrod’s interactions were almost exclusively with gay individuals, so he likewise had the greater part of his focus on his gay identity. Kurt and Josh have reached a point at which they realize that being gay is only a part of who they are. All participants were very forthright about the journey they have started and insightful as to where they feel their journey will take them in their life as a gay individual. Their stories revealed a great deal about what the collegiate experience is like for gay students after they start coming out.
Chapter 5

Discussion

This study qualitatively investigated the significant experiences of full-time gay male college students, ages 18-24, after they started coming out in college. The study was exploratory in nature and generalizations about the gay collegiate experience are not possible when examining the results of this undertaking. The six young men who volunteered for this study displayed vulnerability, as well as a tremendous spirit of generosity and trust, by sharing their stories with a virtual stranger. Through in-depth descriptions of their lives and experiences since their initial comings-out while in college, the participants have provided insight into the complexity of their lives as gay college students. Their stories and conversations were engaging, intriguing, funny, and deeply moving. Each participant expressed gratitude that someone was willing to listen to his story and expressed a desire to help individuals in higher education, and society in general, more fully understand the elements that impact the lives of gay college students. This chapter highlights some of the particular findings of the study, as well as the study’s own limitations, implications for policy and practice in higher education, and suggestions for future research. Some findings reinforce and add clarity to earlier findings already suggested in the literature. Other findings raise new questions worthy of in-depth exploration that could lead to new directions for future research.
Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lives of gay students after they had started coming out in college, because most of the current literature on the collegiate gay experience concerns itself with the initial coming-out experience. Specifically, this study sought to understand how gay students describe their current constructed sexual identity; how they continue to construct this identity; how interactions on and off campus influence the continued construction of their sexual identity; and how interactions with faculty, campus organizations, and age-related peers impact the continuing construction of their sexual identity. D’Augelli’s model of lesbian-gay-bisexual identity served as the theoretical foundation for the study because his six identity processes encompass the variety of individual differences found in college students and their personal identity developments.

Because the researcher intended to uncover and describe the participants’ perspectives on events, not to develop theory or generalizations attributable to a larger population, this investigation was conducted as a phenomenological study. Participants were identified by the researcher’s attendance at two LGBT organizational meetings, e-mails to an additional 15 LGBT organizations to request volunteers, and snowball sampling with participants. Eight initial interviews were conducted, after which six participants were chosen for a second interview. During the second interview, participants were asked open-ended questions about their collegiate experiences since coming-out so that they could take the conversations in directions meaningful to them.

Interviews with the participants led to the discovery of three common experiences. First, coming-out is not a one-time occurrence; rather, each coming-out experience represents a distinct coming-out decision because a participant told another
individual or group he was gay. With each coming-out, participants experienced affirmation or homophobia, and faced the challenge of building coping strategies for dealing either with the homophobia they faced or the impact their decision made on their current sexual identity. Second, differences exist between expectations and the realities of coming-out. The differences manifested themselves in two settings: the campus experience and the gay culture experience. Similarities or differences between their expectations and the realities of coming-out impacted each participant’s identity development differently. Last, repeated comings-out caused participants’ integration of their sexual identity into their overall identity to continue. Thus, the experiences participants encountered both on and off campus affected their identity integration and varied with each participant. The following discussion takes these three common experiences and presents them in the context of how varying experiences impacted the participants’ sexual and overall identity development.

Discussion

The participants’ stories provided evidence that they had experienced a number of significant events since coming out in college that had caused a ripple effect on their identity development. Coming-out was not a one-time occurrence; instead, each disclosure of one’s gay identity to someone else was a separate and distinct coming-out experience. In addition, each coming-out experience had an impact on the participant’s identity development and provided evidence regarding the plasticity and fluidity of identity.

Environmental impact on gay identity. One aspect that impacted the participants’ coming-out decisions, experiences, and overall identity development was their respective environments. This finding concurs with numerous other findings (Eddy & Forney,
(Jackson & Sullivan, 1994; Rhoads, 1997; Troiden, 1989) that the environments in which gay students find themselves play a central role in gay identity development. Throughout the interviews, participants provided various examples of how environments directly or indirectly affected them and their continual coming-out decisions.

Jackson and Sullivan (1994) state that environments hostile toward a gay identity may especially impact the opportunity for positive integration of a gay identity in an individual. Negative experiences for participants in this study led them to question, at times, whether continuing to come out was worthwhile. Negative experiences often slowed, stalled, or caused a regression in the integration of a gay identity into overall identity. This was evident particularly when participants faced rejection from their cornerstones.

No participant, other than Sam, chose his institution because he felt it would be accepting of gay students, but all participants expressed their expectation that the college environment would be more open and accepting of differences than the high school environment. Evans and D’Augelli (1996) report that the expectation of a more accepting environment in college often proves to be wrong for gay students since the reality of the collegiate environment is often one of rejection. For some participants in this study, the reality of rejection of their gay identity often caused incongruence because their expectations of college did not match the reality of their experience. The mismatch between expectations and reality supports Tinto’s (1993) assessment that when expectations do not match realities, there can be a lack of quality campus experiences, ultimately leading to attrition. Again, the mismatch between expectations and reality was particularly true of Sam who chose his institution because he felt it would be accepting of his gay identity. Not all incongruences proved to be negative, however. At times,
negative expectations were met with positive experiences. This was quite evident when participants expected rejection from peers or faculty, but received affirmation instead. The result was a feeling of positive self-worth, which helped participants integrate their gay identity more deeply into their overall identity. At times, some aspects of college life lead to both positive and negative incongruences, which often characterized Todd’s experiences regarding the level of his acceptance at Hollow. This great variation between the acceptance he felt from the administration and the homophobia he endured from his peers was difficult to handle and often caused social isolation from the institution. Tinto (1993) lists social isolation as another important factor that can create negative experiences for students while in college.

