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I, Billy J Hensley, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of: Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

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Student Signature: Billy J Hensley

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee Chair: Miriam Raider-Roth, Ed.D.
Mary Brydon-Miller, Ph.D.
Annette Hemmings, Ph.D.
James W. Koschoreck, Ph.D.

Approval of the electronic document:

I have reviewed the Thesis/Dissertation in its final electronic format and certify that it is an accurate copy of the document reviewed and approved by the committee.

Committee Chair signature: Miriam Raider-Roth
Seeking Safe Spaces:
The Impact of Campus Climate on College Choice

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Cincinnati
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.)

In the Department of Educational Studies
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by

Billy J. Hensley

Bachelor of Science
Psychology
Union College, 1998

Master of Arts
Education
Union College, 2001

Committee Chair: Miriam B. Raider-Roth, Ed.D.
Abstract

This study examined the methods and markers queer students use to evaluate a university climate as an outsider during the admission process as well as the means they use to become a member of a particular campus community. The multifaceted results of this dissertation highlight students’ exploration of the complex notion of safety as a method of interpersonal discovery as well as a process for choosing specific campus spaces. Particularly, the time these students spent choosing a college, as well as the time they spent in relationship with the college campus climate, demonstrated the significant social and psychological impact a campus has upon the students that enroll. The findings of this study highlight particular assertions that demonstrate: that students construct means for feeling safe to hide, explore, and express their sexual orientation on campus; that LGBTQ students often keep part of their authentic selves out of relationships in order to retain the relationships that are available to them; and an emergent discussion that highlights that the inability to find self and be authentic in the classroom has significant impacts on learning.

By using qualitative and action research methods, this study was able to highlight queer students’ subjective characterizations of safety and how it allowed them a broad range of possibilities—from an environment’s ability to encourage a student to hide their sexuality to the opposite extreme that allows for an open exploration of sexuality. This research also emphasizes the impact made on student learning, social development, and relational competence. Specifically, for students to experience the full and broad impact of the college campus, there must be a two-way expression of thoughts and feelings where everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened.
This work also demonstrates that while some students, despite a negative environment, do find resilience and relationships in certain spaces on campus, many students, due to the obstacles highlighted in this study, are unable to navigate the path toward finding positive, inclusive academic and campus connections. If students have spaces that are safe—where queer students are openly accepted—then they will not have to spend so much effort creating and finding safe spaces. The data presented in this study demonstrate the impact of safety not only on college choice but also on the ability to authentically integrate into a campus climate. The implications of this work underscore the power of, and need for, well thought out and inclusive space; fundamentally, safe spaces come about when they are designed by a broad range of LGBTQ students that fully represent inclusive voices—when people reexamine what they think we know about safety, they then find the means to construct safe space that serves all members of the community.
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Billy J Hensley
For:

Kyle R. Gullion
All students who seek safe spaces
Acknowledgements

I can hardly believe I am at this point in my academic journey. The path I have taken to get here is filled with literally hundreds of people that have made a lasting impact on me. By way of meaningful, growth-fostering relationships with family, friends, teachers, colleagues, and my cultural heritage, I am truly a better person. Also, the relationship I have with faith and spirituality is at the cornerstone of all connections in my life—without being open to the people that have been placed by a Higher Power in my life, I would never have been able to take this particular academic track. So, I’m deeply thankful to the Creator for placing me within the journey of so many wonderful people.

The timing of this work has come together with a greater sense of social change at the university. The students and staff with whom I have worked provided the true stamina for this inquiry. My ability to reach this point in my academic career could never have been realized had it not been for the many students and staff who agreed to participate in this dissertation study. The students that are highlighted prominently in this work, as well as those not mentioned specifically, are to be commended for their courage to speak about their experiences and their willingness to share their stories. I share my appreciation and thanks to all those who contributed and all those who continue to make change.

Academic Community

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standards to which she holds me (and others) accountable. She truly honors those of us who seek knowledge and relationship within the academy. I am so grateful that her arrival at UC coincided with my own and that we have been able to journey together. Also, had it not been for her, I may never have discovered the true wonder of the Listening Guide. I am unable to thank her enough for all her comprehensive feedback, support, guidance, and friendship. I look forward to a life-long association with Miriam as a colleague and friend.

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Friends

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many days we spent together illustrate what this research says, that people grow when
they have authentic, mutual relationships. Crystal and Diane have both always been so

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generous in their support and love for me and for my dreams. I would never have known
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Family

I love my family. I do not remember a time in my life when they squelched my
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would have never been able to be at this point in my life, submitting a dissertation. My
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about being a qualitative scientist.

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which I finally found my academic “place.” She always pushed me to give my best and
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Diversity is a prevalent issue on college campuses and is usually included within mission statements and strategic plans. A central component of diversity should be creating a climate where students (and employees for that matter) feel comfortable and safe to be themselves without retribution for various aspects of their individual identity, race, class, religion, and sexuality. The recent focus on diversity and discrimination policies on college campuses is of particular interest to my research agenda regarding campus climate for those labeled as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). More and more people are advocating for inclusive policies in hopes that universities become places where all students are free to bring their authentic-selves to all settings across college campuses. While colleges are full of discriminatory practices and are typically a hostile climate for LGBTQ students (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996; Herek, 1993; Rankin, 2003; Rhoads, 1994; Sherrill and Hardesty, 1994), many still choose to disclose (and explore) their sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression while in college (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996).

There is an explicit need to examine the research that highlights the social climate of diverse perspectives for colleges in general, while also more specifically probing the experiences of LGBTQ persons within the university-context. This largely overlooked population and context has allowed the research literature to perpetuate the notion of heterosexuality as “normal” or “right” while ultimately making clear choices on who and what not to research. It is with the motivation to bring to light a specific and important
experience—that of the LGBTQ college student—that I probe into the literature that is currently available. While this research topic is experiencing a publishing growth in quantity and quality, the LGBTQ college student’s experience is still largely unexamined when compared to various other diversity topics and points of view within the literature on campus climate.

Research Questions

This inquiry intended to: (1) understand the selection methods and social factors involved in how a sample of LGBTQ students evaluate the campus climate toward sexual minorities; and (2) seek out the social factors ultimately informed their decision to become a member of that university community. Since this research sought information that is relational in nature, the myriad laundry list of college admission “search tips” provided little to no insight into issues of interpersonal development as they relate to college choice and campus climate. By building on work that has been done by various scholars from many fields and disciplines, this research positioned the need to address college choice and campus climate’s impact from the point of view of LGBTQ students’ experience with and within campus relationships. In other words, the goal of this inquiry was to build a relationship with LGBTQ students, to gain insight from their experience, and to craft an agency toward social change on a college campus.

Becoming a Researcher

Choosing the abovementioned research questions did not happen arbitrarily. My own experiences with schooling as well as my professional pursuits within higher
education have ultimately influenced the direction from which this dissertation began. So, a more thorough discussion of my own journey toward asking these questions provides greater insight to my own position and reflexivity.

My interest in this research project stems from questions relating to the campus climate toward (and even among) sexual minorities. I am also interested in how sexual minorities seek out a university and what markers they use to gauge how accepting a campus will be for them. My interest in this stems from my previous experience working in college admission and college access as well as my own personal journey in college as a closeted and out gay man. This investigation is an assimilation of my academic and professional interests in campus climate for LGBTQ students, the approach students use to select a college, and the cultural context of educational settings. Specifically, several students end up at colleges that expel them based on their sexual orientation. I want to know more about how and why students end up at the schools they do.

*The Power of Confidence*

I was never in the “Gifted and Talented” program, nor did I win the highest grade point average in any of my classes. Nonetheless, I did fairly well and usually brought home decent grades. Despite always being told I was smart by family and friends, I never felt smart. I suppose at one time I associated being smart with getting a 4.0 every term; I had never been introduced to the idea that not all students learn the same nor should they all be measured the same. I am not sure that grades were paramount to my learning anyway. Essentially, I never felt completely comfortable in the classroom. Without a thorough examination of the factors that caused me to feel this way, I do not want to suppose the reasons here. However, when I reflected on the times and places—from
elementary school to college—that I felt affirmed and optimistic about the school environment, I discovered it was when I was with people that felt approachable that I was most at ease.

The ease that came from these “open” and “comfortable” people seemed to give me the confidence that grades could not. Sitting in the back corner of the classroom with all my female pals laughing and having fun was always a time I felt comfortable at school. These girls, and later women, seemed to love me and enjoy me no matter what. Considering all the bullying I faced in school from the boys, the social refuge I had when spending time with my girl pals was at the heart of the development of my social confidence. While this dissertation is not about bullying per se, my own quest to find comfortable spaces began very early in my schooling experience, as others’ experiences of this quest are discussed later in this dissertation.

The confidence I found socially in school with my female friends was not the only bright spot in school. I also found teachers that felt open and comfortable. Gail Lewis, my eighth grade teacher (we had self-contained classes in my elementary school), for example, seemed to set me apart from other students. Her way of including me in class conversations and the encouraging notes she would write to me were some of the first times I truly felt special as a student-learner. She never played favorites, nor did she stroke my ego. She simply displayed a kindness to me that made me feel wanted and needed in the classroom. I had many wonderful teachers in elementary school, but it was Gail’s attempt at including me that truly made me feel special. I felt more comfortable with her than with any other teacher up to that point.
I had also teachers in high school that took me under their wing, mostly female. The traits they displayed were similar and they always felt approachable, as I never felt like I had to censor my mannerisms or my sense of humor around them. I am still amazed that despite the bullying and fear I felt in school—times between classes were the most stressful—that I was able to gain confidence and have meaningful academic and social relationships.

Becoming a Student

I often think of the deeply personal and rich encounters individuals have within educational institutions and the social networks these institutions and communities help to foster. I grant much credit to the campus climate of my undergraduate institution in my eventual coming out process and my interest in how colleges create and cultivate a unique “personality.” However, without Upward Bound, I am not sure I would have gotten to that point.

The Upward Bound program works with first-generation (to college) students to help them academically and functionally prepare for college. (I have always said that Upward Bound handed me the 64-color box of crayons when I thought the 8-color box was the only one available.) The program opened me up to the whole new and exciting world of college. It is the experience with this program that I began to figure out the language and social capital needed to navigate college. So, the beginning of my journey to college began with the relationships I made in the summers during high school taking college prep and college-level courses. I learned how to “speak college” and how to navigate the process. Thankfully, that program set me on the path toward ending up at Union College as an undergraduate.
I remember visiting several colleges while in high school, but it was Union (where I spent my Upward Bound summers) that I felt most comfortable. I chose to attend Union because I felt part of something there. People I did not know said hello to me when I was on campus. There was also something about the campus that felt safe. As this dissertation demonstrates, safety is paramount to many students’ college choices.

Prior to enrolling at Union, and even while I was a student, my religious background was of a fundamentalist temperament. However, I knew Union was not a fundamentalist school, but that it did have ties to a Christian denomination. So, spiritually it felt safe as it was Christian affiliated, but more deeply and personally, it felt safe because it was not fundamentalist. The professors in their “earthy” clothes, the students from all over the country, and the stately feel of the Georgian campus were too tempting to resist.

On a very personal level, I knew that I could come to Union and explore different questions, but without being too “tempted” to engage the fullness of all the questions I had. Specifically, I did not want to confront my sexuality, but I did surround myself with people who ultimately were the support system by which I decided to disclose it. It was these people, those with whom I felt comfortable, that I shared many conversations. It was also these people, who were Christian, but were also very different spiritually than I, that I began to be “allowed” to have strong questions and challenge previous beliefs. These friends and faculty cared for me and helped me as I stumbled around my own core beliefs. They allowed me to disagree and allowed me to eventually confront my biggest concern, if I can be gay and Christian simultaneously. Had I decided to attend a school that was seen as liberal or in a large city, I am not sure I could have handled such a
sudden change. In many ways, I see part of my journey in each of the students’ accounts presented in this work.

I saw many students navigate the college choice process while I worked in admissions. Financial-aid packages, academic credentials, and geography were important factors influencing students’ choice of particular collegiate settings; however, many students’ path, as well as my own journey, led them to choose a place that “felt right.” As I think back to my college search and campus visits, it was the college that felt most comfortable that I ultimately selected. I also saw this process happen many times with students who where considering several admission factors, often including social influences. My academic pursuit with this line of inquiry has sought to more articulately understand and identify what tells LGBTQ students that a college is “right” or “comfortable” for them in a socio-cultural context. So, from my own experiences I have merged my interest in research that facilitates action and change with the desire to give individuals and groups the right and opportunity to be heard.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First of all, the findings are not meant to be generalized to that of all college campuses and to all LGBTQ students. However, this work has intended to provide a snapshot into a particular university at a particular time. Also, the students that participated in this study are not meant to represent all LGBTQ students. But, their insights can be used to highlight the struggles and triumphs that can happen when students are in and out of connection. This work is deeply personal and
gives depth of understanding into a sample of queer students at a large, urban university in a medium sized city in the Midwest.

Plan of the Dissertation

The chapter that follows presents a review of the literature concerning the campus climate of higher education institutions as well as a discussion of the theory that guided this work, Relational-Cultural Theory. Chapter three provides a thorough discussion of the research methods used in this study while defining the means for inclusion and action for and with the research participants. Chapters four through seven provide analysis of four participants, one chapter per case, who provide particularly significant insight to understanding the influence safety has on college choice. Chapter eight shares an examination of important cross cases themes uncovered during the course of this study. Lastly, chapter nine presents a discussion of the implications of the data analysis for higher education and also highlights the ongoing agenda of this work.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Campus Climate

In order to move forward, it is important to obtain a comprehensive definition of what is meant by the term \textit{campus climate} within the higher education context. Since the terminology will be used extensively throughout this review, and since the literature for this review exists across several fields, a broad and cross-disciplinary understanding of this term should be used. So, I used the work of scholars from several fields of study (at an intersection of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and education) to share the meaning of climate that is suited for work within higher education institutions.

Schein (1985) says that studying the climate of an institution provides insight into the culture of a setting, by examining the beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations shared by members of the institution that are sustained over time. Climates represent the observable practices, routines, and behaviors that act to socialize and perpetuate cultural beliefs and values to individuals in a setting (Guion, 1973). The climate of an institution can also be conceptualized as a psychologically meaningful depiction of the institution’s atmosphere (Pargament, Silverman, Johnson, Echemendia, & Snyder, 1983). In a more specific discussion of a university-context and while discussing LGBTQ issues, Susan Rankin (2005) defines campus climate as the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students within a college environment that concerns access to, inclusion of, and levels of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential.
The terms climate and culture are often used interchangeably within the literature concerning campus life of students—and specifically in the research discussing LGBTQ students. While some works characterize culture and others describe climate, the intent is to frame standards and rules of behavior within a specific context. For example, Kuh and Whitt (1988) define culture as “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus” (pp. 12-13). Giroux (1983) included the concepts of power and influence in his definition of culture, in that culture exists “within a social sphere of contestation and struggle, a sphere rooted in a complex of power relations that influence and condition lived experience” (p. 164). Therefore, as defined here, culture is a dynamic entity where power and influence help to determine proper frames of reference and suitable “rules” of behavior (and response toward) a range of situations and people.

Models of school organizational climate (specifically within K-12 schools) have been used to describe the social and academic systems that make up school settings in ways that parallel the technique psychologists use to describe human personalities and attributes (Trickett & Moos, 1973). The climate of a setting can be viewed, for example, as supportive or non-supportive, controlling or open, or as embodying particular ideologies or philosophies around the ways its members should interact. This gives particular insight to the ways in which campus climates can impact the “mood” or “feeling” of a particular university. It is also important to consider the impact climate has on diversity in general within a campus. Since student development and environmental
studies indicate that students from different social groups likely perceive campus environments differently (Chang, 2003; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Rankin & Reason, 2005), the way we examine campus climates must, consequently, incorporate differences based on group membership (Rankin, 2006).

Diversity

When I began conducting literature reviews of the prevalent themes relating to university campus climates, I noticed that topics relating to diversity are decidedly present. Specifically, there is a substantial literature on diversity issues within the racial, and to a much smaller extent gender and sexual orientation, experience within the context of the college campus climate. Simply, an array of research has focused on the experiences and perceptions of the campus climate of those from various racial heritages (Arnold, 2004; Chang, 2002, 2003; Chavous; 2005; Cheng, 2004) as well as that of perceptions of numerous variables that impact campus climate and culture from the point of view of women (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1992).

For example, the institutional climate at a university has been shown to wield a potent influence on students’ perceptions and attitudes concerning other groups (Hurtado & Dey, 1997). Studies have also drawn a positive association between students who perceive a non-discriminatory racial environment and their levels of openness to diversity during the first three years of college (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). Also, Miller, Anderson, Cannon, Perez, and Moore (1998) found significant differences in perceptions of campus policies by racial identity.
Several studies highlight the influence the campus climate has on the negative perceptions and experiences of students; however, others have shown the university climate’s potential to shape a positive perception as well as the influence this has on retention and persistence rates (Tinto, 1999). Cheng and Zhao (2006) indicate that the campus social environment affects the ability to work with and respect multicultural groups in the community, indicating that an inclusive or “positive” environment toward diversity influences students’ openness to diverse groups. Chang (2002), for instance, found lower levels of racism among students who completed coursework that included materials and readings across multiple group domains (e.g., gender, race, and sexual orientation).

The ability of a campus climate to have positive influence on student perception is not limited to race. Campuses that value sexual orientation diversity, as evidenced through programming and student services, provide a strong catalyst for promoting positive attitudinal change (Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007). The surrounding social and group norms (campus climate) play an essential role in this process. Engberg, et al. demonstrate that students’ interactions with LGB (they did not include transgender or queer identity) peers in college not only directly promote more positive LGB attitudes, but indirectly foster positive growth by decreasing student’s level of anxiety about LGB persons while fostering an increased awareness of one’s multiple social identities.

Unfortunately, research demonstrates that cross-group interactions may be rare and that LGBTQ students and students of color often report hostile campus climates (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Kelig, 2004; Rankin, 2003). It is evident the important role campus climate plays in the perceptions of,
and experience with, campus climate and how the varied discernment of the climate impacts students in different ways. For instance, Miller, et al. (1998) found that Caucasian students described their campus racial climate as positive while African American students rated their campus racial climate as more negative. Even more telling is the finding that African American and other students of color described interracial interactions on campus as less friendly and reported being the targets of racism.

**Race**

As stated earlier, there are several studies that highlight the campus climate from various racial points of view. Regrettably, diversity related issues continue to be the primary sources of conflict on campuses in the United States (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Levine & Cureton, 1998). Students from different communities of color have been found to have varying perceptions of the levels of racial tension on campus (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera & Nora, 1994), which highlights the multiple levels of discrimination that occur on campuses. For example, African American students reported experiencing more discriminatory incidents than did Latina/o, Asian, or White students (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003).

There seems to be a hierarchy of discrimination in regards to race that is documented in the research literature. A more specific instance of this signifies that Caucasian students’ attitudes about cross-group interactions vary by the ethnic/racial groups involved—thus showing that Caucasian students were willing to have closer social distance with Asian Americans than with Hispanic Americans or African Americans (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; McClelland & Auster, 1990). In other words,
Caucasian students do not equally accept nor reject racial groups of which they are not a member.

As previously stated, research suggests that Caucasian students and ethnic minority students at the same institution often experience different racial climates. In regards to intergroup interaction, Caucasian students tend to report more positive perceptions of intergroup relationships and diversity norms at their institutions than do African Americans (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Also, others suggest that students may be similar in their views about particular aspects of the campus environment, but they may differ regarding aspects of the racial climate. Loo and Rolison (1986) for instance, found that minority students (African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans) and Caucasian students were in agreement regarding the existence of socio-cultural difficulties among students, but that Caucasian students perceived that there were greater levels of university support for minorities than the ethnic minority students perceived. There are similar disagreements between LGBTQ students and heterosexual students (Waldo, 1998).

Sexual Orientation

At the outset, studies concerning LGBTQ students have many challenges. The limited number of students who disclose their sexual identity status as something other than heterosexual makes LGBTQ students difficult to reach—essentially invisible—on campus (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson, 2000). Even those students that participate in research studies are not always “out” about their sexual orientation—as outness has been conceptualized as the disclosure of sexual orientation to others (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994). Researchers often face the problem of finding participants because so
many students are not willing to disclose their sexual orientation to anyone—even if the study guarantees anonymity. Cultural influences can also add to a person’s desire to keep his or her LGBTQ sexual identity invisible. Gay and lesbian African Americans, for example, experience a great deal of cultural pressure to conceal their sexual orientation (Evans & Broido, 2002; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000) and are often not heard or are underrepresented within research about LGBTQ issues.

A paradox seems to exist within research on LGBTQ issues and topics (in various settings). Since researchers tend to study only those students who are comfortable with disclosing their sexual orientation, the actual portrait of experience that is drawn displays only the experience of out students. Unfortunately, the numerous people that are not out are left unheard and the experience of “closeted” persons (those who do not disclose their sexual orientation to others) goes unheard. The irony here lies with the vast need to give voice to those who are so deeply silenced, but researchers are struggling to find a way to represent the silenced without compromising privacy or creating undue stress on the LGBTQ person. In some instances closeted students’ experiences may be more telling of various factors that contribute to their silence and, as a consequence, may divulge more about the campus climate. Despite this barrier, it is important to continue LGBTQ research and to continue to find ways to overcome these many obstacles. If we continue research with alternative sexual orientation and gender identity students, we will further legitimize a population that has been traditionally ignored (Bieschke et al., 2000).

Evans and Wall (2000) conducted a literature review of empirical research on LGB (again, there was an absence of transgender and queer identities) college students and identified three emergent themes. These themes are: campus experience, identity
development, and health concerns. I found similar themes, with most work being focused on campus experience and identity development (Hensley, 2007, 2008). It is the literature on campus experience that paints a picture of the climate for LGBTQ students at universities in the United States. This image is not encouraging. Hurtado, Maestas, Hill, Inkeles, Wathington and Meader (1998), for instance, found that lesbians and gays comprise the minority group most likely to be portrayed negatively in campus-affiliated activities.

On some college campuses, LGBTQ persons comprise a significant minority group, and receive considerably less attention and limited services than do other groups (Evans & Wall, 2000). Universities and colleges, as microcosms of society, reflect the biases and prejudices toward LGBTQ people (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway and Savage, 2002). Croteau and Lark (1995) found, as compared to other areas of diversity (e.g., gender, age, and race/ethnicity), faculty and students have lower levels of knowledge, skills, and comfort with LGBTQ issues. In this study, both faculty and graduate students felt more proficient in working with and teaching about women and least skilled in working with or teaching about LGBTQ people. College staff members had similar patterns to graduate students and faculty with the exception that staff members’ comfort level subscale scores were nearly the same for ethnicity and sexual orientation. Interestingly, Croteau and Lark (1995) also found that there is a positive relationship between faculty’s level of knowledge, skills, and comfort with sexual orientation and their students’ level of knowledge, skill, and comfort. The disturbing influence of this is a study that found at one large university, 25% of the employees expressed explicitly negative responses in a survey about LGB (did not include transgender or queer) issues.
(Eliason, 1996). So, since there is a relationship between faculty comfort and student comfort, various attitudes (positive, negative, and indifferent) will be perpetuated and influenced.

Research on the LGBTQ campus climate centers primarily on LGBTQ perspectives on the climate as well as heterosexual attitudes toward LGBTQ people. This research points to a campus climate ordered by heterosexism and homophobia. LGBTQ students describe barriers to higher education and individual development, including the fear of being outed, isolation, verbal harassment, and physical violence (Howard & Stevens, 2000). The perception of a campus climate plays a large role in students’ educational experiences and outcomes (Rankin, 2006). Waldo (1998) states that non-heterosexual students perceive the college climate as less accepting and as providing them with less respect than received by fellow students who were heterosexual. Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, Robinson-Keilig (2004), in their assessment of campus climate, share a similar finding that students report greater perceptions of attitudes on the college campus that are anti-LGBTQ.

A study by Susan Rankin (2003) on campus climates for LGBTQ students discovered that almost one-fifth of the participants feared for their physical safety because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and that more than one-third of LGBTQ students at 14 progressive campuses (those that have policies, staff and programming that are LGBTQ-supportive) experienced harassment within the last year alone. I cannot help but wonder how these statistics may change at less-supportive universities. She also found that 51 percent of those in her study concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation. Sherrill and Hardesty (1994) found
that LGBTQ students are nearly three times as likely to be victimized while a student on campus, while Rankin (2003) notes that those who experienced harassment reported that derogatory remarks were the most common form (89 percent) and that students were most often the source of harassment (79 percent). She also explicitly spells out the various other forms of harassment including threats, graffiti, and physical assaults. What troubles me is if 79 percent of the harassment comes from students, the source of the other 21 percent must be coming from the remaining members of the campus community—the employees. In a similar study, D’Augelli (1992) found that 77% of LGBTQ college students had been verbally harassed and 27% had been threatened with physical violence.

Not all campus harassment is so blatant. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1997) tested Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) notion of more subtle, aversive forms of bias across situational contexts on college campuses and found that “intense negative prejudicial attitudes” (p.572) toward lesbians and gays are prevalent in the college environment. Evans and Broido (2002) found that, for women (specifically lesbians and bisexuals), on-campus harassments were more subtle than direct. Given that the women responded by feeling afraid, distancing themselves from others, and hiding their true identities, this persecution is classified as emotional harassment—though not overt, this form of harassment is as significant and harmful as more obvious forms of persecution and discrimination. Also, it is important to consider that these statistics and various discussions of harassment only account for those that actually report or discuss the occurrences.
Researchers have also investigated whether gender, ethnicity, and religion affect attitudes toward LGBTQ people. Studies consistently report that heterosexual women possess less intense negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people than do heterosexual men (Brown, et al., 2004; Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007; Herek, 2002; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Holley, Larson, Adelman, & Trevino, 2007; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997). Herek (1988) suggests that a woman’s acceptance of sexual diversity is often a result of direct exposure, and Gilligan (1981) posits that a woman’s capacity for empathy and perspective-taking dismantle prejudicial barriers that often precipitate social distancing. A study of social work and counseling graduate students found that students who identified with conservative Christian denominations held the most negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and that women, Whites, and those who were Jewish or claimed no religious identity were more accepting (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002).

Herek (2002) found that White heterosexual women had less negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people than did White men and women and men of color. Despite some of the other studies that imply all racial minorities are less accepting of LGBTQ students, Waldo (1998) found that African American undergraduates were more supportive than their Caucasian peers of policies that affirm LGBTQ students and were more open than Whites to interpersonal contact with LGBTQ students, but that Asian American and international graduate students were less open than their domestic white peers to personal interaction with LGBTQ students. This same study found that Christian and male undergraduates were less open to such contact than non-Christian and female undergraduates. Similarly, Lopez & Chism (1993) found that Evangelical groups and
fraternities are identified as frequent participants in hostile behavior toward LGBTQ students.

Not all studies indicate there are differences in attitudes toward LGBTQ students based on gender or curricular variables. Cotten-Huston & Waite (2000) indicate that attitudes toward non-heterosexuals were significantly predicted by gender role attitudes, personal acquaintance with a gay man, lesbian, or bisexual person, and religious conviction. However, the study states that gender, gender role orientation, age, prior participation in a workshop on homosexuality, sexual experience, and college courses were not significant predictors.

In the literature there is a noticed difference of perception and acceptance of and toward LGBTQ students based on student classification level. For example, upper classmen are shown to be more accepting toward LGBTQ students than lower classmen. Juniors and seniors had a significantly more positive attitude towards gays and lesbians than did freshmen and sophomores. In multi-variant analysis, upper-level students had more positive views on many of the attitudinal measures toward LGBTQ students (Brown et al., 2004; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Lambert, Ventura, Hall, & Cluse-Tolar, 2006; Lopez & Chism, 1993).

Even within the guise of policies that are supposedly supportive of sexual orientation diversity, there is hardly a mention of transgender student needs. There is a universal lack of transgender resources at most colleges while seemingly showing a lack of knowledge or interest in transgender student concerns. Resources, such as gender-neutral restrooms and recreational facilities, knowledgeable faculty and staff (especially at counseling and health-care centers), student groups for transgender students, a well-
funded LGBTQ center (one that focuses on all letters—not just LGB), and responsive student affairs professionals are usually quite absent from colleges and universities. For colleges to be responsive to the needs of transgender students, each of the resources listed above are identified as important to transgender students (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Domingue, Perritt, & Smith, 2005; McKinney, 2005).

So, while many colleges are working toward increased awareness and increased services for lesbian, gay and bisexual students, there is still an underlying hierarchical discrimination that says that some students needs (even those LGB students who are greatly ignored) are more valued than others (those who are transgender). As a side note, it is important to observe that the discrimination hierarchy is also evident within statistical reporting on campus climate. For example, although 28 percent of non-transgender LGB men and women reported experiencing harassment, a significantly higher proportion of transgender respondents (41 percent) accounted incidents of harassment (Rankin, 2005).

Impact on LGBTQ Student Learning

Research suggests that learning is affected by social context, including whether or not the learning environment is encouraging and supportive (Tiberius and Billson, 1991). Learning is enhanced when students feel validated (Rendón, 1994) and when they experience positive interactions with both students and faculty while inside and outside the classroom. Because of the negative environments toward LGBTQ students, they often live in fear and question what others think of them. To ensure that LGBTQ students are afforded opportunities to learn equivalent to those of other students, faculty must take an active role in creating a supportive climate (Evans, 2000).
Often the preoccupation over whether or not to come out overtakes the attention to courses and interferes with learning. In order for learning to occur without obstacle, LGBTQ students must feel that they are safe, valued, and supported (Evans, 2000). In the Lopez and Chism (1993) study, students reported that they continually think about their identity and that coming out had an impact on school performance and activities. The stress experienced during the initial stages of coming out diverted students from their studies, resulting in declining school performance. This drift continued for some students even as they came to terms with a more disclosed LGBTQ identity. Eventually, the students became more involved in activities and social experiences that were previously perceived to be closed to them and also reported that their grades did rise. Clearly, in an encouraging environment where students feel valued, safe, and supported, their academic experience improves.

When students are coming out and possibly seeing a decline in their grades, having faculty that are understanding and aware of these pressures will strengthen students’ campus learning experience (Evans, 2000; Lopez & Chism, 1993). Students share that within the LGBTQ community, information is shared continually on which instructors, courses, and departments are supportive or homophobic (1993). Students also report that often faculty make assumptions of a traditional heterosexual family while denying the experience of all but heterosexual individuals (1993).

There is a broad array of exclusion and inclusion of LGBTQ themes within curricula. Connolly (2000) expanded De Surra and Church’s (1994) marginalization continuum model of the classroom experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. The continuum provides a more explicit discussion that highlights the negative and
positive influences the classroom context can have on LGBTQ students. The continuum says that within the college classroom, *Explicit Marginalization, Implicit Marginalization, Implicit Centralization, and Explicit Centralization* occurs. Evans (2000) shared this discussion and defined each marker along the continuum. *Explicit marginalization* occurs in classrooms where faculty or other students make homophobic statements that go unchallenged. This is also evident in the omission of material on LGBTQ topics in courses that warrant their inclusion, such as courses in human sexuality. *Implicit marginalization* consists of indirect and covert messages that LGBTQ orientations are abnormal and not worthy of consideration except as examples illustrating deviance. While LGBTQ individuals are not directly attacked, neither are LGBTQ issues openly acknowledged. *Implicit centralization* occurs when instructors confront homophobic or heterosexist comments when they are made by students. They may also point out heterosexist assumptions in course reading material or support gay, lesbian, or bisexual students’ statements related to sexual orientation issues. Finally, *explicit centralization* occurs in classrooms where instructors actively support LGBTQ students by intentionally including material on LGBTQ topics. Here, language and examples used in class are inclusive while faculty deliberately create and model a climate in which all perspectives are heard and valued.