_Homophobia and its impact on gay identity._ Most participants expressed that they have endured some very painful experiences because they are gay. These painful experiences come in the form of homophobia. Even Josh, on his open and diverse campus, had occasionally suffered homophobia. That participants had to endure homophobia should not come as a surprise. Several studies (D’Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993; Slater, 1993) have documented the homophobia and harassment that gay students endure on campus. While no participant experienced physical violence toward himself, the fear of harassment caused all participants to change their behavior at one time or another. Fear for one’s safety opposes one of Erickson’s (1968) basic tenets of psychological development, freedom from excessive anxiety. Moreover, fear of harassment or violence concurs with the assessment of D’Augelli (1992) and Evans and D’Augelli (1996) that when gay students believe the physiological costs of being gay are too high, they may alter their behavior. All participants hid their identity when they
feared for their physical safety and many participants chose to hide their identity when faced with possible social rejection.

Harassment and homophobia cause gay students to spend more time and energy on issues of sexual identity than their heterosexual peers (Durby, 1994; Lucozzi, 1998; Renn, 2000). This pulls from time usually spent on academics, extracurricular activities, work, and relationships. In Todd’s case, time spent dealing with developing gay identity was particularly true because his grades fell and he broke up with his boyfriend, who refused to come out of the closet. D’Augelli (1992) and Evans and D’Augelli (1996) argue that, aside from harassment and homophobia, the continual need to decide to come out or not come out again drains energy from gay students. The constant assessment on whether to come out, in turn, takes time away from academics, extracurricular activities, work, and relationships. The constant decision-making also drains emotional energy.

Most participants in this study stated they were constantly assessing the classroom environment in terms of its safety for coming out. While participants never feared for their physical safety when making the decision, they were afraid of such things as grade repercussions and harassment from other students and/or the instructor. This type of constant assessment continually kept one’s gay identity at the forefront of participant thinking. Additionally, continued assessment resulted in a never-ending evaluation of how much participants, as well as other individuals, valued their newly developing identity. This on-going evaluation not only distracted participants from other institutional-related activities, evaluation indeed took a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. The mental and emotional stress was felt even when participants decided against coming out in a particular classroom setting because the decision presented another subtle form of homophobia that each participant had to handle. By not coming
out when the opportunity presented itself, several participants stated they were giving in to homophobia, and in essence they were devaluing their own identity because they once again chose to hide rather than display being gay. Jake particularly struggled with this issue because he often got angry with himself for not challenging homophobic comments he heard from other students.

The emotional energy spent on campus was also reflected off campus, as various stories told by participants verified that their identity was not often accepted outside of the collegiate culture. This concurs with Malaney et al. (1997) who stated that acceptance of gays in mainstream society remains low. It reinforces for all participants what Obear (1991) has stated: colleges and universities serve as microcosms of larger society.

*Homophobia in living environments.* Some specific forms of homophobia were much more difficult to endure than others, especially when homophobia came from people participants valued, mainly age-related peers in their living environments. Fear of coming out in the residence halls supports the conclusions of Evans and Broido (1999) that the anticipated reactions of roommates and floormates play a major role in the decision to come out. Several participants expressed that they hesitated to reveal their gay identity to their roommates because they could not anticipate their reaction. Homophobia was prevalent in the residence halls either from roommates or floormates. While most participants stated they expected either homophobia toward or some discomfort with their gay identity, roommates’ homophobia was particularly difficult to handle given the close nature of living arrangements.

Incidents of homophobia also occurred in fraternities. Previous research (Hughes, 1991; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998) has shown that one of the benefits of fraternity
living is a sense of group cohesiveness and individual social intimacy. Social intimacy can, however, serve to alienate members when there is a conflict between individual and group values. Both of these points were true in Todd’s Greek experience. The presence of a gay brother lead to fears that the entire house would be seen as gay, thereby potentially resulting in decreased membership and low prestige on campus for the fraternity. The fear of decreased membership is very real, as fraternities have lost members and even closed because they were labeled “gay friendly” (“Fraternities Lose National Support,” 1990). Todd spent a great deal of emotional energy trying to dispel the negative perceptions of a fraternity that included a gay brother.

*Homophobia from family.* While homophobia from peers who were socially important to participants was very hurtful, homophobia from family, particularly parents, was especially damaging to participants’ overall well-being. When participants were rejected by family, stories detailing their pain were common. In dealing with this rejection, participants either expressed their continued desire to seek acceptance from their family, or their bitterness toward family members. To compensate for this devastating rejection, they sought other forms of acceptance. Jackson and Sullivan (1994) found that social marginalization of a gay identity by family may inhibit the social development and integration of that identity. This was true for several participants because rejection from their family caused the integration of their gay identity to either stall or digress until they found themselves retreating to the closet any time they perceived rejection.

*Acceptance from cornerstone.* For all participants, it was important to find affirmation for their developing gay identity, relief from the homophobia they were facing, or help in understanding the many challenges and complexities that their newly
evolving gay identity was presenting them. While affirmation was important for all participants, affirmation from the cornerstone, participants’ most valued and most important source of affirmation, was crucial. Affirmation from the cornerstone appeared to be critical for continued self-acceptance and positive integration of a gay identity into overall identity. Usually, the cornerstone turned out to be family, mainly parents. If the participants knew or perceived that family would not affirm their gay identity, they turned elsewhere in search of an alternate cornerstone.