Some theorists challenge the notion of explicitly commenting on sexuality in the classroom due to the question of which and what families and sexualities are valued. Sapon-Shevin (1999) questions how to “represent same-sex partnerships as normative or unremarkable in a world in which they must be remarked upon in order to become part of the conversation” (p.121). Letts (1999) goes so far as to say that the issue is not “whether
certain students are gay or straight, but what identities are validated and made available to students and how these children take them up” (p.106) in regards to identity formation. For example, in Hulsebosch, Koerner and Ryan’s (1999) study, there was a discussion of what specifically is not taught or talked about in schools. Such as using Mother’s Day as an opportunity to address particular families that have either two mothers or no mothers could be an occasion to illustrate diverse families. However, most teachers did not take the opportunity. In this particular study, a teacher states that if the student “had brought up” the issue, she would have done something. Since this notion places the responsibility on the student, only those that are “brought up” by students are mentioned. This is problematic since only those that are remarked upon/included will be validated or “normalized” within the classroom.

This research inquiry has begun to address some of the issues addressed above by providing voice to those largely unheard within the research literature. Specifically, this study represents closeted points of view. This study also addresses the consequences on learning, relational development, and safety for LGBTQ students within the context of higher education climates.

*Relational-Cultural Theory*

Once I began thinking about the problems discussed above and also with the questions I have as a scientist, I considered many theories as a mean for understanding data. Relational-Cultural Theory helped me see the importance of relationships to the experiences of all people. As such, the endeavor to discuss relational feminist theory is
not merely an exercise in educational aptitude; for me this dialogue is a venue by which I am able to establish a foundational understanding of the importance of relationship to inter- and intrapersonal growth. Since before I began my doctoral studies, I felt many people, including myself, were undervalued and silenced with regards to academic research and theory building. I assume this absence has something to do with the highly positivistic and non-inclusive attitude about research and learning that is prevalent in schools. However, when I went to college, I saw that my growth as a person was facilitated by relationships and also by the ability to contextualize my own ways of meaning-making. It was not until I began to be exposed to writings and theory that valued the voice of the individual—by respecting context and expanding the relational experience of all persons—that I began to truly see myself as a scientist with legitimate questions and interests that were “relational” in nature. It was with the “permission” of feminist theory, and more specifically, Relational-Cultural Theory, that I began a fervent quest into academic literature.

Since I am interested in better understanding the LGBTQ-self (within collegial and educational contexts), I find Relational-Cultural Theory especially edifying to my approach and thinking about the research I have done in this dissertation. I concede there are several models of development, of which most are, as is Relational-Cultural Theory, within the psychology literature; however, most of these models do not address a relational, mutual, and comprehensive approach to life-span development. Specifically, the models of “homosexual development” (Cass, 1979, 1984; D’Augelli, 1994) follow the explicit stages of LGBTQ-identity building (which is built on mostly White gay men and lesbian experience and excludes various other racial and gender or sexual
expressions); even theory that follows development beyond the initial coming out phase (D’Augelli, 1994; Rhoads, 1994) focuses primarily on sexual orientation identity growth. Relational-Cultural Theory not only provides a holistic explanation for the developmental growth and/or obstacles associated with LGBTQ persons, but it also addresses their overarching development—inside and outside their sexual identity—and provides enlightenment on the varying experiences of LGBTQ-persons. A few research studies have shown the impact that involvement and relationship with other sexual minorities (LGBTQ persons and LGBTQ groups) has on the growth of the self for LGBTQ individuals (Hensley, 2007, 2008; Renn, 2003; Stevens, 2004); so, a more focused research agenda specifically examining relationships adds greater insight toward understanding the relational nature of development of the self for LGBTQ persons. While no single perspective can comprehensively capture the essence of the evolution of a theory, I trust that my understanding is presented in a format that displays both a historical and foundational overview as well as my own relational understanding of Relational-Cultural Theory.

*Moving Toward a Relational Theory*

Before I discuss Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), it is important to give an overview of a few of the central tenets of feminist theory that resulted in the development of RCT. It seems that from the beginning of psychological and developmental theory-building, there was an unclear recognition of exactly whose experience and development were being discussed and under what conditions (West, 2005). The uncertainty of whose voice was represented within theory-building led many to question which and whose voices were included to represent all of human development. Even voices that seemed
close to my own were not represented accurately, or even at all, within academic literature. Many early theorists with positivistic points of view removed context from the individual and used a male-dominated, pathology-driven approach to development. However, a few theorists began to recognize the interactional and relational factors as a universal consideration toward human development (Fairbairn, 1963; Klein, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1958, 1960). In the beginning, these theories looked at object relations and were flat and un-descriptive and were yet to view relationship as a developmental tool with multi-featured and multi-dimensional notions; however, this was a step toward recognizing the relational components inherent within human development (Robb, 2006; West, 2005).

While building on the idea that relationship is an element of development, several theorists began to reject the notion of a value-free and objective science with omniscient theories that devalue the centrality of relationship (Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1976). Considering that most ideas about the development of the individual were crafted from White, middle-class males, other theorists began to challenge the notion of whose development and within what context those theories were crafted (hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000; Miller, 1976). Miller (1976) essentially said that the lack of understanding of the contextual and relational nature of experiences of women, people of color, and marginalized men led to a lens that pathologized many individuals. It was the lack of context and inclusion for many years that overlooked and ignored the relational factors that actually contribute to the growth and well-being of all people (Robb, 2006).

Fueled by the silence of women and girls voices in particular, some theorists began to challenge the suggestion that people grow by becoming independent. As more
feminist writers (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jordan, 1999; Miller, 1986; Walker, 2003) challenged the Western individualistic notion that growing out of relationship and into “self-sufficiency” is a “mastery” (Jordan, 1999, p.3) of self-development and promotion within a social hierarchy, the notion of relationship as central to learning and human growth began to mature (Robb, 2006). As a result, theorists began to craft ideas of development that explored feminist principles concerning issues of power, voice, and language within a framework while including women and girls in research (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1976). As stated by Spencer (2000), during this paradigm shift in thinking, feminist theorists began to make two general claims about human development: (1) humans are born with innate capacity for, and desire to engage in, relationship with others and (2) an increasing capacity for meaningful connection with others is the focal marker of development of self (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991).

These claims bring awareness about the influence the nature of our relationships has on our individual, cultural, and collective development; this concept becomes an underlying (and central) focus within questions about human growth. In other words, a full understanding of human development can be derived from a thorough illumination of both female and male experience. As such, experiences of connectedness to others lead to greater conceptions of self, morality, and visions of relationship (Gilligan, 1982). However, with this new theory of connection and growth come challenges of multifaceted proportion. For example, Miller (1976) describes the need to develop new language and concepts to illustrate the development of women’s unique experiences and points to the problems of using male development as a universal marker of all
development. Up to that point, terminology about development did not value the relational contributions of psychological growth; Miller recognized the dearth of language available with the capacity to be expressive enough to demonstrate the nature of this distinctive development model. This seemingly simple lack of sufficient language displayed the wide scope of obstacles toward understanding all persons’ development that fueled feminist theorists’ agenda toward an inclusive and respectful premise of human development.

As a means of understanding the notion that growth-fostering relationships are central to all human development, RCT was conceived as a foundation upon which to build theory and deepen the understanding that relational competence is the primary component of the development of self (Surrey, 1985) as well as ideals focused on social change (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salizar, 2008). The feminist principle that I find most fascinating and liberating about RCT is the open condition that allows for many ideas and truths that seek to include various people in a context of clarity. The fact of the matter is that RCT as a model represents a setting for change and flexibility all within a disposition of mutuality, consideration, and respect (all of which will be displayed within a description of relationship). Fundamentally, the opportunity to clarify and inform as a result of the valuing of experience, by means of women listening to women empathically (West, 2005), is the fuel that powered the emergence of RCT within a context of inclusion and social transformation.

RCT is built upon feminist ideals that resist labels and categories that have the potential to be erroneous or misguided, while the tangible process of building RCT (as with any feminist theory) rests on listening and considering-honestly, intelligently, and
respectfully (West, 2005). West draws an analogy of a map when describing the importance of using many voices within theory building. She says,

The working image that comes to mind for me in thinking about feminist theory is one of a large map. This map represents an infinitely intriguing and rich territory too long rendered invisible, ignored or misrepresented. While there are certain elemental guideposts which are critical to its exploration, its boundaries are quite flexible and fluid and many perspectives are required to comprehend and appreciate its terrain. These multiple perspectives—the developing theories—can be envisioned as a series of transparent overlays. Each overlay, each perspective, is uniquely important in its own right; and at the same time each contributes a fuller topography to the map—one atop another, atop another—none singularly whole, separate, static, or competing, but each illuminating, overlapping, providing nuance and texture and expansion, and all together shifting the entire theoretical landscape toward a richer, more thorough understanding of women’s—of human—experience.

(West, 2005, p. 96-97)

She describes the importance of markers for theory exploration, while also stating that the richness of representativeness (valuing of experience—the overlay) that RCT brings, creates a more accurate—some may say principled—method for understanding the individual. Simply, rather than an “objective” other, the individual is the “best authority on her own experience” (West, 2005, p. 96).

This philosophy provides a rationale that highlights the importance of including the individual’s experience. I find the development and historical emergence of RCT a
wonderful example of the ideals upon which it is built. As a case in point, the actual groundwork of RCT came from a small group of women (Judith Jordan, Alexandra Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey) who began meeting in 1978 to discuss the ideas of feminist writers (Robb, 2006). During these meetings, the many discussions about the “centrality of relationship” in development allowed for the emergence of an illuminating theory about women’s growth (West, 2005). It was with these meetings that the groundwork for RCT began as well as the initial model for the actual movement that takes place within the relational nature of the human experience.

Relational Movement

RCT provides an inclusive model of relational development across the life span that can be applied to various settings. As suggested earlier, the RCT model is grounded in the idea that growth takes place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Miller, 1986). Many of the core ideas underlying RCT are articulated in several books written by these theorists (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004; Robb, 2006). Miller et al. (1991) clearly suggest that all growth occurs in connection, that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering relationships are created through a two-way expression of thoughts and feelings (mutual empathy) where everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened (mutual empowerment).

The underlying concepts of RCT are, it seems, most implicit in the context of relationships (relational movement), which is the process of moving through connections; through disconnections; and back into new, transformative, and enhanced connections with others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Being aware of how all relationships move through
these different phases is referred to as “relational awareness.” Acquiring this relational awareness is the first step in developing more sophisticated relational capacities that enable one to identify, deconstruct, and resist disconnections and obstacles to mutual empathy and growth (Comstock, et al., 2008). Through this awareness, one can also see the markers for and obstacles toward growth within various interpersonal and/or intrapersonal contexts.

_Collection_

RCT theorists have clearly stated that all individuals have yearnings for connection, belonging, and social inclusion. Miller (1986), in a work describing what is meant by the term _relationship_, spells out the experience of being in connection with her “five good things” (p.3). Miller says in a healthy relationship:

1. Each person feels a greater sense of zest (vitality, energy);
2. Each person feels more able to act and does act in the world;
3. Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s);
4. Each person feels a greater sense of worth; and
5. Each person feels more connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one’s primary relationships (p. 2).

Miller is characterizing the “interplay” between people is what is important to psychological growth. Accordingly, to typify a growth-fostering relationship one needs all of the five good things (increased zest; increased ability to take action; increased clarity; increased sense of worth; and a desire for more relationships). West (2005) says that the growth that happens between people that exemplify the five good things creates a
“very real, felt creative energy” (p.104). Miller (1986) goes on to support the notion that optimal relational context needs to be based “in the context of mutuality” where people are “granted full value” and where relationships have not been “determined by half of the world’s interpretation of all experience” (p.10). It is with this window that I hope to view the “process” of relationship, as well as seek out the markers of growth within various contexts.

**Disconnection**

A discussion of connection is essential in theorizing human development; however, the places of disconnection—obstacle, silence, hindrance, difficulty, etc.—are where we find the crux of impairment toward our growth. Jordan and Dooley (2000) described the experience of disconnection as the opposite of the five good things. Basically, by disconnection, people have a decrease in energy; they feel unable to act constructively within many aspects of their life; they experience confusion regarding self and others; and a decreased sense of worth actually induces one to avoid (or turn away from) relationships. Depending on the relational context of the disconnections a person experiences with important people in her or his life, and within the larger culture, “these experiences can be accompanied by feelings of shame, fear, frustration, humiliation, and self-blame” (Comstock, et al, 2008, p. 282). Miller and Stiver (1997) convey the concept that chronic relational and/or cultural disconnections promote feelings that create the idea that the individual is actually “locked out of the possibility of human connection” (p.72). One such feeling that wields especially strong obstacle toward connection and that I have found prevalent in the literature is shame. Jordan (1997) defines shame as “a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing
awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others” (p. 147). All in all, these experiences inhibit growth and attainment of the five good things while allowing for those within and outside the relationship an opportunity to identify obstacles toward developmental growth.

There also seems to be a strong indication that those who are disempowered and unable to have voice perpetuate disconnection with others. Realizing that disconnections are an inevitable part of all relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Miller & Stiver, 1997), it is especially important to acknowledge that many persons in marginalized and devalued groups (via racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) perpetuate additional forms of fear and disconnections with others that are not easily scaled (Comstock, et al., 2008). Feelings of disconnection and “condemned isolation” (p. 282) occur within familial and individual relationships as well as within the greater socio-cultural context. The feelings of disconnection are reinforced when individuals from marginalized and devalued groups end up primarily blaming themselves for personal failures that are often linked to factors in the broader cultural context (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Hiding or denying large parts of their life experiences, and relating in-authentically with others in an effort to reconnect in non-mutual relationships (interpersonally and socio-culturally), often becomes a strategy for surviving the emotional distress associated with feelings of condemned isolation (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This experience represents what RCT theorists refer to as the “central relational paradox” (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

**Central Relational Paradox**

Despite the desire of all individuals to have connection, belonging, and social inclusion, RCT theorists state that some individuals use strategies that result in further
disconnection and isolation—thus the term central relational paradox. These strategies are commonly used to avoid risks of hurt, rejection, and other forms of relational disconnection, social exclusion, and marginalization (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Feelings of vulnerability, fear, shame, suspicion, and mistrust make movement into connection difficult, no matter the level of desire to connect with others (Comstock, et al., 2008). In other words, the central relational paradox says that people keep aspects of themselves out of relationship in order to remain in available relationships (Miller, 1988) and so they are inauthentic and silenced.

Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism impede all individuals’ ability to engage and participate in growth-fostering relationships—whether this plays out on a societal level or within a family unit. In essence, when a hurt or less powerful person is unable to be authentically represented in a relationship, or when there is a response of indifference, additional injury, or denial of the experience, they will twist themselves to fit into the relationships available, becoming less and less authentic (Miller, 1988). The various strategies of disconnection are similar to the path that Carol Gilligan outlines for adolescent girls who keep aspects of themselves out of relationship in order to stay in relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990), eventually causing the individual to dread the vulnerability needed in order to fully engage in relationship. Gilligan (1996) calls this dissociation a “brilliant but costly solution” (p. 244).

The power dynamics that play out within various settings (homes, schools, work, etc.) have made for venues that impede Miller’s (1986) five good things. Dominant groups (and even dominant individuals) within relational contexts directly and indirectly limit the power of connection among subordinate groups (Jordan, 1999). Even images
(controlling or otherwise) can prevent connection and growth (Collins, 2000). Jordan (1999) discusses the obstacle that image creates toward being in connection. She says that “preoccupations with images of who we are or who we should be take us out of authentic connection and close us down” (p.5). This especially manifests itself within socially marginalized groups including factors of gender, race, sexuality, or class. Jordan suggests strategies (anti-shaming strategies) for transforming power dynamics that impede authentic connection. These strategies are: 1) naming the problem; 2) complaining; 3) claiming/reframing strengths; and 4) developing communities of resilience and courage. These strategies espouse fundamental elements of social change and giving voice upon which feminist theory is built and upon which marginalized groups/individuals can gain healthy relational growth within once counter-relational settings.

**Including More Voices**

The beginning of RCT theory-building, as with the greater growth of feminist theory, included highly educated, White voices that centrally defined meanings and categories. As such, many voices from those that represented various ethnic, class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and age experiences were largely if not completely silent (Brabeck et al., 1997). West (2005) exemplifies the dilemma with this by asserting that “to have experiences and felt the damaging effects of exclusion and fail to be inclusive could be to merely substitute one paradigmatic caricature for another” (p.98). As the initial RCT theorists recognized their own privilege, they engaged in an inclusion of various perspectives including that of race (Tatum, 1993; Walker, 1999), sexual orientation (Kleinberg, 1986), and men and boys (Bergman, 1991; Gilligan, 1996; Way, 1997, 1998). This struggle with finding a way to express and represent many voices,
models the relatedness and interconnectedness that RCT theory seeks. However, it is important to note that development is not fully understood when viewed from outside the particular cultural context within which it occurs. Spencer (2000) says it well:

Just as the self cannot be understood apart from a relational context, these literatures all assert that developmental processes cannot be fully understood outside of the cultural context within which they occur. Though much more work is needed in this area, the emphasis on understanding the interrelatedness of psyche and culture in relational theory provides rich possibilities for a deeper understanding of psychological development as embedded within the cultural contexts within which it occurs (p. 16).

It seems that as a more comprehensive representation of voice is sought, a deeper and more accurate understanding of relational experience for all will be attained.

RCT and feminist theory have grown in comprehension and clarity, but there are many aspects of the work that are incomplete and even unexamined. The power-over paradigm that girds the majority of empirical writing limits the questions that are being asked as well as “truths” that are considered credible (West, 2005). Until power, as defined by Jean Baker Miller (Miller & Stiver, 1997), is understood as “the capacity to produce a change” (p. 198), several points of view will not be empowered toward a more broad, mutually defined (or at least considered) truth(s).

Despite being a venue for voice and empowerment, RCT has paid most attention to adult relationships, with the exception of some work on adolescents. A few writers are doing research with childhood relationships in schools (Raider-Roth, 2005a, 2005b; Raider-Roth, et al., 2008), but a more comprehensive body of work should include the
relationships of children—the most powerless group in our society. I also concede that by my own limited lens of viewing research, schooling, and the greater society, there are voices and points of view that I am unable to even realize are absent. It is with the spirit of the RCT and feminist theory ideals that I consider my own limits to knowing whose voice is not present while continuing to seek those voices out. If we continue to espouse the notion of the importance of empowerment, hopefully RCT will continue to seek out those who are unheard.
The Role of Researcher: My Background

I have been very fortunate to take several research methods courses over the last few years. These courses have exposed me to various methods of conducting and interpreting research data. My own personal interests and goals in research surround my curiosity regarding relationships and how these are translated through campus climate, schooling, and identity. It is becoming more difficult for me to picture research without data that are reflected from relational methods. Also, it is becoming more difficult to picture research without the considerations that relational methods bring to light, such as meaning making, voice, and power. By exploring my own issues of power, personal values, and self-reflection, I feel that I have been able to work with study participants to create a collaborative and personally meaningful research agenda.

I will be remiss if I do not mention the initial journey that led me toward the path to finding relational, respectful, and collaborative research methods that value voice and the individual’s knowledge. It was the virtual “coming out” process where I proclaimed myself as an academic interested in social justice issues that my journey toward relational methodologies began. As with any researcher interested in relationships, my journey started with a conversation. The conversation began with Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller just a couple of weeks into my doctoral studies. In order to get to know her a little better, I scheduled some time to chat with her and listen to her research and teaching interests. It was during this conversation when she, quite to my surprise, stated that I had already
been doing research—action research. This was moving, shocking, and pleasing all at the same time. To hear from a research professor that, by way of my previous work experience, I had been engaged in research was startling to say the least. I had never approached my work in college access as research nor had I ever been exposed to the idea that my work with community-based college access programs was considered research. My previous notions of research methodology and science were rooted in (and limited to) the positivistic “value-free” science lab, complete with control groups and white coats.

The work I did prior to graduate school was focused on communities in Ohio interested in building locally-based college access organizations. These emerging non-profit organizations began from initial interest within a community to work with the local population to make college more accessible and available to their neighbors. Usually at the center as advocate and resource, I worked with chambers of commerce, higher education institutions, local funders, and various others to build a locally appropriate organization that sought to provide various counseling (financial, social, etc.) venues to create a more seamless transition from high school or work to college. As I told Dr. Brydon-Miller, I was the advocate of the local community in our office and usually had to push back on my employer to try to understand and trust the local people to know how best to design and administer their organization in regards to their own community requirements. It was especially difficult for Appalachian Ohioans to apply the college access “model” based on best practices developed in the urban areas of the state. I told Dr. Brydon-Miller that I always became frustrated that we (and others in my professional circles) would never ask or build champions in the community to deal with community concerns; we always seemed to bring our “best practices” into communities expecting
them to have the same success or to immediately embrace a model that culturally and financially could never really work for them.

The reason I was (and still am) sensitive to the dynamic I mention above comes from growing up in a community that was often forced to fit within policy and practice (in and out of education) of those who did not fully understand local nuances and context. While sharing this frustration with Dr. Brydon-Miller (and later Dr. Raider-Roth) I talked about how mixing my social justice agenda with my scientific study did not seem to “fit” within my previous notions of research. Both professors, each in her own way, shared with me the tenets of action research (and later relational methods) via theoretical readings and later in research methods courses with Dr. Raider-Roth. The more I read, the happier I felt. For the first time in my life, I felt like my own beliefs were represented within a mode of research inquiry that I had never previously known or had even considered possible. The fact that there is a body of research and theory that values the knowledge and expertise of the individual and that it seeks to provide venue for voice is exhilarating.

So, with an interest to consider others’ voices and to acknowledge that individuals are the best authority of their own voice and experience, I have sought to impact change while also taking into consideration local understanding. Action research methods and feminist, relational methods (the Listening Guide) have allowed me the opportunity to examine these issues with specified populations in hopes of working toward improving the climate and understanding of those individuals’ experiences by taking the findings to the community for an action plan. My place in research at this time has allowed me the opportunity to work with students that represent populations that are not readily present
in academic research literature. By this I have been able to better understand these populations and in turn provide a venue for them to better understand themselves. With an improved understanding of self within a greater school culture, I have started to see climate and policy change for the students I have worked with and continue to work with during my dissertation study.

As I struggle to carve out an academic “home” for myself, I am very aware of my own naïve assumptions about research. However, if I have learned anything so far, it is to not place my own assumptions on others’ words or meanings and that research participants will take me (and the research topic) to rich and insightful places that I could never consider or construct on my own. As a result, I have continually, it seems, taken time to reflect on where I am in thinking about research, how I relate to my research interests and questions, and what my experiences in life and in research mean to all of it. Brydon-Miller (2007) says that the need to understand ourselves and where we fit is especially important for all researchers; researchers that are “insiders” within their inquiry need to understand how they relate to those research partners within the community. Specifically, during the course of this work, I have spent much time thinking about how I fit into my research questions—as a sexual minority, as a male, and also as a member of a university community as a student and as a person with “power” and influence.

Recruitment

This study used qualitative action research methods as a means to more deeply understand the assessment of campus climate by non-heterosexuals who are enrolled in an institution of higher education. As principal researcher, I collected data by using a
homogenous sampling plan (Patton, 2002). As such, I conducted up to two hour-long one-on-one in-depth interviews with six participants (Appendix A shows the initial interview guide), distributed and collected an open-ended qualitative survey (Appendix B shows the survey and Appendix C shows the consent for the survey), and facilitated a focus group of nine students (Appendix D shows the focus group discussion guide), all of whom represent a sample of LGBTQ students at a large, urban, public Midwestern university.

Initially, as a means to gain entrée, I met with the director of the Women’s Center and the sponsor of the queer social groups on the campus of the University of Midwest (UM) to discuss the research project. After meeting with the sponsor of the queer organizations and the director of the UM Women’s Center, I emailed them a draft of the research protocol, in order to give a clear explanation of what I proposed to implement. Both women showed interest in the proposed goals of the research and invited me to attend the LGBTQ organizational meetings, after I gained permission from student-leaders of each group.

As a first step to engage potential research participants, I went to a coalition meeting of the officers of the four LGBTQ student-groups on campus where I was given a few minutes to introduce myself, explain the research, pass out fliers (Appendix E shows the recruitment flier), and recruit potential research participant-volunteers (Appendix F shows the recruitment script). I also asked each group in attendance if I could attend a meeting of each respective group so as to introduce myself to the students who participate in order to recruit volunteers. I immediately received affirming interest in the project from students and two invited me to attend group meetings that same week.
Data Collection

After entrée had been made, I began data collection with self-identified queer university students who were enrolled at University of Midwest. (Also, it is important to note that I use the labels queer and LGBTQ interchangeably in this study, because that is the way the students describe themselves—both as queer and as one of the identities represented by the LGBTQ acronym.) Several of the students that participated in the data collection were initially connected to the student-centered social support groups. This served as a means for me to gain access to students without compromising the sensitive nature of their sexual orientation. I reassured them that their decision to participate in the study had no bearing on their involvement or participation in the social organizations; I also gave each student assurance of confidentiality by choosing pseudonyms for the university name and each student’s name and had them sign a consent stating their rights as interview participants (Appendix G). I gave students the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms; several students did so.

I asked research participants to take an active role in examining their own college search process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003; Zeni, 2001) by participating in a focus group as the first data collection tool. The focus group was used first in order to allow student-participants the opportunity to shape the nature of questions and themes to be explored during the in-depth interviews. The focus group also allowed for an exploration of what was important to the students about the current campus climate and their college search experience, while also providing an inclusive platform upon which to construct interview questions. This process also allowed for a margin of initial flexibility in adjusting the inquiry for unexpected data findings (Freeman, 1998; Stringer, 2008). Also,
I asked each participant to reflect upon their responses to interview questions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003; Stringer, 2008; Zeni, 2001) as a means to be fully inclusive as well as add validity to analysis. Also, for those who wanted complete anonymity, I emailed an open-ended qualitative survey to the various LGBTQ groups on campus as well as placed surveys with the Women’s Center staff.

Context

The fieldwork for this study took place at the University of Midwest (UM). This large urban public research university of over 37,000 students in a medium-sized Midwestern city reflects a picture of the greater college-going population of the state in which UM is located. Largely White and middle class, the undergraduate students come from white-collar neighborhoods and suburbs, despite UM being located geographically in an area of the city densely populated by blue-collar and low-income African-Americans. The vast majority of students either commutes from their homes or move into an apartment within the campus neighborhood, while under 10% live on campus. In total, over 83% of students are in-state residents and just over 14% are classified as a racial minority. Also, to have a better practical knowledge of UM, it is important to note that the university is broken up into 13 different colleges and dozens of departments within the individual colleges. All in all, UM is a very large institution.

In general, the political climate at UM is one that is not seen as too liberal or too conservative. Many of the students who participated in interviews who were native to the UM area saw the institution as quite liberal; however, these students’ quickly changed their opinion once they experienced the campus for themselves as students. Oddly enough, those students who did not grow up in the region surrounding UM saw the
campus as conservative prior to enrollment. They confirmed this opinion once they enrolled and experienced the campus for themselves. Conversely, it is important to note that each student’s definition of what makes a campus liberal or conservative is subjectively-based and varies.

UM recently implemented a few policy changes that address LGBTQ staff interests, but UM’s policies concerning queer students and staff are not nearly as comprehensive as other institutions that are within the same state and within a self-designated institutional and academic peer group. So, to put it simply, UM has positioned itself politically within (or outside—depending on one’s point of view) a policy debate concerning LGBTQ individuals that is only controversial (either too queer-friendly or not queer-friendly enough) to those who position themselves somewhere on the polar opposite ends of the argument.

_A Moral Stance: Action Research_

Since I am seeking academic growth via social change, I feel that taking a moral stance is the best way to move toward a research agenda. Noffke’s description of action research as “a moral and ethical stance that recognizes the improvement of human life as a goal” (1995, p. 4) is a nice articulation of my own opinions about research. I have never thought that research findings are just that—research findings. Conclusions without the motivation for change seem inept and wasteful. Essentially, I am unable to philosophically take research findings and just walk away. There is a means toward using the work to inform the community from which it came. However, this is not a nice and neat process for conducting research. It is important to remember that “most action researchers have disciplined themselves to believe that messes can be attractive and even
The notion of rolling up one’s sleeves and getting into the middle of the research is a little scary, but simultaneously exciting. I’m not saying that I am yet at a place where “messiness” is comfortable for me, but I have found that some of the most worthy and important work within academic research are in the confines of “messes,” as has been the case with this study.

Action research has allowed for an overall point of view, a succession of commitments to problematizing social practices (including that of action research itself) in the interests of individual and social transformation (McTaggart, 1994). In other words, action research is “a form of morally committed action” (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996, p.3) that seeks change as a part of the process. If the lives of those involved within a research project are fully respected, then a certain improvement of their experience of campus climate, as well as those yet to enroll at the campus, should be realized. However, the plan does not conclude here. Stringer (2008) says any agenda within action research is cyclical and needs to include fundamentals that allow us to look, think, and act upon the inquiry. Action researchers do not find a particular issue and “solve” it. His point is that action research calls for investigators to continually reflect and respond to the research circumstance where we recurrently look at the situation, think about the situation and act upon the situation.

This study has taken place between definitive qualitative and action research. My intent when approaching this study was to be inclusive and to craft an opportunity for the UM community to participate in the implications of the findings. While on some levels I think of myself as an outsider, I also see myself as an insider within the UM community.
I also did not want to leave the findings of the work as a write-up in a dissertation; I wanted those involved to have a say in how the work moves forward. I wanted to integrate this work within the goals of UM administrators, so that policy change could occur. As such, through the process I had conversations with stakeholders (students and administrators) to figure out how to move forward with the findings.

For me to engage in research about campus climate toward LGBTQ students, it was important that all who become involved in this research study knew that an outcome of the findings was to inform and improve the exchange of information about the on-campus social climate toward sexual minorities. I also was intent that the course of change will not end with my graduation from the university. The nuances of action research, as well as the respect for the community-based nature of this inquiry (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003) allow for that outcome. Working toward institutional change and the way a university responds or is presented to LGBTQ students (and even staff, faculty, and alumni for that matter) is an intention of this research agenda, but must not only be my agenda. Since seeking change is an anticipated result of action research (Stringer, 2008; Noffke, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994) that allows research projects the prospect to inform institutional policy and practice, I trust those involved will be benefitted by the process and also the outcome and the “community” will continue to think, act, and do, well beyond my time here. Simply, my research goal has not merely been an agenda for me to fulfill my own academic aims and social change interests; this inclusive research project has allowed members of the community to help craft the direction, questions, outcomes, and future of the work.

Inclusive Analysis
Since many research tools follow the voice of the researcher, it has been important for me to focus in on paradigms, via feminist theory and action research, that allow for the voice of the research participants to be taken seriously and genuinely heard (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). I have sought to include the voice of the individual as an essential research component within this research agenda in order for those involved to truly be included in the process of the study. Simply, it has been my intent to accurately reflect the values of action research and relational methods that emphasize participation, shared ownership, and inclusion of the research participants (Zeni, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). In other words, active participation in the research inquiry by research participants (to clarify, shape questions, shape interview direction, etc.) has been an empowering tool and has allowed increased competence and self demonstration while also giving respect to people’s knowledge and experience (Stringer, 2008; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003) from the perspective of the subjective (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). It has been with their knowledge and experience, as well as my own interest, to understand the underlying questions that are important to all those involved. Research participants have been asked to take an active role in examining their own research questions within the focus of the inquiry (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003; Zeni, 2001). I have been purposeful to combine qualitative analysis with action throughout the process.

To create a collaborative and respectful relationship with research participants allows for a margin of flexibility in adjusting the inquiry for unexpected data findings (Freeman, 1998; Stringer, 2008). In that same spirit, research participants have been given the opportunity for reflection (clarification) upon their responses to interview
questions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003; Zeni, 2001; Stringer, 2008) as a means to be fully inclusive as well as add validity to analysis. By doing this, perspectives and points of view brought out questions, points, and experiences that I would have never considered as the “knowledgeable researcher.” My desire for building an inclusive framework has allowed for a larger knowledge base as well as allowed research participants to use findings (their own stories really) to formulate a plan for future work, self-empowerment, and self-knowledge.

There is a long history within qualitative research that allows participants the opportunity to respond to data—member checking—to assure their voices and experiences are being accurately depicted (Spradley, 1979). This method assured that participants’ voices were being heard correctly and also gave an opportunity for continued insight to an individual’s process of meaning making. As such, each person highlighted prominently within the analysis of this dissertation was given the opportunity to react and respond to their chapter. Along with this, I found great value in constant comparative analysis (Patton, 2002). This tool allowed the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to come from the data—as opposed to being imposed onto the data. This created a framework for the themes to present themselves giving me another filter that works to keep my own “theories” or “categories” off the data. In other words, I have been interested in “a pathway into relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 22). It is important to note that while I have analyzed the data for this inquiry, I have also asked for participants to provide insight to their own experiences as well as taken the findings to LGBTQ students and allies for their input on next steps.
In order to find a pathway into relationship, I remained reflective upon my own personality and how I “saw” data. Brydon-Miller (2007) paints a clear picture of the importance of being honest about our own understanding of the experiences and values we bring to the research agenda. Her rationale with this is simple; she says that the more we understand about the way our own experiences shape our view, the better we can ethically work toward managing the dynamics of power and privilege within a group. As such, being open to my own means for relating to potential research partners and how my understanding of my own identity influences the extent to which I can participate as an “insider” or “outsider” in the context of the research project. Basically, she seems to be saying that in order to find our place in an action research inquiry, we, as researchers, need to understand how we fit into the social dynamics of those potential research partners (including issues of power and prejudice) and how that influences our view of data (Brydon-Miller, 2004, 2007).

Methods that emphasize participation and access to voice are derived from practiced qualitative methodologies that isolate experiences that seem typical and significant (Patton, 2002; Stringer, 2008) and also listen for the tangled voices of the research participants (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Quite plainly, I have engaged research tools that allowed for engagement in dialogue with the research participants instead of searching for objects upon which to do research (Jones, 2001) and that provide the most access to the story of the individual.

Lastly, constant comparative analysis does a good job identifying the themes that emerge within the data of this inquiry. However, it does not dig deeply enough into the subjectivity of those involved with this study. As such, the Listening Guide provides an
opportunity for the subjectivities, as well as in-depth experiences, to be demonstrated.

The use of the Listening Guide to analyze the data strengthens the findings by going more deeply into the individual’s experience.

*Voice Analysis: The Listening Guide*

As seen throughout these pages, I have a clear interest in hearing the voice of research participants. There are several methods for getting at the nuances of an individual’s voice, but I have found that the Listening Guide provides a keen channel for analyzing the voice of those with whom I have built a research relationship. Feminist research techniques, such as the Listening Guide, provide the researcher (the listener) the opportunity to “attend closely to the voices” (Way, 2001, p.116) of those with whom a conversation and interview relationship is being built. The Listening Guide offers a way of “tracing and untangling the relationships that constitute psychic life” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 27) and works from the assumption that human development occurs in relationship with others (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). In other words, the Listening Guide provided this inquiry a method for “attending to the many voices embedded in a person’s expressed experience” (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003, p.157).

The Listening Guide not only provided a method to disentangle themes and to hear the many relational voices present in this study, it also allowed me to become clearer about my own attitudes, questions, and biases. Since this inquiry rests with a population whose voices institutionally and within academic research have been given little notice or voice, I not only attained a better understanding of their voices, but also better understood my own. Thus, the Listening Guide provided an approach that changes the act of “reading into an act of listening” (p.25) that allows the researcher to better hear and listen for the
story within the interview conversation and also see the relational influence on the development of self for all involved (Raider-Roth, 2005). Since the voice that is recorded is that of the relationship between the interviewer and the research participant(s), the story that unfolded is that of a particular day and within a particular context. With that said, it was also important to develop a clear understanding and always stay aware of the power dynamics that shaped these relationships (Fine, 1994) as well as my position within the relationship.

In order to better understand the psyche of the interview participant, the Listening Guide method asks the researcher to engage in at least four listenings of the interview-conversation. So for each interview, I listened to the transcript at least four times. The first listening provided the opportunity for me to listen to the story as the interview participant tells it. This listening presented the plot of the narrative. The goal of this was to get a sense of what is going on in the life of the interviewee and the story that is being told (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). During this listening, attention was paid to recurring words, images, and central conflicts, as well as the narrative of where the story was going, where it changed, and within which social and cultural contexts it occurred.

The first listening also provided an opportunity to listen for silences—silences of research participants and silences of my own. Often, issues that went unmentioned displayed opportunities to further explore the reasons for silences. In this regard, the first listening asked the interviewer (me) to explore and keep track of my own responses to the narrative and to bring my own subjectivities into the process of interpretation from the start by “identifying, exploring, and making explicit” my own thoughts and feelings about the narrative (Gilligan, et al., 2003, p. 160).
The second reading of the text listened for the voice of the self by reviewing the use of “I” of the person who is speaking in an “attempt to know on her own terms” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p.28). The purpose of this listening allowed me to listen to the participant’s first-person voice and to hear how she spoke about herself (Gilligan, et al., 2003). This step was essential in seeing how relationships were portrayed. In other words, this process highlighted what the person knew of herself and how she expressed her thoughts, needs, wishes, conflicts, and silences. During this listening, it was important to construct I poems (pulling out, in order, the I-voice with the next verb) from the narrative of the interview to capture central meaning to trace what was being said (2003).

Because I sought out the relational context of students’ experience with university climates, the second listening provided me an opportunity to enter the world of the participant (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, et al., 2003). Simply, by creating “I poems,” I heard how students described their relationships within university climates and with peers. Throughout the interviews there were usually conversations between the “I” voice and the “you” or “they” voice. This, too, was essential in providing me a way to see relational themes and to trace internal struggles and draw out conversations so that they were audible and that tones could be easily distinguished (Raider-Roth, 2005). By selecting several sections throughout the interviews, I was able to examine selected passages in relation to one another by hearing potential variations in the first, second, and third person voices that included various themes (Gilligan, et al., 2003)

The third and fourth listenings, the contrapuntal listenings, attend to the ways people talked about their relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). More specifically, these listenings displayed how the participant experiences herself in the relational
landscape of her life (1992). Reading through the narrative a separate time while looking at a particular theme that emerged within the (contrapuntal) voice, provided a method for seeing and hearing the relationship between the first person voice and the contrapuntal voices. This provided insight into the expression the interview participant had of her experience in various voices (Gilligan et al., 2003) relating to different themes. For example, within the work I have done in this study, many students discussed various images of safety as paramount to their experience with the university climate. When I pulled out these contrapuntal themes, I was able to experience in multiple voices a student’s particular experience within a particular context (Gilligan et al., 2003). By doing this, I was able to see if a person’s voice changed in relation to particular themes or when discussing specific aspects of her relationships or when there is silence.

The last step of the Listening Guide allowed for an interpretation of the narrative while pulling together a synthesis of what was discovered through the listenings. At this point, the synthesis told the story of the interview participant and laid out the account of the interview conversation. Basically, the syntheses told what was learned about the person (and the researcher) in relation to the research question (Gilligan et al., 2003). The Listening Guide method provided a framework for me to analyze qualitative interviews where the research question sought to understand a “multilayered individual person’s experiences” (p.169) and the circumstances from where they took place.
Chapter IV
Mason: Seeking a Place to Hide

Mason’s experience with college choice stands out as foundational in the realization that safety is a fluid term with differing interpretations and meanings. While I began to see safety as a theme within this work very early in the data collection process, his responses to early interview questions demonstrated that students’ conception of safety is subjective and more deeply meaningful than I had originally conceived. For Mason, the campus provided a safe space where he felt he would not be challenged or “tempted” to disclose his sexual orientation; UM provided Mason a space where he could hide. His experience at UM as an undergraduate student, a graduate student, and most recently as a law student, provided depth to his time at UM at different ages and from different points of view—in the closet and out. Since it is Mason’s experience that initially illuminated a more complex notion of safety within college choice, I begin by telling his story.

Mason, a Caucasian law student who self-identifies as a gay male, heard about this study via email communication I sent out about the study. The morning I met with Mason, he walked into the room carrying a mug of coffee, a stack of books, and was telling me how little sleep he got the night before (as he flew in late from New York where he works part-time in a top law firm). Mason, a former collegiate athlete who grew up in rural Mississippi, shared amazing insight during our discussion on college choice.

Mason presented an ease and confidence in his voice and demeanor that I did not expect during our first face-to-face meeting. His focus from the beginning of the
interview, coupled with his straight-forward responses, imbued our time together with intense conversation. The hour we spent in the small, basement-like office on campus was not only the first one-on-one interview I conducted for this study, but also a gauge, along with the focus group, that set the tone for following interviews. His need to hide and the impact this had on his time at UM during various points in his life allowed me to see the deeply personal implications safety has on a student’s college experience. Our discussion centered on safety and how the choices in his life have, at different times, facilitated the level of disclosure about his sexuality that he wanted to present.

Over the course of the interview, Mason shared how sexuality impacted his undergraduate and graduate college choice, and in turn how those choices impacted his eventual academic major, his decision to leave college athletics, and where he chose to live. At the center of virtually all of Mason’s collegiate and social decisions, sexual orientation shaped his path. Essentially, Mason presented a continuum that displayed the various levels of disclosure he sought when choosing schools, majors, and places to live, and ultimately how these choices impacted his understanding of self.

Almost immediately upon meeting Mason, he demonstrated the influence of safety upon college choice. While he mentions financial aid and professional outcomes as contributing factors in why he attended UM during different times in his life, he reveals the impact that the perception of safety had on how he made choices to enroll at UM. On a deeper level, and maybe even more importantly, he defines safety as a means to hide, not as a way to be free of harm. His definition, basically a challenge to the idea of how I understood safety in college choice, highlights the experience of the students who are still in the closet when they choose a postsecondary institution.
As with all the interviews, I asked Mason early on how sexual orientation impacted his choice to attend UM. For Mason, the choice to attend happened more than once and at different times in his life. Still, it is his journey toward choosing an undergraduate institution that emphasizes his first, and most enlightening, experience of the relationship between sexual orientation and safety within college choice. Based on the students I talked to during the course of the fieldwork, it seems that all queer students enter college somewhere within the continuum of what they are seeking, from one extreme (one that completely accepts and desires) to another (one that completely rejects or persecutes) in terms of the LGBTQ community. Mason provides insight on the point of the continuum that does not force students to face their sexuality. He says,

One of the things that I think is interesting about your research is that it's relevant here to my story, is that we can think about how people choose the spaces that they go into based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. And obviously think about that, but I think we, I think sometimes we think about in a positive value, that people would choose to go into a space for the comfort that they'll receive from the acceptance, whereas I think that with sexual minorities, there’s a whole other backdoor psychology. I think it's often at work in my mind and I would say most of our minds really, because of the way we develop in our identities. You know, unlike a lot of other minority identities where they develop in a family such as race or class or gender where there’s someone else around to mirror. We really grow up in isolation and part of our identity development is learning how to keep it secret and learning how to keep it hidden and under the
radar. And so to think that we would always choose a space for its ability to allow us for the encouragement of our expression—I think is misleading, that oftentimes we would choose an environment for its ability to encourage us to hide. And I know that has been at work several times in my life, because we’re comfortable. At least until age 16, at least a decade of our lives in hiding; and so, like the womb, that becomes a comfort space. So it makes sense that even in our adult lives, even if it's a minority force in our mind. It's still a work that you should be somewhere that you can be quiet. You should be somewhere that helps you hide, and I think that was my decision to come to UM; three times now, that's always been a force.

Here Mason lays out his understanding of the influence of safety on college choice. His insight is keenly aware of the counter understanding of safety—as being free from harm or being free to be out. He says that he thinks that often “we” choose specific places in “our” lives for “its ability to encourage us to hide.” Mason is saying that in general he thinks that all queer people want to keep their sexuality hidden because they do not want to be out of a comfortable space. Mason groups himself with all LGBTQ people by using “we,” “our,” and “us,” and thus generalizes his assumption. His first person voice (both when directly referencing himself and also when grouping himself with all sexual minorities) is quite pragmatic about what he thinks. He assesses the general comfort level that queer students have by keeping their sexuality hidden. He alludes to the notion that due to the way LGBTQ students develop within their identity, that keeping sexuality hidden “becomes a comfort space.”
Mason describes the “whole other backdoor psychology” that goes into choosing a safe space. He says that isolation and secrecy are part of the identity development of queer people and that the natural instinct is to find spaces that “encourage” them to find a place that is “comfortable.” When I pull out Mason’s I-voice, I am able to better hear the response that he is illustrating.

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<th>I/My</th>
<th>You</th>
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<td>My story</td>
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<td>My mind</td>
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<td>I would say</td>
<td>You know</td>
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<td>I think</td>
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<td>I know</td>
<td>You should be somewhere</td>
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<tr>
<td>My life</td>
<td>You can be quiet</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You should be somewhere</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(that helps) You hide</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My decision</td>
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Mason’s I-voice repeats over and over what he thinks and knows. Then, his you-voice says what he “should” and “can” do—to hide. Gilligan et al., (1990) suggest that the “sense of I” is the “psyche” that is brought to the interview by the individual (p. 97). Without even knowing it, while explaining to me the reason queer people choose a college for its ability to allow them to hide, Mason’s second-person voice actually demonstrates the impact of what he felt (that we learn to hide) was an innate response. Despite the presence of what he knows and thinks, when referring to the “force” in his mind that influences decisions about coming out, his first-person voice disappears and the
you-voice tells him what he should do—to be quiet and hide. Mason said hiding is a “comfort space” and so the “minority force” in the mind, which is illustrated by the you-voice, actually demonstrates the response of disclosing his sexuality.

This is fascinating on many levels. Despite Mason’s clear self-awareness, his first-person account disappeared for a while when he was describing the workings of what motivates certain behaviors, but then returned when he shares what has been a “force” in his decision to enroll at UM three different times. For Mason, the behaviors that were learned early in his identity development still have influence on his decisions. Since he describes his level of openness about his sexual orientation to now be “extremely high,” there are instances that he reverts back to what he learned about his sexuality when he was young—that sexuality should be hidden. In other words, his you-voice takes over for the I-voice in examples where his sexuality could potentially be disclosed. His you-voice tells him where he “should be” or how he should make decisions. As such, he says “three times now, that’s always been a force” in reference to attending UM, even after he was already out of the closet. Essentially, despite all the other aspects that influenced his decisions to attend or return to UM, the ability to hide has always been a factor.

Mason goes on to explicitly describe how and why he choose UM when he enrolled the first time. He tells me he wants to explain his theory about why he thinks he, and others, choose certain colleges for their ability to allow LGBTQ students to hide. He says,

My declaration of that theory is grounded in a personal story. When I was in high school, in Mississippi, a very rural high school, I was a big jock, a big athlete. I
had this big athletic scholarship and I went on all these trips... And so, I would go on these trips and in my mind I knew—this is really interesting to think about—the only experience I had with gay people were in stories that people would tell; stories that they knew of other gay people. How they left the state of Mississippi and gone off and become gay. And there were several like people that had graduated in the years before me in high school that gone off and become gay. And I remember in my mind, what it was thinking the whole time, how many years will I last? How many years will I make it before I become gay? Will I make it one year? Two years? Can I make it five or 10 years? Maybe even I can make it to get married or to have kids. It was actually a competition for me, how far can I push this away, so undoubtedly when I made the decision about where to go. I mean, really, it’s if you're really going to pick a place that has the best policies and the best feelings then every queer in the country would be at NYU or Berkeley. But no, we picked schools that I think the rational person knows we’ll be safe at and no were not going to whatever that Bob Jones University—we’re not going there. But I would have never gone to NYU because that would have completely defeated my goal of staying in the closet. You know. And I knew that and I had the opportunity to go to these big cities, Georgia Tech and University of Georgia. Atlanta, I knew Atlanta, but that's what scared me about Atlanta. I'll be out in six months; I'll never be able to hide there. I was able to hide in Midwest in a safe way.

First of all, it is clear that Mason was aware of his sexual orientation during the college search process. Otherwise, he would not have had to consider it when trying to find a
place to hide. Secondly, he illustrates what he refers to earlier when discussing the limits of not having “someone else around” from whom to learn about being queer. He demonstrates the impact made on his identity development from “stories that people would tell” about how individuals had “gone off and become gay.” Fundamentally, despite already being aware of his sexuality, Mason received the message that being in college was what facilitated becoming gay. He felt that being away at college actually encouraged people to disclose their sexual orientation. As such, he makes it clear that he did not want to enroll in a place that would never allow him to hide safely.

This passage is also important because Mason distinguishes the different concepts of safety. Here safety is defined as a means to hide as well as a mode to perpetuate a chosen identity—that of a heterosexual. He says queer students choose “schools that I think the rational person knows we’ll be safe.” He goes on to say that no matter the desire to hide, queer students are not usually choosing schools where they will not be physically safe, such as Bob Jones University, where the student handbook bans “homosexuality” and where LGBTQ alumni have been threatened with arrest if they come onto campus (ctlibrary.com). He continues to communicate that queer students choose places that they will be able to hide. So, the extremes represent places he knew would challenge him and would cause him to not be safe. On one hand, he mentioned a city that he knew he would “never be able to hide” because he would “be out in six months.” He saw Atlanta, and other “big cities,” as gay-friendly. On the other hand, he referred to a university that is readily known for being anti-queer and thus he was unsafe to hide there, because of their openly hostile policies toward LGBTQ people. He saw Bob Jones University and others like it as a threat to his safety—a place where he could be branded as gay. So, it seems
that Mason wanted a place that he could hide, but also a setting that he could feel safe and unchallenged to come out—by either queer-friendly locations or anti-queer policies. Mason is clearly chronicling the internal dialogue he was having about his resistance to becoming gay and the inevitable day that he would outwardly acknowledge his sexual orientation. When I pull out the first and second-person voices, I can see his journey more plainly.

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<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>We</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was</td>
<td>You’re really going to pick a place</td>
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<td>I was</td>
<td>We picked schools</td>
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<td>I had</td>
<td>We’ll be safe</td>
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<td>I went</td>
<td>We’re not going</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would go</td>
<td>We’re not going there</td>
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<td>I knew</td>
<td>You know</td>
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<td>I had</td>
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<td>I remember</td>
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<td>Will I last</td>
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<td>Will I make it</td>
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<td>Can I make it</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can make it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can I push this away</td>
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<td>I made the decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
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This poem shows the struggle that Mason had when choosing to attend college. By hearing the internal dialogue he had about the challenge to “last,” “make it” and “push
this away,” I am able to hear the conflict he had about whether or not to disclose his sexual orientation. It is clear that he knew he was gay and, based on the stories he heard, knew that going to college would be the place where he becomes gay. He struggled to see how long he could make it before he became gay; however, after he made the decision to attend college, he then had to decide where. His you-voice concedes that he is “really going to pick a place,” which causes a shift to a first-person we-voice where he begins to include himself in the collective LGBTQ community. This is an important point in his decision process about deciding on attending college—which for Mason is the beginning of the steps toward embracing his sexual identity. Once he picks an institution, despite its ability to allow him to hide, he begins placing himself in the collective “we” that includes queer students. He is saying that in general queer students pick schools where they will be safe to manage sexuality on their own terms; they do not choose schools that would push them out of the closet—aggressively or persuasively. Ultimately, Mason chose an institution that allowed him to hide in a way as to not be pressed out of the closet in either manner, a system that he sees as safe.

Basically, Mason was placed in a position of choosing a school that was between the extremes of campus climates that would not allow him to: perpetuate an identity where he could hide his sexuality or to embrace an identity that openly acknowledges his sexual orientation. So, to be at one extreme would prove unsafe to even be perceived as anything outside normative behavior (even to be suspected of being queer) and the other extreme, to test the waters or even come out, was also seen by him as unsafe. Mason provides a lucid example of the way a student who is still in the closet characterizes and measures campus climate. Safety is defined more broadly to include safe environments
where students are unchallenged and are not “tempted” to come out of the closet as well as defined in a way as to be safe to not go to a school that is blatantly anti-queer.

Making the Wrong Choice

Mason continues to delve into the account of his assessment of college choice. He provides a deeper understanding of his experience of the college choice by discussing a gay student that he thinks made the wrong choice. At the beginning of the interview, we discussed a recent news story about a gay student being expelled from a Southern Baptist college for posting that he is gay on his MySpace page. I brought it up to illustrate one of the reasons I am interested in pursuing a research agenda about college choice for queer students. Mason refers to this story when he is trying to describe more deeply his reasons for attending UM. He gave me an example of what choosing the wrong college would have looked like. He says,

There's also a strong motivation, and I'm sure you've encountered this, that person that wants to come out and be gay, but not that gay. I mean I want to be out, but not that kind of gay. So in that way, like they really do want to fall on the spectrum and that to me is where the student that goes to a school like UM, that it’s safe enough to be safe, but not out enough to really kind of like, you know, be the big guy on TV. And then they post on their MySpace profile that they’re gay. So it's kind of confusing you know, are you out? Are you not out? If you're bold enough to post that you’re gay on your MySpace page, shouldn’t you have gone to school in LA? You know, wouldn’t that, didn’t you want to go, assuming that you could; but no, because they wanted to be their own “brand” of gay, and I
think that's kind of the attraction to the middle of the spectrum school that UM is.

I assume that UM is the middle of the spectrum.

This is a complicated passage, but one that shows the conflict that Mason sees in the impact of being queer on campus and the impact of being queer when choosing a campus. In a non-direct way, he is showing that LGBTQ students who want different things choose schools for their ability to facilitate different states of identity. He is saying that students see a range of options in how to represent, if at all, their sexuality and that depending on where they want to fall on that continuum is what should impact their college choice.

Mason says he did not want his college choice to result in him being “that kind of gay.” He did not want to be a gay martyr by choosing to attend the wrong college and then as a result, being expelled for his sexuality. He also sees the college choice as confusing considering all the mixed outcomes that go alongside such an important decision. By pulling out the first, second, and third person voices, I am able to hear how Mason positions himself in this spectrum and the conflict that this causes him. (For clarity of his voice within this poem, I also left out a direct reference that he made to me when he said “I’m sure you’ve encountered this.” Mason was suggesting that I, as an individual, had also encountered what he was saying.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>They/Them</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to be out</td>
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<td>They really do want</td>
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<td>They post</td>
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<td>They’re gay</td>
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<td>You know</td>
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<td>Are you out</td>
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<td>Are you not out</td>
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<tr>
<td>You’re bold enough</td>
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</table>
You’re gay
You’re MySpace page
Shouldn’t you have gone
You know
Didn’t you want to go
You could

They wanted
Their own brand of gay

I think
I assume

This poem demonstrates how Mason positioned himself in the college search process. He sees those people that chose to attend a school that is anti-queer as “they.” By doing this, Mason removes himself from the collective LGBTQ people that are seeking colleges. This is because he sees himself as having made a better choice; a choice that is in the “middle of the spectrum.” The student that was expelled from the college with anti-queer policies is not part of the collective queer community, which Mason usually classifies as “we” or “us.” Posting so outwardly on his MySpace page that he was gay, while attending a school that is not the “middle of the spectrum,” puts this student in a different “brand” than Mason sees himself. Also, by stating “I think” and “I assume,” Mason is maintaining that UM is positioned as a place where it is safe to stay hidden, and that his awareness of this positioned him at a school that allowed for his own safety.

Mason again reverts to a disconnected you-voice when he talks about what is confusing for him—that a person would choose to post his sexual orientation while enrolled in a college with a climate that is anti-queer. Mason’s you-voice has a dialogue with the expelled student about the specifics of his sexuality and the other options he had—to go to another school instead. Then, as he concedes that they must want “to be their own ‘brand’ of gay,” his I-voice comes in to share that he chose correctly by choosing a “middle of the spectrum school.” In essence, Mason is saying that had this
student wanted to hide his sexuality, then he should have made a different college choice. In other words, this student should have chosen like Mason and enrolled in an institution that would not have forced a confrontation about sexuality at all.

*Seeking Expression of Self*

Since Mason classified himself during the interview as being “extremely” out, I asked him about his journey toward disclosing his sexuality while at UM. He conceded earlier that he knew going to college causes people to *become gay*, to come out; however he shared no indication of how *becoming gay* happens other than being in “gay friendly” or anti-queer environments. He decided to attend UM because he saw it as having a climate that would allow him to safely stay in the closet; but, he still ended up disclosing his sexual orientation after he arrived on campus. When describing the point that he came out, Mason “broke” from what he was supposed to do and began to change his life. He said,

I came here as a premed major. It was science; I was really good at science and math. My brain is still inclined in that direction, um, and I spent a year in that program and I spent a year swimming and did everything that I was supposed to do. I did really well at the Olympic trials in 2000, and then right after Olympic trials, that’s that. I had been trying to keep it up as long as possible, and that's when it broke for me. And in the months following Olympic trials, I quit swimming, broke up with my girlfriend, moved out of the house with all the swimmers, and changed my major from biology to English. None of those things were circumstantial or independent of one another and I remember, such a weird 19-year-old, um, everybody was and why did you change your major. And I said
because I wanted, interesting, I used to say this and I didn’t really realize the meaning. I used to say I want to be able to wake up in the middle of the night and paint my walls green and have it be part of my curriculum. And what I meant by that was, that I was studying for math and biology, these rigorous hard sciences, but all I really wanted to do was express myself. I really just wanted to change the walls of my apartment and I felt like I was wasting all this time, because I wasn't focusing on the math. And I used to say that, and one of the things I love about English is I can paint my walls and think about my curriculum and there was a synergy there; um, but now in retrospect eight, nine years later, I realize what I was really saying was I wanted a curriculum that allowed me to express myself and a curriculum that allows me to be gay. Um, really interesting to remember. I haven't thought about that in years.

Mason shares how and why he ended up coming out of the closet. He says here that there came a time in his life that he became weary of doing everything that he was “supposed to do” while trying to keep his sexuality hidden “as long as possible.” Then, in the midst of telling me about the campus climate that facilitated his ability to come out, Mason realizes the depth of the meaning of being able to express himself as an English major. As discussed earlier, he felt he was supposed to hide his sexuality; however, he broke, could no longer hide because his desire to express his authentic self was stronger than his desire to contain his sexual orientation. The vivid imagery here shows that the strain of hiding part of himself forced him to pull away from the inauthentic self. For Mason, an inauthentic self is one where he is not to express himself and where he is not allowed “to be gay.”
When I pull out his first and second-person voices, I am able to better see Mason’s process of coming out.

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<th>I/Me</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I came here</td>
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<td>I was really good</td>
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<td>I spent a year</td>
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<td>I spent a year</td>
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<td>I was supposed to do</td>
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<td>I did really well</td>
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<td>It broke for me</td>
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<td>Why did you change</td>
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<td>I really just wanted</td>
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<td>I wanted</td>
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<td>Allowed me to express myself</td>
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<td>Allows me to be gay</td>
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<td>I haven’t thought about that</td>
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Mason chronicles the year that he tried to do what he was “supposed to do.” Then he breaks and is no longer able to continue hiding, and as a result “quit” the things in his life that did not allow him to express himself. The beginning of the poem shows what Mason was doing in order to stay hidden. But after he “broke,” he is able to say want he wants.
His use of language shows clearly what he was “trying” to do and what he actually
“really wanted” to do, which was ultimately to express his sexuality. Still, the most
striking terminology here is his use of the word “allow.” Considering all the limits that
were placed on Mason’s sense of self and identity development, he still sought out
circumstances and situations (by way of curricula) that gave him permission, or
“allowed” him, to be gay. He sought out provisos by way of majoring in English, which
permitted him to pursue an out-identity. In some ways it seems that despite coming out
and expressing his sexuality, he still sought out direction about what he was supposed to
do by using the words “allowed” and “allows.” While he did come out of the closet, he
also relied on something to make the way for him. I am left wondering why he was not
“allowed” to be out while still being a science major or while being on the swim team.

Mason eventually graduated from UM, and moved to New Orleans where he
could “be as completely gay and as openly gay” as he wanted to be. However, he ended
up coming back to UM as a graduate student which surprised me. I asked him to describe
what it felt like to come back to an environment that, for a while, encouraged him to hide.
He said,

I was in that state of mind where I had gone to the other end of the dialectic.
Where, you know, I lived here before as an undergraduate. I came out. I lived in
the urban center. I lived in Downtown District, if you know the area well. And
when I moved back, I intentionally moved to the suburbs. Like way into Shady
Lake, if you know the area, way past the suburbs actually. And I really took up
swimming, very briefly. When I came here as an undergraduate, I came on a
swimming scholarship so swimming was all I did; it was my life. It was a big part
of my existence until I came out; one of the reasons I left swimming is because I
did come out. So swimming was a currency if you will, that was lost in the
coming out process. So part of my coming full circle like before I came out was
swimming again, and I got really involved in triathlons and swimming. When I
was 23 and 24 and just starting graduate school that's really all I did as well. So I
came back full circle, to where I was when I was 19, in grad school. I wasn’t very
social in my first year in grad school. And then I think I started to miss being gay,
I think I started to miss the fact that I was 24 and 25 years old, that I didn’t have a
strong gay community I was in. I didn't have the potential to be in a really great
relationship here. It wasn't something that happened very naturally.

Here again, Mason shows that the features of the life he had when he was hiding his
sexuality are unable to be reconciled with the fact that he now is no longer hiding his
sexuality. As he went to New Orleans and built a life without restrictions on how he
expressed his sexuality, he began to miss the “currency” he lost when he came out of the
closet. By using this term he is demonstrating that he lost aspects of his life that have
prevalence and value. For some reason, when he came completely out of the closet after
he received his undergraduate degree and moved to New Orleans, he felt that he lost parts
of himself that he had at while at UM when he was safe to hide. So, when deciding on
graduate schools, he came back to UM, a place where he would be safe to reengage with
the lost currency.

By moving to the suburbs, Mason was able to stay away from aspects of his
undergraduate years that associated him with being gay—living downtown, having
access to a “strong gay community,” having the potential of being in a relationship. He
was safe to hide from his sexuality at UM again. It seems that Mason is saying that if he
stayed away from relationships and locations that have the potential to spark his sexual
identity, he could live in Midwest and not be challenged to give up, at least for a time, his
non-gay currency. As he came back to UM and re-embraced aspects of his life that he
lost when he was no longer able to hide his sexuality, he shows again a place in his life
that he seems to be unable to reconcile important factors on both sides of disclosing his
sexuality—athletics and relationships. However, there is a silence here that troubles me. I
assume Mason left swimming because he felt he was unable to be in authentic
relationship with his teammates; but, he never says why being a swimmer and being
openly gay are unable to exist simultaneously. My assumption is based on his desire to be
in relationships where he can have strong community and have the potential to have “a
really great relationship.” Once again, when Mason tried to hide at UM, he placed
himself in a location and frame of mind that did not allow him to have relationships that
were authentic. For Mason, an authentic relationship is one that involves a strong
community where he can express being gay. In the end, he goes on to tell me he
reconnects with his gay-self and defines his graduate school years as “entirely political
and built around community building.”

Seeking Relationships in a Safe Space

There are some points of conflict within Mason’s journey that need to be
examined. Specifically, Mason sees himself as a part of the queer community at UM as
evidenced by his use of “we” and “us.” He also sees himself, however, as separate, as
demonstrated by his use of “you” to describe the certain contexts within this same
community of people. At various times in his undergraduate and graduate career, he
displayed a visibly out profile. He also sought authentic relationships where he could express his sexual orientation. However, when Mason sought to connect with LGBTQ people on campus, he was met with a level of resistance that frustrates him. On one hand, Mason selected UM for its ability to allow him to hide, but on the other hand, he gets annoyed when that same climate inhibits him from openly engaging in authentic relationship with other LGBTQ students. This tension seems to be with his present desire to be more open about his sexuality on a campus where others are not open.