It seems logical that if affirmation from the cornerstone was so important, participants would have turned there for their initial coming out experience; but this was not the case. They did not initially turn to their cornerstone because they feared rejection from that source, and the emotional cost of possible rejection appeared to be too high for the initial coming out experience. Instead, participants created strategies such as garnering affirmation from other individuals so that if, and when, they eventually came out to their cornerstone, they could rely on the accumulated affirmation if rejected. It appeared a sufficiently strong support system was needed to help them deal with the tremendous devastation that cornerstone rejection would cause. The volume of affirmation participants needed before telling their cornerstone varied. The perceived likelihood for rejection from the cornerstone may explain the differences in coming out to one’s cornerstone. The more likely participants’ feared rejection from the cornerstone, the longer they waited in coming out to their cornerstone.

*Impact of previous exposure to gay culture.* There was a wide range of comfort level in coming out. Coming out was easier for those participants who had the deepest level of identity integration and more difficult for those participants who came out only if affirmation were certain. An explanation for differences in the comfort level may be
found in the frequent and continual exposure to gay individuals and culture that some participants enjoyed while growing up. Early and frequent exposure to sexual diversity presented participants with the concept that being gay could be a part of everyday living, because participants continually experienced images and interactions of gay individuals in a positive light. The impact that early exposure to gay individuals had on the comfort level in coming out was particularly evident in Josh who grew up knowing many gay individuals.

For participants who had little or no exposure to gay individuals or culture while growing up, coming-out in college presented an additional challenge because they had to address, and many times dispel, negative preconceptions of gay individuals. Addressing negative perceptions about being gay is consistent with the findings of Savin-Williams (1998) that gay individuals, once they begin to accept a gay identity for themselves and come out, must address the question of whether they conform to societal stereotypes of gay individuals. Experiences in gay bars particularly challenged participants’ perceptions of gay individuals and culture.

Previous exposure to gay individuals or culture notwithstanding, all participants sought out socialization opportunities with other gay individuals after their initial coming-out on campus. Socialization with other gay individuals was critical to fulfilling their desire to socialize with others like themselves. The desire for socialization with gay peers supports Durby’s (1994) conclusion that it is critically important for gay adolescents to socialize with other like individuals due to the social isolation, caused by their delayed sexual identity development, these students often felt in high school. Coming-out did not immediately reduce the challenge of finding socialization opportunities with gay peers. Meeting other gay peers who shared similar interests was a
bigger challenge, especially for participants who attended smaller institutions or who did not participate in their LGBT organization(s) on campus.

*Role of LGBT organizations on identity development.* For all participants, except Sam, LGBT organizations played a prominent role in their lives, and this involvement impacted successful integration of the gay identity into their overall identity. To date, no literature documents the importance that LGBT organizations play in identity development for gay students. For all participants, except Todd, who were members of an LGBT organization, their LGBT membership also offered a valuable social outlet as it provided a relatively easy way to meet other gay students on campus as well as students who were experiencing identity-related issues similar to the participants. Todd did not experience positive social membership with Hollow’s LGBT organization because there were only three gay men who belonged to the organization. LGBT involvement also served as one of the most common ways participants learned about the many dimensions of a gay lifestyle. Meeting peers in LGBT organizations who were experiencing the same issues as the participants was important in order for the participants to understand that they were not alone, as well as to learn more about their developing gay identity.

When participants such as Todd did not reap positive benefits from their LGBT involvement, most often it was because they were not encountering other LGBT members of similar orientation, interests, or level of identity development. The inability to find other gay individuals like themselves in LGBT organizations, or on campus, frustrated participants. This frustration reinforces the importance of finding gay peers with similar interests, desires, and personalities within gay culture. Often, knowing there are other gay students on their campus is not enough to fill the social void left by being gay if there is no match in other desired characteristics and/or interests. When
participants lacked desired social opportunities on campus, they turned elsewhere to find
groups with whom they had more in common.

_Role of gay bars on identity development._ Aside from LGBT organizations,
participants found the most significant social contact with other gay individuals at gay
bars. All participants discussed the role that the bars played in their social lives. For
participants who attended smaller institutions, the importance of going out to bars in
order to meet other gay individuals increased in importance. The bars offered a
significantly greater number of gay individuals with whom to socialize and, most
importantly, the bars provided an opportunity to seek out individuals who were similar to
the participants in terms of personality, interests, and desire for intimate relationships.

As with the role of LGBT organizations on identity development, no
documentation exists regarding the importance of gay bars in the lives of gay students.
The participants’ stories underscored the importance placed on social activities with other
gay students. It appeared that the more social support and contact participants had with
other gay individuals on campus, the less importance they placed on the gay bars.
Referring to the societal perception that bars are places where individuals go to find sex,
most participants expressed at least some embarrassment in going to gay bars, yet they
continued to frequent them for socialization opportunities. Once again, overcoming the
embarrassment to go to the bar reinforces the importance for gay students to mingle and
socialize with other gay students who are similar to themselves. Participants indirectly
benefited from socialization with gay peers at gay bars because through it, they were also
learning some of the meaning for being gay. The bars offered the opportunity to socialize
and learn just as the LGBT organizations did. However, most participants stated that the
gay bars are not a suitable setting for an initial exposure to gay culture because some
individuals there are often willing to take advantage of individuals who have just come out.

**Role of purposeful education on identity development.** Aside from indirect learning that took place through social involvement in LGBT organizations or through visits to gay bars, participants purposely sought out ways to help themselves learn about the many dimensions of being gay. To learn more, participants often turned to older gay individuals for guidance and advice, particularly gay faculty members and individuals in on-line chat rooms. All participants stressed the value of communication with gay faculty members. Participants’ interaction with gay faculty members supports Tierney’s (1992) argument that gay faculty and administrators need to be open and visible on campus because in doing so they can offer support and serve as role models, something that previous research has already shown to be very important (Chan, 1996; Renn, 2000; Slater, 1993). Other ways participants sought to gain insight into their identity were enrolling in specific courses on LGBT issues, or reading books and Internet information on topics related to gay identity development. Indirect or purposeful, all learning helped the participants continue the process of integrating their gay identity into their overall identity.