A significant cause of Mason’s frustration is demonstrated in how he describes meeting and knowing other queer people on campus. When I asked him to describe the climate on campus for queer students, he tells me about the contradictions he sees within the LGBTQ community. He says he has seen the climate “ebb” and “flow” and that it goes “up and down” and that “it’s not this linear thing.” He says he is “hesitant to say it is better than it was,” and concedes that right now “it’s the same” as it was when he was a first-year student. It is significant that he says the climate is the same because now he is an openly gay member of the campus. Since he is now out in the environment that is the “same,” his experience of this climate is in conflict. He goes on to say,

For me it's valuable to have that gay community, to know who the gay people on campus, to know to know one another, to feel comfortable saying hello to one another. You know, in the ideal world, something that really only exists in a very few places in this country. But being able to recognize from a distance that a stranger is gay and going to speak to them for that reason, because you recognize that commonality and you feel it because you are a gay person, and we go to the same university that we should know one another and for that to be a natural
phenomenon. That's the ideal for me and I think to have that, you really have to have a number of people in positions of leadership that set that tone; that really do walk around campus with that priority and agenda of ‘we are LGBT-people here in this common space, and we should know one another.’ And because we don't, I actually encounter this all the time, is one of the things that drives me crazy about this University and this city generally; is that people will speak to you in a gay space and a gay bar and then see you in public and not. It’s not a personal; I hope it's not personal dislike. I take it as a ‘this is not our space; we shouldn't acknowledge one another in this space. We are gay people that know each other in gay spaces and not in the larger world.’ So that, that to me is still here, for sure. There is a barista at Starbucks that will talk my head off at a bar, but will barely say hello to me when he's at work. I guess he can be busy; but no, it's really that like, you know there's this boundary.

There seems to be a tension between the acknowledgement and appreciation of an out community (of which Mason now desires) and the accepted norm that the queer students need to only be out in queer, non-public spaces. This actually plays out in interview conversations with other participants of this study where students want “queer space” to be out, but also do not acknowledge a queer identity anywhere outside the group. So, it seems that the paradox here is that Mason, in his attempt to choose a safe campus, actually is perpetuating this same “safe” climate, despite his desire now for UM to be an environment for more openness for one’s sexuality. While Mason is completely out of the closet now, he is still in an atmosphere that does not necessarily persuade the other LGBTQ students on campus to come out.
When I listen to Mason’s first-person voices (I, we, and our) alongside his you-voice, his conflict is more easily heard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think</th>
<th>We/Our</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>You know</td>
<td>You recognize that commonality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You feel it</td>
<td>You are a gay person</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We go to the same university</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We should know one another</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I actually encounter</td>
<td>You really have to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are LGBT-people here</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We should know one another</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We don’t</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I hope</td>
<td>People will speak to you</td>
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<tr>
<td>I take it</td>
<td>See you in public</td>
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<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>Not our space</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shouldn’t acknowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are gay people</td>
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Mason is again relying on his you-voice to tell him that “there’s this boundary” in his life when it comes to having an out identity. He refers to himself in the second-person when he is seen by other queer people outside a space that is seen as safe space—non-public, gay spaces. This again suggests that in certain aspects of his life, Mason is unable to fully recount his relational experiences in the first-person. Despite his desire to reach out to other queer people, there are aspects of the climate that do not allow for this. For example, when Mason talks about the ideal world where sexuality should be commented on, he disconnects from the I-voice and his you-voice is the one that accounts for the commonality it “feels” with the other LGBTQ people on campus. This appears
comparable to the earlier excerpts that illustrate how Mason’s you-voice takes over in times where he has learned how to hide his sexuality. Specifically, Mason reverts to his you-voice when he recognizes others as gay in an environment that does not permit them to be open with how they know each other. He also, anytime he is talking about the queer community on UM’s campus, uses a collective we. So, in circumstances that feel like he is hiding or when others are hiding, he reverts to his you-voice; in times that he feels safe to be out, he uses first person accounts. The shifting from one voice to another in various contexts demonstrates Mason’s capacity to present the self in either first-person, present accounts or by a more distanced, you-voice. His ability and need to shift illustrates a pattern of behavior that is a result of his desire to hide his sexuality in various environments.

Reflection

The time I spent with Mason really set the stage for further questions I had about the influence of safety on college choice. His forthright account on the ways LGBTQ students approach college admissions is important. This explanation is not only important as it chronicles his experience, but also to the broader scholarly community in higher education. Mason began to learn a new way of existing within what he may have seen as a changing campus climate—although one that he still saw as safe. He was able to express himself in a place that, for him, was becoming safe in a new way—safe to embark on crafting an out identity and disclosure on a wider level. It appears that while he lost one safe place (to hide and thus be an athlete), his desire to continue to cultivate and sustain the safety of expression toward an out-identity was demonstrated clearly. For Mason, this seems to happen within the safe environment of a community of expressive
venues (English major, new living space) and with a strong gay community that allows for strong relationships.

I approached this work with an assumption that students want places that facilitate freedom of expression. According to Mason, I was correct on one hand and incorrect on another. His story shows that students do, in fact, want a means of expression of identity; but, the actual identity they show is not always the one we suppose they will disclose—one where he will choose to be out. In the end, Mason was safe to hide his sexuality, safe to explore his sexuality, and safe to express his sexuality at UM. However, there were also aspects of his experience that he was unable to reconcile safely. He demonstrated that although he was able to “express himself” by coming out as gay, he still struggled to bring together aspects of his assorted safe realities—safe to hide, safe to express, safe to disclose. Despite eventually coming out as gay, he still struggled to participate in aspects of his life that were “lost” by coming out, such as athletics. Ultimately, Mason found self-expression at UM, but seemed to never be safe to merge all aspects of his in and out life.
Chapter V

Cliff: Seeking a Place to Change

Cliff, a Caucasian graduate student at UM, eagerly agreed to participate in this study when he received an email announcement via one of the on-campus LGBTQ student organizations. He contacted me and we set up the first interview for a spring day in late April on campus. He, involved in his own research project, seemed excited to be interviewed for this study. His enthusiasm for not only this inquiry, but for academic advancement in general, calmed the usual fears I have about participants’ anxiety about the interview process. Cliff’s friendly demeanor created a relaxed atmosphere in which to begin the interview. He and I met in a library study room that had a louder than normal air ventilation system. The hum of the vent provided a bit of a distraction at first as I set-up the recorder. Essentially, I was afraid the background noise would distort the sound, but after a quick test, and Cliff’s assurance that he would be happy to move to another room if necessary, we began our conversation and soon forgot the ventilation hum.

Cliff, 33, is a doctoral student at the University of Midwest. Before attending UM, Cliff received a Bachelor’s Degree from Regional State University (RSU)—a medium-sized, largely commuter, state university that is located in a suburban area a few miles from the city of Midwest. He identifies as a gay male, and on a scale of one to ten, with ten being completely out about his sexuality, Cliff says that he is “probably a nine.” We begin the conversation talking about his upcoming anniversary with his partner of twelve years and how he sometimes is not as out as he would like. He tells me of various times that he has gone back in the closet while being a UM student to either pursue a job
opportunity off campus or to wait until his students get to know him as a person instead of as the “gay teacher.” He pays great attention to his answers about being out in the classroom—both as a teacher and as a student.

The general theme that stands out in Cliff’s first interview is his seeming struggle to balance his responses between focusing on LGBTQ climate topics on campus versus issues relating to dignity for all campus persons. He struggles to separate LGBTQ-focused discussions of equality from issues of equality for all campus persons. He says that he is afraid that LGBTQ organizations at UM are branded as “hyper-sexual” and the nuances of individual difference, spiritual growth, and human respect become ignored with an atmosphere that, in his point of view, places too much emphasis on sex. Overall, Cliff sees the campus climate at any university as a place where dignity can be represented for all, but does not think universities are set up to facilitate social transformation. However, he does say that “societal transformation is from individual transformation” and thus facilitates “social policies which make people change their beliefs.”

Cliff thinks change happens for university students by the instigation of institutional policy that promotes openness in the classroom for all members of the campus community. Cliff thinks that improved campus climate is achieved for LGBTQ students when improved campus climate for all members of the community is achieved. He does speak to the campus climate in reference to his college choices, but does not go into great detail about the selection process directly; he focuses more intently on his direct experience of the classroom climate. However, his account does reveal that issues of power and relationship impact a safe discussion of sexuality on campus. Cliff’s
journey shows his desire to safely control change on a college campus while also revealing a multifaceted formula for the correlation between power, social change, and interpersonal relationship.

*Sexuality and College Choice*

Cliff has a great deal to say about openness on the college campus and more specifically, in the classroom. Throughout the first interview, he speaks about the varying level of openness he had with his sexuality as an undergraduate and graduate student. He tells me of times that he moves in and out of the closet based on differing situations. He says that there are times in his life, such as applying for jobs, that he goes into “stealth mode” in order to conceal his sexual orientation. He says that he rarely conceals his orientation anymore, but that on infrequent occasions, he may move back into the closet. However, the compelling notion about Cliff’s level of disclosure is that it depends on conditions related to his ability to control or make change.

Early in the interview, I asked him about the impact and consideration LGBTQ-life had on his graduate school choice. He says,

I’ve always felt really confident to go in or out of the closet in certain situations so I didn’t feel like, well if I’m on the campus then gay issues are going to become readily apparent. It was anything. Like I almost felt like I could go stealth if I need to. It never even crossed my mind. Should I choose UM because it would be good for LGBT? No, not at all. It wasn’t that I intentionally chose it, but I think I could remember thinking that it would be kind of exciting to be on a campus because it was a little more of a metropolitan feel, more than RSU, so there probably would be more gay people on campus. Especially with the College
of Music and stuff like that. So, that was exciting, but it wasn’t why I chose it at all.

While Cliff says the LGBTQ climate was not a factor in his choice to attend UM for graduate school, he does say that the “metropolitan feel” of the campus and the College of Music on campus indicates that there “would be more gay people on campus” and that this is exciting for him. He also implies that he is safe to move in and out of the closet—his reference to being in control by being stealth (covert)—as he sees fit at UM. This answer seems to be representing a conflict within his own perception of his assessment of campus climate. On one hand, Cliff makes a statement that UM’s LGBT-climate did not cross his mind during his college choice, but also says that the campus would probably have more gay people than his undergraduate institution and that excites him. He says that by being on campus, gay issues would become detectable and thus allow him to go in and out of the closet as he saw fit. This seems to imply that the UM climate facilitated an atmosphere where if he felt threatened or assured, he could adjust his level of disclosure as necessary. This also implies that Cliff, by using the term stealth, needs to be in control of how sexuality is considered or discussed. He saw markers at UM that allowed him to safely control—to hide or reveal—his sexuality as needed.

I followed up by asking him if an “absolute zero presence” of LGBTQ-friendly groups or policies on campus would have impacted his choice, he says “not at all,” even though he says later that the fact there was a presence on campus helped him. He goes on, if I were going to reapply for graduate school it might be something that I would contemplate; like say I was going to go on and do another study, then it might be something that I would consider. I might think, well, I’m really not sure if I want
to go to Minnesota because it’s probably not a good city that’s liberal. If I had an
opportunity to go to San Francisco I might think that might be too gay for me. It
wouldn’t mean, I wouldn’t rule it out because of that. It might be (short pause)
that’s a lot. I don’t know if I need that much gay. Going to a place that was at
least closer to the metropolitan area would be good. I know that I would have that
citywide connection which would include gay life.

As with his first response, Cliff indicates the need for a gay community or “gay life”
within a metropolitan area that would be important to his experience as a student. He sets
a tone with this answer that, while not directly implicating LGBTQ-campus climate in his
assessment of a particular institution, he does place emphasis on the importance of
LGBTQ interaction and relationship within a college climate. Specifically, he uses the
word “connection” when describing potential access to gay life. This response indicates
that Cliff seeks a specific level of gay life that is somewhere between too conservative
and “too gay.” This also leads me to consider his criteria for disclosure more carefully. In
short, he seeks places that do not push the topic of sexuality at all. He seeks places that it
is an option, but not a necessity; places that allow him to safely control the conversation
and not be either required to hide or forced to disclose.

Coming Out in the Classroom

Cliff is both a student and a teacher at UM. He sees the tone that teacher-student
relationships have on the degree to which LGBTQ people disclose their sexual
orientation in the classroom. When discussing his undergraduate years, he reflects vividly
on his experience at Regional State University. He says,
In my undergrad years definitely I would have not told my teachers unless it was that special situation where you feel like it’s kind of close. You know, it’s kind of a good relationship and you can talk about it. You can have a better relationship by being genuine.

Here Cliff begins to discuss the relational nature of being out in the classroom. He indicates that coming out and being genuine about one’s self occurs in “a good relationship” where trust is established. For Cliff, to be able to discuss his sexuality, he has to feel “close” and be able to talk and have an improved relationship by “being genuine.” His first and second person voices illustrate the distance he felt from being completely out as an undergraduate.

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<th>I/My</th>
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<tr>
<td>My undergrad years</td>
<td>You feel</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would have not</td>
<td>You know</td>
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<tr>
<td>My teachers</td>
<td>You can talk about it</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You have a better relationship</td>
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Here, Cliff’s I-voice disappears to a second person account of what coming out to a teacher looked like at RSU. He said he would have definitely not told his teachers he was gay unless it was a “special situation.” At that point in Cliff’s life, where he was out to a select few, even when coming out to a chosen professor, he disconnects and his you-voice reports what that situation would have looked like. It seems significant that despite being an undergraduate several years before, Cliff shifts into his you-voice when he describes what a situation may have looked liked when he disclosed his sexuality to a professor years before. This disconnection is noteworthy because it happens when he is describing the times in his life when he was slowly disclosing his sexual orientation; he is
coming out of the closet on an individual level, but he is also still not completely disclosing his sexuality. In other words, by shifting to his you-voice, Cliff is able to disclose his sexual orientation in a controlled way—a method that allows him to have a level of covertness, thus the disappearance of the first person account.

He goes on to say that once he got to graduate school at UM, that he was more open about his sexuality. He says,

Then in my Master’s, by the time I was in my Master’s, and I felt like it was a different realm and I was more of an adult. So, I really wasn’t trying to censor myself. I can think of a few times when I would just raise my hand and speak out in class and just talk about my partner, as long as it was relevant of course…I can’t think of any real strong situations in graduate school years where I did not come out or where I stopped myself or censored myself.

Cliff indicates that as he got older and was in graduate school, that he became less concerned about coming out as a student. So, as he specifies earlier that he “felt like he could go stealth” if he needed to, that he did not have to censor himself any longer. This is noted as his I-voice becomes dominant and his you-voice disappears. Consequently, as he became older and felt like he “was in a different realm,” he becomes more present in his account of how his sexuality relates to the campus climate. As he was more in the closet, his you-voice gives the account of coming out, even in the best and most ideal situations, and his I-voice disappears; when Cliff is more comfortable and more out, as with his time at UM, his I-voice takes the lead in recalling his experiences.
I went on to ask him if the difference between coming out as an undergraduate and a graduate student had to do with his journey or with the particular campus environment. He says,

I came out when I was sixteen and my family was really cool with it and that helped me be more cool with it. So since then I was personally cool with it. From sixteen on I had no qualms at all. Like I was, like I know who I am and it’s not a problem. Undergrad I enjoyed kind of still being stealthy still, high school and undergrad I liked being stealthy. It was kind of fun to come out. It was something interesting to talk about. It was a point to deepen our relationship. It was like a disclosure thing. Then by the time I got into graduate school, it was starting to get boring. I did my identity separate. That was starting to bore me and now as I get older it’s starting to frustrate me that now I’m starting to see social injustice. Where before I kind of liked to keep it quiet and to myself, and not because I was ashamed or anything, but it’s just because I liked coming out to people. It was a neat experience to me and the relationship. Like I said, I started to realize that it really wasn’t that interesting. It wasn’t as interesting as I was trying to make it out to be. So now I like to keep it so that I just say it as if I’m, you know, it’s my wife. Talk about my wife or my life. Although there are some situations where I feel like, you know, for political reasons it might be better for me to not come out at this point. Searching for jobs, every now and then in class, and dealing with power kind of situations.

Here Cliff says that coming out is a relational exercise in which trust is needed for disclosure. Of note, this finding is also found in Raider-Roth’s (2005) work with
classroom relationships. Cliff also says that as he has matured, he no longer comes out on an individual level, but he casually brings up his partner in conversation as a straight man would bring up his wife. It seems that the coming out “process” is called on less and that due to his own comfort level and the climate of the location, he talks about his partner with ease in the greater social environment and without revealing his sexuality on an individual basis.

Despite Cliff’s growing comfort with being open about his sexuality, he does concede that there are times, “for political reasons,” that “it might be better” for him to not come out. He tells me that when he does have to conceal his sexuality, it repeatedly has to do with a specific climate. When I pull out Cliff’s I-voice and place it with the “it” voice—with “it” representing his sexual orientation—from the above excerpt, I am able to hear Cliff’s journey more clearly. His response follows a trail that demonstrates: how he initially would come out as a relationship building tool; how his experience in graduate school created a climate where he stopped coming out as a “process;” and finally that sometimes the climate—in times he has is a lack of control—impacts the level of openness he has about his sexuality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>It</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I came out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I was sixteen</td>
<td></td>
<td>My family was really cool with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am</td>
<td></td>
<td>That helped me be more cool with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personally cool with it</td>
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<tr>
<td>I had no qualms</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I enjoyed</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I liked being stealthy</td>
<td></td>
<td>It was kind of fun to come out</td>
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Cliff's dialogue between his I-voice and the voice of his sexuality, the “it,” paints an interesting picture of how he has evolved in the way he communicates his sexuality within certain environments. As an undergraduate, he was “stealthy” about his sexuality and chose to disclose his orientation as “a point to deepen” his relationships. The use of the word “stealth” and “stealthy” seems to be Cliff's means for describing a controlled and covert way to disclose or hide his sexual orientation. It is clear that for Cliff to discuss his sexuality, he seeks out situations, people, and places that reflect his ability to direct when and where the disclosure happens. He made the decision about when the relationship
needed deepening, he made the decision to disclose to his family, and he decided to change how he talks about it.

As he began graduate school, Cliff says that he realized that coming out to people one at a time, while a tool to deepen relationship, was also not effective from a social justice point of view, so he began to treat his sexuality as heterosexual people do, to mention his partner unremarkably. Or, to “normalize” his sexual orientation, he tried to make his sexuality unremarkable.

I began to wonder if Cliff’s more broad openness about his sexuality had to do with the relationships he had made and also with the environment that his graduate studies has provided. His responses to earlier questions indicate that he had already found support within himself and with friends before enrolling at UM, but he has also found a level of support in graduate school for being open about his sexuality. When asked about the climate in his graduate program, he says,

I feel like it’s a very liberal major at this college. We talk about and there is all this stuff about; well, I feel like education and this college at this level, the graduate level, is very liberal. There is a lot of research going on for minorities and empowerment and queer studies and all that stuff there. It’s to the point where the opposite, that if you’re not liberal, then you’re looked at as kind of a freak. You know, what’s wrong with you, why are you disenfranchising people. So that was good. That’s a nice environment to be in.

Since being in a “liberal major” as a graduate student at UM, Cliff found an environment where his sexuality is essentially unremarkable. There is a marked difference between the way he discloses his sexuality between his undergraduate and graduate experiences—
from an apparent individual coming out process, to a more normative and broader, unremarkable disclosure. It is also interesting to follow the evolution of how Cliff speaks about himself and his sexuality in relationship to his current educational environment. This is evidenced by pulling out his first and second person voices.

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<tr>
<th>I/We</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tr>
<td>I feel</td>
<td>You’re not liberal</td>
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<tr>
<td>We talk</td>
<td>You’re looked at</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel</td>
<td>You know</td>
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<td>You</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(why are) You disenfranchising people</td>
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Here, Cliff is positioned in his academic program, which he assesses as liberal and empowering others. He feels that anyone, including himself, not doing work that is inclusive toward “minorities and empowerment and queer studies” is not accepted and looked at as an outsider. When talking about those that are not accepted by the mainstream in his program, he reverts to the second person voice as this seems to be a distancing or way to separate from the accepted climate. Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Raider-Roth (2005) have also well-documented the use of “you” as a means for distancing. As Cliff’s first person voice disappeared earlier when he was not comfortable with the climate, he again reverts to the second person voice when describing what being an “other” may look like within his own program. Cliff illustrates that when one is not out or comfortable in an environment, his first person and assured self disappears. Like in other places in the two interviews with Cliff, when he is describing what a space may look like for someone that isn’t seen as an “insider,” the disconnected you-voice appears.
While we continue discussing the climate on campus, he works through his ideas about the role of queer professors on campus. This is where Cliff’s conflict lies with sexuality, social change, and the UM campus. He struggles to reconcile the fact that unless sexuality is remarked upon, then social change will not happen. He says,

I feel torn because I understand, I don’t feel like personal issues like sexuality is something that should necessarily be addressed by administration. To me it should be something that everybody should just be okay with. I don’t like it to be really talked about. I don’t like to go marching down the street. I don’t like to make an issue of it. However, I understand how social change works. It really is the tweaking of the world. Unless somebody makes a stir then things are going to continue to be the same. I honestly don’t know how to have both at the same time. You can’t let people be quiet about things and be respectful about their personal lives and at the same time expect society to change.

On one hand Cliff wants an integrated climate that needs no remarks to address sexuality, but on the other hand he says that in order for the social change to happen, that people need to make a “stir” in order to bring attention to the things he wants to see changed. By pulling out Cliff’s I-voice, I can see the conflict he feels about what he sees as necessary to make change on campus.

<table>
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<th>I</th>
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<tr>
<td>I feel torn</td>
<td>You can’t let people be quiet</td>
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<td>I understand</td>
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<td>I don’t like</td>
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<td>I understand</td>
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<td>I honestly don’t know</td>
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This passage shows where Cliff feels torn about the debate on how to change a campus climate. His story here, like many others’ I have seen within this inquiry, is an example of the struggle to make the campus climate more LGBTQ-friendly. The debate seems to be saying that to remark on sexuality is what makes it remarkable, but to not remark on it keeps the status quo—a status quo that “should just be okay with it,” but one that is not. Cliff’s first person voice is very descriptive about how much he does not like discussing sexuality so openly. Most notably, when he says that he doesn’t know, he shifts into a second person voice where the you says what has to be done to create social change—to not let people be quite about their sexuality. His you-voice takes over suggesting that he does not want to be pushed to talk about sexuality.

Cliff goes on to mention that he wanted people to make sure being gay “is valued and not just accepted” on campus. After reviewing the transcript and beginning the initial analysis, I was intrigued about the conflict between “having to” talk about sexuality in order to improve campus climate versus the idea that by remarking on sexuality, we cause it to be remarkable. This takes me back to Sapon-Shevin’s (1998) question of how to “represent same-sex partnerships as normative or unremarkable in a world in which they must be remarked upon in order to become part of the conversation” (p.121). This seems to be a significant struggle for Cliff as it is clear that he wants to be in an environment where he can safely control when and where he discusses his sexuality.

Awkward Tolerance

Historically, I have viewed tolerance as open-mindedness, but considering the recent political backlash of the word when discussing LGBTQ people during a political debate (Advocate.com, 2008), it is important to have an understanding of how Cliff
defines the word in relationship to the UM campus climate. In the context of our conversation, he defines tolerance not as open-mindedness or broad-mindedness, but as putting up with someone or “its okay if you’re here.” It is important to examine his feelings toward the campus climate because it is the motivation for his desire to bring discussions about sexuality, despite his aversion, to the forefront. When discussing the UM campus, he says,

The [UM] climate that I generally feel is in the lower bracket, which would be barely tolerated, an awkward toleration, I would think. Almost to the point where it almost feels like; many times it feels like it’s now to the point where it’s worse to not tolerate gay people because there is something wrong with somebody who isn’t tolerant. So, I think the climate is becoming that if someone were in a classroom and were to say something more derogatory towards gay people, then they would then be the ones that were the odd ones. The norm now is that you should be tolerant. You should be maybe even accepting. I don’t know if there is really a distinction between the two. I’m using them a little different. Tolerant means: it’s okay if you’re here. Accepting is: ‘okay, you’re here and I’m okay with it.’ But, it’s getting close to ‘it’s interesting and we can be friends,’ but I feel like currently the climate is in a lot of patches. Currently a lot of groups it’s not P.C. to make derogatory comments about gay people. So I think that’s probably where it’s at; and it’s at the point now also in some areas where it’s almost kind of cool, but maybe not in the most powerful way to know a gay person and be cool with it. ‘Oh I know a gay person.’ It makes it interesting. That’s what it is. It’s juicy to talk about your gay friends. It’s like, ‘oh there is a gay guy in my office
and he might take me to a gay bar sometime.’ Suddenly it’s interesting because it’s unusual.

Cliff lays out a progression of the relationship between the UM climate and LGBTQ people. Here he is saying that the campus is moving from tolerating queer people, to accepting queer people, to almost a point that “we can be friends.” He says that he thinks the current climate is one that is in “a lot of patches.” It seems that he is saying that the climate is different among different groups on campus. He says that the overall climate of the campus is one that says “it’s not P.C. to make derogatory comments about gay people.” This reinforces his definition of UM as a place that awkwardly tolerates queer people; that queer people are put up with and that “it is ok” they are on campus, but their presence is more or less “interesting because it’s unusual,” not because they are valued. This evolving acceptance of LGBTQ people on campus may also have to do with Cliff’s more open stance about his sexuality as a graduate student.

Cliff is saying that the campus is generally tolerable with the presence of LGBTQ people, and that it is generally accepted that people should not make derogatory comments in a public setting, but the tolerance that is shown is more like a novelty or something “kind of cool” and “unusual.” Cliff’s assessment paints a picture of the “awkward tolerance” he describes earlier in that he feels, knows, and thinks that the UM campus climate displays little value of his presence as a gay man. I see Cliff’s assessment of the UM campus climate as one that has allowed him to be present on campus, to even integrate himself more openly into various groups of people on campus. However, he also feels he is a novelty on the campus and not a truly valued member.
During our second interview, I ask Cliff what it means to him to be valued as a gay man versus being accepted. He says,

I feel like whenever you bring somebody who is not normal to that environment into that environment; like when women started coming into different jobs that were typically men’s jobs or you know even vice versa. Suddenly it’s just kind of like an acceptance. Well, it’s like okay that you’re here and that’s okay. That’s what I hear a lot about from, that’s what I hear a lot from people who are new to gay people. They will say, you know, ‘oh I’m okay with you’ or I’ve heard things like, ‘oh, I have a brother who is that way. I think that’s okay.’ To me that’s different than ‘wow, you’re gay and that’s really interesting.’ Or ‘you are bringing something unique to the environment’ or you might even have different skills or ideas or something that is now creating a different climate. Like, for example, and I know a lot of this is dramatized, but like if women come to a job site and if they are accepted then it’s okay. It’s like, ‘oh you are coming to this job and that’s okay. You are fine. You’ll be all right.’ If you’re valued then it’s like, ‘wow, it will be really nice to have some women around here because that’s going to change the dynamic of how we communicate’ or ‘it might be a little more calm around here’ or ‘it might be a little bit more easy to be around. It’s not going to be so macho driven’ or something like that. That’s what I think.

Cliff is describing what it may sound or look like to be in an environment where a person who is “not normal to that environment” is valued instead of merely being accepted. He says that in order to be valued in an environment, such as that of the UM campus, a person needs to be appreciated. I see this as relational—in order to be appreciated, one
must be in relationship for value to be determined. Based on what Cliff is saying here, a person cannot be valued without being in a relationship; relationships provide an opportunity for an individual’s contributions and worth to be valued. In other words, when a person is in an authentic relationship, their significance to the environment is then seen; without such relationships, the campus climate is unable to change or mature.

Cliff mentions that to be accepted or tolerated, people may relate, but it seems that he is saying that to be valued, individuals need to be open to relationship so that the benefits of the individual’s presence are seen and discovered. For an LGBTQ person (or any person for that matter) to truly become a member of the campus climate, and not merely tolerated, one must be valued; in order to be valued, growth-fostering relationships must be present. Similarly, in order to be in growth-fostering relationships, people must be authentic, and from Cliff’s point of view, to be authentic, he must be open about his sexual orientation. All in all, his experience says that in order for real change to happen, growth-fostering relationships, where value is attained, must be present.

Cliff goes on to describe what he thinks being valued in the classroom looks like. He says,

If somebody were valued then I think you would start to hear more things like, ‘it’s so good to have a woman or lesbian in this class because it would be really nice to hear a very strong female voice or a female voice that hasn’t stuck with some traditional women’s ways’ or ‘it’s so nice to have a gay man in here because it will be really interesting to’; and I know these are all stereotypes. It will be really nice; ‘it’s so nice to have a gay man in this class because it will be really interesting to hear somebody who thinks both logically and sensitively at the same
time.’ To me that’s when gay people realize they have something to bring and not just ‘well, we’ll let you in and it’s okay. We can tolerate this. We can make this work, I guess.’

Cliff continues to describe what it would sound like if the environment valued LGBTQ people. His examples all show that diversity actually brings insight to the community. And again, he highlights that in order for a person to be in authentic relationship, there must be a two-way expression of thoughts and feelings where everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened (Miller, Jordan, Kaplan, Stivers & Surrey, 1991). This is typified when he uses words like “it would be really nice to hear” or “it will be really interesting to hear” as opposed to situations where Cliff feels that queer people are just let in or tolerated. So, to merely be present, accepted, or tolerated does little to nothing to actually create true value or benefit to all involved. Plainly, Cliff seems to be saying that until all members of the campus are allowed to offer two-way expressions of thought and feeling, no persons, despite their presence, will actually become a member of the greater UM community.

Controlling the Conversation

I asked Cliff to clarify what seemed to me to be a conflict on his thoughts about bringing topics of sexual orientation to the forefront of conversation at UM. He had mentioned during our first interview that he does not think that queer persons should have to “champion their lifestyle,” but he also says that he knows “how social change works” and that people need to make a “stir” in order for things to not stay the same. I also found it interesting that a person who dislikes openly discussing sexuality in various situations confronts the topic so openly. I asked him to describe his thinking is on the issue. He said,
Some of that might have just come from my background, which I think like my upbringing and I would think that maybe some of that influence was from like being Catholic and being very conservative about, especially sexual topics; you don’t want to talk about that. So it makes me uncomfortable to try to push sex in people’s faces. Like in a way I fight it. Sometimes I will catch myself saying I’m not gay in front of old people because I’m afraid I will offend them. It isn’t that I’m embarrassed or anything like that but I know they will feel awkward about it so I don’t want to talk about it around them. Same thing around like nuns and priests and stuff because I know it’s going to make them feel awkward so I don’t talk about. So, I think in a way that there is this side where people shouldn’t really talk about sex or sexuality relationships, and also at the same time that people need to do something about it. So, of course you have to be a little bit vocal. I think that if there was any kind of struggle or anything that I was trying to figure out, well we really need to do stuff that’s necessary to make change; but I don’t like to make waves, especially with sex topics. Also a little bit that I kind of enjoy under the radar. To me I don’t always like to come out right away because I like people to form an impression of me assuming that I’m straight and then having that shock value. That’s kind of just a fun thing. Maybe there is not anything really valuable there other than it’s just kind of fun. It maybe gives me a little bit of kick. In my classes I usually wait until like the third class. Partially because I do think it’s important for students to form an impression about a teacher. It isn’t important enough that it needs to be said on the first day but also because I want them to form an impression so that I can then break it.
I find this passage fascinating. First of all, Cliff gives some insight to his background and the struggle he feels when talking about his sexual orientation. He says that he is afraid he “will offend” various groups that he thinks may “feel awkward” about his sexuality, so he just does not talk about it. Then he goes on to say again that people should not “really talk about sex or sexuality relationships,” but says that he thinks in order to “make change” we need to “do stuff that is necessary.” There is a clear struggle here between how Cliff feels and what he thinks is important. He says several times over the course of the two interviews that he is uncomfortable talking about sexuality in public, but he also goes on to tell me several times that he comes out to his students and that in order to make change for an improved campus climate, he must be vocal about his sexuality.

When I pull out the I-voice, and place it beside the you-voice and the third person voice, this conflict is clear.

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<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>Them/They</th>
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<td>I think</td>
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<td>I would think</td>
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<td>You don’t want to talk about that</td>
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<td>I fight it</td>
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<td>I will catch myself</td>
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<td>I’m not gay</td>
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<td>I’m afraid</td>
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<td>I will offend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Them</td>
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<td>(It isn’t that) I’m embarrassed</td>
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<td>I know</td>
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<td>They will feel awkward</td>
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<td>I don’t want to talk about it</td>
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<td>Them feel awkward</td>
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<td>I don’t talk</td>
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<td>You have to be a little bit vocal</td>
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<td>I think</td>
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</table>
I was trying
I don’t like to make waves
I kind of enjoy under the radar
I don’t always like to come out
I like people to form an impression
I’m straight
I usually wait
I do think
I want them to form an impression
I can then break it

This poem shows the struggle of how Cliff’s I-voice feels about the competing truths in his life. First of all, when his you-voice tells him he does not want to talk about sexuality, the I-voice responds by outright denying the truth of his orientation in order to make “them” comfortable. He says, “I’m not gay,” “I’m afraid,” and “I will offend.” As a result, in order to make others feel at ease, he refuses part of himself in order to remain in available, although inauthentic, relationships. Secondly, when Cliff’s you-voice tells him what he has to do, by telling him “You don’t want to talk about that” and “You have to be a little bit vocal”, the I-voice responds by resisting again, but eventually does what he thinks is important in order to break impressions. It seems that no matter the intent, Cliff is fighting to reduce conflict in his life in regard to sexuality. The result is on one hand, he perpetuates an inauthentic self, and on the other, in order to make change, he concedes his own comfort-level for what he sees as the greater good—a version of the central relational paradox. Ultimately, it is clear that Cliff would be happier if he did not have to discuss his sexuality at all; the tension illustrated here seems to cause Cliff much anxiety. This poem also demonstrates that there are connections that caused him to hide his sexuality. As demonstrated in the time I spent with Cliff, it is obvious that relationship is very important to Cliff’s ideas about social change. Here, he has a past relationship with priests and nuns, due to his Catholic upbringing. However, he also knows that there will
be no change in their ideas about his sexual orientation. So, to preserve the relationship, and knowing there is no possibility of change, he does not disclose his sexuality.

I admire Cliff’s ability to respond to the “awkward tolerance” of the UM campus in order to break molds of who queer people are. This is clearly not easy for him, especially on a campus that he describes as one that generally does not value his presence. The concern for the greater goal of social change is more important to Cliff than his own comfort level. While he may not engage in discussions of sexuality off campus and with those he is afraid he may “offend,” he sacrifices in order to engage in a social movement upon the UM campus. Cliff does not want to make waves, but does come out to all his students because he feels it is important for them to form an impression and have it broken because people assume he is straight. All things considered, Cliff is working to actively engage critical thought about sexuality and LGBTQ people’s place among the greater campus climate.

Cliff goes on to say that he does not want his sexual orientation to be “the number one quality” when people think about him. He says that he sees his sexuality “as something that’s remarkable; meaning something that’s interesting.” He told me “I just want to be Cliff.” However, he does not want messages of sexuality to disappear completely. It is apparent that Cliff struggles to openly discuss his sexuality, but when he talks about other queer people on the campus, he communicates that there should be clear messages about sexual orientation’s place within the UM campus climate. He says, I don’t really worry about me, but I do worry about others like the freshmen and things coming in. I worry; you know I think, I wish there was more of a message
to the incoming students that this is going to be a place where you can be yourself
and not have to feel like you have to hide or change.

This short paragraph says so much to me about Cliff. He has a deep concern for others
and wants others to feel they can be themselves and not have “to hide or change.”

When I pull out Cliff’s I-voice here, I am able to see the cornerstone of what he
has been telling me about the remark-ability of sexuality.

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<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t really worry about me</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do worry about others</td>
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<tr>
<td>I worry</td>
<td>You know</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>You can be yourself</td>
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<tr>
<td>I wish</td>
<td>(not feel like) You have to hide or change</td>
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When I consider what Cliff has already told me about his struggle to make sexuality
remarkable, and his concern for others’ feelings when discussing queer topics, this
response succinctly pulls together what occurs for Cliff on campus. He doesn’t worry
about his own concerns or issues with sexuality, but worries about others who may be
getting messages about how to discuss or handle sexuality within the campus climate. He
wishes that people could be themselves and that they do not feel they have to hide or
change in order to become members of the UM community—like he has had to do at
times.

On another level, his you-voice could also be saying what messages Cliff wishes
he had received when he was looking for colleges as an undergraduate. It seems that Cliff
may be saying in a more subtle way that he felt he himself had to change, as he did not
want to openly discuss sexuality; but, due to the current campus climate, he moved
beyond what felt comfortable in order to try to build an atmosphere that is better for
current and future LGBTQ people seeking a college. Cliff put himself out of his comfort
zone so others will not have to leave theirs.

Another point important to consider here is how Cliff controls the conversation of
his sexual orientation in the classes he teaches. He says,

I teach a lot; that’s always an issue for me, like whether or not to come out in my
teaching. I eventually turn it into a talk on like the third day of class. I do it on the
third day of class because I, wanting them to have the students to get a chance to
know me first before they would, because I didn’t want to be known as the gay
teacher. So I let them kind of form their opinion about me and then I would just
kind of walk in and the first thing I would talk about that day is I would say, hey
everybody, and by the way I always have a really good rapport with them. That’s
something that’s really important. It wasn’t an awkward talk. It was like, all right,
we’ve kind of gotten to the point where I like to give you what I call the gay talk.
I talk about why I think it’s important for me to come out for them because I think
it enhances our student/teacher relationship. Also, it’s important to come out for
the gay community because it’s very important, I think, for people in society to
see that gay people have positions of power…. It isn’t important enough that it
needs to be said on the first day but also because I want them to form an
impression so that I can then break it.

This passage shows Cliff’s continued desire to control the conversation about sexuality.
His voice is clear and assured in what he thinks and does in the classroom. He
methodically approaches the topic and goes back to his rationale for improving
relationships. It is clear here that Cliff values the relationships he builds with students, but he is also highlighting the intent to make change.

Cliff does not want to broach the topic on the first day, but he does disclose his sexuality early in the term. This suggests that he wants to control the message of sexuality because of the implications it has for social change. Unlike the instance with the priest and nuns, Cliff sees that safely and carefully broaching the conversation in the classroom does have the potential to make change. He thinks that there will be the possibility of change in their ideas about his sexual orientation; so, to build relationship, and knowing there is a possibility for change, he discloses his sexuality.

Cliff has shown that in certain situations, he discloses his sexuality and in others he does not. During the course of our time together, he told many stories about how he “called people out” for using homophobic language on campus or with family. He also discussed his ease in holding hands with his partner in public. However, one story he told about a friend who is in the closet began to unravel the formula for which Cliff seeks out opportunities to make change and control the conversation about sexuality. By challenging his friend’s belief that two men should not hold hands in public, Cliff demonstrated his understanding of the power of relationship in change. When referring to his friend, Cliff says,

I came full circle. I feel like that that same environment is on campus. That nobody challenges anybody to a culture of outness. In the culture of ‘be in the closet if you want to be in the closet,’ I’m torn because I feel like I should respect people and let them be in if they want to be in. At the same time I feel like you’re not really helping anybody by being in. You’re not helping yourself and you’re
not helping the community. So I’m kind of torn on that decision. Definitely in a sentence the culture on campus is that you are allowed to be in if you want to be in.

This passage suggests the journey that Cliff has encountered since the first time he disclosed his sexuality. At previous times in his life, he was not likely to be so open or confrontational about queer topics. However, his motivation to create an environment that “normalizes” LGBTQ relationships has pushed him to disclose and discuss topics formerly unmentionable.

It is also interesting how easily Cliff will hold hands or display affection in public considering all the times he has said how much he does not like discussing sexuality. However, for Cliff, public affection and discussions are very different. When considering places that he does and does not discuss his sexual orientation, relationships always play a factor. In the instance of public displays of affection, there are no relationships. As suggested earlier, in order to make change, there must be relationships. So, in instances of public affection, there are no relationships, therefore the potential to make change is not there. As a result, disclosing his affection for another man actually does not introduce a conversation of sexuality at all, because on one hand, there is no potential for change or relationship, and on the other hand, there is no potential to discuss the topic meaningfully. Therefore, being so open about his affection for his partner is actually not threatening to Cliff, as it does not place him either in control or out of control in discussions about sexuality.

*Reflection*
When I initially sat down to evaluate the interview data from our first conversation together, I thought the interview with Cliff would lend several insights, but I was unsure how deeply his experience impacted the work of this inquiry. However, after I began to review the transcript, the depth of discovery from our time together revealed an impressive insight. Not only had Cliff provided a rich intensity of thought, but the interview also demonstrated how important this inquiry is to the greater academic work on diversity issues. I am once again amazed at the level of scholastic insight that two in-depth interviews can lend to educational scholarship.

As with the experience of others in this inquiry, Cliff verified that relationships play a key role in how an individual understands himself. His journey toward coming out on campus was facilitated by relationships that allowed him to grow and better value himself. He also illustrates that in order to remain in relationships people sometimes alter who they say they are. His concern for justice leads him on a path that is not always comfortable, but in the end may actually help create and sustain a climate where people will ultimately be valued and safely embraced without feeling like they “have to hide or change.”

Cliff’s journey is similar to many others’ from this inquiry. He sought a safe environment that was “not too gay” or too conservative; one in which he would decide when and where he discussed or disclosed his sexual orientation. He also shares what can be gained from the formula about the association between relationship and social change. For Cliff to be in a safe space, one that allows him to control the conversation, he needs relationships that allow him to discuss his sexuality securely and with the intent to change social ideals. The idea that he uses control as a means for discussing sexuality puts his
experience in perspective. The notion of Cliff’s intent to control his situation for an
ultimate change has three possibilities: some relationships facilitate no change; some
relationships facilitate change; and when there are no relationships, there is no change.
However, the idea that weaves throughout Cliff’s story, that choosing and controlling
when and how one discloses his sexuality, and the safety that comes with this control, are
central and essential for understanding the complexities associated with college choice.
Chapter VII

Aaron: Seeking a Place of Dignity

Aaron is a 23 year-old Caucasian graduate student at the University of Midwest. He heard about this inquiry through one of the LGBTQ student groups on campus by way of an email announcement sent to the group seeking volunteers to participate in the study. Aaron self-identifies as a gay man and had been enrolled at UM six months when he and I met for our first conversation. I prepared for our interview as I had for others; however, when he began to respond to my initial questions, I was pleasantly surprised at not only his articulate responses, but also touched by the story of how he ended up at UM. His journey is important to explore deeply because he demonstrates the impact that campus climate has on a person’s quest for truth. He came to UM because he felt safe to combine the competing truths in his life—being gay and being Christian; however, what he found was that he was not safe to combine other aspects of his identity—that of being a student and being a feminist.

Aaron came to UM from Rae College (a pseudonym), a small, liberal arts institution located in the Great Lakes Region. While at Rae, he served as a student-pastor at a Protestant church a few miles from campus. It was his experience with the church and his ultimate arrival at UM as a graduate student that led to a particularly rich interview. Aaron’s experience of leaving his intended career path of seminary and Protestant ministry, and ending up in a secular academic setting, is what most fascinated me about our time together. His matter-of-fact and pragmatic responses added a level of honesty and passion that I had not expected to encounter. Not that I did not expect
passion, but Aaron’s straight-forward and coherent expression of self was not only impressive to me, but also challenged me to continually question my own place within dichotomies—both academic and social. It is also important to note that in order to attain a vivid understanding of Aaron’s story, it is essential to thoroughly examine the journey that led him to UM.

The general plot that emerged from the interviews with Aaron tells an account of a person who seeks justice and dignity for all people. He seemed to always come back to dignity as paramount when any question or prompt about UM’s campus climate surfaced. Aaron often responded to dichotomous questions with “why can’t we have both?” and made it clear that he does not like “either/or” choices. He shared that when he came to UM he was much more open about his sexuality than as a student at Rae, which is in large part due to his role as a student-pastor. His strong and present voice paints a vivid picture of how coming out of the closet was positioned against staying in the closet and the battle this raged in his life about converging two truths—that he is gay and that he is Christian.

Aaron tells me that he feels like an outsider within his class cohort, not because he is gay, but “for being a feminist and for being concerned with human dignity.” He says that at UM, he has experienced “a lot more ignorance than homophobia” and that he has a great desire to see LGBTQ persons not become a “single issue people.” He says that LGBTQ people are not “being fully honest as activists” if not they are not doing something to provide an alternative to any prejudice or discrimination. All in all, Aaron feels that interpersonal and intrapersonal growth, within the campus climate, should not be limited to certain spaces, but should happen in all aspects of campus life; however, his
account demonstrates what occurs when growth is stifled. His journey toward becoming a member of the UM campus is complex and full of interpersonal reflection. That process has given him a perspective about respect and honesty that allows him to see the campus climate as being built on “nothing but a lie.” As his story will recount, issues of truth and authenticity are paramount with the campus climate as well as with his own decisions that led to his enrollment at UM. Aaron’s experience of the UM climate has been one where his liberty as an individual is restricted within the guise of a self-described “progressive” environment; one where the open and accepting image that the campus suggests it portrays is, in fact, one that is seen as completely untrue. While Aaron does feel safe to disclose his sexual orientation, he does not feel free to confront injustice in academic spaces on campus. Aaron came to UM not only acknowledging his sexuality, but also seeking a space where he is safe to confront injustice.

The Convergence of Two Truths

Coming out on campus for Aaron—at both UM and Rae—has been a gradual and contemplative process. He has faced factors relating to career, family, and spirituality that have all impacted the way he discussed sexual orientation. His previous work in ministry created an internal conflict that influenced the level at which he felt safe discussing his sexual orientation while an undergraduate. However, when coming to UM, Aaron decided not to hide his sexuality any longer. When asked to describe how out he was to people, he replied, “right now I’m basically out to everyone.” He went on to tell me that a few distant family members did not know, but that is due to lack of communication, not intentionality. He said that he had been asked to “be on an awful lot of blogs” and that he is “now out on the World Wide Web.” He then continued that he is “at a place right now
where I’m not keeping it a secret.” This seems to be intentionally emphasized to place focus on the fact that at one time, or previously, he was keeping it hidden.

Since he had indicated that he was not as open with his sexuality prior to attending UM, I asked Aaron to describe his involvement with LGBTQ campus life and the level of openness about his sexuality as an undergraduate at Rae College. He said,

I was probably less out at Rae. Well, I was less out than I am here because I was working as a pastor of a United Methodist Church and I did that for two years. So when I first started going to GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] meetings at Rae, I did tell, very protectively, and I was very, very cautious and careful. As time developed, I came to understand that people on campus were, at least the accepting people on campus were accepting. They weren’t going to call the Bishop, so I started to let go of some of that paranoia that I had around that. When I got here, I left that appointment at the end of June, so since then I’ve been very intentional about stepping away from any pretense or sort of closet. I don’t wrap myself in rainbow flags, but I certainly don’t try to hide it.

Here Aaron is telling me that due to his job with the church, he was “very, very cautious and careful” about his sexuality. He does say that despite this caution, he found “accepting people” where he built trust and “started to let go of some of that paranoia.” It seems that due to relationships with “accepting people,” even while working in a job that caused him to stay in the closet, he was able to attend GSA meetings and build more authentic relationships with people who accepted him as both a pastor and as gay. Aaron also is direct to point out that he has been “very intentional” about no longer hiding his
sexuality. Since he came out of the closet, he does not want to build any deception about his sexual orientation; he came to UM with no desire to hide his sexuality.

Seeing the obvious difficulty that Aaron faced while living a secretive life at Rae, I asked him if his sexual orientation had anything to do with coming to UM. He says,

Not really. I had originally intended on going to seminary and when I came out to my supervisor I withdrew from the process of ordination. I did that really late in the academic calendar that, well I made the decision to do that in January. So then I knew I didn’t want to go into the workforce right away and I knew I wanted to do more school. I started applying to places that I know this sounds awful—places whose deadline I didn’t miss. That was my number one criteria. I found five such places and this was one. I also sort of perused the website of the school to see if there was at least an LGBT group and I assumed there would be. I was looking for LGBT offices and their sort of here was sort of connected to the one in the Women’s Center. So seeing that those things existed was really enough for me. I was looking for seminaries, which I did in a very timely way and with great amount of intentionality. I was very careful to make sure that there were these sort of organizations. I applied to Duke University and Emory University. Both those places have offices and from what I could see from the website they were very active student groups. I would have liked it to be more of a consideration than it was.

Aaron’s initial response to my question about the influence of sexual orientation on his college choice is “not really.” However, he soon explains that his sexual orientation had everything to do with the reason he came to UM. He not only directly discusses the
college search methods he used to research the LGBTQ organizations on UM’s campus, he also says that: sexuality forced him to choose a new career, thus influencing his graduate school options; sexuality influenced his search for a seminary; and that he wishes he had considered sexuality more than he did when choosing to attend a secular graduate school.

All in all, from my perspective, sexuality was the underlying motive for Aaron’s arrival at UM as a graduate student. Clearly the reason he came to UM was not due to the inclusive policies or accepting climate toward LGBTQ people; the reason he came to UM was because his sexual orientation conflicted with his chosen career path in Christian ministry. Had his sexual orientation not limited his choice to attend seminary, he would not have attended UM no matter the campus policies or resources for queer people. It is important to state that the rationale to attend UM was not based on the fact that he researched and discovered information about LGBTQ groups and offices on campus. Had sexual orientation not been a factor in Aaron’s choice to attend seminary, he would not have had to choose UM at all.

Aaron assumed UM would “at least” have an LGBTQ group and said that since there was one, that it helped him decide to attend UM after he was admitted. Also, according to this passage, he was already open about his sexuality when he applied to UM and it seems he did not need a space that facilitated a dynamic LGBTQ atmosphere; he sought a presence, as indicated by saying that since there was an LGBTQ office, that “was really enough” for him. The time he put into looking for LGBTQ organizations and support networks at the various seminaries to which he applied did not seem to be mirrored when attending UM, although he wished “it to be more of a consideration than it
was.” I suppose this is because in seminary, he would have had to keep his sexuality a secret. Also, since the seminaries at Duke and Emory are part of the larger university campus, he would have had the opportunity to engage in an LGBTQ community without disclosing his sexuality to his seminary colleagues.

When I pull out Aaron’s I voice from the above excerpt, the definitive first-person account of his journey to UM is displayed.

I/My
I had originally intended on going to seminary
I came out
I withdrew from the process
I did that late
I made the decision
I knew
I didn’t want
I knew
I wanted
I started applying
I know
I didn’t miss
My number one criteria
I found
I also sort of perused
I assumed
I was looking
I was looking
I did in a very timely way
I was very careful
I applied
I could see
I would have liked it
I had sort of an interesting situation

Here I am able to hear the process Aaron went through to arrive at UM. Despite being late, he knew what he wanted to do and how his late decision impacted his graduate school choice. Initially, he says what he “had originally intended” and that after he came out, his voice, which becomes active, accounts for how he found UM. This I poem also
illustrates the importance he placed on his previous “careful” search for seminaries and the LGBTQ organizations he could engage at each. Since he placed so much emphasis on seeking out queer organizations during his seminary search, it highlights the importance the organizations were to play in his life if he were to have remained in the closet. In the end, this poem shows that despite his desire to have been more intentional about the secular graduate school search process he “would have liked” to have engaged, that he attended “select schools” due to the change in his original plans—all connecting back to sexual orientation. Had Aaron chosen not to disclose his sexuality, the role of LGBTQ social groups would have played a larger role in his life as a seminary student.

As Aaron described his decision to not attend seminary and to not hide his sexual orientation, I became more curious about how he came to the decision to come out. I asked him about his time with the Rae College GSA and how that influenced his journey as a college student. I also asked him about the political work of the GSA. At the time of the conversation and considering my interest in social justice, I assumed his attendance at the GSA was politically motivated. However, Aaron’s interest in attending GSA was not political at all and was actually relationally motivated. He says,

I felt very isolated and the fact that a group consisted of open minded people, people who weren’t all straight and that was okay. So I really went for supportive functions more than for advocacy functions. I certainly didn’t want to be known as the gay advocate while I’m serving in a United Methodist pastoral appointment. So that was really not a part of my original intent. I guess it sort of developed that way. I went for one year sort of as a participant. I went to almost every meeting…So I guess I did find myself in a more activist role than I had expected.
Perhaps that gave me some glimpses of what it’s like to be who I really am, but I also can relate with that with serving in the church.

Aaron says that due to the activist role and due to connections within the GSA, he was able to get “some glimpses of what it’s like to be who” he really was. However, he also illustrates the importance of the GSA while he was in the closet. Aaron was serving in a church role that did not permit him to openly disclose his sexuality. So, he went to the GSA for “supportive functions” that consisted of “open minded people, people that weren’t all straight” in which to find community—a community with whom he could be both advocate for spiritual and gay causes.

Aaron goes on to describe the antithesis of being in a supportive environment and how hiding his true self because of his career caused him to live an inauthentic and dishonest life. He continues,

People would ask me, ‘do you have a girlfriend,’ and I thought it would be easiest to say no, but when people would ask are you in a relationship, then I would say ‘no.’ I was telling a lie. As I continued to grow in my relationship with Jesse, and not knowing or expecting that it would become permanent, but still realizing whether it’s Jesse or someone else, there is still this nonsense about having to worry about where we go on dates. I remember very vividly that we went on a date to Pizza Hut in Greenville. The church I was serving was in Greenville and Greenville does not have a whole lot of restaurants. So some parishioners of mine came to the Pizza Hut and there I am with Jesse. They sat at a table that was sort of far away from us and they were sort of out of our vision. They wouldn’t necessarily have to see us. I remember thinking if I don’t look that way, they
won’t know for sure. If they do see sort of this figure they won’t know for sure that it’s me—that it’s I. So I sort of turned my body and looked out the window for the whole dinner. I didn’t look at the server and I didn’t look at Jesse. And I, I just remember the awkwardness of that 30 minutes of my life. It’s really instantiating the kind of falseness I was ready to sign on for on that day. I realized that wasn’t fair to whoever my partner would be. It wasn’t fair to me. It wasn’t fair to the churches I would be serving. I ultimately came to understand that if anything that’s a sin or if there is anything that’s an abomination, it is to reject what God created. I understood myself as a creation of God and was made in God’s image and beloved of God. And I and I continued serving in the church that forced me to reject that very creation that I understood of God. It was true abomination. So I can’t say there was really one reason or factors that lead to that, but really a confluence, I think, of situations and relationships, circumstances, and spiritual journey.

Here Aaron describes the “confluence” of situations in his life that led him to leave his intended career path that ultimately led to his enrollment at UM. When I began this inquiry, I did not anticipate the various impacts on college choice that sexuality plays. However, Aaron’s vivid description of a time in his life where various forms of his identity converge to force him to reflect on how best to live his future is an example of the many ways sexual orientation influences choices in the lives of individuals. This passage paints images of what it looks like for Aaron to be inauthentic—to not be safe to be free or open about his sexuality. He uses words like falseness, lie, sin, reject, and abomination to express what it feels like for him to not be safe to have his two truths
coexist. Before he disclosed his sexuality openly, he kept two separate truths about his life; when those truths were confronted, they equated an untruth. For Aaron, to not be safe to embrace both truths simultaneously is the true sin.

By listening to his I-voice alongside the they-voice, the juxtaposition of Aaron’s struggle to balance two truths is more apparent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>They</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I thought</td>
<td>They sat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would say</td>
<td>They were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was telling a lie</td>
<td>They wouldn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I continued</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was serving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am with Jesse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember</td>
<td>They do see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do</td>
<td>They won’t know for sure</td>
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</table>

This poem shows the interpersonal conflict of what happened to Aaron when his two separate realities collided. This collision forced Aaron to understand and acknowledge the untruth he was sustaining in his life. At this critical point, the poem shows that when
Aaron was with Jesse and then ran into the parishioners of his church, he was unable to face either position honestly. He physically and emotionally turned away from both realities of his life. This confrontation, as illustrated by this poem, helped Aaron to realize that unless he came to understand himself as a whole person—as spiritual and as gay—he would be unable to reconcile the two realities of his life. Until he came to understand himself by way of this confluence, he would have continued to live his life by “telling a lie.”

Despite the pain of leaving his “calling” and coming to UM, Aaron gained a freedom to be open about his sexuality and thus was safe to be both spiritual and gay. Even when being asked to work with the Wesley Foundation (a United Methodist student-ministry) at UM, Aaron was emphatic about being open and authentic in his life. He said,

I didn’t apply for the job and she sort of handed over and I fell into this position. I did that with complete openness. I said, look, here’s who I am. I’m not going to be shy about that. I’m not going to hide that anymore. She was great about that. That would have been a deal breaker for me, so if she had said, ‘well, we really,’ if she sort of bought into the rhetoric and rules with the rest of the church, I wouldn’t have done that. The internship here was not worth it and neither is the parking. Fortunately that didn’t happen that way.

Aaron paints a clear picture of his desire to live an open life at UM. He states, even to those within his religious circles, that he is “not going to hide” his sexual orientation anymore. He says that the benefits that he may have received by hiding his sexuality “was not worth” having to go back to a life where he felt he had to hide or be inauthentic.
There is a stark difference between how Aaron presented himself at Rae and how he began his time at UM. He decided to come to UM open and honest about his sexual orientation and no matter the response he gets from his employer or others at UM, he is “not going to hide that anymore.” It seems that Aaron is not going to place himself in a situation where he has to be dishonest about his sexuality again, nor would he be dishonest with the key relationships in his life, including and foremost, his self. The relationship between his sexuality and his spirituality—the process of safely joining the two truths of his life—is remarkable to say the least.

*Seeking Dignity*

Aaron and I spent half of our first conversation discussing how he came out and how that act led to his position as a graduate student at UM. The second half of the interview focused in on his experience of the UM campus climate. I began asking him to describe his experiences on campus as a gay male. He tells me that he has not experienced much homophobia at UM, but has instead experienced “a lot more ignorance.” He says,

I haven’t experienced much homophobia here, a lot more ignorance than homophobia; a media professor who insists that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is a progressive TV show. I came back with all this analysis and said, you know, ‘it’s really not gay people, only it’s to serve straight people and they are not real men and they are demasculinized and they are sort of in the gender stereotypical roles and making the straight man look pretty.’ I sort of went off on this professor. Aaron explains that the representation of gay men in a TV show for him is an ignorant way to represent progressive thinking about LGBTQ issues. For him, the professor
represents the ignorance of the campus toward queer topics. He says the media
professor’s definition of progressive thinking about LGBTQ people is actually a
framework that stereotypes gay men. Essentially, an example of the way Aaron describes
the campus climate’s thinking of him, as a gay male, is one that places him into a role of
servant to straight men. However, Aaron feels that in this climate he can challenge the
professor’s representation. He feels safe to challenge the academic establishment in
places that he feels LGBTQ people are not represented fairly.

I am challenged by the idea that ignorance is different than homophobia for Aaron.
Not because I disagree, but because I would like a clearer description from Aaron about
what he sees as homophobia. I did not ask him to describe homophobia, so I am left to
assume that for Aaron, homophobia is direct acts toward LGBTQ people and maybe has
less or little to do with assumptions or perceptions that people have. During the first
interview he told me that he had experienced homophobia in his family and that at Rae
there were some things “that weren’t terribly friendly.” So, without a description from
Aaron of how he describes homophobia, I am left to assume that he is referring to actions.

Still, despite the way he illustrates homophobia, Aaron straightforwardly
describes how he is placed in the role of outsider within his program—not because he is
gay, but because he is a feminist. He goes on to describe the UM climate in more detail.
He says,

I do, I do rather feel like an outsider in my cohort, not for being gay, but for being
a feminist and for being concerned with human dignity. I have a colleague who
actually said to me, ‘why do you care about racism; you’re not Black.’ I thought,
and this is a person who describes herself as liberal. Well, no. I’ve discovered and
I continue to discover this is a university that’s not nearly as progressive as it thinks it is. The Department of Communication is not nearly as progressive as it thinks it is. We’re really, I knew Midwest was conservative historically, and racist, homophobic, and otherwise problematic, but I thought coming here to the university would be a breath of fresh air from all that. Not really. Not really at all. Instead we have sort of these—well if we claimed to be as progressive as we thought we are, and that’s nothing but a lie. I haven’t felt homophobia by my colleagues. They are more afraid of the fact that I’m a feminist and I claim that, the fact that I really challenge the status quo and most of them aren’t really comfortable with that. (Probably because they benefit from that.) Yes, absolutely.

For Aaron, being a feminist and “being concerned with human dignity” places him on the outside with those within his graduate school cohort. However, what is most fascinating to me here is how Aaron describes the way UM and the Department of Communication sees itself—as progressive. Aaron does not agree with their assessment and states that “that’s nothing but a lie.” For Aaron, in order for a climate to be progressive, it must challenge the status quo and to be concerned with human dignity, which he does not see UM and his academic department as doing.

I expected this inquiry to place me in conversations about homophobia and queer issues on campus, but that was limiting. Aaron is signifying that being gay does not limit one to only experiencing the campus climate from a gay point of view. As such, he experiences campus in many ways: as gay; as feminist; as a student; as White; as Christian; and so on. On one hand, Aaron ended up at UM as a result of his sexual orientation; on the other hand, he describes his negative experience of the campus climate
as more a direct result of being a feminist or basically one who is concerned with human
dignity. This positions him to be an outsider where he is limited and not free.

Aaron also gives insight to the limits of heteronormative thinking that he
experiences on campus. He says,

I find here that I do think that the department is pretty heteronormative and they
are accepting of me, but I don’t know that they really challenge much. We do
have a couple of gay professors in the department and one of them does research
about couples who, how they cope with HIV and he also does research about
marital satisfaction of straight couples as compared to non-straight couples. But I
don’t see his research as reaching out or challenging. He still pretty much buys
into the system, the binaries, etc. I took one class, personal communication, and
all the research was about heterosexual married couples and I tried to say several
times that this isn’t all-inclusive. I felt sort of secluded from everything that was
read. Certainly the teacher was open when I would use examples with Jesse and
she wasn’t closed off with that. But being truthful, what we were reading, it really
wasn’t very progressive and it really wasn’t challenging much. I found that
overall, the faculty are accepting, you know, I won’t say they are homophobic,
but I do believe they’re heteronormative and those are different. I would say
overall that they are conservative, but they don’t think they are.

So, while the campus and the faculty see themselves as progressive and liberal, Aaron
experiences them as the opposite. His experience of heteronormative thinking impacts the
classroom environment, and as a result, impacts his learning. He sees the classroom
environment as one that “isn’t all-inclusive” and as a result has him “secluded.” However,
there almost seems to be a struggle between the heteronormative environment versus the
desire (or attempt) to be inclusive within the department. The contrapuntal listening
provides an opportunity to hear the voices of tension in the narrative. When I listen to the
voices of heteronormativity with the phrases that seem to imply inclusiveness, the
struggle is more apparent.

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<tr>
<th>Heteronormativity</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
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<td>The department is pretty heteronormative</td>
<td>They are accepting of me</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t know that they challenge much</td>
<td>We do have a couple of gay professors</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t see his research as reaching out</td>
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<tr>
<td>or challenging</td>
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<td>He still pretty much buys into the system,</td>
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<tr>
<td>the binaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>This isn’t all-inclusive</td>
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<td>I felt sort of excluded</td>
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<td>The teacher was open</td>
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<td>She wasn’t closed off</td>
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<td>It really wasn’t very progressive</td>
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<td>The faculty are accepting</td>
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<td>I do believe they’re heteronormative</td>
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<td>I would say overall that they are conservative</td>
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Here the voices of inclusion and heteronormativity display a conflict that Aaron is
experiencing within his department. It also highlights the theme that students are not safe
to engage injustices; while the climate promotes the idea that UM is an all-inclusive or
progressive institution, some students say that idea is, from their viewpoint, untrue. While
students may feel accepted despite their sexual orientation, they are also not challenged
via the curricula. This leads to a feeling of exclusion, as Aaron highlights here.
For Aaron to be in an environment of inclusion, he uses words to describe faculty such as “open” and “wasn’t closed off.” These words conjure up images that portray accessibility and approachability. Since he is talking about his academic department, these images describe people that are open to him. However, these images are in stark contrast to the way the departmental environment is portrayed as heteronormative. He uses words and phrases such as “excluded,” “isn’t all-inclusive,” and “wasn’t very progressive” to describe faculty and curricula within that same department. It seems that Aaron is feeling conflict within his department between the ideas that the faculty accepts him as gay, but anything that is seen as progressive or as challenging the binary way of thinking is not accepted. Since Aaron already feels like an outsider within his department, any attempt to challenge the heteronormative thinking further isolates or “excludes” him.