**Impact of plasticity on identity development.** Throughout the participants’ stories, the idea of plasticity (Lerner, 1984), the ability to grow or change, was evident as the stories were at once different yet similar. Each time a participant decided to come out again, encountered affirmation or homophobia for his identity, or subconsciously or consciously learned about himself as a gay individual, he changed. Theories proposed by Cass and Troiden seem to suggest that with each new experience, individuals steadily move closer to some type of final stage of gay identity integration.
The results of this study show that forward progression in stage-like fashion was not the case, as participants described being at varying points of integration, display, acceptance, and even regression. The many differences found in the lives of the participants and where they had been, where they currently were, and where they saw themselves in the future is more in line with D’Augelli’s (1994a) argument that sexual identity is an ongoing, changing process that is, indeed, a life-long journey. D’Augelli describes this life-long journey as a process and has defined six processes he believes gay individuals may experience during their lifetime. As described in Chapter two, these six identity processes are: (a) exiting heterosexual identity, (b) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual (LGB) identity status, (c) developing an LGB social identity, (d) becoming an LGB offspring, (e) developing an LGB intimacy status, and (f) entering an LGB community. The participants’ stories of their experiences in coming out reflected the D’Augelli processes and confirmed that sexual identity is indeed fluid. At times, participants continued to move forward in displaying their identity such as Todd and Jake with their peers on campus; at times they regressed such as Sam in hiding his identity when confronted with potential rejection.

The stories verify that participants were able to modify their behavior according to the context in which they found themselves. Occasionally, participants hid their gay identity because of fear of rejection, reprisal, or physical harm. At times, some wanted the full focus to be on their gay identity; others wanted their gay identity to be only a part of their overall identity, and not the full focus. Every time they made a decision to come out again or not, the decision impacted their identity development.

Identity development was also influenced by a variety of experiences and environments participants either found themselves in or chose on their own. Often
participants sought information, individuals, or environments to aid them in understanding their developing gay identity. Participants were very active in creating and influencing their gay identity. Illustrations provided by participants show that the more active they were in their learning, the deeper the integration they were able to reach. At times, identity development was minimal, as in Sam’s case. As Lerner (1984) argues, stagnation does not mean that the participants were no longer able to progress in their development, but that the individual was in a consistent state of demand from his environment or that there were environmental constraints that deterred further development and growth.

Conclusions

Importance of a cornerstone. For gay individuals, the acceptance or rejection for being gay by a cornerstone seems to have the most profound impact of any experience on continued identity development. While rejection from one’s true cornerstone seems unlikely, if rejection is a possibility, gay individuals may seek out another cornerstone to avoid the potential pain of rejection by their preferred cornerstone. The alternate cornerstone might offer enough support to help gay individuals go through life without ever revealing themselves to socially-important individuals or groups. Also, the alternate cornerstone might offer enough support to affect continuing identity integration. An alternate cornerstone may also be vital to individuals who are unintentionally(outed to socially-important individuals or groups whom the individual had chosen not to tell. If individuals are outed to and rejected by those parties, the alternate cornerstone may be a crucial means of support for dealing with this intense rejection, as well as for continued identity integration after the trauma.
If individuals suffer rejection by any cornerstone, damage to one’s gay identity may be severe, particularly if there is not enough other support in the individual’s life. This severe rejection may lead individuals to experience a variety of negative emotions, including self-loathing, doubt about the wisdom for subsequent disclosures, or the desire to retreat to the closet, either temporarily or permanently. If rejection does occur from a cornerstone, individuals may seek substitute affirmation to help them deal with the pain of their cornerstone’s rejection and to help fill the resulting void. Until acceptance by one’s cornerstone occurs, continued integration of one’s gay identity into overall identity will most likely stall, or even regress.

Institutional impact on identity development. The size and culture of some colleges create additional challenges for gay individuals. This is particularly true of smaller institutions with a high level of homogeneity within the student body. At smaller institutions, where fewer gay students are likely to be found, the variety of support gay students receive is even more important than the support their peers receive at larger institutions. As with any subculture, gay students on campus represent a diverse mixture of races, interests, and levels of identity development. On smaller campuses, it is harder than on larger campuses for gay students to find others like themselves. Their gay identity alone does not provide a strong enough connection in terms of their social, sexual, mental, emotional, or intellectual desires. As the number of gay students on the campus increases, so does the possibility that gay students will be able to find other gay students who share many common interests, not just their gay identity.

When few gay students are found on a college campus, finding affirmation for a gay identity becomes difficult. On smaller campuses, gay students may have to seek affirmation and support from as many places and sources as possible, while their peers on
larger campuses can generally seek this support from their gay peers. For the students on small campuses, visible support and affirmation from a variety sources becomes even more critical. Because the faculty, staff, and administrators on smaller campuses are highly visible to students, their affirmation and visible support of gay students may partially ease some of the burden felt by those students. The desire to socialize with others who share similar interests and aspirations underscores the additional difficulty that gay students must endure at smaller colleges. This conclusion may significantly affect the retention of gay students, especially at smaller colleges and further research should explore this issue.

*Gay culture’s impact on identity development.* Positive exposure to gay individuals and gay culture while growing up may impact the timing of gay individuals’ coming-out, as well as the speed and depth to which they integrate their gay identity into their overall identity. Such positive exposure may serve as an important cue for gay individuals because they realize at an earlier age that gay individuals represent valuable parts of society. Frequent and positive exposures to gay individuals while growing up may also serve as a reminder during times of homophobia that being gay is acceptable, normal, and conducive to being an active member of a productive society. Increasingly positive and early exposure of gay individuals and lifestyles in the media may mean that more gay youths may start coming out earlier, or if they choose to wait until college for their initial coming out, the integration of their gay identity may occur more quickly than it has in the past. This conclusion warrants further study; it suggests important consequences for K-12 systems of public education that would necessitate more resources and more understanding of gay youths on the part of K-12 educators and administrators.
Expansion of D’Augelli’s Model of LGB Identity Development. D’Augelli (1994a) suggests that sexual identity is a result of six dynamic social processes that occur in a variety of contexts over a lifespan. This study found that a seventh process may need to be added to the model. D’Augelli argues that social interactions, and the contexts in which they take place, strongly influence identity development and integration; however, this study showed that sexual identity is a deeply personal and internal developmental process. This internal journey is obscured in D’Augelli’s model of LGB development. The internal process must not be ignored.

While this study found examples of all six of D’Augelli’s LGB processes in participants, and found that these interactions influenced individual identity development, each participant had to determine at what level he was going to let social interaction influence his identity. Several participants articulated clearly that they were not “just gay” anymore. Although this realization may have been influenced by external social interaction, the ability to articulate clearly that one is not “just gay,” provides evidence that the plasticity of identity development is also a deeply internal and intensely personal process. It was this internal recognition that affected the conclusion of some participants that they are not “just gay” anymore.

While theories suggested by Cass and Troiden make it easy to assume that all gay individuals are evolving toward an internal stage at which they too are not “just gay,” many may never evolve to this point due to the fluid nature of sexual identity. The ability to articulate that one’s gay identity is only a part of one’s entire identity is reached via an internal process influenced by many factors; it is a process that should be included and discussed in the literature. By adding a seventh process, integration of an LGB identity into overall identity, D’Augelli’s model becomes more representative of LGB
development because it encompasses another vital process that gay individuals go through each time they encounter a new social experience. This additional process would complement and possibly complete D’Augelli’s model of LGB identity development because it serves as the underlying internal process that ties together the other six. It is the umbrella process under which social interactions influence identity development.

**Limitations of the Study**

In this study of six gay male students, four limitations arose. The main limitation was the small sample size. This investigation provided a rich description of the lives of six gay students, but a generalization to all gay students in college is impossible. Furthermore, the findings from this study only represent the experiences of Caucasian gay men. Nevertheless, the findings encourage further research into the lives of gay collegiate students.

Second, participation was totally self-selected and limited to currently enrolled students who identified themselves as gay. Such self-acceptance might indicate that only those gay students who had positive experiences since coming out volunteered, thereby decreasing the variety of stories heard. Asking participants to refer students who had experiences very different than their own did not work very well; only one referral came forward. Asking participants to refer the study to individuals who had a very different story than their own was most likely difficult. Most students tend to know and socialize with other students who were similar to themselves. Sam was the only participant referred by another participant. His experience varied greatly from the experiences of other participants. Referring potential students who had experiences very different than the participants may have occurred, but potential students may not have come forward for various unknown reasons. An additional 15 potential participants did not meet the study
criteria. Even though these potential participants knew they did not meet the criteria for inclusion in this study, they had a strong desire to have someone listen to their stories. Requests for someone to listen to their stories reinforces the importance of investigating the lives and experiences of gay individuals from all walks of life, not only college students. Gay students who have dropped out of college because of negative issues related to their gay identity were not included in this study.

Third, the data were not analyzed using qualitative software due to very thorough hand coding that identified emergent themes. Analysis with qualitative software may have resulted in additional themes emerging among participant stories.

Fourth, participants were interviewed only twice. A third interview after initial data analysis and narrative writing might have provided additional depth and clarity to the participants’ coming-out experiences.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

*Providing safe classroom environments.* All participants in this study stated the classroom should be open and accepting of differences and that faculty should be accepting of gay students. All, however, expressed initial reservations toward coming out in the classroom or to various faculty members for fear of grade repercussions, disapproval of their identity, or lack of support for their identity in the classroom. While all personnel in higher education need to be more aware of what their affirmation or rejection means to gay students, faculty in particular must be more aware of their potential impact. Respect for gay students must be conveyed in the classroom by faculty at the start of each new term. Faculty should distribute syllabi on the first day of class that include statements regarding social justice, the professor’s respect for diversity, and the expectation of respect for diversity from all students in the class. This action will send
a very powerful pro-diversity message. Faculty who have personal convictions, such as religious beliefs, that do not condone homosexuality could adapt the university’s diversity statement to promote respect for diversity. This would allow these faculty members not to compromise their beliefs, but at the same time send a message to students regarding the importance of respecting differences. It is also important for faculty to avoid heterosexist ideology, such as discussing marriage but not committed relationships or talking to the male students about their girlfriends but not talking about possible gay relationships. Institutional policies should be included in the faculty handbooks stating that harassment or disparaging comments to gay students or about homosexuality will be cause for institutional discipline.

*Need for role models.* This study reinforced the importance of the visibility of gay faculty members, institutional staff, and administrators. All students look for role models, and gay students who are just starting to come out or continuing their coming out journeys in college, must have positive gay role models. Gay role models can understand and empathize with gay students who often face homophobia, as well as provide strategies for dealing with that homophobia. Gay role models can also serve as a valuable resource for gay students by helping them understand the life-long coming-out journey they have started. Institutional personnel who share their personal coming-out experiences can be sources of comfort for gay students, as well as can answer questions about current life issues that gay students face in college. Results from this study showed that when gay students start to come out, they often are not aware of the breadth and depth of diversity within the gay community. Gay faculty and staff can help gay students understand and discover the diversity found in the gay community. Through continued
networking, gay students can find a peer group of gay individuals who are similar to themselves.