Despite the conflicting messages that Aaron faces within his academic department, I asked him to describe how the university could go about creating an environment that values diversity and dignity. He says,

Well I think that really has to do with relationships. I don’t think that it’s possible for the bricks and mortar of the university to embrace human dignity. That’s something that people have to do relationally and in connection with one another. So I think that if the university experience wants to do that then hire some people who do that. Hire some people who do that research and who are interested in that, who express a passion for that in their interview. Ultimately if the university wants to challenge the status quo that is not welcoming and un-accepting, that it’s time for that. ...so, that would be my advice—to train people and work with people who are actively working on a human dignity agenda.
Aaron goes back to relationships and the role that interpersonal connection has in building an open and safe environment for all students. He says that location and facilities have nothing to do with connection, but that a campus climate is built by the people that are hired. He does not single out faculty here necessarily, but it seems that he is implying faculty when he mentions hiring people who research topics that embrace human dignity. So, for Aaron, changing a campus climate begins with hiring people that can engage relationships of progressive thinking and authenticity. Based on his inability to connect with those in his department, I am not surprised by his desire for more inclusive and fair-minded faculty.

As we closed our first interview, I asked Aaron if there was anything else about his experience that he wanted to share or if he had lingering thoughts about his time at UM he wanted to highlight. After a long pause, he said,

I guess I find myself frustrated wondering why we tolerate places and professors or why we, why we tolerate what can amount to hate speech sort of language. Why do we tolerate things like the genocide awareness. [The genocide awareness statement refers to a very large display of aborted fetuses on campus by an anti-abortion group.] Things that are not right and to say that we do it because of freedom of speech is really sort of offering oxymoronic, I think. I was not free to walk across a part of campus when there were pictures of bloody fetuses (Yes, I remember that) all over campus. I was not free to go and leave the room when I had a professor spouting racism and sexist sort of babble all of last quarter. It was a tenured person, so I didn’t feel, and graduate students are sort of the awful metaphor, like the red headed stepchild. Undergrad students can go and complain
to the undergrad director, and get their way. But, graduate students who are required to be in the class, that is a small group, and if we complain, they are going to know. No one else seemed to care in my cohort. Those are the things that really erode human dignity, and there are things that are inherent freedoms. They are not manifestation of freedom and yet they are tolerated and they flourish here.

I’ve only been here six months, so give me more time and I’ll find more examples.

This section exhibits the intrapersonal conflict between Aaron and an environment that erodes human dignity and limits his “inherent freedoms.” Again, he is at a time in his life when the environment causes him to be in conflict. In other words, Aaron, by way of the departmental climate, does not feel safe. He feels limited and secluded. This is similar to other experiences where he was not free to have multiple truths coexist—here the truths of one who feels powerless (a graduate student) and one who combats injustice.

When I listen to the first-person voice with the collective “we” of the campus and the “they” that represents the people and ideals that erode human dignity, the relationship between Aaron and the campus is clearer.

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<td>No one else seemed to care</td>
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They are not manifestation of freedom
They are tolerated
They flourish here

I’ve only been here six months
I’ll find more examples

This poem allows me to hear how limited Aaron feels on campus. He says that he is not free and that collectively “we tolerate” indignity and are unable to confront the erosion. It also shows that he feels “if we complain,” those in power will know and thus the intolerance continues to flourish at UM. He says that the consequence of complaining—and thus those with power knowing he complained—is that he would be alone and isolated even more, with a possibility of academic retaliation. He says that if people stand up to the voices that erode human dignity, that there will be repercussions that will further limit the inherent freedoms of human dignity, including his own. Here Aaron sees himself to be in an environment where no one else seems to care about injustices, but he, by using the first-person “we,” concedes that he exists with the environment that does not challenge injustice. So, on one hand Aaron wants to stand up to instances of injustice and ignorance, but on the other hand, standing up within the classroom further isolates him within an academic community within which he already feels unsafe to challenge authority.

It is intriguing that Aaron feels safe to challenge issues relating to being gay, but not other issues seeking equality or voice. It seems the difference rests with his ability to reconcile multiple truths; however, the more complex rationale may be that Aaron does not feel safe to challenge authority within a point of limited power. After all, he does feel support within his academic department as a gay man, but not as a feminist who seeks dignity for all. In his short time at UM, Aaron has experienced a wide range of tolerance
on campus. He has found like-minded people, those that classify themselves as open and accepting despite their limited understanding of acceptance, and those that blatantly limit open conversations about acceptance, social justice, and dignity. I wonder how Aaron, who is open, confident, and ostensibly unafraid to take on injustice in certain environs, balances his desire to build tolerance with the many places his freedoms are restricted.

As I reflect on dignity, and what it means to those that are not only LGBTQ, but also any person who seeks increased dignity for themselves and others, I become curious about how Aaron described dignity. So, in order to be clear about his meaning, I asked him to give me his definition of dignity. He said,

Well I think that’s what I was saying when I said embracing people for the whole person that they are. Recognizing them for worth, and believing that ultimately they have value and they have rights. They are no more or less important than anyone else. No more or less entitled than anyone else.

Based on this definition and his earlier responses, Aaron assesses that UM does not embrace people for the “whole person” that they are. He mentioned previously that he feels accepted based on his sexual orientation, but does not feel accepted for many other facets of his persona. Aaron experiences UM as a place that he has not directly experienced homophobia, but the other intolerances that have occurred have a profound impact on his ability to feel embraced for the “whole person” that he is. With such limiting acceptance, Aaron is unable to feel widely accepted on campus. Over and over he uses words such as “open,” “freedom,” and “authentic” to describe people and places that he feels safe to be himself. These trigger words are absent when he is describing the academic climate of his department. He trades words that emphasize accessible people
and places for words that portray restricted freedom. All in all, from Aaron’s point of view, the liberal and open environment that UM proclaims to afford is “nothing but a lie.” The climate that Aaron experiences is one that limits minds more than expands them.

Inauthentic Relationships

As we closed our first interview and as I reflected on our time together, I became more curious about how Aaron built authentic relationships on a campus that, from his experience, does not value diversity. I told Aaron that there is a common theme across the interviews in which the people I have talked to consider themselves to be multi-issue people—people that are seeking dignity and improved campus climate for all, but that they are not always safe to confront injustice. I reminded him that he said that UM needs to stop telling lies about itself and that it needed to transform itself into an institution that respects human dignity and diversity in word and deed. I then asked him, with more time on campus, had that opinion changed. He said,

No. In fact I took, through the consortium of universities in the greater Midwest area, I took a class at another university. You’ll anonymize it probably as a smaller, public university in [another city five miles away, RSU—Regional State University]. So I go there and I take this graduate class and there are sixteen people in the graduate class and probably half of them are writing theses related to gender and sexuality research. This is a communication class and the topic of it was communication and sexualities. I just thought, wow, in my program at UM I stick out like the weird person for doing this research and over here it’s really, that’s the norm. So I just thought what a totally different cohort and so really, I mean, comparing that to what I experienced here, you know, if a class like that
were offered here, my cohort would be miserable. In fact we had a class that dealt with the rhetoric, the woman’s suffrage movement and I think I was the only person that wasn’t miserable. I loved every minute of it and everyone else is like, ‘why do we have to learn about these feminists?’ I really thought that was illustrative of everything that I told you in terms of the climate of this university. Maybe I shouldn’t judge the whole university by my cohort, but I’ve even found in the classes I teach, when I talk about inclusive language and public speaking, my students are really resistant in ways that I didn’t experience at the college I attended in my undergrad. We talked about race in every communication class there. We talked about gender in every class there. You were abnormal if you didn’t bring it up there. It was something we recognized and we dealt with and we talked about. Here I even had a colleague who said, ‘oh I just like to pretend that race doesn’t exist.’ She acknowledges that she has this bias. So I definitely noticed it in more ways and now I have a comparison university that said wait a minute, there is definitely something here.

This response is quite significant. First of all, Aaron shows that another university five miles away, at least within the Department of Communication, has a climate that is starkly different than that of UM. This is especially interesting considering Aaron’s primary regional impressions about the city and region of Midwest as “conservative historically, and racist, homophobic, and otherwise problematic.” He initially had said he thought UM would be more accepting and different than that notion, but ended up experiencing a similar climate on campus. However, at RSU, within the same regional area, he found a “totally different” atmosphere where he feels included. So, for Aaron,
the isolation and exclusion he felt in his academic department are not regional, they are institutional.

Aaron goes on to question if his experience with his cohort and academic department at UM are institution-wide. However, he says that he gets the same resistance to inclusive ideals in classes that he teaches—that reach to a wide cross-section of students—that he feels from his own colleagues. In reference to intolerance, says that he “definitely noticed it in more ways” now that he has a comparison university. He has now seen a broad section of ideals within similar academic departments at institutions geographically close. In many instances, within his academic department, Aaron feels isolated. This is typified when he says that he “loved every minute” of a class on suffragists where he was the “the only person that wasn’t miserable.”

The isolation, both academic and social, that Aaron highlighted in his responses concerned me. Since I imagine it is difficult to learn and grow within such an environment, I asked Aaron how the divisive climate impacts the relationships he has with his colleagues. He says,

I have a colleague who hasn’t spoken to me since last spring when I was bold enough to point out some of these issues. With other colleagues we have kind of an understanding that we won’t go there or we’ll disagree. So I probably function in a less than authentic way with those persons. We can talk about very superficial things but we really don’t go into the places that we disagree on a fundamental level. That might be smart for having a collegial relationship with folks. I’ve kind of resigned myself to the fact that I’m the radical in the group and I’ve developed a lot of relationships in other contexts through the Wesley Foundation and friends
that I’ve worked with and met there and other areas of my life. I have a lot of places where I can be authentically who I am in every way. I don’t have to do that with my cohort necessarily so I can come here and do the work I need to do and then go other places. They know where I stand but just so we don’t keep coming to the impasse I think I will make the concession to deal with different issues there.

Essentially, Aaron is saying here that he has decided to be “less than authentic” with his academic colleagues in order to not “keep coming to the impasse.” Aaron concedes that he will never reach a place of authenticity with his academic cohort and has decided to be “superficial” in his relationships with them. This phrase demonstrates how Aaron has made his time at UM work. He is saying that he has found authentic relationships outside his department and that there are several places outside the cohort that he can be himself “in every way.” Authenticity is where he can be his total-self, as illustrated when he discussed accepting the position with the Wesley Foundation.

Pulling out the I- and we-voice here, both examples of his first person, and placing them with the they-voice, shows Aaron’s concession more closely.

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I’m the radical
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I’ve worked
I have
I can be authentically
I am in every way
I don’t have to
I can come here
I need to do

They know

I stand

So we don’t keep coming to
the impasse

I think
I will make the concession

This poem lays out the relational journey that Aaron has been on with his
academic cohort. It shows the consequence for Aaron when he is bold with his colleagues
and points out the “issues” he sees within the department. The result is that on a
fundamental level, they have an understanding that they “won’t go there” in discussing
the issues and that they disagree, essentially placing a limit on his ability to be safe to
challenge or free to question. He then admits he functions “in a less than authentic way”
with them, and as a result, they engage on a superficial level that does not employ a level
of depth that would ignite disagreement. As such, his I voice says what he has “resigned”
to be the radical in the group and how he has found authenticity in other places on
campus. It is also clear that he begins to see his cohort as a collective “they” that he does
not engage so as to not “keep coming to the impasse.” In the end, it is Aaron that makes
the concession within his academic department while seeking authentic relationships
elsewhere. He becomes inauthentic while the collective “they” in the cohort do not have
to change or make concessions.
This poem also highlights what Miller and Stiver (1997) refer to as the “central relational paradox.” Here, Aaron keeps aspects of himself—academic, feminist self—out of relationship with his colleagues in order to remain in academically available relationships, and thus he becomes inauthentic, silenced, and the only one seeming to make concessions within classroom contexts. Also, his I-voice is strong here; he is clear about what he is and is not able to do within academic situations. This is very important as his internal connection to self resists these very negative forces. While the poem shows that Aaron has meaningful and authentic relationships in other places in his life, it is clear from this passage and also in the previous passage, that he seeks happiness and authenticity within the classroom. Whereas there are levels of disagreement within most any academic department, this poem suggests that Aaron is unable to approach subjects that he would deem as having any depth, meaning, or obligation to challenge injustice. It seems those that do not consider themselves feminists or those that are not “bold enough to point out” the department’s issues—sexism, heteronormativity, racism, etcetera—are the ones that find themselves within the collective “they” that Aaron contrasts with so clearly.

Reflection

The time I have spent with Aaron has provided a view into his quest for dignity for all persons. Since our first interview, I have reflected many times about what it means to become a single-issue person. For me, it equates to the sentiment of success being a journey, not a destination. Aaron’s story is one of a continual course toward dignity and freedom for all persons. His resistance to dichotomies is at the center of the experience he wants, not only for himself, but also for his peers. His concern for the freedom of others
and for himself is an inspirational push away from heteronormative policy and language within the campus climate. The impact sexual orientation had on his graduate school options highlights an example of the significance that sexuality plays in college choice. While Aaron came to UM open and free about his sexuality, he was not safe to challenge instances of indignity outside his sexuality.

Aaron’s experience at UM is significant because it underscores the oppositional places within which queer students are placed. Aaron’s pursuit for authenticity—by coming out and by challenging heteronormativity—at times forces him to be the “radical” or the outsider. The extraordinary place interpersonally within academic departments—even those that see themselves as progressive—that many students are forced to take create marginalized states. Aaron began a journey of freedom within the social context of his sexuality by coming out, but he was also placed within a social-academic environment where he was again in a state of being inauthentic.

Aaron’s search for liberty at UM forced him to build authentic relationships in places other than with his academic peers. It seems that Aaron was able to find like-minded people at UM despite the campus climate, not because of it. Unfortunately for Aaron, the antithesis of growth-fostering relationships occurs more often in his classrooms than not. As with others I have interviewed for this study, the marginalization that occurs in the classroom and within academic contexts forces students to find supportive and authentic, growth-fostering relationships beyond the confines of the academic thinking.

While some in this study came to UM because of their desire to hide, control, or express their sexuality, Aaron came here because he finally felt safe to combine the
competing truths in his life. He sought a campus that showed markers where he would be safe to bring topics of sexuality to both social and academic conversations. However, he was not free to challenge greater instances of heteronormative behavior or instances that limit human dignity. This placed Aaron at a point in his life very similar to when he came out of the closet. Despite the fact that Aaron was safe to have his spiritual and gay self coexist at UM, he was unable to have other truths coexist—his feminist self and his academic self. His fear of the academic consequences limit his ability to reach authenticity in the classroom while at UM. In the end, Aaron came to UM as an openly gay man, but leaves without authentic academic relationships as a feminist and humanist.

Epilogue

As part of the member checking process, Aaron responded to the chapter above. Specifically, he says he feels honored to be included in the project and he also shares his definition of homophobia. So, as a means of inclusion I am incorporating his definition below. In an email, he says,

I differentiate between ignorance and homophobia in a similar way that rectangles are different from squares. All homophobia is also ignorant, but not all ignorance is homophobic. Homophobic, for me, is anti-queer, hostile, hateful, etc. Ignorance means simply not knowing. So, I call the professor who thinks *Queer Eye* is progressive ignorant because I don't see his perspective as anti-queer; I see it as uninformed. He hasn't critically engaged the show and what it communicates. For him, the presence of a gay character is progressive. This isn't an anti-gay attitude, but it is an ignorant attitude because he hasn't considered the ways in which the
show perpetuates patriarchal and heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Aaron’s definition of homophobia continues to highlight his view of queer-themes in classrooms and the ways in which these themes are accurately or inaccurately represented.
Dion, 19, learned about this study by word of mouth and also via email communications with the Transgender Support Group on campus. Dion is a self-described poly-gendered (one whose gender-identity is not limited to either male or female) pansexual (one whose sexual attraction does not recognize gender-identity as an attraction filter). Dion is an African-American undergraduate at UM, a published fiction author, is involved in a couple of the queer-focused groups on campus, and, at the time of this analysis, was nominated for UM’s Diversity Award. Despite being soft-spoken, Dion is quite clear that the ability to love is important and does not want to be linked specifically to a female or male gender. So, with Dion, gender-identifying pronoun use is inappropriate. In order to respect Dion’s poly-gender status, I will use the pronoun hir, blending her and him, and I will use ze instead of she or he when pronouns are necessary. I realize that neither pronoun substitution encompasses Dion’s rich persona, but for the sake of writing, the attempt to not label Dion with a specific gender provides a more accurate telling of our time together.

When Dion and I met for the first interview it was a very cold day just at the end of winter. We had been emailing for a few weeks trying to find a day to meet, as a snow storm the preceding days had caused us to reschedule our initial meeting. Hir kind and patient demeanor seemed to almost come across in the email communications we shared before we met face to face. It is as if I already knew that Dion was a kind soul before we met in the stale office on campus to begin our first interview. When ze arrived, I did not
expect hir to be so quiet and soft spoken. I would not describe hir as shy, but maybe a little more reserved than ze seemed via the email communications we shared. I have to confess, I liked Dion immediately; there was something about hir demeanor that impressed me straight away. If I had to point out what it was, I would say it was hir pleasant and kind approach that seemed so natural and unforced. To be only 19, Dion seemed to be an old soul.

The story of our time together chronicles Dion’s call to UM officials to consider the rich diversity of representation on campus in the university policy; it also displays the level of growth ze has experienced by way of engaging meaningful relationships. Hir intent on campus has been to fashion an atmosphere that is more inclusive of all the actual members of the UM community and to challenge the assumptive climate. Dion cites examples of the heteronormative culture of the campus in the way gender is handled in the classroom, in the campus facilities, and in social settings. Ze tells me that hir experience on campus is better than high school, but that the campus climate is different than ze expected. Overall, Dion found means for growth, despite a climate plagued with assumption, by hir access to resources—both interpersonal and academic—that led to an increased understanding of self. Hir opportunities to engage in meaningful relationships with other poly-gendered, queer, and transgendered people have facilitated an environment where ze feels that ze has a community of support which in turn has led to an increase in hir self-confidence.

Dion shared that ze conceded a specific social climate when enrolling at UM due to financial restrictions of going to hir top, more socially accepting, college choices. However, there have been many opportunities for connection and relationship for Dion at
UM, which seem more important to hir. Overall, ze hopes for a continued connection with hir current friends at UM and also seeks to be in a position to do more to champion a better reflection of diversity within the campus climate. It is clear from the time I have spent with Dion that ze desired to be in a space that allowed for openness and freedom to live an openly queer life; however, the financial necessity to attend UM has not provided as many roadblocks to an open and accepting social community as ze originally thought.

Seeking a Queer Campus

Dion’s experience with college choice is an excellent example of a student who came to the university search with an acute awareness of the impact hir sexuality had on the way ze searched for the right university. During the college search process, sexual orientation and gender expression had an impact on Dion’s interest in and research on colleges that were in queer-inclusive locations. Specifically, Dion mentioned researching several colleges during the admission process on the west coast that are in cities that ze deems to be queer-friendly. I asked hir what ze looked for in a school during hir search. Ze said,

Most of the schools I wanted to go to were in California. It was kind of far away. The distance, the prices were out of my range. It was really, I guess my mom who wanted me to come to UM, so I did it as sort of a backup in case I, you know, I didn't get in anywhere else and that I definitely, um. One of the main things I was looking for on campus was how many LGBTQ groups they had and what they had actually in the city that surrounded it.

Here Dion seems to be saying that if it were not for the distance and price, ze may be currently enrolled in a college in California. I am also struck here by Dion’s sudden stop
when ze says, “I definitely, um.” I am left wondering if Dion wanted to go more deeply into hir desire to be at a college in California. For some reason, ze stops in mid-thought when ze is talking about hir mother wanting hir to come to UM and how UM was hir backup school. Dion seems to have silenced hirself here. However, despite the silence, ze does share hir intent to seek out a queer-friend college.

Dion says that it was “pretty easy to find information” about the campus climate at UM. Ze says that hir online search for LGBTQ groups and also being in ROTC (while in high school) and visiting campus “a few times” gave hir an impression of the campus. Despite Dion’s desire to attend a college that ze perceived to have a more queer-friendly campus climate, ze ended up coming to UM solely due to distance and financial concerns. Ze had to make a difficult choice about college, based primarily on financial-aid and less about finding a campus climate that is more inclusive. (Being local, in-state tuition fees to attend UM are much lower than private schools or for out of state students.) Since Dion came to UM despite the campus climate, and not because of it, I became curious about hir perceptions of the campus. So, I asked hir to discuss hir opinions about UM as an outsider before ze enrolled. Ze replied,

I guess I knew that they [UM] were a lot better about it than some of my high schools were and everything. I really appreciated that it wasn't like, you know, it wasn't completely where I wanted it to be; you know, it was a start, like everything, we are trying. I know how conservative Midwest is. So just the fact they have anything at all is really, um, good.

Here it appears that Dion is making the choice to attend UM work for hir sexual identity, despite hir original desire to be in a more queer-inclusive environment. Ze says during
our interview that UM is not very inclusive of LGBTQ students, but also admits that the
environment is “a lot better about it” than high school—of which Dion attended three. Ze
says that while being in a “conservative” city, the fact that there are any LGBTQ social
groups on campus is positive.

By listening to hir I, we, and you-voices alongside the voice of they, the way Dion
relates to campus is more easily heard.

I We You They
I guess
I knew
They were a lot better
I really appreciated
You know
We are trying
I know
They have anything

This poem allows me to hear the different points of view from which Dion discusses UM.
First of all, ze states that “we are trying,” which seems to indicate that ze identifies hirself,
by using first person, as part of campus, or at least part of the group that is “trying” to
make the campus more queer-friendly. Ze also refers to campus as “they” as well,
indicating that in some cases she sees campus as “they,” or from an outsider’s point of
view, not seen as part of the campus community. It seems that Dion is finding ways to
integrate hirself at UM by working with others that are trying to improve the campus
climate, but at the same times does not see hirself as part of the greater campus
community, the “they.”

I asked Dion if the climate was different than ze had perceived as an outsider
during the admission search. Ze said, “It is kind of different than what I expected; like
some things are better than I thought they would be and other things are kind of worse in
a way.” Ze said that having access to so much information in the library amazed hir. Ze said that the access to information provided hir with power to better understand hirself and that ze “was amazed that they have so much information” on issues of sexual orientation. Ze continued,

But it's like that other group [UM’s Transsexual Support Group] really helped out a lot. You know, when I first came here I identified as bisexual. And then I was able to you know come out as transgendered. You know poly-gendered. I discovered polyamorous. So it was really interesting discoveries. (Billy: So, you are able to have a journey and continually discover who you are?) Yes. So even if I couldn't find exactly the resources in my classroom or from my teachers, there were many things that I could look up. I started working in the library, and I started finding all of these writings and books and still like that I was amazed that they have so much information on this.

Dion’s ability to search out information, whether it be via the library or through social support, allowed hir to have access to queer-themed topics that ze did not anticipate at UM. When I listen to Dion’s I-voice, I am able to hear the evidence of hir access to queer information and how it impacted hir.

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<td>I was able</td>
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<td>You know</td>
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I was amazed

It is apparent that despite Dion’s initial perceptions of UM and hir own understanding of hirself, ze was able to use access to information—from people and the library—to better “come out as transgendered.” Dion clearly has access to LGBTQ community in various forms of connection—to people and to information—while a student at UM. After all, Dion came to be involved in this inquiry by way of being connected to the LGBTQ community on campus. I am also intrigued by Dion’s use of language that depicts hir transformation so vividly. For example, ze uses words that highlight a transformational process, like that of a learner, and language that formulates a progressive change by way of hir first person account. Ze goes from saying that ze previously identified hirself one way, but by way of what ze was able to discover, ze then found a more accurate means to describe hirself. While hir original intent was to seek out a queer campus, Dion inadvertently found a safe avenue that provided hir the opportunity to uncover knowledge that afforded hir original goal—to find queer space. In this space, ze was safe to seek out information that allowed for a transformational understanding of self, and the result amazed hir.

*Encountering Assumptions*

While Dion plainly tells me about the ways in which UM has been better than ze thought, I began to wonder to what ze was referring when ze said earlier that “other things are kind of worse.” So, I asked hir to tell me about that. After laughing, ze said, “Some of the teachers are still like a little confused, and it's weird, because I'll be sitting in the classroom and I know more than the teacher does.” Ze goes on to tell me about how the instructor of hir Human Sexuality class was making assumptions about various
attractions people have to each other. Dion told me that ze emailed the professor to make suggestions on a better way to discuss sexuality in the classroom. Ze said, “I'm not sure if he used any of them are not.” So, on one hand, Dion felt comfortable enough to send the professor an email, but on another hand seemed frustrated that ze “knows more than the teacher does” about how to address issues such as sexual attraction and gender labels.

Dion’s frustration with assumptions in the classroom is similar to the frustrations that others in this inquiry have shared about how LGBTQ topics are represented and/or misrepresented by faculty. As we spent more time together, it became apparent to me that Dion, while trying to focus on the positives about the campus, does take issue not only with assumptions that take place in the classroom, but also with other campus assumptions, like the restroom options. When I asked Dion how UM could make the campus climate better for LGBTQ students, ze said,

Well, I know I do feel a little weird in like classrooms and stuff. Because it's like they're always, you know, when they would bring up examples for things. It’s always the male-female couple and like they were married and had kids and everything. I just like more, like, acknowledgment that people do come in all different shapes and sizes. Um, I, also, you know, like with the bathrooms it would be easier for them to, you know, point out exactly where all the bathrooms are where it's like, you know, both genders can use it and everything. (Billy: Are there places like that on campus?) There’s a few like they're mostly like single bathrooms or something like that. You know pretty much anybody can use them and I think it would just be a lot easier. You know to let everybody know where
they are. So, I'm always standing out like it's such a hard choice to decide which one to go into and then you know, like the safety issues and everything.

For Dion, not only would the consideration of “different shapes and sizes” in the classroom be appreciated, but also ze says that more thoughtfulness in the actual layout and design of the campus facilities could create a more attentive and safe climate. Dion has to consider more than issues of sexual orientation, ze also has to consider the gender limits that have been placed on hir by the campus climate. The limits placed on hir not only omit hir experience from the classroom, but by the way the campus is designed, ze is also placed on another level as outsider. Ze is forced to choose one particular restroom, where ze will either compromise where ze feels ze should go, and maybe feel more safe, or not compromise where ze feels ze should go, but potentially risk hir safety. Of particular note, Dion’s inference to safety could be two fold—a threat to hir physical safety and also compromising the safety to represent hirself as poly-gendered. Either compromise to Dion’s safety has the impact of negatively affecting hir experience and growth at UM.

When I listen to Dion’s I and you-voices along with the juxtaposed “it”—with “it” being the choices and assumptions imposed by the limits of a normative climate—I am able to hear how ze articulates hir relationship to the normative campus climate.

I
You
It
I know
I do feel a little weird
You know
It’s like
It’s always the male-female couple
I just
I
You know
It would be easier
Here, Dion’s I-voice is definitive, with supportive statements of “you know” throughout, about what ze knows and feels in relationship toward what ze considers are aspects of UM’s climate that are worse than ze perceived as an outsider. Dion is clear in how ze feels in relationship to UM’s normative campus climate; ze feels “a little weird” and that ze is “always standing out.” Also, ze indicates the imposed assumptions create difficult choices, and that there are circumstances that would provide “a lot easier” existence without having to make arduous choices. (It is important to note that I will be discussing safety implications more in depth later in the chapter.)

In order to assess hir comprehensive experience at UM, I asked Dion if ze had an example of an experience where a faculty member was sensitive to LGBTQ needs or if a faculty member had, from hir point of view, used appropriate and inclusive terminology. Ze said,

It's actually weirdly enough in a statistics class. (Both laugh) It's so weird the subject of, um, sex came up. She asked the class, you know, how many genders are there, you know, and people said, you know, two. And then everyone else was like, no there’s more than that. And so we got up to like, we agreed that there was
probably at least six recognized ones. So it's really interesting, you know, I appreciated that everybody you know, was knowledgeable about it.

Here, Dion appreciates the atmosphere of inclusion and consideration that occurred in a statistics class. This example demonstrates the opportunity to see the broad range of experiences that ze has had in the classroom. It also suggests that despite Dion’s sometime difficult relationship with the campus climate and facilities, ze is able to have classroom experiences that are less frustrating than those discussed earlier. There are times Dion feels marginalized and times ze appreciates others’ acknowledgment of hir identity.

I remarked to Dion during our first interview that I was seeing with other students a perception that UM was a great place for them to hide their sexual orientation from others. I asked hir to respond to that idea—that UM is a place where individuals do not have to confront their sexuality. Ze says,

It’s fairly interesting. I can see why that happens, because like this city is definitely a place where you know like assumptions are rampant. And like, I even have problems with it when I walk somewhere; people just assume that I am, you know, female and I'm straight, you know, and it's like UGH. It's like, you know, it just doesn't occur to them that anything else can happen. So, I mean, if you're going to hide this is definitely the place to do it.

Here again, Dion confronts the occurrence of assumptions within the city and campus. Ze is saying that ze has to confront assumptive thinking about hir gender and sexual attraction even when ze is walking somewhere. This says much to me about how Dion experiences the campus climate of UM and the city climate of Midwest. For example,
Dion shows that the climate is generally so normative that “it just doesn’t occur to them that anything else can happen.” In other words, the climate is such that despite one’s gender expression or sexual orientation, people are assumed to be heterosexual and whatever gender that they look like. This, to Dion, is the reason that UM is “definitely the place” where one can hide any aspects of themselves that they choose. Also, ze seems to imply that because of the way assumptions are the basis of identity, that ze could easily hide at UM as a heterosexual female.

*Safety on Campus*

During the course of our time together, Dion conveys the idea that comfort with hir sexuality has as much to do with hiding as it has to do with being open. Like others in this inquiry, Dion sees how it is possible to have various opportunities at UM to blend in and not embrace an identity that is outside the heteronormative spectrum of male-female relationships. On the other hand, ze also talks about the importance of getting involved in supportive groups on campus in order to build visibility. As the conversation moved toward a discussion about safety, Dion described how ze feels when ze is on campus. Ze says,

> Most of the time I feel okay and safe it’s just, um. I guess that depending on the people who I have around, you know, or who are around. Some of them don't quite understand. You know most of the time I'm pretty comfortable in, you know, able to express myself the way I want to. So, it’s pretty good.

Here, Dion is saying that “depending on the people” that ze is around, ze feels safe. So, for hir, feeling safe on campus does not always occur; feeling safe and comfortable expressing hirself on campus is a result of the people with whom ze surrounds hirself.
Dion seems to be saying that as long ze is around others that understand the ways ze expresses hirself, that the campus is “pretty good.” I initially assumed these relationships occurred behind closed doors, or in less visible venues. However, this ended up not being the case.

In an effort to learn more about the various levels of comfort that Dion experienced on campus, I asked hir if ze felt comfortable displaying affection publicly on campus. Ze laughed and said “yes.” I then asked hir if I embarrassed hir, as hir cheeks turned a little red. We both laughed and then ze told me about some public displays organized by the campus Transsexual Support Group. Ze said,

My group [Transsexual Support Group], they sometimes do these, where basically, there's this one time they just got a lot of people together and they like [had] male to male kissing and female to female, trans, straight. I guess you know on the steps and everything like that. It was really cool stuff like that.

While it seems that at times Dion is not comfortable or safe to express hirself depending on the people that ze is around, ze has displayed affection to another person quite publicly. I was a little confused by the ostensible contradiction of what ze was saying—a contradiction in that one response had Dion feeling unsafe depending on the people ze has around, and in another response had Dion publicly displaying affection that, from the campus point of view, was not normative.

I began to look more closely at hir responses to these questions and noticed a difference in the circumstances. Dion said that “depending on the people who I have around, you know, or who are around” is what led to hir comfort of expression. Basically, the time that ze felt comfortable displaying public affection was when ze was with her
support network. Ze says specifically that “my group” sets up the public displays. By using the phrase “my group,” Dion is showing ownership in the relationships ze has made within the Transsexual Support Group. I asked hir if ze felt like ze was in a protected environment during those types of public and political activities (essentially acts of resistance). Ze said, “Yeah.” Then I asked hir would ze feel the same way off campus. Ze said, “Not so much.” So, it seems that despite what I first saw as a contradiction, was in fact a clear display that for Dion, feeling comfortable to display hir true self depends on those that ze is around. Ze is not just comfortable in a social setting with hir friends, but with hir friends in an open space on campus. Despite the overall campus climate, Dion feels that ze can be hir authentic self when ze is in relationships that encourage understanding and in a context to safely express these relationships.

I commented to Dion that it seemed that ze had integrated hirself fairly quickly on campus and that ze had found outlets so that ze can express hirself. I then asked hir what advice ze would give to an LGBTQ student about to enroll at UM. Ze said,

I guess I would suggest they definitely get involved in one of the groups. One of the issues is definitely visibility. I mean you can't always tell with everybody, but at least that's a safe place. You know, I always hung out in the Women's Center when I first came here, and it was like a sanctuary and I definitely suggest, you know, going there. Finding those people to connect to, ‘cause it’ll make it easier to go out and everything else and, you know, be exactly sure to know where some things are okay, and where it's not, and what's going on.

Again, Dion goes back to the importance of building relationships within an accepting community. Ze says here that finding people, by way of the Women’s Center, was what
provided hir a sanctuary, from what I presume to be the assumptions ze encounters. Ze says that by building connections with people, LGBTQ students are able to “know where some things are ok, and where it’s not, and what’s going on.” For me, that statement is at the cornerstone of what Dion conveys throughout our time together. Ze is able to say in a few words that relationships are the central component to being able to build an authentic self—not only for interaction, but also for insider knowledge. Ze says that without the relationships ze has been able to build, ze would not be exactly sure how best to connect to an authentic LGBTQ campus life. Ze says that “you can’t always tell” if people are going to be accepting, again alluding to assumptive climate of campus, but that within one of the LGBTQ groups on campus, ze was able to find “a safe place.”

Dion mentioned that the Women’s Center provided hir a sanctuary where ze could connect to people. I asked hir what initially connected hir to the Women’s Center and what caused hir to go there. Ze said,

Um, I think that I randomly wandered in there one day. And started hanging out and started talking to some of the people, and I, it was just like an all-encompassing place. And I guess, I, you know, there was basically a link between them and the LGBTQ community and everything so I went in there and everybody was just wonderful. And I had a library and everything in it was really cool. Like that's how I ended up meeting the people from the groups and everything like that because I started to go there.

For Dion, the link between the Women’s Center and the LGBTQ community expressed to hir that the Center would be a welcoming place. So, ze began spending time there and talking to people and eventually building relationships.
When I listen to Dion’s I-voice along side the “it” voice—with it representing the “all-encompassing place” of the Women’s Center—I am able to hear how hir relationship with the Center crafted an opportunity to develop more interpersonal relationships later.

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Here I am able to hear how Dion’s experience and relationship with an accepting space facilitated further interpersonal growth. Dion’s first person voice says that because ze went into the Women’s Center, a space that had a link to the LGBTQ community, that ze ended up meeting the people who would allow hir to eventually build relationships within the queer social groups on campus. Hir experience highlights the potential for connection, by being in relationship with others, for students who seek to convey their sexual orientation and gender expression. Ze also takes ownership of the space where ze feels safe. For example, ze says, “I had a library,” alluding to the fact that ze felt attached. In spaces that Dion feels safe and in connection, ze takes ownership in the people and places. This is significant considering so many times ze has felt like an outsider—on campus and off. By going to the Women’s Center, Dion did not have to make “a hard choice;” ze was able to be a poly-gendered pansexual openly without an either/or consequence.
Since Dion gave such a clear insight to hir experience with an accepting space on campus, I began to wonder if ze had a relationship with a specific space that was not positive. So, I asked hir to tell me if there are spaces that ze does not feel accepted. Ze said,

I think that would, yeah, just walking into different buildings. They just feel completely different. Like I do, you know, I go to school in Arts & Sciences Building, but I work in the Engineering library. It's not exactly the most friendly atmosphere, you know. (Billy: Meaning the engineering library is the one that's not friendly?) Yeah. Like the staff they’re pretty, you know, open about stuff like that. But it’s like the people that come in there, you know, you're not really sure how they would react to it and everything and you know, so it's almost like another version of ‘don't ask, don't tell.’ So, you know.

Dion says that the atmosphere of specific spaces on campus “feel completely different” from those where ze is most comfortable—like the Women’s Center. Ze cites the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy about how to discuss sexuality in these places. Dion says that in some spaces on campus, like the engineering department, ze does not feel comfortable discussing hir sexuality at all. It is as if ze feels that people should not ask hir about it, nor should ze volunteer anything about it. Ze does say that some of the staff members are “open about stuff” such as hir sexuality, but that ze is not really sure how the people coming into the engineering library, the students and faculty I assume, would “react to it.” In this account, Dion’s I-voice disconnects.

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When Dion begins this section, I am able to hear a clear first-person account, but when ze begins to talk about where ze works, the I-voice disappears and hir you-voice takes over. This seems to be because Dion feels that ze cannot be hirself at hir job, and thus, the disappearance of hir first-person voice reflects the way ze feels about hir work environment—that ze cannot be hirself and a more unsure self (the you) takes over. So, some spaces are clearly more comfortable for Dion than others. This is highlighted above when hir I-voice is prevalent when talking about where ze takes classes (where ze is comfortable) and then when the you-voice takes over when talking about where ze works (where the atmosphere is one of uncertainty). This is significant because it demonstrates that a loss of connection is possible in various aspects of hir life. In the face of having safe spaces on campus, Dion clearly is unable to fully express hirself in every UM space.

I am left wondering what is missed by being unsure within, or disconnected from, certain areas, like classroom or work space. I also wonder how a student is able to fully engage on a campus that has segregated self-expression to specific locales.

I asked Dion why ze thinks that engineering specifically is a department where ze would have to keep hir sexuality to hirself. Ze said,

It's like, I guess it's sort of like people that go into certain disciplines tend to um, you know, they act a certain way. And people that go into like, you know, sciences or manufacturing, something like that, you know, they tend to be more of
the, you know, I guess leaning toward the conservative side. And you know, Arts & Sciences College, you know, they are about arts and you expect expression and everything like that. There's like probably, you know, like I've heard in the College of Music they got like the largest like set of queers and everything. So it's just some really interesting. You know.

For Dion, within an environment that expects “expression and everything like that,” ze is more comfortable to be hirself. However, within hir work environment, one that ze says is “leaning toward the conservative side,” ze is not able to be expressive. Dion seems to be saying that within academic contexts, the expectation of expression facilitates a more comfortable atmosphere for demonstration of sexual orientation and gender identity. As such, ze also is saying that departments that “act a certain way,” of which ze is referring to the more applied and regimental character of engineering disciplines, do not allow for expression outside their more prescribed and arranged curricula. This is intriguing on many levels, but more interestingly is the idea that in expressive environs, LGBTQ people are more likely to feel safe to express their sexuality. Also, this idea transcends the experience of others I have interviewed in this study. In short, an academic discipline or specific college that is seen as more expressive may actually facilitate an individual’s expression of self. I suppose this is not limited to queer identities.

As we closed the first interview and I took time to reflect on the conversation we had, I was pleased at the depth of hir responses and also surprised by hir assessment of the campus. I assume I was surprised because I expected hir description of the campus to be more negative considering we began our conversation talking about the open and accepting environments of hir top college choices. It is clear that Dion initially conceded
a specific social climate when enrolling at UM, but there have been opportunities for connection and relationship which seem more important to hir. When I asked hir to elaborate on specific elements of the campus climate that are important to hir, Dion talks about interactions with others. Specifically, relationships seem to facilitate hir discovery of self as well as work to create the climate within which ze seeks refuge.

*A Changing Climate*

During our second interview, I asked Dion if ze still had to censor hirself on campus. Ze said, “At times, yes. Depending on the, you know, who’s around like the teacher or the setting of the class. It’s not as much as before.” So, nearly a year after the first interview, ze says ze does not have to censor hirself as much as before. Ze seems to be saying that hir relationship with the climate is improving. However, ze still implies that the people and the context of the situation have an impact on hir level of disclosure, including within the classroom. Considering this, I asked hir to tell me if hir comfort level on campus had changed since we last talked. Ze said,

I think the group of people that I feel comfortable around has grown because I’ve been taking a lot of Women’s Studies classes and they; you know the whole department is just wonderful. So it’s just really helped a lot. As I get up into the higher level classes, you know, it’s like we talk about more things and get into, you know, philosophy of stuff. So it’s easier to, you know, to bring up issues or sort of bring in something that is not like mainstream. So I think I am a little more comfortable and especially seeing that, you know, working with the administration and, you know, adding these new things into the, you know, the discrimination policy and everything. It does make me feel a lot more comfortable.
This passage covers a wide range of Dion’s relationships on campus. First of all, ze says the group of people ze feels comfortable around has grown, and then defines the reason this group has grown. Based on earlier responses, Dion felt like an “outsider” in many of hir classes, but has now found classes where ze can “bring in something that is not like mainstream.” Hir ability to bring up topics that interest hir, that are not mainstream, creates a feeling of ease in a department ze describes as “wonderful.” Also, ze mentions the advocacy work ze has been involved in with the campus administration to bring more diversity into the university anti-discrimination policy. During the course of hir time at UM, Dion has lobbied the administration for a more inclusive policy surrounding transgender and gender identity protections. As a result of the work of Dion and many others, the university included a statement about transgender and gender identity into the campus non-discrimination policy. Working with the university administration, and the resulting policy change, allows hir to “feel a lot more comfortable” on campus. So, for Dion, a combination of relationships and policy, as well as hir own interest to bring about change, has created an increased sense of comfort on campus.

Dion says that ze is more comfortable on campus. However, considering the subjective disposition of this term, I asked hir to paint a picture of what feeling comfortable on campus looks like. After all, ze says ze is more comfortable, but without hir description of that may look like, the actual image of hir experience at UM is not as clear. Ze said,

I guess I could just pretty much walk around not paying attention and, you know, nothing would happen to me. So it’s pretty nice knowing that I can be, you know, ultimately when I’m talking about my relationships or just any aspect of me and
being able to, you know, have that understood or embraced or something. That really means a lot.

Dion shares that being comfortable on campus means not having to pay attention to hir identity. Ze also says that being comfortable also means “nothing would happen to me,” which seems to be hir way of saying that ze would be safe to be hirself without having to be afraid. Ze says being comfortable is to be safe to “not pay attention” to her sexuality or gender expression and to be able to talk about hir relationships, “any aspect” of hirself, and to be “understood or embraced.” Basically, to be fully comfortable at UM safety not only happens in the confines of LGBTQ-community, but must also occur within the greater campus community. However, when I listen to Dion’s I-voice, hir level of comfort is depicted as something that will happen in the future.

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<td>Any aspect of me</td>
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By listening to this poem, I hear Dion’s voice describe how a comfortable environment could look and what the consequences of this environment would look like. Despite access to an improved classroom environment and the increased number of people with whom ze feels comfortable, hir description of what a comfortable campus looks like seems to be presented as a possibility or as something for which ze still hopes. When first arriving at UM, Dion began to explore and express hir sexuality and gender expression
via relationships with people and spaces. Hir comfort has increased, but ze also realizes that the ideal situation, where ze would not have to pay attention to sexuality and gender at all, has yet to be fulfilled.

Even if Dion has yet to fully realize the campus as completely comfortable, ze has still grown on many levels due to hir relationships and being able to find hir voice. Based on all the activist work ze mentioned during our second conversation together, I commented that it seemed that ze had become more socially active on campus, especially considering that ze described hirself as shy during the first interview. Ze mentioned meeting with various administrators on behalf of LGBTQ issues on campus as well as talked about making more friends. I mentioned to hir that it seemed ze had grown socially. Ze said,

It’s like a completely new experience. I really did used to be really shy, like all through high school and everything and it’s just amazing how being able to find my voice and to, you know, just be able to come out of my shell more. It really is amazing. At first it’s really kind of scary because it’s like, what will people think and will I be safe. It’s like realizing that there is already space here for me and I don’t have to go and completely make something new. It definitely helps. What I do I can put down stepping-stones for the people behind me and know that it’s okay. I’ve been there but it’s like there is always something better out there.

Dion says that ze has really grown by finding hir voice. Ze also mentions the fear and safety concerns that came with coming out of hir shell. However, by finding established space that belongs to hir, ze was able to have support without having to “completely make something new.”
When I listen to Dion’s I and you-voices alongside the voice of other people, I am able to hear hir social transformation.

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<td>Will I be safe</td>
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Dion is saying here that ze found hir voice as ze came out of hir shell. Ze also states that when ze arrived, ze was concerned what others thought and if that would impact hir safety. By way of the safe spaces on campus, ze arrived at UM without having to create safe space on hir own. This statement also implies that ze intended to build queer space had it not been present. Dion also indicates that ze wants to help others who come to UM behind hir because ze now can put down stepping stones for them—considering hir growth, ze now has the tools where ze can do this. Also, ze says that having spaces on campus helped hir social growth, but also states that there is always something better, meaning improved climate, so ze wants to continue to help the campus improve in the way it responds to LGBTQ people.

By finding hir voice and coming out of hir shell, Dion was able to grow as an individual. Ze also indicates that ze wants to continue advocacy and leave the campus better than when ze arrived. I asked hir what specifically ze wanted to leave behind when ze graduates. Ze said,
I would want this place to be comfortable and safe for everyone. You know, even if they don’t have the language to describe what they’re feeling or what’s going on. Whether it has to do with their sexuality or, you know, something medical or, you know, anything. Just having them know that there is a place. That they are guaranteed that, you know. The Constitution says that there is basically room for everybody. I want that to actually be true.

This beautiful response describes the journey Dion has traversed since arriving at UM. Ze came to UM battling assumptions and seeking space where ze would be safe to express hirself. Ze says that ze wants the campus to be a place where people are comfortable and safe even if they are unable to articulate what they need. Hir transformation from shy bisexual to public queer advocate is amazing to say the least.

The vast depth of information and insight that Dion shared during our first interview together was almost overwhelming. Ze had talked about the assumptive atmosphere of the campus, how ze felt that ze had grown because of the access to information and relationships, and how the campus climate is different depending on the people and places involved. I asked Dion what ze hoped to socially attain from hir time at UM before ze graduates. Ze said,

I would definitely like to make some lasting connections with people, because there are people doing all sorts of things. And it's just like really wonderful and it's like, um, hoping that, you know, we can all stay connected and be like a really big support for each other. Because I know it's hard with some of the mazes that we’re in, you know, and some of the jobs that were trying to get. I just hope that
we will all be able to, you know, call each other up and know that we can depend on to each other like that.

At the end of hir time at UM, Dion wants to take away connections and support from the relationships ze has made on campus. Ze says that ze knows that with some of the “mazes that we’re in” and “some of the jobs we are trying to get” that ze will need a support network upon which ze can depend. I assume Dion is referring to the challenging climate ze expects ze and hir friends to encounter when they graduate. Considering all that Dion had learned and the growth that ze has experienced by being in relationship at UM, ze wants to keep up the connections, and thus, the opportunity for continued mutually supportive growth.

It is clear that Dion’s time at UM has afforded hir the opportunity for growth and expression, despite hir initial apprehension about attending. Ze has demonstrated hir ability to make meaningful connection with others and with spaces. Considering hir growth at UM, I became curious about the value ze has seen in hir time at UM; so, I asked hir if ze would enroll at UM, knowing what ze now knows about the campus, if given the opportunity to start over as an undergraduate. Ze said,

I think I would. You know, Midwest is one of those places that, you know, it needs work. Anywhere else I would have gone, you know, I wouldn’t have had to do anything, so it wouldn’t have pushed me to grow as much as I did but here. It’s like people are really looking for this education. It’s like I could do a lot of work here and I could help a lot of people so I think it was a very good choice. If I had it to do over again I would still come here.
This response does not surprise me considering the fact that Dion has grown so much while attending UM. Ze also sees the value in this growth. Ze would not trade another more queer-friendly institution for the benefits of attending an institution where ze sees that ze has not only grown as a person, but for its ability to provide hir opportunities to help others.

Even though Dion was not necessarily happy to attend UM, the relationships made and hir interpersonal growth seems to outweigh the concession. When prompted to discuss the relationships made at UM, Dion sees a bright side of not attending Stanford during undergraduate study. “I guess, um, Stanford is a much larger school and everything. I don't think I would've been able to like grow like I did here at the smaller campus.” Actually, Stanford is a much smaller school in terms of undergraduate student population, but from Dion’s point of view, has a much larger queer community. While UM does not have a large queer or queer-friendly community, a significant impact—an impact in which Dion is more able to articulate self and also in which ze has become an advocate for LGBTQ issues—has been made on hir development, despite being in an environment in which students can easily hide or are not readily embraced.

Reflection

Dion and I spent two hour-long interviews together, attended a couple of rallies together, and shared a few email communications, but the impact ze made on me goes deeper than academic pursuit. I am intensely impressed with hir ability to take a less than ideal situation and grow within it. Hir time at UM is compelling on many levels. First of all, ze came to UM seeking a space where ze could express hirself. Unlike others who are looking to hide, start anew, or ignore their sexuality, ze looked for a space to convey and
better understand hirself. I expected a desire to express self when I began the inquiry, but hir experience is different than what I imagined. I assumed people would seek out markers that indicate which schools they felt they would be free to be themselves. However, Dion’s journey is much more complex than that. Ze illustrates the more multifaceted concerns that accompany college choice—choice to enroll and choice of how to integrate self. Hir time at UM is also significant because ze demonstrates the impact of an assumptive atmosphere on self and how campus spaces are different depending on the people and contexts involved.

While Dion did not end up at one of hir top queer-friendly schools, ze did find unexpected spaces that facilitated much interpersonal growth. Hir journey to and within the UM campus shows that students are able to develop, even in environments that are initially not seen as ideal. By way of safe spaces, Dion found hir voice and transformed from a shy bisexual to a complex and intriguing individual who challenges assumptions and advocates for social change. Had ze gone to a more queer-friendly school, ze may have integrated hirself more easily; however, hir time at UM has provided hir the opportunity to give to the campus in a way ze did not originally anticipate—as an advocate and leader.

Dion gives hope to those who attend institutions that are less than accommodating to LGBTQ students. Hir time at UM shows that given at least one safe space, people have the opportunity to develop growth-fostering relationships. Hir engagements within safe spaces have provided the opportunity for hir to better understand hirself, to gain more confidence, and to find hir voice. Dion’s interest in staying at UM, even if given the opportunity to go to her initial top-choice school, demonstrates the power of relational
growth, even in less than ideal situations. Hir time at UM also shows that the more comfortable and safe people feel, the greater potential they have for interpersonal and intrapersonal growth.
Chapter VIII
Cross-Case Examination

Up to this point, this study has specifically highlighted the in-depth experience of four students at UM. The time these students spent choosing a college, as well as the time they have spent in relationship with the UM campus climate, have demonstrated the significant social and psychological impact a campus has upon the students that enroll. Safety has been demonstrated to be a dominant consideration in this dissertation as mentioned throughout the previous four cases. The findings of this dissertation also have other cross-case themes that reach across all the students with whom I met during the course of this work. As the previous chapters discuss data from individuals in an in-depth manor, this chapter highlights three themes that reach across all the data. These themes are: (1) constructing safety; (2) the impact on learning; and (3) the central relational paradox.

While the ongoing nature of this work prevents the findings of this dissertation to be “complete,” this chapter is meant to lay the groundwork for a greater understanding of how students construct safety as well as begin the conversation about how students’ experience of safety impacts learning and relational development. So, this chapter underlines the theme of constructing safety more prominently as well as begins a discussion about student learning and the impact of the central relational paradox on LGBTQ college students. It is by beginning the conversation here that the foundation of future work I plan to pursue exploring a more thorough inquiry about student learning and relational development is fostered.
Constructing Safety

Choosing and controlling when and how one discloses sexuality, and the safety that comes with this control, is central to understanding the complexities associated with college choice and campus climate. The students in this study moved along a continuum of authentic and inauthentic self. They were able to strategically adapt to various “needs” they had to safely hide, explore, or express themselves. Also, at various times, safety increased because of the venue, the ability to hide, or the friends they were around. At the center of the student’s relationship with safety was the ability to construct various forms of safety as necessary.

For example, Mason was able to hide his sexuality, safe to explore his sexuality, and safe to express his sexuality all during his time at UM. When he wanted to conceal his sexual orientation, he sought out a place that he could “be quiet” about his sexuality; somewhere that he could “hide in a safe way.” As he grew to have different needs—needs to explore and express his sexuality—he sought out places that did “allow” him “to be gay.” He was able to construct a safe environment several times by the various choices he made. At various occasions he chose to hide and at others, he chose to pursue relationships where he could be authentic in expressing his sexuality.

Cliff’s construction of safety, while similar to Mason’s on some levels, was also unique on others. For Cliff to feel safe, he sought out situations, people, and places that reproduced his ability to direct when and where the disclosure of his sexuality happened. He made decisions about when relationships needed deepening, he made the decision to disclose to his family, and he decided to change how he discussed it. On a campus-level, and in the classroom, Cliff moved beyond what felt comfortable in order to try to build an
atmosphere that is better for current and future LGBTQ people seeking a college—he put himself out of his comfort zone so others would not have to leave theirs. This all plays into his desire to create spaces that are safe for him—and for other LGBTQ students. For Cliff to be in a safe space, one that allows him to control the conversation, he needed relationships that permitted him to discuss his sexuality securely and with the intent to change social ideals.

Another aspect of creating safety has to do with choosing with whom to befriend. Dion’s ability to feel comfortable to display hir true self depended on those that ze was around. Ze is not just comfortable in a social setting with hir friends, but with hir friends in an open space on campus. Despite the overall campus climate, Dion demonstrated that ze can be hir authentic self when ze is in relationships that encourage understanding and in a context to safely express these relationships. As such, ze sought out and choose to stay in relationships with people that provided hir the opportunity to safely express hirself. For hir, to be safe meant to construct safe communities of supportive friends.

While Cliff, Dion, and Mason constructed safe spaces that allowed for them to control a particular environment or situation, some students construct multiple safe spaces where they are perpetuating various identities in each. Cliff, Dion, Mason, and Aaron sought out particular means for constructing safe space to merge truths, to hide, to express. (A more thorough discussion of this is underlined in their respective chapters.) However, another student, who is not prominently mentioned previously, worked to manage multiple, distinct safe spaces simultaneously and purposefully. Leslie, a 19 year old female Caucasian pansexual student from a small rural town in the Midwest, illustrates the means a student can use to maintain different safe spaces simultaneously.
Simply, Leslie provides particular insight to the journey of the student who is seeking to juggle the in-self (or the self that she is with her family and hometown friends) and the out-self (the self she is when she is on campus at UM). Like Dion, Leslie came to UM saying she was bisexual. But, she had not told any of her family or friends from her hometown about her sexuality. While many students come out while in college (Love, 1998; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Rhoads, 1994, 1995), not all students come to college with that focused intent—some come to hide and some, as is the case with Leslie, come to explore self.

Leslie knew that coming to UM would allow her the opportunity to explore her sexuality within an environment where she would be safe. Her idea of safety is defined around the notion that she was safe to explore her queer identity within social circles at UM, but also safe enough that she would not be visible to her family and friends back home while doing so; she also does not disclose her sexuality to her non-queer college friends. She says that “I’m pretty open within the LGBTQ community. Like I really don’t have secrets from them, but I’m not open outside of UM.” When asked to elaborate on this, she continues,

Ever since I have like understood who I was, like my parents and my family are really Christian conservative and so I; well, when I go home I can’t be who I am. I feel like I’ve had to lie for a long time and I just don’t want to do that anymore. So I’ve been trying to get away from them, which is causing more issues, but they just don’t understand.

Leslie is working to articulate the complex location of self. She is existing within a campus that facilitates her desire to explore her sexuality, but the distance that this causes
creates tension between her in-self (the self of her hometown and the self of interaction with her parents) and her out-self (the self within the queer community at UM). She is working to create safe space that permits her to explore her sexuality, but also permits her exploration to remain safely hidden from her family. By way of distance, she has constructed means for simultaneously keeping both aspects of her sexual identity separate. Despite the tension of the lies, she does feel “open” to explore her pansexuality at UM.

Leslie had the opportunity on campus, like many others in this study, to make connections with others that allowed her to discover, question, and affirm her identity as a queer person. It is her interaction with other affirming, like-minded, and like-experienced (even safe) people that have truly facilitated her journey toward embracing a queer identity. She says,

I know I was really interested in like what was going on and with my sexuality. I knew that the queer spaces on campus would be a way to help me understand that. I guess going in and meeting all those people and you know learning about it. I didn’t even know what pansexuality was. So it was like, no, I do not discriminate whoever you are. That’s me. It was really helpful to be able to explore options that I didn’t even know were there... It seemed like I was bisexual, you know, and so over the summer I realized I was sticking with the binary and there is so much more than just two.

Leslie beautifully describes the importance of being in relationship with others in a safe environment and the influence this has on her understanding of self. Prior to coming to UM and prior to developing relationships with those who allowed her to question her sexuality markers and labels, she did not have the options, language, or considerations to
get beyond a binary mode of thinking and to actually explore the fluidity of her sexuality. It is, then, her ability to create safe spaces with other people—safe people, really—that have facilitated her journey toward self-discovery. However, this journey is not without conflict, tension, or sacrifice.

While Leslie has been able to develop within a sexual identity construct, her intention to come to a safe institution where she can continue to explore her sexuality was severely damaged when another person (one who knew only her in-self) saw Leslie’s sexual orientation disclosure on a Facebook webpage (an online social networking website) and then communicated this to Leslie’s mother. As a result, her two safe spaces of self converged and as such, began to deconstruct the safe spaces that she was able to previously maintain. Essentially, the convergence of her two realities—the straight-self and the pansexual-self—were unable to exist within either environment. She was unable to continue a safe balance of two safe spaces during her exploration of self. When asked if Leslie and her mother are talking about this, she says,

She’s kind of pretending it’s not happening. Whenever she thinks about it she’s just emotional and cries. She’s angry at me all the time. It’s not my fault. She told me, this choice that you’re making is a horrible choice. You really lost your financial future because I’m not going to support that...She told me that this was the first time in her life she’s ever been happy that my grandpa was dead, so he wouldn’t find out about it.

Leslie has much to consider here. First of all, now that her mother has seen that Leslie is not “choosing” a heterosexual identity, she will no longer financially support her school tuition and expenses—particularly in an environment that “supports” Leslie’s identity as
pansexual. Here Leslie has had her safe worlds collide; this creates a great deal of tension between her in-self and her out-self. She is currently seeking institutional and private financial aid support so that she can continue to embrace her out-identity in a place that is becoming safe to her in a new way—safe to embark on crafting an out identity and disclosure on a wider level. She still has a measure of safety within her in-self identity, as her father and others from her hometown do not know of her pansexuality. In order to maintain her safe spaces, Leslie sought out the resources to continue to independently stay at UM and did not move home at the end of term. It appears that while she is beginning to lose one safe place, that where her in-self subsists, she desires to continue to cultivate and sustain the safety of her out-self. And for Leslie, this happens within the safe environment of a community of queer-friendly people at UM where she continues to explore her identity.

As discussed above, students seek out and, if need be, construct spaces that are safe and allow for various demonstrations of identity—to hide, to explore, and to express themselves. The resilience of their ability to seek out and construct areas for growth is encouraging. However, not all students are able to have this level of success. Many students, due to the campus climate, are unable to fully integrate or successfully engage in authentic relationships. The data of this dissertation demonstrates that learning and classroom relationships are impaired and as a result, obstruct growth-fostering relationships. While the findings of this dissertation are ongoing, I want to lay the basis for the conversation on future analyses that more deeply discuss how students’ experience of safety impacts learning and relational development. So, the next few paragraphs will underline the initial discussion to these themes.
Impact on Learning

Considering that colleges and universities, by their very existence, seek to provide an environment that is conducive to learning, the university community needs to assess the loss of learning that is happening within their environs due to the restraints that are perpetuated within intolerant climates that have been illustrated in this dissertation. Not only should this evaluation happen in a more general campus-wide assessment, but it should happen at the college and departmental levels. The loss of learning that is happening is not simply about a single group being unheard; it is about creating a climate of respect of what can be learned when an inclusive and respectful dialogue is allowed to mature. With the well-documented evidence that campus social environments affect the ability to work with and respect multicultural groups in the community (Cheng and Zhao, 2006) and that lower levels of discrimination occur among students who are exposed to differing groups than their own (Arnold, 2004; Chang, 2002; Cheng, 2004), universities, if simply for the sake of fulfilling their mission statements and core values, must work to advance inclusive dialogue and mutual respect within their campus climates—in and out of the classroom.

For example, Cliff described what a campus environment would look like if it valued LGBTQ people. During our time together, he said that diversity actually brings insight to a community. He expressed that in order for a person to be in authentic relationship, in and out of the classroom, there must be a two-way expression of thoughts and feelings where everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened. His description, similar to the work on relationships by Miller, et al, (1991), is illustrated when he uses words like “it would be really nice to hear” or “it will be really interesting to hear” from
LGBTQ points of view, as opposed to situations where Cliff feels that queer people are just let in or tolerated in the classroom. So, to merely be present, accepted, or tolerated does little to nothing to actually create true value or benefit to all involved. Cliff shows that until all members of the campus are allowed to offer two-way expressions of thought and feeling, no persons, despite their presence, will actually become a member of a learning or social environment.

Aaron’s experience demonstrates the impact to student learning when students are not included in the classroom. For example, his search for liberty at UM forced him to build authentic relationships in places other than with his academic peers. Unfortunately for Aaron, the antithesis of growth-fostering relationships occurred more often in his classrooms than not, as demonstrated by his search for authentic relationships outside his academic department. As with others I have interviewed for this study, the marginalization that occurs in the classroom and within academic contexts forces students to find supportive and authentic, growth-fostering relationships beyond the confines of academic thinking. This, in turn, limits their social and academic engagement within the classroom.

The Central Relational Paradox

Another theme that is displayed across is data is what Miller and Stiver (1997) refer to as the “central relational paradox.” As I discussed extensively in the literature review of this dissertation, the central relational paradox states that some individuals use strategies that, in an effort to remain in available, although inauthentic relationships, result in further disconnection and isolation for those involved in this study. These strategies are commonly used to avoid risks of hurt, rejection, and other forms of
relational disconnection, social exclusion, and marginalization (Miller & Stiver, 1997). These strategies occurred inside and outside of the classroom for those involved with this study.

Aaron, for example, kept aspects of himself—his academic, feminist self—out of relationship with his colleagues in order to remain in academically available relationships, and thus he became inauthentic, silenced, and made concessions within classroom contexts. He described his experience in the classroom and with academic colleagues to be “inauthentic” because he “resigned” to be the radical of the group. He kept certain aspects of himself out of academic relationships because he came to an “impasse” and was unable to be authentic with them. When describing these relationships Aaron uses words like “falseness” and “lie” to express what it feels like for him to not be safe to be authentic.

Cliff also highlights another version of the central relational paradox. Throughout the interviews, he demonstrates his desire to reduce conflict in his life in regard to sexuality. The result is on one hand, he perpetuates an inauthentic self, and on the other, in order to make change, he concedes his own comfort-level for what he sees as the greater good. Ultimately, it is clear that Cliff would be happier if he did not have to discuss his sexuality at all; the tension his experience illustrates causes him much anxiety.