Availability of resources. This study showed that various and visible resources such as LGBT organizations, coursework, gay faculty, counseling services, administrators, and off-campus resources should be available for gay students while in college, especially at smaller institutions. These resources should be available to gay students to help them understand and integrate their developing identity. All aspects of the campus experience should lend themselves to affirmation of a gay identity, since flaws in various aspects of the campus environment can provide additional obstacles that gay students must overcome on their own.

Promoting campus-wide values for diversity. At smaller institutions, where the number and diversity of gay individuals will most likely be smaller than at larger institutions, the visible support of administrators may serve as a vital substitute for affirmation that gay students may not find in other parts of the campus experience. Most often, the smaller the college, the higher the visibility of the administration. Therefore, visible affirmation from administrators such as meetings with campus LGBT leaders, attending LGBT events, stating publicly there is a no tolerance policy on harassment towards any differences found in students, sends a strong message to the whole institution regarding the value of diversity. Visible affirmation for LGBT students by administrators can create a more accepting campus culture and overall experience for gay students. Also, having policies that include sexual orientation in the institution’s nondiscrimination policy and having policies in the faculty handbook that states the institution does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation for faculty can send powerful messages of affirmation.
**Incongruence and social isolation.** Providing a holistic campus experience for gay students minimizes the two leading causes of withdrawal from college: incongruence and social isolation (Tinto, 1993). Also, institutions that endorse a respect for diversity through institutional promotional literature may help increase recruitment of gay individuals. As the competition for students increases, additional ways of attracting them are vital to the financial viability of the institution. Admissions material can list the variety of services and organizations available to gay students among the other general services available to all students. Knowing that a campus has a friendly LGBT environment, services, or organizations may sway potential students who are contemplating coming out, or those who have already come out in high school. A college that meets the needs and wants of gay students allows the expectations and realities of gay students to be congruent, which this study showed is critical for creating a positive college experience for gay students.

**More accepting living environments.** This study reinforced the powerful influence that the living environment has on gay students. A safe and accepting living environment for gay students, especially in residence halls and Greek housing, is vital to their individual acceptance and the integration of their identity. Policies in college student personnel offices that require diversity education training of resident assistants and chapter officers should be developed to help them understand that their attitude toward gay individuals often sets the tone for residents in their respective living environments. Policies must also be in place for discipline of students who harass students.

**Creating values for diversity in new students.** Since many students entering college have not experienced much exposure to diversity or gay students, individuals who
work in higher education should also be discussing ways to help incoming students understand the many differences they will experience while in college. Institutional policies that add diversity seminars to summer orientation programs would reinforce the incoming students’ awareness of diversity and the respect that should be shown for diversity. Orientation programs and statements from administrators that all diversity will be respected by incoming students would lay the groundwork for increased open mindedness and help to dispel fears of diversity and differences.

Suggestions for Further Research

The purpose of this research was to look at significant experiences of gay male students after coming out. Findings from this study can serve as the foundation for additional study into the lives of gay individuals. Results from this study lead to seven suggestions for future research. First, this study focused on gay men. The study could be replicated to investigate the experiences of lesbians to see what similarities or differences may exist between the experiences of gay men and lesbians.

Second, only Caucasian men participated in this study. Future research must seek out gay ethnic and/or racial minority students to look at their collegiate experiences in order for their voices to be heard. The complexity of belonging to two marginalized groups makes the burden of minority LGBT individuals heavier than their Caucasian counterparts; therefore, future study comparing the similarities and differences in coping skills used by minority LGBT individuals in the face of racism and homophobia could be also conducted.

Third, another study might research the similarities and differences between racial and LGBT identity development. Racial minority individuals cannot hide their racial identity, but they can hide their orientation. Coming-out decisions influence identity
development, so an understanding of what factors influence coming-out is important for higher education to understand since coming-out is most often a conscious decision.

Fourth, because coming-out is a conscious decision, energy spent on decisions of whether or not to come out again take time and energy. The time and energy spent on issues related to identity development will influence institutional involvement and integration. Research has shown that time and energy spent on racial identity development impacts collegiate involvement and integration. Future studies could look to see if parallels exist between sexual and racial identity development and the impact identity development has on collegiate involvement and integration.

Fifth, a longitudinal study of gay college students should occur. Researching the lives of gay students during and beyond college could measure the impact of the collegiate experience. Longitudinal research could examine the types of jobs they seek, the geographic locations where they seek employment, and the contrasts between coming out in the work place and coming out in college. This study could serve as a springboard for all these areas of research.

Sixth, this study only looked at gay students who are in college. Finding those who have stopped out is difficult. However, future research must look at a completely forgotten and very elusive subculture: that of gay students who stop attending college. Documentation of factors contributing to gay students leaving, such as too much energy being focused on their developing gay identity; social isolation and/or incongruence caused by their gay identity; or a lack of, or rejection by, their cornerstone, must occur. Perhaps the factors for stopping are similar to their heterosexual peers or other factors not yet explored or understood.
Seventh, results from this study underscore the importance that familial acceptance or rejection plays in the lives of gay students. Studies looking at coping strategies used by families in dealing with their child’s coming-out would be of importance in helping other parents understand the emotions they may experience, as well as the impact of these emotions on the child after coming-out. Also, information learned about the ways parents cope with the coming-out, or the outing of the child to them, and its impact on the child is very relevant to higher education retention rates. A lack of support from the family (often the cornerstone) may negatively impact the entire collegiate experience of that student.