It appears that LGBTQ students have learned to be quite successful at managing the Central Relational Paradox; however, this is not an encouraging accomplishment. The LGBTQ students at UM have kept their full, authentic selves out of various campus relationships—both academic and social—by not only hiding their sexuality, but also by their inability to challenge heteronormative behavior. So, the students in this study
highlight that while they have been able to retain relationships, the cost to do so has been masking their authentic selves.

The discussion of the impact of safety on learning and relational development is by no means complete. However, the emergent discussion of these findings is included to begin framing the future implications of this work and to emphasize the ongoing nature of this study. Also, the broad-reaching implications of all the themes mentioned in the findings of this dissertation have the potential to fuel much more analysis and to propel future work.

Conclusion

Students from various racial, social, sexual, religious, and geographic viewpoints experience harassment and perceive a negative campus climate as illustrated by numerous studies (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Although colleges are beginning to recruit and reach out to LGBTQ students in their undergraduate admission plans (Cavanagh, 2002; Rivard, 2002), there is little indication that policy and climate changes on American college campuses are shifting to the point that these institutions are ready to meet the needs of the out students that arrive on campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Domingue, Perritt, & Smith, 2005; McKinney, 2005). While there are positive examples of investment in diversity programming and resources at some colleges, there is a vast need to continue to examine LGBTQ student experiences and perceptions in order to assure that all students’ needs are met and that all students can learn and develop in a safe and well-equipped environment that promotes multiple levels of individual growth.
In order to reduce the negative impacts on learning, colleges must work to design programs, policies, and classroom environments that celebrate and support the authentic selves of LGBTQ—and all—students. The psychological damage that happens when students are not provided opportunities to explore and express their selves is seen in this work—students become cut off and disengaged from academic and social relationships. While many students do find resilience and relationships in places on campus despite the environment, I suspect that many more, due to the obstacles highlighted in this study, do not navigate the path toward finding positive relationships. If students have spaces that are safe—where queer students are openly accepted—then they will not have to spend so much effort creating and finding safe spaces. Students will also be free to use their energy creating true, authentic relationships inside and outside the classroom. This will eliminate the arduous steps toward seeking out authenticity beyond the classroom and campus community and will allow more time for academic and social growth.
Chapter IX
Implications

I was really interested in like what was going on and with my sexuality. I knew that the queer spaces on campus would be a way to help me understand that.

–Leslie, 19, UM undergraduate

Safety, learning, and relational growth have been demonstrated to be dominant considerations in this dissertation. More specifically, the various ways safety is defined and created are at the cornerstone of the implications of this work. The university climate has great potential to shape a positive perception as well as the influence this has on retention and persistence rates (Tinto, 1999). Cheng and Zhao (2006) indicate that the campus social environment affects the ability to work with and respect multicultural groups in the community, indicating that an inclusive or “positive” environment toward diversity influences students’ openness to diverse groups, resulting in safer environments for all. Chang (2002), for instance, found lower levels of racism among students who completed coursework that included materials and readings across multiple group domains (e.g., gender, race, and sexual orientation).

Campuses that value sexual orientation diversity, as evidenced through programming and student services, provide a strong catalyst for promoting positive attitudinal change (Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007). The surrounding social and group norms (campus climate) play an essential role in this process. Engberg, et al. demonstrate that students’ interactions with LGB (they did not include transgender or queer identity)
peers in college not only directly promote more positive LGB attitudes, but indirectly foster positive growth by decreasing student’s level of anxiety about LGB persons while fostering an increased awareness of one’s multiple social identities. The implications of the work of various scholars, along with the findings of this study, demonstrate the power of relationship in the outcomes (both learning and social development) of student experience on college campuses.

Per the implications of this work, it is important to highlight two sub-themes that have suggestions for ongoing action that cut across the data of this study: the desire for appointed LGBTQ space and the divergence of living and learning spaces within a single university campus. In the discussions about safety, several students suggest that safe space is differently defined and differently experienced depending upon where the student is physically and socially positioned at the time. There seems to be a discrepancy within the LGBTQ community at UM in how to advance queer-policy and queer-space. Students (and staff, too) discussed the struggle between making all space queer-friendly space, while some specified the desire for explicitly appointed LGBTQ space on campus. All students I interviewed for this study want designated space and are advocating (in various ways) for an LGBTQ Center with fully funded staff, and a smaller number are advocating for LGBTQ floors in the residence halls. A few students said that advocacy efforts should be focused toward making all space “friendly” and “safe.” While there seems to be a difference between those that want queer space and those that want integrated space, all want space where they can feel comfortable.

In addition, the data show that depending on the specific college (or department) within which a student is enrolled, queer students experience varying levels of acceptance
and normative behavior. For example, more expressive colleges and departments, such as those in the liberal and performing arts are seen as more “friendly” academic areas. Students specifically describe these spaces (colleges and departments) as “liberal,” “expressive,” and “open.” Those colleges and departments in more applied fields, such as construction and engineering, are seen as “unfriendly.” Students characterize these spaces as “conservative” and “heteronormative.” This chapter will highlight these themes as well as discuss the ongoing agenda of action that this dissertation has espoused.

The Desire for LGBTQ Space

Place is vastly important to the student-participants in this study. The UM Women’s Center has been a safe-haven for many involved in this dissertation. Due to the close ties with the LGBTQ community, and the fact that the Women’s Center administers queer programming on campus, many students make use of the space and social groups housed there. The centrality of the Women’s Center as home for LGBTQ issues has created an opportunity for many queer students to find location and community. When thinking about the need for LGBTQ space, Leslie says, “We definitely need a place where people can go if we have all these questions. I mean the people at the Women’s Center are amazing. They are really great people.” Not only has the affiliation of the Women’s Center provided a social entrée for queer students, but the staff members themselves have also played a role in the construction of safe space.

There is ongoing advocacy work at UM to bring a full-time LGBTQ staff director and also an office specifically devoted to LGTBQ programming. The queer UM community has seen one victory, the establishment of office space for an LGBTQ Center. While this seems to be a win, it is bitter sweet. Dion says,
It put us back in the closet. Yeah, it was the Wellness Center’s storage closet. It’s a really tiny space, but it’s something. They didn’t want to put it in another building because, you know, then we’d be, you know, out somewhere. They wanted us to be around everyone else. It’s like we were hoping we would be switching offices with somebody that really doesn’t use the office too much. It is supposed to be a temporary space. We are definitely going to keep reminding them about it. You know it’s a start and it’s kind of a, you know, show of faith.

The establishment of a location that will serve as an LGBTQ Center is a “show of faith” of UM to begin a closer consideration of instituting a more focused agenda toward improving campus climate for queer students. While UM officials put the Center in an old closet, Dion says that the LGBTQ community will “keep reminding them” about their commitment for better space and better policy. Ze sees this as an opportunity to continue momentum toward a more appropriate and fully-funded enterprise. Just as this dissertation was in final draft stages, Dion and Aaron were two of the select members of the queer community who spoke at a rally on campus demanding more appropriate LGBTQ Center space. (Of note, the maximum capacity of the “closet” LGBTQ Center is eight people.)

For the students involved in this study, queer space is needed for a multi-faceted role. The earlier analyses demonstrate the importance of safe space for attaining interpersonal growth and new relationships. However, safe space can provide other means for improved climate such as visibility and voice. When discussing fully-funded and strategically located queer space, Leslie lucidly conveys the benefits when she says,
Well I feel like if we had an LGBT Center on campus, that that would be a big deal because it would be an open, like it would be a very visible thing to see. And I think visibility is one of the keys to like safety, a place that we can go and that we can see and its there if we know that that is a safe place for us to be in. Then I feel like that would draw a lot more students here. Because right now, I mean the Women’s Center, I mean it’s very small. You can barely fit 15 people in there comfortably. We need a big queer center where we can just all come together at the same time. Be able to have discussions and be able to meet with the administrators. I think we would be a lot stronger of a voice if we had a community that big.

Leslie is saying many things here. Some relate to student community and even some to student recruitment. She says, in reference to a more visible queer community, “that would draw a lot more students here.” For her, more visibility could draw even more LGBTQ students to UM and as a result, having more people could build a “lot stronger of a voice.” She is also saying visibility is paramount to safety on campus. For Leslie, to build a larger community means more visibility, and more visibility means a more accurate assessment of an institution’s safety. By building these numbers, and as a result having greater visibility, queer students are able to assess whether “we know that that is a safe place for us to be in.” It seems that for her, as the queer population becomes an “easy thing to see,” it will be easier to get an accurate account of the queer climate of a location.

At UM, many have implied that having LGBTQ programming within the Women’s Center is important. This is especially imperative in a climate that is not seen as “queer friendly” and within a climate that puts very little time and money into LGBTQ
issues. (At UM, there is one graduate assistant devoted to queer topics, housed in the Women’s Center, and a small amount of funding from the student government association earmarked for student organizations, including the four queer student groups.)

However, some students, particularly a few males, find the connotations of LGBTQ issues as women’s issues to be problematic. Cliff says,

That is something that kept me from becoming involved; because all of the LGBTQ stuff was coming out from the Women’s Center and to me it was just identifying more of the things I was trying not to identify with. It was gay men are basically women who are men who are a lot like women. I don’t want to be part of it if I feel like everything is coming out of the women’s center. I’m not a woman and I don’t want to be a woman. I like women, but that’s not what I’m trying to identify with. Then to get [LGBTQ staff and programs] out of the [Women’s Center] and to have full-time person would be great. That’s a really good idea.

Considering the problematic nature of joining LGBTQ matters within the confines of women’s issues, some students may be hindered from finding or connecting to LGBTQ students at UM. Since the campus is moving toward separate space for queer students, this may improve the accessibility of LGBTQ programs and staff. However, if the budget and political issues inhibit the creation of appropriate LGBTQ space, many students will continue to be disconnected and a few others will find themselves unable to associate with the Women’s Center.

The Divergence of Living and Learning Space
Over and over during the course of the one-on-one interviews, and to some extent within the focus group, students, such as Cliff, Mason, Dion, Justin, Ray, Leslie, and Beth, referred to the College of Music and the College of Design as bastions for queer students. Cliff and Dion mentioned that they knew the College of Music drew LGBTQ students even before they enrolled at UM. Students, like Mason and Dion, mentioned specific departments, like English and Women’s Studies, as places that queer students find their voice and thrive. Leslie, a psychology major says “it really hasn’t been an issue” in her classes. However, some students, like Dion and Rusty, mention the College of Engineering and the College of Applied Sciences as locations that harbor especially “heteronormative” climates. Within the same university, it is especially difficult for students to experience such wide-ranging models of acceptance toward LGBTQ students. I am left wondering how many students run into road blocks because of the atmosphere within a specific major, department, or college. Also, the divergence of acceptance within a single physical university campus must evoke a level of confusion for students. As illustrated with Dion earlier, students are unable to fully engage on a campus that has segregated self-expression to specific spaces—such as the difference between hir work and classroom atmospheres. I am left wondering how well, and how differently, LGBTQ students are retained in these various segregated spaces.

During the focus group, I was able to see the diverse experiences that students have at UM in relationship to their chosen major. Specifically, Justin, who is a gay student in the College of Design, said he has “never experienced homophobia” while at student at UM. On the other hand, Rusty, who is gay and is in a technical major in the College of Applied Sciences, said his colleagues have “heteronormative career ideas”
about who is in their field. He said that he is always being asked about his girlfriend and other heterosexual topics—his classmates do not even consider that someone around them may be gay and not have a girlfriend, but a boyfriend instead. If Justin is not experiencing homophobia and is enrolled in one of the “expressive” colleges, and Rusty is gay, but enrolled in a more “conservative” college, then their time at UM seems to have a marked difference, despite them both being gay and attending the same university.

There is also a conflict among the queer students I talked with about how best to handle the residence halls at UM. I originally asked about the residence halls because I assumed that having a queer floor in a residence hall may actually provide LGBTQ students a comfort zone when they were researching colleges. However, during the focus group, the notion of having a queer space within the residence halls brought a level of tension I did not expect. Ray, a gay education major, said he does not want to have a designated queer space in the residence halls. Rusty added that this could make LGBTQ students “easier targets.” There was a dichotomy between those that want queer space and those that want integrated space. Leslie said she is experiencing some verbal and written harassment in the residence halls; some harassment comes in the form of graffiti on her door’s dry erase board. She also spoke of an instance in the residence hall of how another resident told her that her behavior (having a girlfriend visit her in her room) was disgusting and disturbing—Leslie says they were doing nothing in the room and that is wasn’t her business anyway. With teary eyes, she said she could not feel comfortable in the dorm, but that she did not want to “give in” to them either.
Students arrive at UM with varying senses of safety and also with different capacities to function within the queer spaces on campus. Leslie highlights the desire for answers that some students feel when they arrive on campus. She says,

At least if we had a queer space or a queer building, like you would hire only queer friendly people, you would be able to provide queer friendly support. Someone who is knowledgeable and can help students who are searching for their identity and who just need help understanding all the words. There is like a lot of words.

To have a place, apart from the various and wide-ranging extremes of the campus, that is solely focused on queer themes could create an ease for students like Leslie and Rusty who come to UM and experience various levels of antagonism in their living and learning spaces. The advocacy efforts, if successful, to bring a fully-funded LGBTQ Center to UM may be a start in attaining a better understanding of the queer UM student’s journey. If the Center is realized, and more programming can be done on campus, the results could be two-fold: to provide a specific LGBTQ space and to continue advocacy for making all space more integrated and safe.

Reflection

Since this dissertation is being written while the advocacy for a fully-funded and fully-functional LGBTQ Center is taking place, I have room to reflect on the benefits of this for those I interviewed. First of all, the students who attend UM seeking a place to hide will be allowed to do so. However, if those students decide to seek out connections with the UM queer community, they will be able to do so in a designated space; a space that is separate from their closeted campus life and in a way that they can continue to
hide, at least on some levels. Also, those that are seeking a campus where they want to
explore their sexuality will have a space where they can find community and information.
It is important that those wanting to explore their sexuality and their identity have safe
and helpful space in which to do so. Lastly, those that are seeking a campus where queer
people and ideals are more integrated into the larger campus climate will find a space that
is advocating for broader inclusion of LGBTQ people within all aspects of UM—not
merely segregated space for specific majors. Establishing a Center will be the first step in
a more wide-ranging integration; at least that is the hope.

It is apparent that if the students with whom I conversed during this study are able
to realize their desire, and are provided a fully-funded LGBTQ Center on campus, they
will consider it a triumph. They use words such as “great” and “exciting” to describe this
possibility. The desire for the Center was mentioned by every student I interviewed. They
all were either directly advocating for, or expressed interest in, attaining a Center and
full-time staff for the campus. (The current proposal before the UM administration is to
have a full-time LGBTQ Center director, a Graduate Assistant, and $50,000 to fund the
Center’s operation.) Though several students felt ignored by the administration, their
enthusiasm and resolve to make the Center happen was contagious. A lesbian graduate
student, Ellie, who was close to graduating told me that she “can’t wait to get out of here”
because of all the discrimination and negative experiences she experienced. However, she
said she “worried about others” who will still be here or who are to enroll. So, only a few
weeks before graduation, she was still attending protests and rallies in support for more
LGBTQ rights and for the LGBTQ Center, despite the fact she will not be here to reap
the benefits of her work. I suppose the connections made on campus and the concern for
others yet to enroll is stronger than the negative experiences she had, and thus she continued to advocate for change in an environment that she would soon no longer inhabit. I believe that if a fully-funded Center is realized at UM, it is the first step to helping students like Mason, Cliff, Aaron, and Dion (and all the others on campus) build more relationships and also to hopefully have fewer negative experiences on campus.

_An Ongoing Agenda_

_Moving Toward Relationship_

There are several directions and opportunities to move forward with this research and for future research on campus climate for LGBTQ students. The next stage of my research agenda will focus on the importance of relationship and space as a means of inter- and intrapersonal growth and the various ways that a university can facilitate their development. Evans and Broido (2002) found that visibility and a sense of community play vital roles in establishing a positive climate for lesbian and bisexual women. In general, several studies, including this dissertation, indicate that participation in an LGBTQ campus community promotes positive LGBTQ identity development (D’Augelli, 1994; Rhoads, 1994; Stevens, 2004). The relational nature of coming together and sharing experiences is beneficial to students. LGBTQ communities that foster relationships allow individuals (and the greater group) to realize that they have common experiences due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Outcalt, 1998).

As indicated earlier in this dissertation, student affairs administrators should extend social connections among student cultural groups through programs and activities
that positively affect social relationships (Cheng, 2004). Examples of best practices in these types of programs include “safe zone” programs (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Draughn, Elkins, and Roy, 2002), the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the mainstream curricula, the creation of curricula focused on the study of LGBTQ people (as a means to reduce heteronormative assumptions), and the creation of residence life centers or resource centers focused on LGBTQ needs and issues.

I think an improved campus climate occurs by way of an increased LGBTQ voice. Susan Rankin (2005), who also agrees with this assessment, says it best,

As participants in institutions of power, higher education faculty and staff are part of systems of relations that can silence those who are not in positions of power. Heterosexism and homophobia, for example, operate to reinforce the heterosexual norm. Differences disturb the norm; a culture of silence reinforces the norm for those who are different. When LGBT people on campus increase their visibility and, therefore, their voice on campus, they challenge heterosexual norms. By providing a voice through visible LGBT-supportive initiatives on campus, they engage in dialogue and action with individuals who may have different ideas and perceptions about the world. This is hard work, but such work creates the conditions for change (Rankin, 2005, p.21).

It is clear that she is saying that by providing a vehicle for voice and connection on campus, LGBTQ students are able to engage in change. It also seems that when LGBTQ people within a setting are given value and an opportunity for connection, their perspective and voice are given strength and thus begin to have power to create change within their campus. By considering the findings of this
work, I believe that we can begin a journey toward building the changes needed within university climates.

The issues raised in this dissertation represent a cross-section of themes that transfer across many of those with whom a research relationship has been established at the University of Midwest. Going into this research study equipped with questions about college choice and campus climate actually provided more information about the current state of institutional frustration many of these students face than I had anticipated. I have also been quite pleased with the level of commitment and action that is taking place on the UM campus—even well-beyond their participation in this study.

While issues of student-recruitment and visibility are of great importance to all involved with this work, many are focused on petitioning the campus administration to increase the university commitment to LGBTQ issues. Namely, the current LGBTQ budget is $1000 and there is a graduate assistant who works out of the Women’s Center to facilitate queer student groups and programming. The students in this study do not see these resources as providing enough support. Many students saw great support from the Women’s Center, but a few also raised the point that the Women’s Center (and even the name itself) limits their ability to adequately serve queer student needs. So, many students that participated in this research project would like the analyses and results to advance politically the queer presence on campus. The advancement of visibility on campus that several students want is really a means toward policy recognition via literal space and resources. The opportunity to be heard (via this project and also their own course of political activity) has allowed the students’ wish to be treated fairly on
campus—to begin to be addressed; hopefully the platform that is being created will provide a venue from which several concerns and desires will be heard.

While recently UM officials designated a location on campus for a LGBTQ Center, many students felt this was not enough—considering the Center was placed in the storage closet of the campus Wellness Center. The complete function of the LGBTQ Center is still being designed and implemented; but as of the writing of this dissertation, the Center provides little more than a few office hours a week. The students leading this campaign are very insistent that their voices be the ones that draft the proposal of concerns and rationale for this Center, as they feel that UM administrators are not giving them much, if any, support to move forward. There is also very strong interest that the plans for how to operate the Center be taken to university administrators by the students (largely undergraduate—two student-leaders in particular) themselves. I have enjoyed getting to know these students and greatly admire their drive and desire for justice. Also, their intent to advocate for themselves is reflected by a level of distrust that a few of the students have for any administrator.

The tenets of action research have played a huge role in the shaping of this inquiry, as the collaborative nature of the ongoing “political” work with the LGBTQ community at UM will continue well-beyond me fulfilling the requirements for completion of a dissertation. After all, this research is a spoke in the wheel of the greater LGBTQ equal rights movement at UM. Many students are seeking to integrate themselves—as out and as hidden individuals—into the college community and many feel that the establishment of a LGBTQ Center will do just that. In other words, these students (both in and out) want to have a place on campus that they are not only queer,
but also male, female, spiritual, inquisitive, scientific, and artistic. The students want a place where they can integrate all parts of self. Aaron, an incredibly articulate student puts it best when he says he wants a place to “come and not just be safe, but find out more information. To learn more and to develop more…where you’re just accepted for who you are or where you are right now in your life.”

There has been a direct impact of this study on the formulation of queer-friendly policy changes on campus. Specifically, and as a result of the pilot study and dissertation work I was doing on campus, I was asked to join the Campus Life and Climate subcommittee of the UM Diversity Taskforce during the summer of 2008. The Diversity Taskforce works on issues of diversity and addresses policy and programmatic issues that reach into student life and scholastic procedure. As a part of my participation on this subcommittee, I was asked to present the broader context and discuss the data from this study with the group last fall. Many of the ideas I discuss in the findings section of this dissertation were presented to the subcommittee, and as a result, many recommendations, based on what I shared about the students’ experiences, ended up being recommended for inclusion in UM’s diversity initiative priorities. One specific recommendation, the establishment of an LGBTQ Center, was even adopted by the University. The status of the Center, as discussed earlier, is still yet to be fully-funded, or moved from the “storage closet” space, but is at least a start. Also, as of this draft, UM officials have yet to decide on a second recommendation, to hire a full-time Center director. A rally in support for hiring a full-time person took place in April 2009.

As part of the ongoing collaboration, and as part of the action research goals of this study, I presented the findings of this work to the UM Women’s Center staff. This
meeting allowed me to bring back the data to several key stakeholders involved in the work to build a more queer-friendly campus environment. As a result of this meeting, students and staff are going to take the findings and work toward crafting a LGBTQ Center that meets the needs of the UM community. One way we decided to do this is to craft focus groups with various members of the campus community to being having discussions on how to design the Center. We decided that no single person involved has the answer, but that the answer to creating a safe and functional Center lies within a collaborative, mutually-respectful process that includes all voices. As with other aspects of this study, we decided to rethink what we think we already know. In other words, we are rethinking what an LGBTQ Center at UM may look, feel, and sound like—we are re-examining what we think we know a Center should be.

The timing of this research project has been a blessing both to me and to the students that are working toward a more just and equitable campus community. To some extent, the shaping of this dissertation and the student-advocacy work on campus have fueled each other. The energy and motivation I have had to write this dissertation has joined well with the UM queer students’ work toward equality; after all, I am both a researcher and a queer student working toward equality. I feel that this work has been another ally in the struggle for a “safe” campus. I have provided ongoing support to the student-leaders who have been meeting with various UM administrators. I have provided insight as one who has worked in university administration and knows the “ropes” of the bureaucratic “process.” The political work of the UM queer students has been well-documented in the school newspaper over the course of the last several months. The ongoing synergy of the political issues on campus have fueled the work of this study and
in turn has provided insight to particular students’ issues within the UM campus climate. While this work has an ongoing agenda, the implications here suggest that if provided safe and comfortable spaces, students have a greater potential for interpersonal and intrapersonal growth.

This study has produced new research findings that convey the experience of a localized group of students at one institution that suggest a broader academic research agenda for discussions that inform university policy and practice. The implications of this study have the potential to greatly improve the student-experience of many queer people directly if colleges realize the importance of safe and comfortable spaces within which students can learn, be authentic, and grow. However, beyond the LGBTQ student community, the impact of a more scrutinized learning community has the potential to acutely advance learning and individual development for all students.
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Appendix A

One-On-One Interview Guide for Initial Interview

1. How do you identify your sexual orientation? (e.g. lesbian, transgender, gay, bisexual, queer, etc.)

2. What is your age?

3. What is your year in college?

4. How long have you been a student at this university?

5. Did you begin your studies at this university or did you transfer from another institution?

6. Discuss your level of “openness” with your sexual orientation/identity with other members of the university community?
   - (If open) Are you involved with LGBTQ organizations on campus?
   - Are you involved with organizations that are not LGBTQ focused on campus?

7. Did you research the LGBTQ organizations on campus before you enrolled? If so, did your findings influence your decision to attend this university?

8. Discuss the ways you researched the campus climate (inclusiveness) toward LGBTQ students at this (and other) universities?

9. Describe the ease or difficulty of finding information about the campus climate toward LGBTQ students at this (and other) universities.

10. What are suggestions for ways to find out what the campus climate is like for LGBTQ students at this university?

11. If you had an opinion/perception of the campus climate toward LGBTQ students prior to enrolling at this university, was your perception accurate? If so, explain. If not, explain the differences.

12. Describe your experience of being LGBTQ on campus.

13. If you had all the knowledge of being a student at this university and your experience of the campus climate toward LGBTQ students before you enrolled, would you still attend this university?
Appendix B

Open-Ended Survey
(For those who did not participate in the one-on-one interviews)

1. How do you identify your sexual orientation? (e.g. lesbian, transgender, gay, bisexual, queer, etc.)
2. What is your age?
3. What is your year in college?
4. How long have you been a student at this university?
5. Did you begin your studies at this university or did you transfer from another institution?
6. Are you open with your sexual orientation/identity with other members of the university community?
7. If you are open with your sexual orientation/identity, are you involved with LGBTQ organizations on campus?
8. Did you research the LGBTQ organizations on campus before you enrolled? If so, did your findings influence your decision to attend this university?
9. What are some of the ways you researched the campus climate toward LGBTQ students at this (and other) universities?
10. Describe the ease or difficulty of finding information about the campus climate toward LGBTQ students at this (and other) universities.
11. Do you have specific suggestions for ways to find out what the campus climate is like for LGBTQ students at this university? If so, please share these.
12. If you had an opinion/perception of the campus climate toward LGBTQ students prior to enrolling at this university, was your perception accurate? If so, explain. If not, explain the differences.
13. If you had all the knowledge of being a student at this university and your experience of the campus climate toward LGBTQ students before you enrolled, would you still attend this university?
Appendix C

Informative Consent Cover Sheet
(Anonymous Survey Participants)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Survey
University of Cincinnati
College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services
Billy Hensley
Billy.Hensley@uc.edu

Title of Study: Social Factor Influence on College Choice

Introduction: I am inviting you to complete an anonymous survey. The survey is part of a research study that I am doing for my doctoral degree program. The questions ask about factors that influence LGBTQ students’ college choice. This research study seeks up to twenty five (25) research participants.

Procedures and Duration: Completing the survey will take less than 20 minutes. When you are finished, please submit it to me in person or via campus mail (ML 0002). Do not write your name on the survey form.

Risks/Discomforts: There are no expected risks or benefits to you from completing the survey. Because the survey is anonymous, your identity and your answers can not be connected. Your participation may, however, help universities tailor the ways they communicate information about campus climate for LGBTQ students.

Offer to Answer Questions: If you have any questions about study-related activities, you may call me at 513-556-2342 or Dr. Miriam Raider-Roth, my faculty advisor, at 513-556-3808. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Chair of the Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at 558-5784.

Legal Rights: Nothing in this consent form waives any legal right you may have nor does it release the investigator, the sponsor, the institution or its agents from liability for negligence.

BY TURNING IN YOUR COMPLETED SURVEY YOU INDICATE YOUR CONSENT FOR YOUR ANSWERS TO BE USED IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR REFERENCE.
Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Prompts

1. Describe the campus climate toward LGBTQ students on campus.

2. List examples to illustrate the climate toward LGBTQ students on campus?

3. Discuss the ease of finding information about LGBTQ life on campus.

4. Were LGBTQ issues a factor in your decisions to attend this university?

5. How can this university better communicate LGBTQ climate to those who are “outside” the university community.
Appendix E

Recruitment Flier

University of Cincinnati LGBTQ Research Participants Needed:

Would you like to participate in a research project that will examine the University of Midwest’s campus climate toward sexual minorities and the social factors that informed LGBTQ students’ decisions to become a member of this university community?

My name is Billy Hensley and I am a doctoral student in the UC College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services. I am conducting a research project that will study a university’s campus climate toward sexual minorities and the social factors that ultimately informed LGBTQ students’ decisions to become a member of the university community. Specifically, I am seeking to determine if LGBTQ students choose a college or university based on factors that are related to their sexual orientation.

This study will have three components of data collection: a survey, up to two one-on-one in-depth interviews and a focus group. You are welcome to participate in one, all, or none of these components. You are not obligated to participate in this study nor will your participation impact your inclusion in any student LGBTQ group on campus. This research study seeks up to twenty five (25) research participants. You will always have the right to withdraw from the study or to choose not to complete any aspect of the study.

If you would like to participate, I will ask you to complete a survey, to participate in an interview and/or participate in a focus group. I will ask your permission to tape record your participation in the interview and focus group. I realize this is a lot of information to ask of you and I will try to make it as easy and unobtrusive as possible. This data will be collected only by me and your confidentiality will be honored at all times.

I am happy to answer any questions you might have about this project and then you can decide if you would like to participate.

If you would like to participate in this research study or would like more information, please contact Billy Hensley at Billy.Hensley@uc.edu or 513-556-2342.
Appendix F

Recruitment Speech

My name is Billy Hensley and I am a doctoral student in the UC College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services. I am conducting a research project that will study this university’s campus climate toward sexual minorities and the social factors ultimately informed LGBTQ students’ decisions to become a member of this university community. Specifically, I am seeking to determine if LGBTQ students choose a college or university based on factors that are related to their sexual orientation. This research study seeks up to twenty five (25) research participants.

This research study will have three components of data collection: a survey, up to two one-on-one in-depth interviews and a focus group. You are welcome to participate in one, all or none of these components. You are not obligated to participate in this study nor will your participation impact your inclusion in any student LGBTQ groups on campus. You will always have the right to withdraw from the research study or to choose not complete any aspect of the study.

If you would like to participate, I will ask you to complete a survey, to participate in an interview and/or participate in a focus group. I will ask your permission to tape record your participation in the interview and focus group. I realize this is a lot of information to ask of you and I will try to make it as easy and unobtrusive as possible. This data will be collected only by me and your confidentiality will be honored at all times.

I am happy to answer any questions you might have about this project and then you can decide if you would like to participate. Thanks for allowing me to visit your meeting today.
Appendix G

Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
University of Cincinnati
College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services
Billy Hensley
Billy.Hensley@uc.edu

Title of Study: Social Factor Influence on College Choice

Introduction: Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read this consent form and understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study as well as your right to withdraw from the research study at any time. Please note that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this research study is to determine if sexual minorities choose a college or university based on factors that are related to their sexuality and how campus climate toward sexual minorities is measured prior to enrollment in a particular university. This research study seeks up to twenty five (25) research participants.

Procedures and Duration: The investigator will conduct all interviews, administer a survey and facilitate a focus group. For anyone that participates, one-on-one interview (will last approximately 45 minutes), a focus group (will last one hour) and surveys will be used to collect data.

Risks/discomforts: You have the right to decide whether or not to remain in the study. You may discuss discomfort and risks with the investigator Billy Hensley at 513-556-2342 or Miriam Raider-Roth at 513-556-3808. It is anticipated that the risks for participating in this research study are minimal.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit for you. Findings may be used to develop recommendations for improving the ways universities communicate their social support systems for LGBTQ population to potential students.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality. The investigator will not allow anyone to read observation field notes and interview transcripts or listen to audiotapes of interviews. The data from the research study may be published and presented at conferences; however, you will not be identified by name—pseudonyms will be used for every participant that participates in the focus group, survey or interviews. To further ensure confidentiality, all field notes, interview audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after the research study is completed. Consent forms will be stored in a secure place for three years after the end of the study and then will be destroyed.
Compensation: You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.

Right to refuse or withdraw: Your participation is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your withdrawal from the research study may be for reasons related solely to you or because the entire study has been terminated.

Offer to answer questions: If you have any other questions about this study, you may call Billy Hensley at 513-556-2342 or Miriam Raider-Roth at 513-556-3808.

The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human subjects to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at 558-5784. If you have a concern about the study you may also call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547.

Legal Rights: Nothing in this consent form waives any legal right you may have nor does it release the investigator, the sponsor, the institution or its agents from liability for negligence.

I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS SIGNED AND DATED CONSENT FORM FOR MY INFORMATION.

_________________________________________________       ___________________
Signature of Participant                                                                   Date

_________________________________________________       ___________________
Signature and Title of Person Obtaining Consent                           Date