Eighth, this study reinforced the importance that faculty, particularly gay faculty, play in the lives of gay students. While it is important to provide a safe and accepting environment for gay students, what about providing a safe and accepting environment for gay faculty? A better understanding of the outing process, and the reasons gay faculty remain in the closet, are relevant to higher education because positive gay role models are crucial for gay college students. Having a better understanding of why gay faculty do or do not come out themselves during their stay at an institution would allow administrators to take proactive steps in providing a safe environment for gay faculty. Feeling safe and confident enough to come out allows gay faculty to serve as role models, which in turn helps to create a better collegiate experience for gay students.

Conclusion

While the research conducted on the experiences of gay college students is limited, this study builds upon Rhoads’ work and helps to improve the understanding of what college is like for gay students after they have come out. This study took an in-depth look at the lives of six gay male students and explored the experiences that have
influenced their current identity. Participant stories were rich in description and provided in-depth information regarding coming out in college. Their stories emphasize that gay identity development and overall identity development are complex processes and are influenced by a variety of factors that students encounter both on and off campus.

To answer the question posed by Rhoads’ participant, “What is next?”, this study found that coming-out in college and beyond is not a one time occurrence and the “What is next?” is that there will always be another “What is next?” in the lives of gay individuals; it is a never-ending question. With each decision about “What is next?” individuals are influencing future experiences and the integration of their gay identity into their overall identity. Most experiences occurred for participants as a result of the day-to-day routines that most college students follow. Participants sought out some experiences as a way of learning more about their developing gay identity. Whatever the means, or the method by which experiences took place, all interactions influenced the identity development of participants in some way and helped provide them answers to “What is next?”

This study may have provided some clues as to why David did not return to campus in the fall of 1995. This study may also have provided some clues as to what my collegiate experience may have been like had I come out while in college; it has helped me answer part of my own question “What is next?” My work will always be ongoing as an activist on my campus. This study started many new personal ripples in my life and it reinforced for me just how important all aspects of the collegiate experience are in the lives of gay students. Personal knowledge gained from this study has provided me with additional insight into how I can create positive experiences and ripples in the lives of gay students on my campus. My work continues.
This study confirms and underscores the universal commonality and diversity among the experiences of gay students, as well as among the institutions they attend. The stories participants shared reaffirm what higher education often forgets in the discussion of the experiences of gay college students: that there are wide-ranging differences and great diversity found in gay students and in the experiences they endure, create, and encounter. The gay collegiate community, like any social group, is diverse. Even though all participants shared the commonality of a gay identity, their experiences were distinct and multifaceted. With each new experience, participants set off ripples of change in their lives that would continually influence them and the course of their future coming-out decisions, expectations, realities, and identity development. The stories of these participants and the ripples they created, as well as the stories of all gay students, are separate and distinct voices that must continue to be heard.
References


Appendix A

1st Interview Protocol & Questions

Preparation

Before we begin, I’d like to tell you a little bit about myself and how I got interested in this topic of looking at the experiences of gay students after they have come out in college. Please remember that you can stop being a part of this study at any point in time and that my only expectation from you is that I want to listen to your story, not what you think I want to hear. I anticipate that our time together today will be around 30 minutes, but please do not worry about the length of this interview, unless you need to leave, as I am once again only interested in hearing your story based on the interview questions I will be asking. Please take as long or be a short as you like on each question.

Background and Early History

Now I’d like for you to tell me a little bit about your background and history leading up to the point on why you choose to come to this institution.

Interview Questions

1. Looking back at your life, when did you begin to realize that you might be gay?
2. Can you remember a specific time, place, or event when you first told someone else or a group of individuals that you were gay?
3. What does coming out mean to you?
4. How out do you currently feel?

Conclusion

As my research continues I may wish to contact you for a second interview at a later point in time. If you are willing to continue your participation in this research, can you please provide me an email address and phone number where I can reach during the remainder of this school year and over the summer. If we meet again I would like to hear about what you feel are significant experiences or events for you that have impacted your life since you have come out in college. I anticipate that our second interview will last anywhere from 90-120 minutes. Until we meet again, please feel free to contact me at any time if you have any questions, comments, or have additional information you would like to share.
Appendix B

2nd Interview Questions & Protocol

**Preparation**

Thank you again for your willingness to meet with me again. Since we are meeting today I assume that you have had some time to think about the interview questions I will be asking you today and that you want to continue to participate in this research. Please do not worry about the length of this interview, unless you need to leave, as I am only interested in hearing your story based on the interview questions I will be asking. Please take as long or be as short as you like on each question. The emphasis of today’s interview will be on your feelings and experiences since you have come out. Please remember that you can stop being a part of this study at any point in time and that my only expectation from you is that I want to listen to your story, not what you think I want to hear.

**Interview Questions**

1. What are some of significant experiences with your peers, faculty, staff, or other individuals for you since coming out and why?
2. What are some of significant experiences with on or off-campus groups for you since coming out and why?
3. How do you perceive that your interaction with individuals or campus groups has impacted your current sexual identity?
4. How do you perceive that your interaction with individuals or campus groups has impacted your level of *outness*?
5. How do you perceive that your interaction with individuals or campus groups has impacted your future sexual identity development?
6. Please describe your perceptions and feelings regarding your current sexual identity and being out?

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and for concluding the interview process for this part of my research. Your story will be a great help in understanding the experiences of gay students after they have come out in college. Towards the conclusion of my research I will also send you a narrative description of your experiences for you to look over and provide feedback on so I ask that you provide me an email and mailing address where I reach you over the next six months. This narrative description will not disclose your identity, but will be a part of my final write-up for this research. I thank you for your time and willingness to be a part of this study. Best wishes to you with your remaining college experience.
Appendix C

Study Description

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Toledo. For my dissertation I have an interest in listening to stories about significant experiences for gay male college students after coming out, as very little research exists in this area. I am gay, but I did not come out until after college so I am very interested in hearing how coming out while in college impacts the college experience. In order to conduct this research I am in need of your help.

Specifically I am looking to conduct two interviews with gay male college students who did not come out until they attended college, are between the ages of 18-24, enrolled full-time, and have been out to themselves and others (no minimum or maximum number of ‘others’) for a minimum of three months.

If you know anyone who meets the above stated criteria I ask that you give him a copy of this study description. At the bottom of this description is my phone number and email address where anyone who is interested in participating in this study can contact me. Participants do not need to be located at your institution, as they can be acquaintances or friends from other institutions.

Once a potential participant has contacted me I will set-up an appointment to meet with him where we can discuss the research I’m conducting, answer any questions he may have, and set-up a time and place for the first interview. The first interview will last around 30 minutes, and I will ask questions related to his coming out experience while in college. After the first interview a possible second interview will be set-up that will last around 90 minutes where I will ask specific questions about what he feels have been or currently are significant experiences for him since coming out.

I will ask to tape record all interviews. Recording interviews is necessary for me in my data analysis, as I will be looking for themes from each interview, as well as common themes in the experiences of the participants I will interview. Participation in this research is voluntary and any participant can stop being a part of this study at any point in time. Only the transcriber (types up a copy of the interview) and myself will listen to the tape. Only the transcriber, my dissertation chair, and myself will see the transcription of our interview.

At the conclusion of this research I will be writing a narrative description of all participants and their experiences since coming out. To protect participants’ identities I will not use their real name or the name of the institution they are attending in my write-up to try and keep their information as confidential as possible. I will send each participant a copy of his narrative to look over, ask questions, or make comments on. This narrative will be presented in the results section of my dissertation.

Gay students represent a minority group of college students. In order for ‘our voices’ to be heard, research on gay students must be conducted and shared with others. I hope through this research everyone involved in higher education (students, faculty, and administrators) will come to know and understand a little bit better the experiences of gay college students and the variety of experiences that gay college students have. Letting others hear your story, I hope, will help create a better collegiate environment for all gay students.

If you feel that you meet the criteria for this study and are interested in participating in this research please contact me as well so we can set-up an initial meeting to discuss this research more in depth. Thank you for your consideration and possible participation in this study. If you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this study and meets the criteria for this study, please have them contact as soon as possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Brian Hofman
(419) 772-1878 Office
b-hofman@onu.edu
Appendix D

Participant Consent Form, First Interview

Dear (Participant’s Name),

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Toledo. For my dissertation I am conducting research on the experiences of gay male students, ages 18-24, who have come out to themselves and others for a minimum of three months while in college.

For my research I would like to interview you for approximately 30 minutes. During this interview I would like to hear about your coming out experience and what lead you to come out to yourself and to others. I would like to audio-tape and transcribe this interview. I will keep the tape from our interview locked in a secure location for five years prior to destroying the tape. This interview will be used only for this research. Your name and the institution you attend will be changed during transcription of this interview to protect your identity. Only the transcriber and myself will listen to the tape. Only the transcriber, my dissertation chair (Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti), and myself will see the transcription of our interview.

You are, of course, free to end your participation in this interview at any point in time and request that I do not use the interview, or make reference to it, in any way in my writing. Refusal to partake in this interview, or to discontinue this interview or future participation in this research will in no way impact your relationship with the your institution.

If you have any further questions or concerns, you may reach me at (419) 772-1878 or Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti at (419) 530-2728. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Brian Hofman

This exercise has been explained to me, and I consent to participate in this project. I understand a pseudonym will be used for my name and institution in reference to this research, and that I may withdraw from this research at any point.

Signed: _____________________________    Date: ______________________

I consent to have my interview audiotaped and transcribed.

Signed: _____________________________    Date: ______________________

Copies to: Participant

Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti
Appendix E

Participant Consent Form, Second Interview

Dear (Participant’s Name),

You have been selected for a second interview because I believe you can provide further information regarding the significant experiences of gay male college students after coming out. Today I would like to interview you for approximately 90-120 minutes. During this interview I will be asking you share significant experiences for you in college since coming out and what these experiences mean to you.

I would like to audio-tape and transcribe this interview. I will keep the tape from our interview locked in a secure location for five years prior to destroying the tape. This interview will be used only for this research. Your name and the institution you attend will be changed during transcription of this interview to protect your identity. Only the transcriber and myself will listen to the tape. Only the transcriber, my dissertation chair (Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti), and myself will see the transcription of our interview. Based on the information obtained from this interview I will also be writing a narrative description of your experiences. I will send you a copy of this narrative for you to look over, ask questions, or make comments on. This narrative will be presented in the results section of my dissertation.

You are, of course, free to end your participation in this interview at any point in time and request that I do not use the interview, or make reference to it, in any way in my writing. Refusal to partake in this interview or to discontinue this interview or future participation in this research will in no way impact your relationship with the your institution.

If you have any further questions or concerns, you may reach me at (419) 772-1878 or Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti at (419) 530-2728. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Brian Hofman

This exercise has been explained to me, and I consent to participate in this project. I understand a pseudonym will be used for my name and institution in reference to this research, and that I may withdraw from this research at any point.

Signed: _____________________________ Date: ____________________

I consent to have my interview audiotaped and transcribed.

Signed: _____________________________ Date: ____________________

Copies to: Participant
            Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti