

NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE COMING OUT EXPERIENCES OF GAY MEN IN
STUDENT AFFAIRS AND HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION PREPARATION
PROGRAMS

by

DARREN ERIC PIERRE

(Under the Direction of Diane Cooper)

ABSTRACT

Few studies have been conducted looking at the experiences of graduate students within student affairs/higher education administration program. The purpose of this study was to investigate the coming out experiences of gay men in student affairs/higher education administration programs. The study was conducted with 11 participants, representing seven different student affairs/higher education programs across the United States. The study was intended to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do gay men talk about their coming out experience when it occurs during their student affairs preparation program?
- 2) What environmental factors impact gay men's coming out experiences?
- 3) What connections do gay men make between the graduate preparation program and the coming out process?

Each of the participants took part in two in-depth interviews. The first interview was a life-history interview. The second interview focused primarily on the participants coming out experience and the factors leading to that decision.

The findings of this study offer greater understanding on the experiences of gay men in student affairs/higher education preparation programs. First, participants spoke of coming out being a fluid process. Meaning, disclosing one's sexual orientation is an on-going process, not always defined by words, but more often by acts, thoughts, and behaviors. Secondly, environmental factors such as the role of faculty, staff, and classmates, as well as the opportunity to attend graduate school away from home served as support structures for participants in their decision to come out. Third, the academic program contributed to participants' decision to publicly disclose their sexual orientation. Participants discussed the role of the academic curriculum, which provided them the opportunity to engage in conversations on topics germane to gay identity development. In addition activities such as self-reflective exercises allowed the men in the study to make meaning of their sexual identity. In close, three main themes were produce from the data that offer implications for practice, teaching, and future research.

INDEX WORDS: Student affairs preparation programs, coming out, gay identity development, graduate education

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DEDICATION

Thank you, they are the greatest words, they are the words we use to communicate with God. To God; my grandmother, Pauline H.B. Cole; Glenda H. Bebber, and the students who have touched my life, too many to recount – these are those who inspire the narratives of my personal and professional journey. I share my deepest gratitude.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Graduate Education and Student Affairs	1
Overview of Student Affairs	3
Student Affairs Preparation Programs	5
Support for the Gay Community in Student Affairs	6
Gay Men’s Identity Development	6
Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework	7
Research Questions	8
Operational Terms	8
Summary	9
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	10
The Gay Rights Movement from the 1960s to the Present	10
Life-Span Human Development Model Overview	12
Place and Learning	13
Environments	14
Cognitive Structural Development	15
Sexual Orientation	16

Sexual Identity Development.....	16
Cass Model of Sexual Identity Formation	17
Fassinger’s Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development Theory	18
D’Augelli’s Model of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Identity Development	19
Oppression	21
Coming Out.....	23
Coming Out & Identity	25
Student Affairs Preparation Programs	26
Summary.....	27
3 RESEARCH DESIGN	28
Qualitative Research	29
In-depth Interviews	30
Data Analysis	33
Participant Selection	34
Ethics.....	35
Limitations	35
Timeline	35
Where I Fit In.....	35
Summary.....	36
4 FINDINGS	38
Participant Profiles.....	38
Themes.....	44

Barriers to Coming Out.....	45
Religion: “I had a firm belief in the Bible and that firm belief told me gay is wrong”	45
Being Busy: “the busier I am the more I don’t have to think about or deal with the Issues”	46
Fluidity: “Coming out is a process and it is still going on”	48
New Location.....	51
The Rebirth: “liberated to be who I wanted to be”	52
Environmental Factors	55
Student Affairs/Higher Education Program Provides Support to Gay Identity Development	56
Role of Faculty, Staff and Cohort Community	58
The Academic Program, Curriculum, and Specific Classes Such as Student Development	60
Self Reflective Exercises Support Identity Development.....	64
Reflections on Being Gay Today	67
Summary	69
5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	71
Discussion.....	74
Implications for Teaching and Practice	80
Recommendations for the Future.....	85
Summary	86
REFERENCES	87

APPENDICES

A EMAIL SCRIPT97

B PROTOCOL FOR INITIAL SCREENING.....99

C CONSENT FORM.....101

D INTERVIEW GUIDE.....104

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The ache for home is in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. ~Maya Angelou

In higher education, student affairs professionals are strong voices in academe when it comes to conversations on human identity development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Despite research to understand the various facets of identity development a fundamental question remains: how and to what extent do student affairs administrators and faculty engage future professionals in graduate preparation programs in their own developmental work? Furthermore, research is limited on the pathways taken by graduate students in student affairs preparation programs to explore their identities, particularly in the area of sexual orientation. A primary goal of student affairs practice is to assist student in their own understanding of their identities. To that end, it becomes challenging for practitioners to support students in their sexual identity development if they have not done that work themselves.

The following section provides an overview of student affairs preparation programs. It highlights two key developmental theories, sexual identity development and self-authorship. This section also provides a brief overview of the methods to be employed in the study.

Graduate Education and Student Affairs

Graduate education emerged in the mid-19th century, with institutions such as Johns Hopkins University recognizing the need for advanced education beyond the three-year baccalaureate (Berelson, 1960). Since those early beginnings, graduate education has spread to

the majority of U.S. colleges and universities, with over 2 million students currently enrolled (Gardner, 2009). Over time graduate education has evolved in ways that give it an identity distinct from that of the undergraduate experience. These differences between undergraduate and graduate education can lead to difficult adjustments for those who embark on graduate education after completing their bachelor's degree. The transition to graduate school can cause stress and self-doubt, while also leading to newfound self-awareness (Gardner, 2009).

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) described four components that influence an individual's ability to work through transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies. *Situation* refers to one's understanding of the triggers that precipitated the transition and one's perception of those triggers as good or bad. *Self* is a person's abilities deal with the situation and challenges as they occur. In this factor, graduate student peers play a critical role in serving as a positive support network that promotes academic persistence (Fairfield, 1977; Gardner, 2009). *Support* focuses on friends and social factors that sustain the individual through the transition. Finally *strategies* refer to a person's ability to cope with situations as they arise (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Much has been written about graduate students' experiences in acclimating to the culture, values and norms of the profession (Gardner, 2009; Guentzel & Neisham, 2006; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Four stages are used to describe the socialization process for graduate students: the anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal stages. In the *anticipatory stage* students begin to understand the role they need to assume and the expectations they need to fulfill in their graduate program even before admission to a program. Stages two and three, the formal and informal stages, occur after students are admitted into a program. These stages encompass students' experiences in the classroom and interactions with faculty and peers. The final stage,

the personal stage, encompasses the internalized growth and establishment of a professional identity within students (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). This awareness of the stages of graduate student socialization provides a backdrop for looking specifically at graduate preparation programs in student affairs.

To respond to the developmental needs of graduate students in preparation programs, The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) re-developed earlier standards from 2007 to focus more closely on development (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2009). To that end, student affairs preparation programs have a responsibility to foster the holistic development of graduate students, enabling them to embark on their professional lives with authenticity, a strong sense of purpose, and clear understanding of their career path (Rogers & Love, 2007).

Overview of Student Affairs

Student affairs as a profession seeks to provide a seamless learning environment between the in- and out-of-class experiences of students (Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001). *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949), a conference report published by the American Council on Education, defines the purpose of student affairs as a profession. *The Student Personnel Point of View* highlighted the responsibility of student affairs personnel to advance the mission of the institution, support the holistic development of students, and ground their practice in collaboration with other campus entities.

Since these early beginnings, student affairs has evolved to include conversations on multiculturalism and inclusion (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2011). Specifically, the increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, faculty, and staff on campus have led to the creation of centers and departments that

address the needs of those within the LGBT community and influenced the research that appears in journals of higher education and student affairs (Lark, 1998; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001).

In the early twentieth century, student development theory began to take shape to inform student affairs practice. *Student development* describes students' growth as a direct result of their enrollment in an institution of higher education (Evans et al., 2010; Gardner, 2009). Student development theory illustrates the many ways students develop in college (Guentzel & Neisham, 2006). Student development theory helps aspiring practitioners explain, predict, and inform student behaviors (Barr & Upcraft, 1990; Evans et al., 2010).

Within the student development theories, a subset of theories examines students' social identity development in areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Gardner, 2009). In recent years, student development has become a central focus in many graduate programs in higher education (Evans et al., 2010). While prominent, however, conversations on student development have focused mainly on undergraduate education, with research still needed to explore the developmental needs of graduate students (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009; Gardner, 2009).

Gardner (2009) argued that researchers should investigate the developmental impact of students' transition into graduate education. Gardner (2009) posited that further understanding of the developmental experiences of graduate students could have positive impacts on student attrition. Austin (2002) likewise suggested that graduate students' professional socialization specifically needed further study. More specifically, he supported studying graduate students' self-efficacy; their exploration of career and vocational fit; and the role of external factors, such

as family and previous academic and professional experience, in influencing their performance in graduate school (Austin, 2002)

Student Affairs Preparation Programs

Currently, student affairs masters level graduate education programs serve two primary functions. First, the programs introduce future practitioners to literature and developmental theories relevant to student affairs practice (Evans et al., 2010). Second, the programs provide students with field experiences (typically in the form of graduate assistantships) that provide them with practical tools and competencies that prepare them for professional roles after graduate school. To accomplish these functions and provide a quality educational experience for students, highly collaborative partnerships must exist between faculty in the student affairs classroom and practitioners working at the institution (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Finally, faculty and administrators are called upon to implement practices that address the diverse needs of an ever more heterogeneous graduate student population (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009)

Over time, conversations within student affairs preparation programs have come to include a greater emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity (Flowers, 2003; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Turner-Kelly & Gayles, 2010). The discussions taking place within the classroom mirror the increasing diversity of students attending colleges and universities within the United States (Flowers, 2003). Efforts to discuss multiculturalism are often met with resistance by majority students because of their own feelings of inadequacy in broaching these conversations. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) proposed that greater opportunities for reflection are needed in student affairs preparation programs to allow students the space and tools to understand and

examine their own issues, and to grow in their understanding of how all identities, including their own, are socially constructed (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Support for the Gay Community in Student Affairs

Student affairs faculty and graduate students report having significant knowledge, comfort, and competency in addressing concerns related to LGBT men and women (Evans, Broido, & Wall, 2004; Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002). Additionally, student affairs staff report feeling competent addressing concerns related to LGBT issues, in part because of the profession's general tenets that support multiculturalism and inclusion (Gonzales & Kemp-DeLisser, 2010; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001). However, discrepancies exist in self-reports, indicating that faculty and graduate students often overestimate their overall competency in addressing the issues surrounding sexual orientation (Croteau & Talbot, 2000). For most masters graduate students in student affairs preparation programs, their first exposure to conversations about LGBT issues are in class room discussions centered on sexual identity development. Models on sexual identity development serve as a framework for practitioners to garner understanding for building inclusive communities.

Gay Men's Identity Development

Over the past 30 years, researchers have paid increased attention to the developmental process of LGBT people (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The 1970s marked the emergence in higher education of research on sexual orientation from a number of different perspectives. The literature of this era employed the lens of multiple identities to begin revealing the complexities associated with sexual orientation (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The history of developmental models of sexual orientation showcases movement from an earlier stage process to a subsequent steering away from stages, toward a view of development as a series of processes (Torres, Jones,

& Renn, 2009).

To that end, D'Augelli's (1994) life-span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development offers a solid theoretical construct for understanding the coming out experiences of gay men in student affairs preparation programs. D'Augelli's studies and those of his predecessors have broadened our understanding of the experiences and developmental processes of LGBT individuals. However, even with this greater awareness of LGBT issues, research continues to show that sexual minorities encounter many internal and external obstacles to disclosing their sexual orientation to others. Fear of rejection, bodily harm, loss of social status are just a few of the factors keeping many LGBT individuals from disclosing their sexual orientation (Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009).

Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study employed an in-depth interview design to understand participants' lived experiences prior to disclosing their sexual orientation to others. In the first interview, participants were asked to draw a timeline marking significant life events, milestones, decisions and individuals. A second interview was conducted to explore specifically the individual's experience of coming out. These two interviews were analyzed for common themes that comprise the findings of the study.

The theoretical framework referred to as *life-span human development* provided the foundation for this study. Life-span human development involves the recognition that over time, patterns of impactful interactions influence the development of individuals (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). The framework recognizes that people need to be viewed in context, which means that context provides the lens to understand how a person develops over time. Furthermore, life-span human development invites the researcher to consider the impact of

culture, community, and situation on development. To conclude, this framework introduces the idea of *developmental plasticity*, which suggests that human functioning is highly responsive to environmental circumstances.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences and circumstances surrounding gay men and their decision to publicly disclose their sexual orientation for the first time while in a student affairs/ higher education administration graduate preparation program. As a framework, life-span development theory provided grounded support for viewing the multitude of factors present in gay men's sexual identity development (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Hofer, S. M., & Piccinin, 2010). The following research questions were used to directly examine gay men's experiences of coming out during their master's program:

- 1) How do gay men talk about their coming out experience when it occurs during their student affairs preparation program?
- 2) What environmental factors impacted gay men's coming out experiences?
- 3) What connections do gay men make between the graduate preparation program and the coming out process?

Operational Terms

Student affairs/student personnel services – a profession dedicated to the growth and development of students outside of formal curriculum (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011)

Gay – same-sex romantic and physical attraction between two men

Lesbian – same-sex romantic and physical attraction between two women

Coming out/identity disclosure/identity formation – the moment in one’s life when the behavioral, emotional, political, and moral aspects of one’s sexuality converges. This act is chronicled in the form of telling others one is gay (Grierson & Smith, 2005)

Closeted – term used to describe LGBT individuals who deny, suppress, or hide their non-heterosexual feelings or activities (Dilley, 2002)

Heterosexism – systems that deny or stigmatize non-heterosexual people through behavior, relationship or community (Hunter, 2007)

Homosexual – the term historically used to refer to gays and lesbians; many works cited in this study use this term because it was the acceptable or preferred label at the time of their publication (Hunter, 2007).

Summary

Research on gay men’s identity development has been on the rise for decades (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Environmental factors lay the context for how an individual navigates their understanding of sexual orientation. Within student affairs preparation programs specifically, more research is needed on the environmental factors at play for gay men who publicly disclose their sexual orientation to others for the first time while in school.

Findings that showcase the impact student affairs preparations programs have on identity development may inform pedagogical approaches taken within student affairs preparation programs. In the next chapter, I outline the literature on life-span development, provide a brief history of the gay rights movement, highlight developmental theories relevant to the study, and provide an overview of the student affairs profession and student affairs preparation programs.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I provide an overview of literature germane to the coming out process for gay men in student affairs preparation programs. To begin, I offer a brief overview of the modern gay rights movement to provide perspective on the historical and current issues impacting the gay community. Secondly, I describe the theory of life-span development, this provided a theoretical framework for this study. Next, I discuss environmental and cognitive development theories to provide a context for understanding how place influences sexual identity disclosure, and present sexual identity development theories to illuminate the process of coming to understand and acknowledge one's sexual orientation. The final section provides an overview of student affairs preparation programs, presented as the context for the study.

The Gay Rights Movement from the 1960s to the Present

In the section that follows, the term “gay” is used to discuss any same-sex relationships of both men and women. The term deviates from the operationalized definition included in this study in an effort to honor the historical context of how the word has been used. The modern-day gay rights movement began in the 1960s, influenced by such social movements such as Civil Rights, the free speech movement, and the women's movement (Hall, 2010; Likosky, 1992). In the beginning, the gay rights movement was organized to protest the criminalization of homosexual activity (Gay Rights Movement, 2011). By the mid-60s, cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco were hosting demonstrations periodically to bring attention to gay rights. Newspaper articles and other publications initiated discussion on the liberties of

consenting adults. In May and October of 1965, protests took place at the Capitol and the Pentagon, drawing attention to the government's responsibility to ensure the rights of gay people.

Primarily, the gay rights movement of the 1960s provided a narrative of the United States' ongoing struggle to define and protect the ideals of democracy for historically marginalized populations (Hall, 2010). In 1969, the Stonewall Riots became a symbol of the modern gay rights movement. The Stonewall Inn, located in New York, became the birthplace of gay, lesbian, and bisexual liberation after a lesbian patron struggled with a police officer who was attempting to escort her to a patrol car. The scene quickly escalated, leading to riots covered by the media that attracted widespread attention.

Today, the gay rights movement continues to advance equality concerns for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. By 1999, anti-sodomy laws were declared unconstitutional in 32 states, and in 2003 the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed anti-sodomy laws in all states. More recent conversations on gay rights have focused on spousal/same-sex partner benefits, including health care and legal recognition of relationships, i.e., gay marriage (Gay Rights Movement, 2011). Nevertheless, much work remains to bring about equality based on sexual orientation (Hunter, 2007). As of 2009, 44 states did not recognize gay marriage and 26 states had formally changed their constitution to specify marriage as between a man and a woman (Horne, Rostosky, Riggle, & Martens, 2010). As of 2013, conversations around the United States and specifically within the Supreme Court are looking at the Defense of Marriage Act that defines marriage between two individuals of different sex (Schmidt, 2013).

Life-Span Human Development Model Overview

According to Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz (2010), life-span development models that emerged in the early 1900s were the first to look at individuals as active agents in their own lives. While earlier life-span models existed, those prior to the 1900s did not view individuals as participants in their own development (Heckhausen et al., 2010). Life-span development models are based on the belief that people are impacted developmentally over the course of their lives by biological maturation, the aging process, and critical events. Beyond these three main factors, educational systems, vocational career patterns, and welfare systems also have the potential to impact development over the life span.

These secondary factors are important in relation to this study because they provide the basis to explore the coming out process in student affairs preparation programs. In this case, the educational system is the student affairs program and the vocational career pattern is the field of student affairs(Heckhausen et al., 2010).

A major assumption in life-span development models is that individuals play an active role in their own growth. According to Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz (2010), life-span development can be parceled into two main challenges: selectivity of resource investment and compensation of failure and loss. *Selectivity of resource investment* refers to individuals' inability to strive for goals simultaneously, or even sequentially. The second challenge, *compensation of failure and loss*, refers to individuals' recognition that setbacks will inevitably occur over the course of their lives.

Research in the field of life-span development explores how individuals across cultures define what constitutes a successful life, how individuals serve as active agents in the

developmental process, and how life experiences influence individuals' opportunities and their engagement or disengagement with developmental and personal goals (Heckhausen et al., 2010). It takes into account the individual ways each person develops by viewing development as continuously influenced by experience and culture, not as linear or hierarchical (Gansemmer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Heckhausen et al., 2010; Roseborough, 2003). Life-span development incorporates biological, psychological, and social perspectives in exploring an individual's lived experiences (Hofer & Piccinin, 2010). This developmental approach also showcases the problem-solving techniques individuals employ to compensate for failures, setbacks, and losses (Heckhausen et al., 2010).

D'Augelli's approach to life-span development research is particularly useful in examining the coming out process for gay men in early adulthood. His research first launched the conversation on how coming out during late adolescence and early adulthood impacts college students. Through his work, D'Augelli (1992) introduced the important role campus environments can play for gay men who struggle, often in secrecy and fear, to incorporate their sexual orientation into their daily lives.

Place and Learning

Environments can play a critical role in student development (Strange & Banning, 2001). Environments showcase symbols and actions that affirm or undermine the process of identity exploration. In addition, understanding how individuals make meaning of their experience can cast a wider net in identifying factors that influence identity formation. The next section, summarizing the literature on environment's impact on cognitive development, further explores the context for the coming out process.

Environments

Environments have a notable impact on adult development, and culture within a specific environment has a particular influence on development (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Stevens, 2004). Kegan (1982) posited that human development is an active process of navigating the relationship between self and environment. Furthermore, any environment is comprised of a succession of environments, encompassing the culture of lived experiences that are embedded in a person (Kegan, 1982). Kegan wrote, “every development seems to require its own culture; every renegotiation of evolutionary contract seems to require some bridging by that culture to a new one of which, in some new way, it becomes a part” (1982, p. 174).

Environments play a key role in students’ ability to develop a sense of identity and can be the most powerful instruments in influencing human behavior (Strange & Banning, 2001). For this reason, understanding interactions between an individual and a given context can provide valuable insight into their developmental trajectory (Evans et al., 2010). The exploration of context, process, person, and time in connection to individual behaviors is referred to as developmental ecology (Evans et al., 2010).

In this study, the *context* was student affairs preparation programs. The *process* refers to the interaction among peers and between students and faculty during graduate school. Strange and Banning (2001) posited that environments are transferred primarily through people, meaning that cultures, norms, and traditions are most readily seen through the representations of people within the community (Strange & Banning, 2001). To that end, *person* explores how individuals and environment impact one another.

Campus ecology specifically examines the relationship between individuals and the campus environment. Campus environments provide the social climate within which students

develop as individuals, explore the dimensions of relationships, and begin to explore their own inner landscape (Strange & Banning, 2001). Campus ecology also takes into account college culture, a composite of the institution and the interactions between individuals within the college setting (Evans et al., 2010).

Cognitive Structural Development

Kegan's (1982) outline of the stages of psychological development is often referred to as a model of ego development (Hamrick et al., 2002). Kegan stated that one of the greatest determinants of a person's character is the people with whom they associate. Using a life-span approach to development, Kegan explained how individuals construct meaning-making structures and explored the evolutionary process that guides individual maturation. Kegan suggested that "human development involves a succession of renegotiated balances . . . which come to organize the experience of the individual in qualitatively different ways" (1982, p. 81).

Kegan (1982) argued that evolution is by its very nature more than biological, describing this process as, "the ongoing tension between self-preservation and self-transformation" (p. 45). Over time individuals begin to take over controls and authority that were previously held by parents or guardians. Through this process, individuals begin to reorganize their thoughts and self-concept in ways that may differ from beliefs held by parents, friends, and loved ones (Kegan, 1982).

Kegan (1982) uses the terms *subject* and *object* to describe self and other. Kegan's *subject-object theory* refers to the ways individuals separate their own understandings (meaning) from those of the world (other). In the case of gay men coming out, achieving the "self" requires both recognizing one's sexual orientation and separating that recognition from the viewpoints of others.

Kegan (1982) suggested that people move through unique stages. One of these stages is that of the self-authoring mind, which is capable of stepping back and seeing the limitations in its own authoring and ideology. Self-authorship refers to the individual's ability to listen to and be guided by an internal voice; reaching this stage of development can be a difficult and painful process that speaks to the ways in which people make meaning of their lived experiences (Baxter-Magolda, 2001).

Sexual Orientation

The concept of sexual orientation is itself difficult to define, making the coming out process at times even more challenging (Hunter, 2007). Alfred Kinsey's seven-point scale, numbered 0 to 6, placed individuals along a spectrum ranging from exclusively heterosexual at one end (0) to exclusively homosexual at the other (6). The Kinsey scale was one of the earliest instruments developed to examine the development of sexual orientation. However, although Kinsey used a scale to conceptualize sexual orientation, the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* were historically not used to describe orientations, but rather to examine the degree to which an individual exhibited particular sexual behaviors. In the 1970s researchers began to question some of Kinsey's theoretical assumptions, citing a need to move beyond "sexual preference" to understand the emotional connections that are associated with sexual identity (Hunter, 2007; Whittier, Sanders, & Reinisch, 1990).

Sexual Identity Development

The process of gay identity development begins with a person's ability or willingness to acknowledge their engagement in, or desire to engage in, homosexual behavior (Whittier et al., 1990). Within the sexual orientation developmental process, the individual plays an active role in identity formation. In addition, within the coming out process, individuals at some level of

consciousness choose to act to make a desired change in their lives. While homosexuality is often described by behavior, it is important to note that fantasies of and desires for same-sex intimacy may define sexual orientation in the same way as acting upon those desires or feelings. In other words, a person can be celibate and yet self-identify as gay (Dilley, 2002; Whittier et al., 1990).

During the 1970s researchers began to develop models exploring the process of sexual identity formation (Stevens, 2004). These models have brought about a considerable increase in the level of discussion in the academy focused on the experiences of gay men (Savin-Williams, 2001). Vivienne Cass's (1984) theoretical model of sexual identity formation is one of the most often cited among these models of identity development (Hunter, 2007).

Cass Model of Sexual Identity Formation

Cass's (1984) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development posited a same-sex sexual orientation as not just a change in preference, but an actual change in identity. In Cass's model, identity is marked by a series of changes or points of growth delineating the model's stages. These stages move in a sequential order and are characterized by increasing levels of self-acceptance, development of a positive attitude about being gay, and a growing desire to disclose one's sexual identity to gay and heterosexual people alike (Cass, 1984).

The model is comprised of six stages that progress in a linear fashion. In the first stage, identity confusion, the individual begins to acknowledge an awareness of actions, feelings, and thoughts that are non-heterosexual. In stage two, identity comparison, an individual experiences feelings of alienation as the difference in one's sexual orientation in relation to the majority becomes more salient. Stage three, identity tolerance, showcases an individual's increasing

commitment to a gay self-image and an active search for community amongst others who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cass, 1984).

In stage four, identity acceptance, individuals have increased contact with the gay community and those cultures within the community that promote a positive self-image. Stage five, identity pride, is characterized by a deep-seated loyalty to the gay community coupled with anger over the stigmatization gay people face based on their sexual orientation. The sixth and final stage, identity synthesis, is marked by positive contacts with heterosexual people that serve to reintegrate the heterosexual community into a person's life. Cass's model was recently used as the theoretical framework for a study that examined how shame and guilt are manifested for gay men as they navigate the coming out process. Cass's six stages provided markers for understanding the broader impact of sexual identity on mental health (Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka, & Moes, 2009).

Fassinger's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development Theory

Fassinger (1998) noted that critical distinctions arise in the comparison of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people with other marginalized groups based on race, ethnicity, or gender. Fassinger contended that sexual orientation differed from other marginalized identities in that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual are not identities that can be typically seen. Fassinger developed a four-phase sequence model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development. Phase one is described as an *awareness* of feeling different; individuals in this phase recognize the existence of various sexual orientations. In phase two, *exploration*, individuals begin to experience strong sexual feelings someone of the same sex. In the third phase, individuals develop a *deepening commitment* to a sexual identity that differs from that of the majority.

Finally, in phase four individuals begin to *internalize* their sexual orientation. In this phase sexual orientation has been incorporated holistically as part of one's salient identities. Each phase of the model incorporates "branches," enabling a person to metaphorically sit on a different branch of each phase simultaneously. Fassinger's model is cyclical, which means individuals can "recycle" through each of the phases at various points in their life (Fassinger, 1998; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

In their study on multiple dimensions of identity, Jones and McEwen (2000) identify Fassinger as a leading scholar in the study of identity construction. Mayfield (2001) also used Fassinger's work to illustrate multiple formations of identity development. Mayfield argued that sexual identity development occurs in two forms: within the self and in the context of groups. Fassinger and McCarn (1996) provided theoretical support for Mayfield's (2001) research that found a need to look for scholars to understand the diverse patterns of identity development. In addition, Abes and Jones (2004) illustrated connections between Fassinger's work and Kegan's approach to understanding the cognitive complexities that result from being a sexual minority.

D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development

D'Augelli (1994) sought to showcase holistically the development of gay men as they began to explore their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 2012). In D'Augelli's (1994) work, he found that the literature lacked substantive conversation on sexual identity as a developmental process taking place over the course of an individual's life (D'Augelli, 2012). In other models, sexual identity was conceptualized in stages that did not fully capture the fluidity of sexual orientation and failed to acknowledge that not all individuals reach every stage of sexual identity development. D'Augelli developed his model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity construction as a non-linear approach to identity development during the rise of the HIV epidemic in the

United States (D'Augelli, 2012). D'Augelli notes in the model that sexual orientation should not be viewed as one-dimensional, but must instead take into account the multiple dimensions that make up individual identity.

D'Augelli's model has three main components: socio-historical connections, personal bias and actions, and interactive intimacies. In the model, D'Augelli describes socio-historical connections that relate to background, culture, religious beliefs, and societal factors pertaining to perceptions of being gay. D'Augelli expanded on the three main components of the model, constructing six frames, also referred to as processes, to further understand gay identity formation (Evans et al., 2010).

In the first frame, *exiting heterosexual identity*, individuals begin to question their sexual identity and share that realization with someone else for the first time. In the second frame, *developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity*, individuals have thoughts, feelings, and desires related to being gay and a need for contact with other gay people to affirm this identity. In frame three, *developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity*, individuals begin to develop a network of people who are aware of their sexual orientation, enabling them to find support for their newly disclosed identity (D'Augelli, 1994).

In frame four, *becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring*, individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation to family and loved ones. In the fifth frame, *developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status*, the individual has reconciled their gay identity and is able to have an intimate relationship with a person of the same sex. The sixth and last frame, *entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community*, is marked by greater political activism and awareness. It is important to note that the later frames of D'Augelli's model of identity construction may not be realized by some participants until after college, if ever (D'Augelli, 1994).

Beals and Peplau (2001) used D'Augelli's work to illustrate the role the community plays in the self-efficacy of gay men. Their study focused primarily on environmental factors and demonstrated the value in understanding sexual identity from the perspective of the individual in the context of others. Similarly, Schope (2002) used D'Augelli's work to examine the levels of anxiety gay men face when disclosing their sexual orientation to peers and family members. My investigation of gay men's coming out experiences in student affairs preparation programs will utilize D'Augelli's model of sexual identity formation in a manner similar to its use in these two studies.

Oppression

Since the early 1900's the oppression experienced by gays and lesbians has been widely documented. The term *homophobia* is used to describe the prejudice often directed at those perceived to be gay or lesbian. Homophobia is often internalized by members of the gay community with lasting impact, such as stunted emotional growth. In a study conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force more than 90% of gay and lesbian respondents reported experiencing some form of discrimination based on their sexual orientation (Blumenfield, 1992). Currently, research continues to indicate that hostile attitudes toward gays and lesbians still exist at alarmingly high rates in the United States (Maleny, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Patton, 2011).

Political systems, religious groups, and societal norms have all been actors in the oppression of people based on their sexual orientation (Hunter, 2007). Each of these entities has made it difficult for the majority of gays to lead open lives and develop communities that affirm their sexual identity (Likosky, 1992). The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reported that in 2000 there were fewer than 2,000 violent incidents directed at LGBT persons (Hunter, 2007). While this number represents a decrease from previous years, the numbers are

still alarmingly high. Moreover, many such incidents go unreported as a result of individuals' fear of being "outed" and thus experiencing even more discrimination (Hunter, 2007).

Being gay is often linked with guilt. Particularly within Judeo-Christian religions, same-sex relationships are often viewed as sinful, generating feelings of guilt among individuals attracted to those of the same sex. Similarly, some politicians employ rhetoric against LGBT people as a political strategy, rather than choosing to educate citizens about diversity or promote acceptance. In addition, conservative religious groups that promote marriage as a sacred partnership between a man and a woman and view childbearing as an expected function of women continue to condemn those who fail to conform to traditional heterosexual relationships and roles (Hunter, 2007).

A number of factors explain how sexual oppression came into existence. Early on in human history, large family units were an extension of the work force within the home, with children providing assistance through work for the maintenance of the financial system. Societal expectations such as women assuming the role as a child bearers and by extension women are expected to also reared children. Traditional views of what a family unit should encompass have continued to perpetuate the patriarchal views that exist within today's society (Hunter, 2007; Sanlo, 1998).

Since 1998, there has been a steady increase in the number of gay-affirming roles portrayed on popular television (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). As the number of positive portrayals of gay characters has risen, so has their influence on the gay community (both closeted and open). Positive depictions of gays in the media have been shown to increase individuals' self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) showed that positive media role models fostered positive gay

development. Moving forward, media must play an even greater role in the continuing shift toward less stereotyped and damaging depiction of gays and lesbians, which will be critical for continuing to foster a positive self-image among sexual minorities (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011)

Because gays and lesbians are often unable to celebrate their relationships through legal or religious marriage ceremonies, these individuals are left to their own devices to validate their relationships. In a culture that sees sexuality as a means to a practical end (having children), gays and lesbians find themselves having to reposition themselves in seeing sexuality as an end in itself. To fight oppressive systems, gays must find ways to “liberate” themselves into new modes of thinking. To liberate oneself in terms of sexual orientation is to move beyond tolerance toward acceptance and celebration of diverse individual identities. This move toward acceptance coincides with the autonomy that results when a person looks internally to discover the modes that can affirm them based on their sexual orientation. As Likosky (1992) observes, “liberation does not mean an end to the struggle, but it does alter the ends for and the means by which we struggle” (p. 152).

Coming Out

For gay men, the act of coming out is a lifelong exercise in self-acceptance (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people must look internally to find affirmation of their sexual identity (Horne et al., 2010). In the beginning, many gay men’s first reaction to their awareness of being gay is one of fear and dread. Frequently men begin to question their sexual orientation after interactions with other gay men that prompt them to explore new aspects of their sexual identity. Of this experience, Kegan (1982) stated, “sometimes the me I have been starts to look more like the expectations of other people, often one’s parents who are just now being separated from oneself” (p. 205).

Those who do choose to come out often do so despite feelings of fear about their safety (Hunter, 2007). Many elect not to disclose their sexual orientation because of the perceived benefits of remaining closeted, such as avoiding stigmatization and differential treatment from others. While there are drawbacks to coming out, however, there are also significant benefits. For example, those who disclose their sexual orientation often experience positive changes in their psychological and interpersonal well-being (D'Augelli, 1991; Hunter, 2007; Stevens, 2004). These psychological gains, coupled with greater feelings of authenticity, allow individuals to function at higher levels while lowering stress (Hunter, 2007; Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009).

In most cases, gay men have an easier time sharing their sexual orientation with friends than with parents and siblings (Hunter, 2007; Roseborough, 2003; Stevens, 2004). Close to 75% of gays and lesbian who come out first disclose their identity to friends. Mohr and Fassinger (2003) found that those individuals who had difficulty achieving self-acceptance based on their identity had fathers who were also less accepting of their sexual orientation. Gay men often discover that friends are more likely to offer support, acceptance, and encouragement of one's gay identity than are family members (Bond et al., 2008; Hunter, 2007; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003).

College can also advance the ongoing development process involved in forming a gay sexual identity. College introduces individuals to a new culture that moves individuals toward self-authorship and psychological autonomy (Kegan, 1982). For this reason, gay men often first disclose their sexual identity when they are in college. The opportunity to no longer feel constrained, coupled with the ability to build a gay social network, often makes the higher

education environment an appealing setting in which individuals can come out (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1991; Kegan, 1982).

Coming Out and Identity

While this study did not examine the intersections of other identities in concert with sexual orientation, it is important to note briefly the role that religion and race play for many individuals who are negotiating their sexual identity. Previous research has noted that many gay men leave formalized religion once they come out of the closet (Johnson, 2008; Roseborough, 2003).

One's sexual identity can also be influenced by one's racial or ethnic identity (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010; Hunter, 2007; Stevens, 2004). Gallor and Fassinger (2010) found direct correlations among ethnic minority gay men between their sense of belonging and their confidence in exploring their sexual orientation. Gallor and Fassinger (2010) discovered that White gay men, on average, have a greater sense of satisfaction with their social support based on their sexual identity network than do ethnic minority gay men.

In addition, sexual identity may be complicated by the fact that in some cultures men who engage in sexual practices with other men do not identify themselves as gay. In still other traditions, based on roles within an intimate relationship, one person in a relationship may identify as gay while their partner does not (Patton, 2011). Finally, as research on the experiences of gay men continues to advance, increased attention must be given to the interplay of multiple identities, to increase understanding of how the coming out process supports or hinders the development of other social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion) (Stevens, 2004).

Student Affairs Preparation Programs

Student affairs preparation programs have operated under stated standards and guidelines for almost 60 years (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009), yet little investigation has assessed student outcomes in these programs. Similarly, limited research has explored the impact of student affairs preparation programs on the development of those who participate in them. As the profession continues to evolve, students and instructors will be expected to articulate the outcomes of a student affairs graduate education (Kuk & Banning, 2009; McEwen & Talbot, 1998).

Graduate school poses a variety of challenges. Students are often faced with unfamiliar challenges presented by the transition to graduate school; the delicate balance of school assignments and work duties; personal responsibilities acquired as a more mature student; and an overall increased workload. The challenges of graduate-level education may be mitigated by several factors, including students' ability to build a community through support networks of colleagues and friends. These networks help students cope with challenges, provide encouragement in stressful times, and teach them strategies for handling similar circumstances in the future careers (Schlemper, 2011).

Within student affairs preparation programs, structures such as classroom instruction, practicum experience, etc. are readily available to prepare students to become competent practitioners upon graduation. Such preparation is paramount to the larger profession's expectation that student affairs staff will advance the missions of their respective institutions. Thus the profession must ensure that student affairs practitioners are well trained to meet students' challenges as they present themselves (Kuk & Banning, 2009).

To gain practical experience, many graduate students in student affairs preparation

programs work as graduate assistants within a division of student affairs. Examining the effectiveness of student affairs preparation program and the graduate assistantship experience only goes to strengthen the profession overall (Komives, 1998). The developmental experiences of gay men in student affairs preparation programs may have implications for their work as graduate assistants and ultimately as student affairs administrators.

Summary

This chapter examined literature relevant to the experiences of gay male graduate students enrolled in student affairs preparation programs. While research is emerging on the impact of graduate education on student development (Gardner, 2009; Gardner & Barnes, 2007), little research has examined student development within student affairs graduate preparation programs, and even less is known about the experiences of LGBT students enrolled in these programs. Although an examination of the overall impact of student affairs preparation programs on student development was well beyond the scope of this investigation, my study explored the impact of student affairs preparation programs specifically on gay men's sexual identity development. In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the data collection methods utilized to conduct this investigation.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

“He who does not know can know from learning.” –African Proverb

This chapter provides an overview of the data collection methods employed for this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the purpose of the study. A brief summary of qualitative research methods is described to provide context for the reader.

The data analyses as well as the participant selection techniques are characterized; finally, the chapter concludes with an outline of the limitations of this study.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of gay men who disclose their sexual orientation while enrolled in a student affairs/higher education administration master’s program. The intention of the study was to provide insight into the experiences of gay men in student affairs as a means of informing future research and practice. The study was designed to use interviews as a primary technique to explore participants’ coming out experiences. Specifically, this study investigated the following research questions:

- 1) How do gay men talk about their coming out experience when it occurs during their student affairs preparation program?
- 2) What environmental factors impact gay men’s coming out experiences?
- 3) What connections do gay men make between the graduate preparation program and the coming out process?

The following sections will provide an overview of qualitative research methods, discussing specifically life history as a data collection technique and in-depth interviewing

within the qualitative tradition, and examining how both were incorporated in this study. Finally, I address issues of trustworthiness and subjectivity to shed light on the study's limitations.

Qualitative Research

This study utilized a qualitative approach for data collection, employing non-experimental approaches to examine experiences that are socially constructed in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people create meaning from their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This approach examines events as they take place in the natural world while also attending to context and to participants' perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Using a social constructivist paradigm, I sought to understand the world in which individuals lived and work. A qualitative approach to individual participants' experiences helped illuminate the meaning individuals made from and directed toward certain objects and events (Crotty, 1998). Social constructivism works on the premise that knowledge is derived from interchanges among people. In social constructivism, all facts are derived from the context of activities within the mind (Flick, 2009). This study focused on how gay male graduate students in student affairs preparation programs construct meaning from their experiences of disclosing their sexual orientation.

As a researcher, I consider myself an interpretivist, viewing the individual and society as inextricably linked (O'Donoghue, 2007). Interpretivists pay attention to everyday activities, the meanings individuals impose, and the ways in which people act not in isolation but through interaction with one another. Employing this perspective, I drew on the participants' stories to examine how they made sense of their world. I utilized a two-part interview approach, explained

in detail below, to allow interviewees to examine their experiences in constructing the meaning of their coming out process.

In-depth Interviews

Qualitative interviews enable the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge of a participant's experience. In these interviews, developing rapport between the participants and me enabled the participants to co-construct the meaning of their experience (deMarrais, 2004). Thus, qualitative research provided a broad approach to the study of social phenomena and the lived experiences of participants. The exploratory and descriptive nature of qualitative research is one of the most compelling arguments for this research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

In-depth interviews were conducted for this study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach to interviewing garnered responses that were not only explanatory, but also descriptive in nature (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this style of interviewing, the majority of questions were open-ended and built upon one another. In-depth interviewing is often described as a "conversation with a purpose" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In-depth interviews are much less formal than traditional interviews and allow for an "up-close" and personal interaction with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

In this strategy of inquiry, the participants' understanding of the phenomenon unfolds as they share their perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In-depth interviewing employs open-ended questions that build upon and explore participants' answers. Through in-depth interviewing, questions were used to help participants recall specific events and experiences. Questions posed to participants started broad, or "safer," moving gradually to more emotionally risky questions as the interviewee became more comfortable (deMarrais, 2004).

I referred to Seidman's (1998) approach to in-depth interviewing. Seidman's approach combines life history interviewing and focused interviews that are informed by phenomenology (Seidman, 2006). Used traditionally, Seidman's approach to interviewing is done in three parts. The first interview focused on life history, where the central objective is to put the participant's experience in context. The second interview explores the specific situation being studied; its purpose is to understand in detail the participant's current lived experience. Finally, the last interview is a reflection on meaning, which is informed by the conversations in the previous two interviews (Seidman, 2006).

For this study, I used a modified approach to Seidman's (1998) three levels of dialogue for data collection, elaborated below. Rather than having three points of contact with participants, this study focused on two in-depth interviews to explore the research questions posed. Interviews were conducted a week apart, following Seidman's (1998) recommendation that a week provides enough time to reflect on the initial interview, without allowing so much time that it may impact the connection between the two conversations. The first interview with each participant lasted between 90 minutes to two hours and was a life-history interview in which the participant engaged in an activity that marked major life events, people, decisions, and other milestones.

At the beginning of the first interview, I asked individuals to reconstruct their lives, drawing a life history timeline of significant events leading up to the coming out process. Such life histories allow participants to share their stories, building perspective from which further questions are derived (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Life histories also allow for a free flow of unstructured conversation with participants that are derived from the stories shared. In short, life

histories provide a substantive way to build a knowledge base and perspective for further conversations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

After the first interview and timeline exercise were completed, a self-addressed envelope was sent to the participants to collect the timeline for further analysis. While the life history timelines themselves served as data for analysis in the study, their greater purpose was to act as a guide for the conversations with participants. Once timelines were received, I analyzed them to identify any items mentioned on the timelines not referenced during the first interview. Prior to the second interview, the first conversations with participants were transcribed and reviewed. I conducted the second interviews, which focused on graduate school and the coming out process, and asked follow-up questions of the participants based on the first interview. The second interview session lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. The second interview focused primarily on the actual coming out process. This two-stage interview approach allowed me to place the coming out process in the context of the overall lived experiences of the participants (Seidman, 1998).

The second interview was semi-structured. This meant that a certain set of questions were used to guide the discussion, but the structure was flexible enough that questions could be altered during the interview based on participants' responses (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The semi-structured approach allowed for a natural flow of conversation that enabled the dialogue to go in unexpected directions and complemented the traditional tenets of qualitative research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Data Analysis

Each conversation was recorded and transcribed to recreate the verbal and non-verbal content of the conversation (Seidman, 2006). Once transcribed, interviews were coded to attach key words to text segments and organize findings in a systematic fashion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Coding was done not only looking at patterns, but also similarities and differences amongst participants. Initially, data was coded holistically for words or phrases that were repeated across conversations with participants. The coding method was repeated several times to ensure no pieces of data were overlooked. Data was highlighted in “codable moments” which are large sections of text connected with the research questions, in a technique often referred to a lump coding (Saldaña, 2009).

Throughout the coding process, the research questions were continually referred to in an effort to make certain each question posed in the study was sufficiently answered. A second round of coding took place using two additional coding techniques. Structured and simultaneous coding techniques were used to organize the data. Both coding techniques lead to rich responses to the research questions of the study. The data was coded, recoded, and group into segments known as categories (Saldaña, 2009).

The goal of developing categories was to fully capture the experiences of the study’s participants. The codes and categories together were used to formulate broader themes that shepherd data analysis from the descriptive to the theoretical level (Kvale & Brickmann, 2009). I used the themes to serve as restatements of the participants’ views from my perspective. I identified connections among the themes and clustered them for further understanding and analysis of patterns across the participants’ experiences (Butler-Kisher, 2010). Finally, those

categories were organized into themes, which produced the findings presented in the next chapter.

Participant Selection

I used network selection to identify participants, which enabled me to use personal contacts to locate potential participants for the study (deMarrais, 2004). By being intentional in my sampling I increased the likelihood of having conversations with participants who have a rich, in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied (Patton, 2002). During initial conversations with gatekeepers, network sampling was used to recruit additional participants from those identified by student affairs/higher education administration faculty. Eleven self-identified gay men were selected for the study. The 11 men represented seven different student affairs/higher education preparation programs in which they either are currently enrolled or have recently graduated.

Ethics

Throughout the study, I kept ethical considerations at the forefront of my mind in an effort to both avoid harming my participants, and to ensure the research was done with positive and identifiable benefits rather than being carried out simply for its own sake. I obtained informed consent from each participant prior to the first interview to ensure that they adequately understood the nature and intent of the study (Flick, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Particularly because student affairs is a relatively small field, I kept in mind my placement in the research, being sure to recognize the potential for bias and documenting that in my findings. Throughout the study, I noted the ways in which I attempted to make the definite indefinite and vice-versa.

Limitations

While the design of this study allowed for rich understanding of individual experiences, it was limited by the small research sample. In addition, because of my own proximity to the topic being discussed, there was a need for me to exercise reflexivity to identify assumptions I may bring to the conversations with participants. Furthermore, because of the vast geographical differences of the participants, each interview was done using Skype, which did not allow for physical face-to-face interactions.

Finally, though each participant in the study shared in the same experience of disclosing their sexual orientation in graduate school, each of them responded to the experience differently. Participants came from different graduate programs and disclosed their sexual orientation at different points in time. These two factors could not be ignored; documenting them illuminated diverse understandings of the phenomenon by different people (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

Timeline

I began data collection in January 2013 with the initial outreach to potential participants. Once participants were chosen, I conducted phone screenings to assure each participant met the criteria of the study. Interviews with participants took place over the course of four weeks. In late January, I began to analyze the transcribed interviews. Data was analyzed and findings were written by February, with a final defense of the dissertation in April 2013.

Where I Fit In

First, a word about my personal journey. I remember vividly my own coming out process. Like those I interviewed, I came out while enrolled in a master's program in higher education. I had my own internal stories about what it meant to be gay and none of those provided a particularly positive narrative. It was during graduate school that for the first time I

was in a reflective place, a place that exposed me to an environment that was inclusive of others regardless of sexual orientation. This environment, in conjunction with several pivotal experiences separate from my graduate school experience, led me to disclose my sexual identity.

According to Dahlberg et al. (2009), Hans-Georg Gadamer was one of the first to explore this idea of pre-understanding. Gadamer noted that we cannot allow our pre-understanding (or as some may say, prejudices) to hinder the progress of the study at hand (Dahlberg et al., 2008). As I carried out this study, I identified strategies and tactics that allow me to distance myself from the phenomenon to allow the true essence of each participant to emerge. I acknowledge that simply by being of the world and in the world, it was hard to fully remove my pre-understandings of the coming out process in graduate school, but through self-reflective exercises, including journaling, I fostered my own consciousness throughout the study.

Finally, I recognize the power and significance coming out had on my life. The process of openly sharing my sexual orientation with others is one of the main markers of my life. My personal connection to the experience and to student affairs necessitated my continual engagement in reflective exercises, to understand how I showed up in the study.

Summary

This chapter introduced the methodological approaches I employed to explore the coming out experiences of gay men in student affairs preparation programs. The chapter highlighted commonly practiced methods and techniques in qualitative research. In addition, I discussed life history solicitation and in-depth interviewing as two qualitative techniques of data collection that informed the study's methodology. I outlined the following methods of data collection: an initial interview in which participants were asked to share their life history leading up to coming out; which included drawing a timeline of significant milestones, life events, decisions and people

that marked their lives; a second interview focused on the experience of coming out in graduate school; finally, follow-up questions were asked to further examine themes that were created from the first two points of contact. This approach to data collection captured the complexity of the participants' experience. I believe that the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methods I employed in this study generated a rich understanding of gay men's experiences coming out in student affairs graduate preparation programs.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter begins with a table summarizing the participants' profiles. During the first interview, participants were invited to choose a pseudonym to be used to report the findings of the study. For participants who did not select a pseudonym, one was assigned by the researcher. Additionally, names of institutions were changed to protect the participants' identities. Following the table, a brief description of each participant is included to provide context for the larger study. Next, the findings that answer the research questions are described using a model and quotes to introduce major themes. The quotations are taken directly from the transcribed conversations and have been altered only to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study's findings.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Name	Race	Age	Family History of Substance Abuse	History of Depression	Distant Relationship With Father	Adolescent Bullying	Graduate School	Program of Study
Paul	White	25	X	X	X	X	Bluxome University	College Student Affairs Administration
Jonah	White	22	X	X			Whitt University	College Student Personnel
Cain	White	25	X				Williamson University	Higher Education
Nelson	Latino	23			X	X	Williamson University	Higher Education
Kevin	Black	27		X	X	X	King State University	Higher Education
Isaac	White	27			X		Nunn	Student Affairs

Timothy	White	28			University	and Higher Education
Dean	White	25	X		Turner College	Higher Education and Student Affairs
Micah	White	26		X	Whitt University	College Student Personnel
Don	Black	24			Yonah University	Student Affairs Administration
B.W.	White	26	X		Nunn University	Student Affairs and Higher Education
					Bluxome University	College Student Affairs Administration

Paul

Paul is a White male who grew up in the Southeastern United States. Growing up, Paul experienced many difficulties. Paul's dad committed suicide when he was young and in order to cope, he began binge eating during middle school. High school is where Paul began to thrive and to come out of the bouts of depression that spurred in middle school. He looked at two colleges after high school and decided to attend the one that best supported his major. In college, he was involved in his fraternity, served as an orientation leader and held a role on student government. He graduated with his degree in sports management from a religiously affiliated institution in the Southeast. Paul came out his second year of graduate school. Since graduating from Bluxome in 2011, Paul has served as the Assistant Director of New Student Programs at a mid-sized private institution in the Southwest and currently serves as the Assistant Dean of Students at a mid-sized public regional institution in the Southeast.

Jonah

Jonah is a White male who grew up in a rural town in the Northeastern United States. Growing up, Jonah was an avid musician, playing the piano throughout elementary and middle school. Raised in a small town, he was continually influenced by environmental factors that led him to believe something was wrong with him being gay. After graduating from high school, Jonah went on to attend a large public institution in the northeast where he graduated with his degree in psychology. Now a first-year graduate student at Whitt University, Jonah came out during his first semester (fall 2012).

Cain

Cain is a White male who grew up in the Midwestern United States. Growing up, Cain was not exposed very much racial or ethnic difference in his rural hometown. Often when he spoke about his relationship with his parents, he would reference a strong connection with his mother. His parents were conservative; his dad once said in conversation, "if one of my sons were ever to come out and say they are gay, I would kill myself in shame." Comments such as these fostered internalized homophobia and influenced Cain's decision to remain closeted about his sexual orientation until graduate school. In college, Cain became involved in student organizations, served as president of one of those organizations and became a residence advisor. Cain attended a large university in the Midwest where he graduated with a degree in accounting. Today, Cain is a second-year graduate student at Williamson. Cain decided to come out in his first semester of graduate school (fall 2011).

Nelson

Nelson is Latino and grew up in the Midwestern United States. Nelson was raised primarily by his mother and attended strict catholic schools growing up. It was through school and cultural teachings at home that he learned about manhood and also about how being gay was not accepted by the local community. Nelson's first experience with a man was when he was 11, the other individual was significantly older at the time of the encounter. In our conversations, I could tell that this experience had great impact on him. Nelson went to college and was heavily involved in various student organizations. Nelson graduated college with a degree in education. Now, Nelson is a second-year graduate student at Williamson who came out in his first semester of graduate school (fall 2011).

Kevin

Kevin is a Black male who grew up in the Midwestern United States. Kevin spent the majority of his life in a single parent household. Kevin's step dad (who he refers to as his father) died in the military when he was younger. As an undergraduate, Kevin was awarded outstanding freshman and outstanding senior in college—two awards that he referenced often with pride during our interviews. Kevin graduated with his degree in music and voice performance. During graduate school, Kevin came out in his second semester (spring 2008). Since graduating from King State University, Kevin has moved to the Southwest, where he works as a residence hall coordinator at a local state institution.

Isaac

Isaac is a White male who grew up in the Midwestern United States. Isaac was raised Catholic and lived in a racially homogenous environment. In high school, he was involved in several activities such as speech and debate. Isaac continued being involved during college while

working two to three part time jobs, and, typically, taking a full credit load. Isaac graduated with his degree in secondary education from a mid-sized state institution in the Midwest. In graduate school, Isaac came out in his second semester of his first year (spring 2010). Since graduating from Sell, Isaac has taken a position as an admissions counselor at a large state institution in the Southwest.

Timothy

Timothy is a White male who grew up in the Southwestern United States. Growing up, Timothy lived in a large urban area, relatively socially progressive. For Timothy, while the town may have been progressive, the home environment was conservative and served as the guiding force for what his thoughts were for what it meant to be a man. Timothy went to college at a large state school that in his words was “a very liberal campus.” He served as a residence advisor and an orientation leader while in college. Timothy later graduated with a degree in art history from a large public institution in the Southwest. Timothy came out in his first year of graduate school (fall 2010). Since graduating from Turner, Timothy has worked as a study abroad coordinator at a large public institution in the Southwest.

Dean

Dean is a White male who grew up in the Southeastern United States. As a child, he studied mandarin and eventually spent a year studying abroad in Japan. In college, Dean was heavily involved in the residential community. He graduated college with his degree in biology from a mid-sized private school in the Southwest. Soon after college, Dean moved to Japan where he taught English as a second language. Now, Dean is a second-year graduate student at Whitt. He decided to disclose his sexual orientation during his first semester of graduate school (fall 2011).

Micah

Micah is a White male who grew up in the Southwestern United States. Micah is the son of a minister and grew up with religious influences throughout his life. Micah struggled with his sexual orientation throughout high school, experimenting sexually with men and hoping that, with counseling, the phase would pass. Micah went on to attend a Baptist-affiliated university where he graduated with his degree in real estate and human resources. Micah came out in his first semester of graduate school (fall 2008). Since graduating from Yonah in 2010, Micah has worked at a sorority national headquarters in the Midwest.

Don

Don is a Black male who grew up in the Midwestern United States. Growing up, Don, played sports and attended a religiously affiliated high school in his hometown. Don's family was heavily involved in his church. One story Don recounted was about the church doing a prayer for the pastor's son who had been accused of beating someone with a bat because he was gay. The church, as Don put it, showed no care or concern for the victim; moments like that shaped his own understanding of what it meant to be gay in the Black Christian community. Don went on to college where he was heavily involved, played sports, and studied abroad. He graduated with a degree in marketing. Don came out in his first semester of graduate school (fall 2010). Since graduating from Nunn in 2012, Don has taken a position in residence life at a large public institution in the Southeast.

B.W.

B.W. is a White male who grew up in the Southeastern United States. B.W. spent much of his early years in the church with his family. Early in our conversation, B.W. spoke about the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his pastor; that abuse still impacts him today. B.W. went

on to attend college where he joined a fraternity, worked at a local radio station, and served as an orientation leader. He graduated with his degree in communication. B.W. came out in his second semester of graduate school (spring 2010). Since graduating from Bluxome, B.W. has taken a position in student activities at a mid-sized private institution in the Southeast.

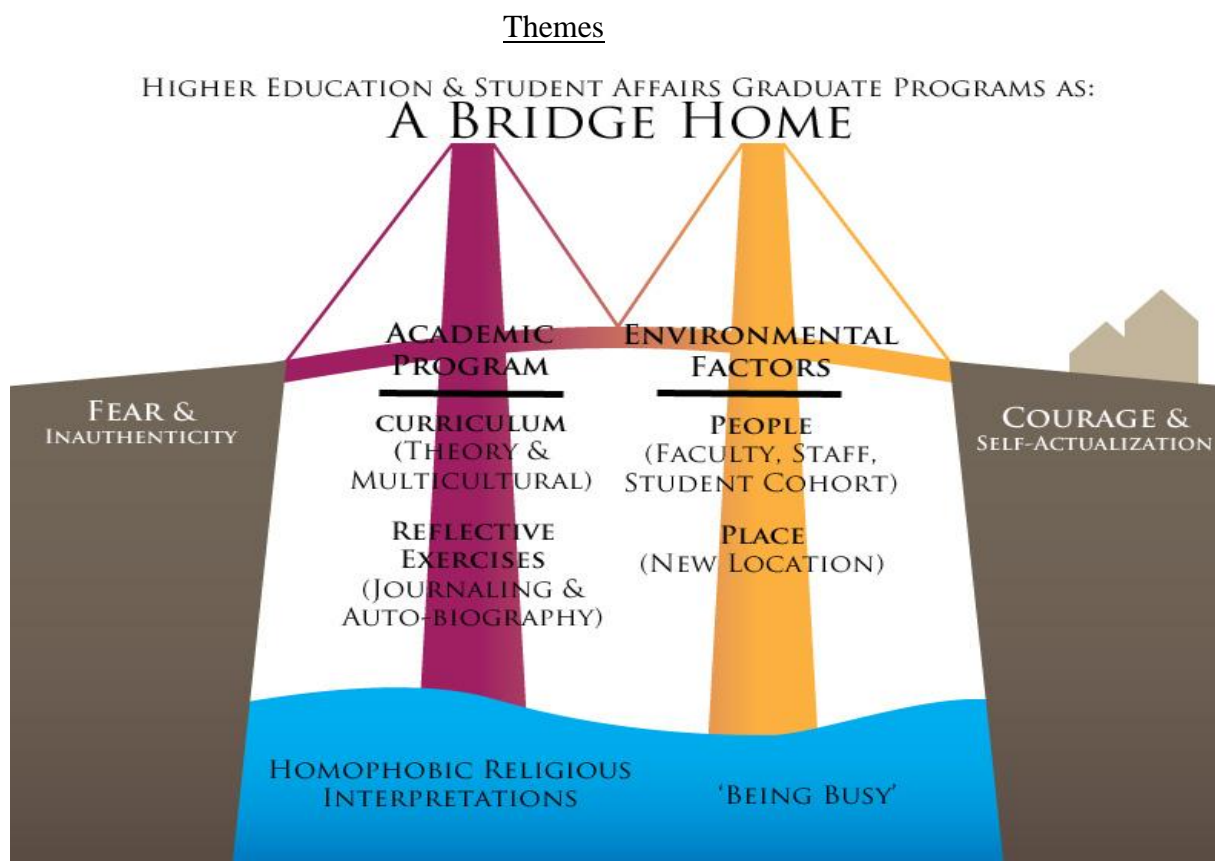


Figure 1

Pierre Model, 2013

The figure above serves as a visual representation of the findings. Participants' experiences are seen as moving from fear and in-authenticity to courage and self-actualization. The area between "fear" and "courage" represent the main findings of the study. Beginning with the water, homophobic religious interpretations and being over involved in co-curricular programs are offered as barriers to participants coming out. The image of water represents the

concept that coming out is a fluid process. The pillars of the bridge: the academic program and environmental factors are introduced as the support structures that aided participants in their ability to eventually disclose their sexual orientation. In the section that follows, quotes from the participants are offered to substantiate each of the themes.

Barriers to Coming Out

Participants identified a number of factors that hindered them from disclosing their sexual orientation prior to graduate school. To understand the participants' descriptions of coming out, it was imperative to explore their rationale for not coming out previously. Men often spoke of remaining closeted because of internalized homophobia, often based in religious beliefs. Participants also referenced becoming overly involved in co-curricular programs during college to cope with being closeted about their sexual orientation.

Religion: "I had a firm belief in the Bible and that firm belief told me gay is wrong"

Often participants talked about the role of religion in their understanding of their sexual orientation. Many of the men spoke about messages that came from their upbringing in the Christian and Protestant church, where they were indoctrinated to believe, as Micah put it, "you are going to hell and gay is a sin." Paul stated simply, "I had a firm belief in the Bible and that firm belief told me that gay is wrong."

B.W. described his religious upbringing as follows:

I was raised Southern Baptist and I went to a Christian school where we were really ingrained in the hetero-normative, like traditional gender roles . . . anything that varied as perceived as gay was labeled sinful, you were just going to hell. The whole culture of my church was homophobic.

Similarly, Jonah described the messages he received about being gay while he was growing up:

God meant for a man to be with a woman and I thought relationships would be consummated through marriage and the perception of the gay community was pretty much the opposite. There was a perception [within my church] that it wasn't okay and that it was a mental illness of some kind and just that it wasn't acceptable . . . not how God intended it to be, like there was something wrong with people who felt that way.

Nelson also discussed having to reconcile his faith with his sexual orientation. He shared:

I thought it was against God's will because that is what I had been taught and so that really played a part in my denial and like me not wanting to be gay. I was like, this just can't be allowed . . . it's bad. It took a long time for me to get to the point where I could, umm, stray away from like what I had been told and what my parents taught and [find my] own sense of faith, kind of that self-authorship pattern.

Being Busy: "the busier I am the more I don't have to think about or deal with the issues"

A number of participants identified the impact that co-curricular involvement in college had on their decision not to come out. Participants repeatedly mentioned that "being busy" was a way to cope with having to remain closeted about their sexual orientation. Participants suggested that co-curricular involvement freed them from having to think about their sexual orientation. As Jonah noted, "being involved kept me from thinking about a lot of things . . . it was like a nice way to stop thinking about all the things going on."

Reflecting on his undergraduate co-curricular involvement, Micah observed:

I actually remember the conversation with people just to say like, Oh, the more involved I am, the busier I am the more I don't have to think about it or deal with the issues. Or I don't have to face reality, or the flipside of that is, you know, the busier I am the more involved I am, you know I can actively, umm, I guess portray this idea of who I wanted

to be and so that people don't suspect anything other than, you know, what I am trying to put out there.

Reflecting on his undergraduate involvement, Cain also saw it as a way to distract himself from having to think about his gay identity. He shared:

I can look at my involvement and the reasons I became so involved in many different ways . . . the fact that I stayed so busy and became so involved was a way to distract myself from thinking about, you know, this identity that I was hesitant to think about or develop. It also served as an excuse for, you know, any questions that might have arose from peers about why, maybe, I wasn't dating another woman, or pushing any type of relationship. It was a nice fallback to say well, you know, I am doing all these things, I am involved, I have classes, and I am just too busy for that.

Isaac also described how staying busy served as a distraction, adding that he would use being busy as a way to deflect questions about his dating life. He stated:

I certainly remember saying, like, Oh, I am too busy to date. I am sure underneath that was the idea that I don't have to date and because I don't have time to think about this particular identity that I happen to have. Especially now and even in grad school after I came out, I much more valued my time, even as busy as I was in grad school after I came out, I valued my time and would leave town and do things I had never done before.

Paul also discussed how being involved allowed him to make excuses for why he was not dating women. Paul said:

You could create excuses for why you didn't date, or if you did date you didn't have to invest a lot into those individuals, those women. The more involved I was, umm, the less I had to think about being or even reflect on dating and the more connections to other

folks I had . . . I just got more and more involved to the point where I didn't have to really think about dating at all.

Nelson secretly dated a man in college. In recounting his college involvement, he discussed being involved in co-curricular activities as a way to shield himself from the double life he was leading. Nelson shared, "I remember days when I would want more meetings like another event just so that I would not have to come home and face that."

Fluidity: "Coming out is a process and it is still going on"

Coming out was described as fluid—an ongoing process. For example, Dean said, "coming out is a process and it is still going on." Micah shared similar sentiments, noting, "it is not a defining experience; it's a gradual thing over a number of years." For others, coming out was less about directly sharing their sexual orientation with others, and more about being less passive and showcasing to those around them public displays of affection with other men. The popular anecdote, "actions speak louder than words" comes to mind when looking at the ways several of the men in the study talked about the actual moment when they disclosed their sexual orientation.

For some of the men in the study, it was hard for them to pinpoint the actual moment they came out. From the interviews, the idea of coming out was presented as an internal dialogue that leads to an external conversation with friends and family. For example, Cain stated, "I admitted to myself the fact that I was attracted to men; I admitted that to myself and I did not want anyone else to know." Cain later shared, "I have this [gay] identity and whether I have accepted it or admitted it to myself it's there, however deep it might be in my subconscious." Cain described coming out as "a very long process; in my undergrad it was completely an internal process. I was okay with my identity; it was just the public exposure that was the part that was really new for

me.” Prior to coming in graduate school, Jonah had already internally acknowledged that he was gay.

For Jonah, coming out publicly was more of a spontaneous process that resulted from letting go of concerns about what other people thought of him. Jonah said:

So finally one night I met this guy who I ended up sort of seeing—umm, not necessarily in a relationship, but that is how it started. And it [coming out] just happened, I mean I wasn’t expecting it, I wasn’t looking for it, it just did. . . . Within a few weeks, I had this like random, total change of mindset that I just didn’t care anymore, [it] almost was like a sudden change of like, oh well, whatever, I don’t care what people think, or how I might be treated, I just didn’t care.

Jonah spoke of letting go to explore his sexual identity in doing so he showcased a lesser regard for what other people thought of him. The idea of letting go of others’ expectations served as catalyst for some participants in their decision to disclose their sexual orientation. For many, letting go meant releasing the burden of being someone they were not. Nelson shared:

I did not want to worry about it anymore. Like I didn’t want to be something that it was like so much of my life and something I couldn’t share with people that I was close to . . . the whole like hiding stuff didn’t make sense, but I knew that my gay identity didn’t make sense to society. So I figured I mattered more than the people who didn’t [matter] that’s what ended up making this a little bit easier for me.

Cain shared that for him, coming out was a long process; while Jonah shared his experience was more spontaneous. Although coming out may have been observed differently; one theme that was found across the interviews was the notion that coming out is a fluid and on-going process.

Participants spoke about freeing themselves to act and behave in ways that were more authentic. The participants' change in behavior, in turn, led others around them to draw their own conclusion about their sexual orientations without there being a need for greater conversation. For example, Timothy kissed another man in public and found that to be the catalyst for others to learn about his sexual orientation. Timothy shared:

It wasn't an explicit coming out, but [members of the cohort] saw me kissing another man and saw that it was a little bit, more than just friendly, and so that I think that was really like [good] because I didn't have to worry about starting that conversation with them.

Like Timothy, Paul relied on actions to change others' opinions about his sexual orientation. He initially told a couple of people in his graduate school community that he was gay, but he found one event in particular helpful to announcing his sexual orientation on a larger scale. He shared:

I came out to my cohort essentially in April. It wasn't through words; it was through actions, essentially. The town I lived in had this huge AIDS benefit to improve awareness on AIDS . . . the culminating event is this huge drag show, so I was at the dance with a few guys that evening. At that point in time, you know, everyone in my program whether they were gay or straight realized clearly I was gay if I am dancing with other men. Most people in my cohort were just upset because I had not come out sooner.

The idea of coming out was inevitable for some of the men. To participants, coming out was synonymous to the idea of "living in your truth": eventually everyone must get there. Isaac shared, "It [coming out] was bound to happen; I was going to out myself on accident or on purpose, one way or the other, because of the very things that I was doing, making comments and such in class."

Whether it was kissing another man publicly, or dancing at an AIDS benefit, the notion that coming out is about a conversation was disproven by several participants. Many men allowed their actions to tell the story of their journey of exploring their sexual orientation. For Micah, coming out was a gradual process. In contrast, Paul shared coming out as being a public declaration. Regardless, Isaac's words sum up the sentiments of many participants; that is, coming out was an inevitable process, one that was going to happen whether by accident or intentionally.

New Location

The participants' stories showcased the impact location had on their decision disclose their sexual orientation. Paul, Micah, and Timothy referred to the change in location as a sense of liberation. While Nelson, Kevin, Don, and B.W. spoke of the new found motivation that came from moving away from their previous environment, which provided the opportunity to let go of what others thought of them, to embrace their true selves. The conversations with participants illustrated the environmental factors that supported their gay identity development. The men repeatedly used words like "free" and phrases like "create a new identity" to describe their feelings about being in a new place where no one knew them. Some participants saw being away as an opportunity for self-discovery that illuminated hidden truths about themselves and their sexual identity. For many, whose college experience was away from home but still in their home state, being in another state altogether made the difference in the freedom they felt to explore their sexual identity.

Paul discussed the influence of his distance from home on his coming out experience in graduate school. Paul saw the distance between home and school as freeing, observing:

I think that being six hours away from home [felt] close enough where I could escape to get home if something was to happen, but far enough away where I felt liberated. I could do me, I didn't have to worry about running into people [from home] at the gay bar or being out with friends that were gay and things of that nature. I am not sure, if I would have went [sic] to grad school near home, if it would have been a similar coming out experience even if the opportunity would have been there, because I would have been so close to home.

The Rebirth: "liberated to be who I wanted to be"

For a number of the men in the study, moving away for graduate school represented a time of reinvention and an opportunity for a fresh start. Timothy spoke about this:

I was completely starting over in a different city, a different part of the country and all that kind of stuff . . . I was able to start my new identity all over again and be who I wanted to be. . . . doing that far away from my family and they didn't know where I was going or who I was going out with, I think there was a lot of freedom to really kind of finally explore some of these other parts of my identity.

Micah used words like "liberating" when he described the opportunity to move away for graduate school. He shared:

It was my first time that I had been in a city where I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. So I was really kind of like liberated, I guess, to be whoever I wanted to be. It was so liberating; I think back and I didn't know anybody there, I could reinvent myself, I can be myself without having to, you know, be one person to a different group. For so long I had been hiding behind a façade . . . it was just a breath of fresh air.

Cain, who grew up in rural Wyoming, discussed the impact of moving out of state for graduate school on his identity development. For Cain, the distance gave him reassurance his family back in Wyoming would not know what he was doing at school, therefore giving him the freedom to explore his sexual orientation without fear. He commented:

Living outside of the state of Wyoming for the first time, and that was unique. Really, I remember thinking when I first got there that there was no one who somehow through maybe half a degree of separation knew my parents. I had no chance of running into someone I went to high school with in the grocery store, umm, and that was refreshing because of all of the personal changes I was going through. The fact [that] I would be in a new location and that being completely out would have no chance of spreading home to my parents, it was refreshing

For Jonah, the experience of being in a new environment where he did not know many people made the difference, as well. Jonah discussed how overwhelming the thought of coming out back home was. He also discussed the role distance played in his coming out experience:

I only knew one person here out of everyone. . . . I didn't have to go against what I had been saying my entire life, or having to explain to multiple people. It was just like a new experience . . . being in a different place helped me to figure out how I wanted to eventually come out to the rest of my friends and made it much easier. I think being in a whole new place and kind of taking it step-by-step . . . it's like these people don't have a perception of me yet, they don't really know much about me yet, so it's not like I have to change what they knew about me. I would just start with a clean slate.

The inauthentic mask that participants had to wear when living the life as a straight person was easy to take off when the environment was altered. Isaac described:

Going to [Nunn], even though I started there with one identity, it became so much easier to overcome sort of three months of incorrect information instead of 23 years of it . . . so suddenly to change identities, not only would [it] have been really rough to have to admit that I was lying, which I kind of had to do anyways, but it is easier when they are 900 miles away.

For some participants, the change in location provided the courage needed to shed old identities to show up more authentically. In other cases, the location change was not a rebirth for participants, but a source of motivation to begin to live their lives as they truly were.

As stated above, several of the participants came to graduate school at a time of self-discovery about their sexual orientation. While other participants had already acknowledged their sexual identity internally, and graduate school provided the motivation they needed to come out to others. Nelson explained:

When I moved to graduate school, I made the decision that I was going to be out. In [this new state] I could kind of test it out and what it was going to be like after graduate school if it was the life I wanted to have. It was like here, none of my family was here. It's not like going to get back. I didn't have fear of like somehow my mom finding out. It gave me a sense of liberation, like I am totally open, fully free to living this lifestyle.

B.W. shared his fear of being "outed" at home and the way that distance aided his identity development. He stated:

When I was at home, I would be fearful of who would see me like acting out in that way. I think I was almost fearful of doing things at home because I know a lot of the people there. At Bluxome, people don't know me. Like I am this out-of-state kid, so there is

really anonymity that kind of comes with being in a new space, a new town and no one really knowing who you are . . . and not feeling pressure.

Kevin shared similar sentiments, noting, “being away from home allowed me to really explore a lot of myself. Like I didn’t have to worry about my mom or my family being anywhere near me.”

Don spoke about being away from home as a coping strategy. As an undergraduate, Don studied abroad and found the time away to be an opportunity to learn about himself. When discussing being away for graduate school, Don referenced his time studying abroad in college:

My coping mechanism was studying abroad in college. For me, flying halfway across the world to kind of figure out things . . . going away has been a coping mechanism throughout my life, whether I left my elementary school district to go somewhere else, or I left my undergrad to go somewhere else . . . [that’s] why I went to grad school a thousand miles away. The distance gave me a fresh start. No one knew who I was and what I was about. I was able to live essentially for a year as a gay man before I told my parents. I needed to build up the confidence to handle what was next. I needed to establish a new life in case my old life did not want anything to do with me.

Environmental Factors

Participants described environments within student affairs/higher education programs as supporting their gay identity development. These student affairs/higher education administration programs and the curriculum played a vital role in participants’ ability to successfully navigate coming out as gay. They described supportive faculty, staff, and the cohort community as being instrumental in their ability to explore and disclose their sexual orientation. For some participants, the support from faculty, staff and classmates was felt the first day of the program.

Cain stated that the decision to come out during graduate school started at an open house for the program, prior to formal admission. Through the graduate admissions interview process, Cain sought out attributes in the graduate program's environment that would indicate whether the program would be supportive of his gay identity. He recalled that his initial decision to be "out" in graduate school occurred during college and was affirmed when he met faculty, students, and staff affiliated with the program. Cain stated:

I made the decision that at grad school I wanted to be at a place I could finally be out. [The graduate program] had a roundtable on what it was like to be LGBT both in the town and at the university. I remember in my folder they had a sheet of different marginalized identities and people in the current cohort that matched those identities . . . so it was really a great place and a part of the reason I accepted it was because it seemed like it would be a good place to take this next step.

It was only a matter of time . . . many participants knew that they were going to come out in graduate school, it was less about a personal realization, but more a perception that the time was right. Timothy explained, "from the beginning I knew that even though there weren't many gay people in my cohort, there were a couple of people on staff and faculty that identified as LGBT so it was nice to see that."

The power of inclusive words also contributed to participants' perspectives of the graduate community's value of diversity and inclusion. Words such as "partner," which deterred individuals from having to disclose sexual orientation when referring to a significant other, contributed to an inclusive environment. Don shared:

When I went on my interview it seemed everyone was gay because [faculty and students] used such inclusive language, and I was like OK, this is probably a cool place to be. The

language made me feel safe; it was the language, the people, and the emphasis on social justice.

Paul commented:

I was in a very safe environment. I felt it was a safe space and I would not be judged. I knew I was going to be surrounded with a lot of people that loved and cared about me regardless, and so I was able to do things and share more openly.

In chapter one, I referenced a quote by Maya Angelou, she said, “the ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” The sense of “home” Angelou spoke of is exactly what is being created in many student affairs/higher education preparation programs. For Cain, home was found early on during his interview for admittance into the program. In Timothy’s case, it was the ability to see out gay people on staff that gave him the sense of home. Finally, for Don it was through language that he found comfort in the perception that the community was inclusive. In several instances, the participants in this study gave new meaning to the phrase, “there’s no place like home.”

Student Affairs/Higher Education Program Provides Support to Gay Identity Development

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that the graduate preparation program played a large role in how participants understood their gay identity. The men identified the influence of the faculty, staff and cohort community. The program curriculum and specific classes such as student development theory supported participants’ understanding of their gay identity. Finally, participants discussed how the opportunities to engage in reflection provided by the program enhanced their understanding of their gay identity.

Role of Faculty, Staff, and Cohort Community

During the interviews, participants often referenced the faculty, staff, and members of their cohort as influential in their coming out process. When discussing faculty, participants, like Dean, referenced the importance of one-on-one conversations, noting, “some of my first conversations I had about being gay were actually with a professor who I had taken theory and multicultural competence with.” Paul recalled the “attention and support” he received from faculty when he shared that he was gay. Reflecting on his experience telling a faculty member he was gay, B.W. shared:

She [the professor] reacted very similar to like any proud mom would react. When I told another faculty member, she very much talked it out with me, helping me develop strategies to assist me in the transition . . . trying to figure out what would best work for me and insuring that I was safe and supported, and able to make the transition without any worries, or cares or anything like that. It was overall a great conversation with both of them.

Often the men shared stories about seeing openly gay and lesbian faculty and staff on campus and the important role they played in their own identity development. As interviews continued, what began to emerge is that out staff and faculty were not only seen as source of support, but also as role models for what it meant to live as an openly gay person. B.W. shared it best:

Having role models . . . like people who worked in the student center and I could look to and say like, you know, they are successful, they have a family, they have friends, like they have a sense of belonging here at the university and I can have those things too.

Paul also described the influence of seeing out gay men among the staff while he was in graduate school. He said:

There were so many gays in the Division of Student Affairs . . . so for the first time I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is such a supportive, embracing environment for gay men. They can be out and they can do well in their careers.”

Beyond faculty and staff, there was the cohort. The cohort was the community of classmates in the program. The cohort sometimes provided participants with challenge, at other times support, but most often they provide these men with invitations for personal growth and development. Timothy, describing his cohort, observed that, in their affirmation of his sexual identity, “they were always supportive and like, you know, I think anybody I talked about it with, everyone, I never had any negative experiences.” Similarly, B.W. noted how his cohort supported him in his sexual identity development:

I like the cohort model really being able to open up to them and see them as more of a family kind of relationship where I was comfortable sharing with them things . . . like knowing that they weren’t going to judge me and they were going to be there to help me through the process.

Isaac, looking back on his experience in the cohort, shared his appreciation for the open-mindedness of his peers. Isaac said, “the cohort was really supportive, which I really appreciated and really needed too. I had hoped they wouldn’t be a bunch of homophobes and I didn’t get a single [piece of] negative feedback.”

Paul offered a complementary perspective about his experience with his cohort. Paul discussed the ways the cohort challenged his viewpoints on various issues and offered him an opportunity to question many aspects of his identity. He shared:

Being around so much different stuff made me question who I was, what my beliefs were on certain identities, whether that was socio-economic status or how I [present myself to others]; whether that was [my] beliefs on White privilege or the way I dressed.

Everything was challenged by these individuals and through the master's program and the courses and curriculum.

People make the difference. For B.W., it was a straight faculty member whose nurture and care gave him the support and validation he needed in his coming out journey. Paul looked to the experiences of openly gay members within the Division to help guide his decision to come out. In Isaac's case, it was the cohort who provided him the support necessary for him to continue in his own identity development. When men talked about the environment, it was comprised of both people and place. In the section that follows, the participants' thoughts on the role of place in their decision to come out will be shared.

The Academic Program, Curriculum, and Specific Classes Such as Student Development

The academic curriculum of the program played a large role for many participants in understanding their gay identity. Several men specifically noted that the opportunities to engage in dialogue with peers and faculty about class readings and assignments provided new insights and perspectives. Furthermore, participants shared the influence of classroom discussions on topics such as social justice, diversity, and identity development. For example, Nelson commented, "the program really opened my eyes to a lot of issues of social justice and really wanting to make me more open about my sexual orientation."

The vast majority of student affairs programs offer a course on student development. The course examines various sets of theories germane to identity development. In multiple conversations I had with participants, it became clear that student development theory served as

an opportunity for the men in this study to learn about themselves. For example, Micah described in detail his experiences:

My first, like, student development theory class was the first time I had heard that there was a such thing as gay identity development, and that there was a process or you know identity development series. I was like, Oh my gosh, I am not the only one with these feelings! Every single thing that was on the identity development process, I had gone through; that was the first time I realized nothing was wrong with me. I remember sitting in the room of Intro to Student Affairs class and being like, Holy fuck, you know I'm like this--the first time someone has told me that everything that I have been through in my life is okay and normal and there have been many people who have gone through these things themselves. Just learning that there were people who researched this topic, sexual identity, and having conversations reinforced for me that there was nothing wrong with me. I would just sit in class, tears running down my face, and just be like, Thank God! You know, exactly what I have been needing to hear. That every message that I have heard until this point was complete opposite and I am finding research and history. It was like someone was telling me about myself without me even knowing.

Discussing his graduate school experience, Paul saw the program in its totality influencing how he thought about his identity. Paul stated:

I think [the master's program] had everything to do with me coming out. I think that if I wouldn't have come or got my MBA, there is a good chance I would still be in the closet, trying to date women and being miserable with my life. I do believe [the city in which the program was located], enrolled in a program with the people I was taking class with hands down, I don't think that I would be in the spot I am in today. Number one was the

people, number two was the curriculum of our program; they were very intentional about gay identity development in our student development class. The curriculum challenged me think about things like being gay and then just being in a place to do me.

Paul later added:

There were always stories shared that were about coming out and our faculty were huge allies and huge advocates so the conversation was never one they would shy away from in class. I even shared that I was attracted to men and had these feelings in my first year in my student development theories class in my autobiography.

B.W. echoed Paul's sentiments about the importance of course offerings in providing a context for understanding his feelings about his sexual identity. B.W. said:

I think my experience in the program made all the difference and had I not went [sic] to Bluxome, or not went to grad school and still lived and worked at home, I don't think that I would be where I am in terms of my identity development, because I would still be closeted or in a very negative space....Being that you have courses that touched on a lot of different things, I think I was able to not necessarily see myself in a clean framework, but just to have some context for things that I was feeling. I could look at a theory and go, that is exactly what I am feeling. And not that, umm, I looked at theory as a way to get through things, but to definitely provide some strategies to kind of adjust to the change.

Reflecting on the influence of his graduate program, Dean likewise noted:

I wonder a lot if I had not gone here, would this have happened now, and I don't necessarily think that it would have . . . it is the perfect combination of content that I was learning, the assignments I had in front of me; it all really came together.

Isaac shared how one class in particular during graduate school served as the main impetus for him to publicly disclose his sexual orientation:

The program was absolutely instrumental. I am sure I would have come out eventually, but this program was a real big part of what pushed me to come out . . . so without it I don't know where I would be, I can't even fathom that I would have come this far in the process. We were discussing all sorts of theories and had talked about LGBT theories and that sort of thing. We wrote papers in theory that were personally difficult for me . . . it was theory class that was sort of like what finally pushed me out of the closet . . . because whether you believe in the theories, you sort of have to look at yourself. I had to say, Yes, I follow this step in the timeline, or no I did not.

Don offered a similar account when discussing how class influenced him in coming out. He noted:

What pushed me into the whole me figuring out who I was, was going to Nunn. And like our program is really known for its emphasis on diversity and social justice, and really it was in Theory where I realized in order to be an advocate for my students I have to be an advocate for myself. Nunn's inclusion university course is known to push people out of the closet. Literally every year someone has come out of the closet during an exercise called the privilege line . . . that is when I ultimately came out to my cohort.

Timothy pointed out the value the program placed on students understanding their own identity. Timothy shared that his graduate program gave him an opportunity to focus on himself with a curriculum that centered on personal development:

I think the program played a big part in me coming out, being able to help students understand their identity and their development. . . . from the very beginning we were

starting to focus more on where we came from and getting a little deeper into who we were and our identities. It's really important to understand your own identity first, and so being able to take all of these personality tests and things like that was helpful. I finally got to focus more on myself and who I was and understand what I was inside and my sexual orientation . . . all I learned was finally starting to give me a better picture of my identity.

The program and curriculum played a large role in the coming out experiences of participants. In some cases, it was classroom discussion that centered on sexual identity development that challenged men to reconsider their own understanding of their sexual orientation. For B.W., he used theories discussed in class to serve as a framework for his own identity exploration. For Dean, he saw a mixture of assignments and in-class learning as the perfect combination for his own development. Finally, Timothy used his time in the classroom to engage in deeper levels of critical thinking about his own identities. Conversations with participants such as the one with Timothy about deeper levels of critical thinking lead to the findings on the impact of reflection in the coming out process.

Self Reflective Exercises Support Identity Development

Participants repeatedly addressed the role of reflection in understanding their gay identity. For some, reflective exercises were where they first came out. In other cases, reflection served as a way for participants to make meaning of their sexual orientation. In either capacity, reflection played a pivotal role in many participants' experiences of coming to terms with their sexual orientation. Timothy reported that many of the reflective exercises were include in assignments and papers, and shared how reflection helped him become more comfortable with his identity:

I feel like most of the projects and research I did throughout the program was [sic] tied back to reflecting on my own experiences . . . it was a lot of opportunities for structured reflection. I think that reflection probably allowed me to become more comfortable. I think the reflection helped it all come together for me.

Jonah also spoke about the role reflection played in his class discussions and assignments, noting:

Our theory class had us do a personal theory paper, so before we learned about any student development theories, we kind of reflected on our undergraduate career and came up with our own development theories, so that was really awesome . . . in our multicultural competence class that I am taking now, we have critical reflection papers that help us reflect on major life experiences. I think continuing to provide these experiences to reflect on your own life is really helpful.

Cain made direct connections between reflection and his ultimate decision to come out. Cain shared:

We had the opportunity for the first time really to reflect on kind of how we formed, and how we functioned. My grad program encouraged us to reflect and talk about our experience a lot, and so my papers are a big part of what made me who I am. So I wrote about being gay a lot and it was kind of something that just sort of happened.

Dean described reflection as opportunities to be in his own thoughts. For many of the men in the study, keeping busy had previously been a way to cope with masking their sexual orientation; as a result the opportunity to engage in personal reflection introduced a level of discomfort. Dean observed:

A lot of what the program did for me was give me nothing but time. A lot of time to reflect on my decisions, on my life. And I think time got me to where I was and got me to a place where I am okay with everything.

Nelson also discussed the role of reflection on his understanding of his gay identity. Nelson noted how reflection shaped his understanding of his sexual orientation in context of his religious upbringing, stating:

Having to reflect and getting into that mindset that you really come up with some crazy stuff and I was coming up with things that were a product of me being reflective in this program. Without reflection I would have never understood the intersections of identities and how Latino played a role into my ideas of masculinity, how Christianity would have played a role in me believing that gay was wrong. Like there are so many things about what I have learned and how I have plugged it into myself that are a direct result of just that reflection piece.

Isaac spoke about the power of writing and how, through written assignments, he was able to understand his own thoughts and feelings about being gay:

You know when you are digging deep and baring your soul you can't bare your soul and hide a part of it, umm, at least not do it very well . . . a lot of my reflection came through writing . . . so all these thoughts in my head for me, like I needed to put them on paper, and I would spend a lot of time trying to get the words right.

The conversations with participants suggest that learner-centered pedagogical techniques, such as personal reflection exercises, are beneficial in supporting identity development. Jonah noted assignments that invited him to reflect on his identity as being impactful in his coming out process; Dean appreciated the less-structured schedule graduate school provided, which allowed

him to engage in personal reflection about his own identities. In Nelson's case, reflection offered a chance for him to negotiate multiple identities in concert with his sexual orientation. In the section that follows, the barriers that kept participants from disclosing their sexual orientation prior to graduate school will be discussed. The barriers to coming out are discussed in the next section. Barriers to coming out in conjunction with the factors that lead to coming out in graduate school offer a foundation for implications that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Reflections on Being Gay Today

While not an original research question in the study, several participants shared their understanding of their gay identity today. Some participants had been out for years, while others had only been out for a couple of months. In each case, the participant's understanding of his current gay identity was heartfelt, compelling, and enlightening.

Nelson, reflecting on his current understanding of his gay identity, shared:

I can allow it to be a part of me without consuming me. . . . it doesn't have to be all of me. It is really comforting knowing what I have gone through emotionally and psychologically the past few years and also because of that it has become a part of others' identity, like it can be something that other people accept, support, and identify with.

B.W. also discussed his increased comfort with being gay. He commented:

I am definitely a lot more comfortable with myself being out and having the label of gay and being comfortable with that. Being able to go to a gay bar and just be overall more comfortable with being out, and then also being more comfortable with like family knowing. I am definitely a lot more comfortable seeing myself as a gay person.

Isaac, who has been out for a couple of years, is left with many more questions than answers. He questions his place within the gay community and the place of the gay community in the context

of the larger society. He shared, “I think a lot of what I am trying to figure out is where I fit in best within the communities, plural, and then where the community fits into the larger society.” Student affairs as a profession is often celebrated for the ability to help students figure out who they are. In reflecting back on their coming out experience, many men shared about the gift of learning who they are in graduate school, which now supports them in their work today. Timothy shared:

If I don’t know who I am, how am I supposed to help students figure out who they are? understanding my own process of coming out and how comfortable I am today . . . I think helps me remember that it’s a process that I have to work through with students.

Likewise, Don connected his understanding of his own gay identity today to his work in student affairs. Don said:

I feel that I am a better professional because I am embracing all of my identity and really being true to myself, like the students I work with today have been able to dig deeper and truly embrace those parts of themselves that they were not comfortable with.

Micah discussed understanding his gay identity as an ongoing process, a journey he continues to make. He shared:

I am still at a point where I have to justify who I am to friends and family. I think as I continue to live my life and continue to be who I am, I think I will have to justify and convince other people that who I am is not by accident or a choice. My story is still happening and I am still living my story; there is [sic] a lot of things I wish were different in my life, but it is the life I have been given.

Summary

This chapter presents the findings in response to three research questions focused on the coming out experiences of gay men in student affairs/higher education administration preparation programs. The study included 11 participants who currently attend or recently graduated from seven different preparation programs. The stories the men shared were powerful, heartfelt, and compelling. The men described in detail the struggle of coming out, the fear that was held within, and life experiences prior to graduate school that impacted their own beliefs about being gay. Based on the research questions and the data collected through two sets of interviews, themes emerged around the coming out process being fluid, environments and the academic program.

Coming out was discussed as a fluid process, less of a direct conversation in which someone announces “I am gay,” but more of a passive process that is dictated by thoughts and behavior. Going to graduate school afforded participants an opportunity to move to a new location which provided them a greater sense of freedom to explore and disclose their sexual orientation to others. Faculty, staff, and other students in the program played a significant role in supporting individuals who were exploring their sexual identity. The academic program was mentioned as a factor in supporting participants in the exploration of their sexual orientation. The curriculum, which included conversations on gay identity development, allowed participants to personally connect to the literature being covered in and out of class. Finally, opportunities to engage in self-reflective exercises allowed participants to make meaning of their sexual identity development.

Six out of the 11 participants talked about the centrality of reflection in their coming out process. For some, reflection papers were the place where they first disclosed their sexual

orientation. For others, in-class reflection exercises gave them the courage to disclose their sexual orientation to their classmates and professors. In the chapter that follows, the data collected from this study will be used to offer a discussion of the findings reported here, implications for teaching and practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the coming out experiences of gay men in student affairs/higher education administration preparation programs. The study centered on the following questions: How do gay men talk about their coming out experience when it happens during their student affairs preparation program? What environmental factors play into gay men's decision to publicly disclose their sexual orientation? What connection do gay men make between the graduate preparation program and the coming out process? One-on-one interviews with participants were used to investigate the research questions posed.

Eleven men participated in the study, representing seven different student affairs/higher education administration programs across the United States. The men participated in two interviews, the first of which was a life history interview in which participants were asked to draw a timeline identifying major milestones, decisions, and life events. The timeline was then used to elicit information from participants about their experiences up to the point of coming out in graduate school. The second interview focused primarily on the participant's experiences surrounding the time of coming out.

Based on data collected from these interviews, coming out being a fluid process, change in location, and the academic program were seen as common themes that influenced participants' decision to come out. Participants in the study characterized coming out as a fluid process. The data indicated that coming out does not happen in one particular way, or at one specific point in time; instead, coming out is an on-going process taking many different forms. The men in the study referenced an internal coming out process that led to subsequent disclosure to others. For

other participants there was no explicit statement that “I am gay,” but a change in attitude and behaviors allowed those around them to recognize their sexual identity.

Nine of the 11 participants discussed change in location as a factor in their decision to disclose their sexual orientation. For each of the men, graduate school presented an opportunity to put physical distance between loved ones such and themselves. This space between their home community and graduate school allowed many participants to create a new identity, to “reinvent themselves,” as some expressed it. In many cases, the distance and new location gave the men a sense of liberation.

The men in this study discussed environmental factors (people and place) that contributed to their coming out process. Participants emphasized the role of faculty, staff and classmates (referred to as their cohort) in supporting them through the process of navigating their sexual orientation. Sub-themes were developed all centered on the graduate preparation program itself. The program and its curriculum offered participants the opportunity to engage in conversations on topics with which they were personally connected. The curriculum provided participants the opportunity to engage in discussions on topics related to sexual orientation. In addition, participants referenced the impact of learning about sexual identity development in class and seeing their own experiences mirrored in the models they were studying. Participants commented specifically on the role of in-class discussion and exercises, which in some cases led to their decision to finally disclose their sexual orientation to others. Finally, across conversations with participants, opportunities to engage in reflection was noted as a factor in the decision to disclose their sexual orientation.

The study's findings are subject to several limitations. First, the study looks at the accounts of 11 individuals whose experiences may not be representative and cannot be used as the basis for large-scale generalizations. In addition, only even different student affairs/higher education administration programs are represented in the study where in the U.S., well over 100 such programs exist, according to the directory provided by ACPA College Educators International (www.myacpa.org). In addition, the ability and willingness of this group to participate in the study and their comfort in doing so may indicate that their views differ from those of individuals who were either unwilling or unable to participate in the study. Work by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) suggests that identities should not be viewed in isolation, but rather be seen in relation to one another and the environment. A comprehensive examination of gay men's experiences and their understanding of their sexual orientation should therefore consider the influence of such factors as race, ethnic origin, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, and other variables of stratification.

The participants were asked about their sexual orientation, but limited time was allocated for the men to discuss how their sexual orientation connected to their other identities. The reason conversations on socially constructed identities held by participants beyond sexual orientation such as race, ethnicity, ability, and class were intentionally shortened were because those topics fell beyond the scope of this study.

Despite these limitations, the study suggests strong implications for faculty and administrators working with graduate students in student affairs/higher education administration preparation programs. As discussed in Chapter Two, graduate school presents a variety of challenges for all students, including maintaining a balance between school, work, and personal/family responsibilities and effectively managing the transition that occurs when moving

into graduate education (Schlemper, 2011). Those who work closely with graduate students need to remain mindful of the challenges and transitions that graduate school may present. The findings of this study indicate that additional challenges and transitions may exist for gay men who are negotiating their sexual identity in graduate school. Specifically, the findings of this study are intended to inform practice with student affairs/higher education preparation programs as well as future research initiatives examining identity development and graduate education.

This chapter will showcase the findings of this study in light of the existing literature on graduate school, student affairs/higher education preparation programs, and identity development. The chapter includes a discussion on the study's findings, implications for teaching and practice, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Exploring the experiences of gay men coming out in a student affairs/higher education preparation program yielded several findings that invite consideration. First, the literature on graduate education suggests that graduate school can offer newfound self-awareness for graduate students (Gardner, 2009). Similarly, this study showcased how graduate school can provide opportunities for self-exploration and self-actualization for gay men who are closeted about their sexual orientation.

Whether the participants entered graduate school with a clear understanding of their sexual identity or discovered their identity after arriving, the men in this study found the graduate education program to be meaningful in their process of self-discovery. In both cases, the impact of being away from home and the liberation that came from being in a place where it was possible to shape a new identity were profound. Each of the participants deliberately picked a graduate program that gave him a significant amount of separation from home. B.W. noted that

when researching graduate programs, he purposely looked at programs that were out of state. Don found excitement in applying to programs that were at least 1,000 miles away from home. For many participants, graduate school presented an unprecedented opportunity to break free of previously established expectations, behaviors, and identities.

For participants, the new location prompted the courage to explore their sexual identity, which led several of the men to decide to disclose their sexual orientation to others. For some, the new location provided an opportunity to live out a truth they had already acknowledged. For example, Jonah knew prior to graduate school that he was gay, but needed to move away from home to feel comfortable to live out his truth. In contrast, prior to graduate school, Paul had never explored his sexual orientation or perceived himself as anything other than heterosexual. His graduate school experience, and in particular the city in which his graduate program was located, presented new situations and experiences that led him to greater self-awareness. The distance from home had a clear impact on many of the participants' decisions to come out, presenting strong considerations for how practitioners and faculty think about the transitions of graduate students.

Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) write extensively about the various identities that are explored and developed during college and young adulthood. However, Evans et al. (2010) do not discuss the factors that emerge during this period that may *hinder* an individual from exploring various identities. Many of the men in this study attended colleges with relatively supportive LGBT environments that would have allowed them to explore their sexual orientation. Several men spoke of knowing “out” people in college who self-identified as gay, and being aware of resources available to LGBT students on campus. Despite these factors, participants remained closeted because of fear of being ostracized by the community for coming

out and shedding the heterosexual identity they had work so hard to create. This identity, which several participants described carefully crafting, became a prison of sorts that confined them in their own developmental process. Graduate school provided an opportunity for participants to be liberated from their fears of what it would mean to live out their lives publicly as gay men.

Graduate school also introduced levels of cognitive dissonance that spurred growth among the participants. The men discussed the various ways their graduate program opened them up to experiences and people they would not have encountered otherwise. Exposure to diverse perspectives; racial differences; and gay faculty, staff, and students all played a critical role in reshaping the participants' views of themselves.

Several participants spoke of feelings of reassurance and comfort in seeing gay and lesbian staff and faculty who lived happy and productive lives. For the men in the study, the diversity of their graduate program community helped them to achieve new levels of understanding and acceptance of their sexual orientation. Baxter-Magolda (2001) used the term *self-authorship* to capture the ability to listen to one's own internal voice as a means of ascertaining truths that lead to new ways of knowing and being. Jonah captured the move to self-authorship when he stated, "I just didn't care anymore" to describe his response to other people's beliefs and judgments about his sexual identity. The "I don't care" mantra, repeated by several participants, represents a confidence and a comfort in recognizing that one's own truth must come from within.

The student affairs/higher education administration program curriculum and philosophy provided the participants in this study with an ideal framework in which to explore their sexual orientation. Student affairs practitioners and scholars have recognized for years the developmental impact that student affairs preparation programs can have on students (McEwen

& Talbot, 1998). The findings from this study further bolster arguments about the important role student affairs programs may have on their students' developmental processes. Participants discussed how the curriculum itself led them to question, and at times to gratefully recognize, many aspects of their experiences and identities.

Findings support the literature on learner-centered pedagogies to instruction. Learner-centered education defined as, "a student-focused teaching and learning environment [where] educators attempt to maximize students' productivity, knowledge acquisition, skills augmentation and development of persona and professional abilities (Liu, 2008 p. 19). The participants in this study time and again illustrated how a learner-centered approach to teaching positively impacted their identity development and understanding of difference across identities.

A majority of the participants commented on the value of attending graduate programs that focused on social justice and diversity. The activities, conversations, and exercises required by such programs engaged participants in self-reflection, spurring them to explore their sexual orientation either further or for the first time. Don spoke of how his graduate assistantship supervisor challenged him to think about his role and place in student affairs, asking, "If you don't do the work on yourself, how will you ever be able to help students do the same?" Dean said, "If I am going to do this and preach this and teach this, then I need to live it, too." The adage "practice what you preach" was infused into every aspect of the participants' graduate school experience.

Participants repeatedly mentioned one class more than any other: student development theory. On several occasions, student development theory was referenced as a course that either got the participants to think about their sexual identity, or finally gave them the courage to be open about that identity. In both cases, the course played an undeniable and integral role in

participants' understanding of their sexual orientation. The student development theory course spends a considerable amount of time addressing social identity formation, including the development of gay identity. When Micah spoke about student development, he shared the course represented the first time he finally felt normal--the place where he recognized that his experience and understanding of his sexual orientation was, in fact, part of a typical and predictable developmental sequence.

Micah's experience is important for practitioners and faculty alike. This participant's narrative affirms that dynamic learning is taking place within the graduate preparation program. For faculty, it gives greater credence to practices that engage students in self-reflective exercises. For practitioners working with graduate students, Micah's story gives support for on-going dialogue that focuses on not only their day-to-day work responsibilities, but also their experiences in the classroom and how those experiences are impacting their own development.

For Micah and several other participants, the graduate program offered their first exposure to a different and more accepting views of their sexual orientation. For many of the participants their previous perceptions of their sexual orientation were based in their religious upbringing. Many participants discussed the role of religion in shaping their initial understanding of their gay identity. While connections between religion and homophobia are not new (Hunter, 2007), the ways the men talked about their gay identity in relation to religion were nonetheless telling.

In a field such as student affairs, which emphasizes promoting positive self-esteem for students (Evans et al., 2010; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001), as a researcher, I was left to question how, as a practitioner, participants could effectively counsel others through the process of coming out while they themselves struggled with their own internalized homophobia. The

question is troubling and speaks to the continued need for faculty and staff to provide meaningful experiences, through reflection and through the curriculum itself, that encourage students to come to terms with their own identities. In addition, faculty and staff working with graduate students should consider to challenging these individuals to think about those identities in relation to their work with undergraduate students. Finally, just as coming out was noted earlier as an ongoing process, the practice of self-awareness and reflection a continual activity throughout a person's career may offer added benefit.

The three models of sexual identity development discussed in Chapter Two offer an explanatory framework for how gay men come to understand their sexual orientation. Two of these theories, those of D'Augelli and Cass, complement the findings of the study. D'Augelli (1994) suggested that sexual identity development occurs in frames, or processes, which do not move in a linear fashion and which occur in the context of background, culture, religious beliefs, and societal factors. The first three frames are comprised of an individual's willingness to question their sexual orientation and share their new identity with someone else, showcasing feelings, thoughts, and desires related to being gay; the need for contact with other gay people; and the development of a gay social identity. For the men in this study, the acknowledgment of a gay identity came at very different points in time.

D'Augelli's model leaves out an important first step in sexual identity development that Cass (1984) captures in Stage One of her model. Cass suggests in Stage One that lesbian and gay individuals first experience identity confusion, a time marked by self-awareness of actions, feelings, and thoughts that are non-heterosexual. Several of the participants in the study reported a time of identity confusion related to the discovery of their sexual orientation. For example, Nelson acknowledged to himself his attraction to men during his early adolescent years, yet he

didn't disclose this identity to others until graduate school. Similarly, Isaac spoke of visiting gay neighborhoods in Seattle during college, researching the Stonewall riots, and reading literature about gay people before acknowledging his sexual identity to himself and others.

When asked about their gay identity today, participants responded in a variety of ways. Some described their sexual orientation as an ongoing process, while others talked about it as a fully integrated identity. A parameter of the study was that participants must have come out no earlier than 2008; thus all of these men had been out for less than four years at the time of the interviews. In the future, it may be useful to revisit the study and these participants to discover how they view their sexual identity in later years in comparison with how they view it today.

Implications for Teaching and Practice

The literature showcases the power of reflection as a learning tool (Jordi, 2011; Krause & Stark, 2010). The results of this study reinforce the role of reflection in engaging students in learning as well as its importance as a developmental tool. Several participants (Paul, Isaac, Cain, and Jonah) referenced written exercises, similar to an autobiography that fostered self-reflection and served as a catalyst for exploring their identities. While the primary purpose of these autobiographical assignments was to reinforce the theoretical constructs taught in the class, its effectiveness in supporting and advancing students' personal development should not be overlooked.

Findings display the importance of faculty in supporting students' examination of the multiple facets of identity, in particular the intersections of sexual orientation and religion. For several of the participants, religion served as a primary barrier that hindered them from coming out. Faculty can engage students in conversations on spirituality and faith that lead to beneficial discoveries for individuals wrestling with their sexual orientation.

Incorporating theories such as Fowler's (1981) model of spirituality and faith development into the curriculum may prompt students to examine their own understanding of faith and spirituality in relationship to their sexual orientation. Fowler offered that faith and spirituality could be self-constructed domains based less on external forces and opinions, but more so on the individual's personal meaning making of their beliefs. In an era where many gay men feel their faith pitted against their sexual identity, models such as Fowler's may provide many people struggling to reconcile their faith and sexual identity an ability to marry the two identities. For the conversation on faith development to occur best, it may be necessary for faculty in student affairs/higher education programs to be attuned to their own understanding of faith and spirituality in efforts to help students to do the same.

Findings further suggest that faculty can support students in examining their own understanding of difference. Exercises such as the privilege line, in which students explore concepts of power and privilege, provide strong tools for helping students understand the experiences of marginalized populations. For participants such as Isaac and Cain, graduate school was their first exposure to broadly diverse communities. Through understanding differences based on race, religion, and socioeconomic status they were better able to understand their own sense of difference based on sexual orientation.

Additionally, faculty, staff, and students play an instrumental role in the overall program experience may have on the identity development of gay men. Repeatedly, participants mentioned the overall impact their program had on their sexual identity development. Beyond the curriculum and the contributions of individual faculty and staff, an overall inclusive environment must be created in such programs through language, in the recruitment of students, and through general practice among faculty and staff working with graduate students.

For Don, activities that engaged him in conversations on power and privilege gave him the courage to share with others that he was gay. Talking about marginalized intrinsic and extrinsic identities proved to be an effective way for Don to give voice to his own experience of navigating his sexual orientation. For exercises such as the one discussed in the previous paragraph, faculty should examine their own assumptions about the experience prior to facilitating such activities. For Isaac, who participated in a power and privilege exercise, a faculty member's assumption that he was heterosexual gave him the courage to finally come out, as he felt compelled to correct the error.

Several participants referenced the importance of faculty support in the process of understanding and accepting their sexual orientation. For Dean, it was a faculty member to whom he first disclosed his sexual orientation. In B.W.'s case, his poor academic performance led him to have one-on-one conversations with the faculty to explain the difficulties he was having navigating his sexual orientation. For Jonah, seeing the faculty model a culture of inclusivity gave him the courage to come out for the first time in a class assignment. Similarly, Timothy discussed the positive impact of having lesbian and gay faculty in his program who gave him an understanding of what the community would be like for him as he contemplated coming out. In each case, by demonstrating acceptance and inclusivity and/or sharing their own experiences, faculty had a powerful impact on the experiences of the participants in this study. Timothy's statements on the role of faculty support the research of Bilodeau and Renn (2005) who posited faculty play a vital part in how lesbian, gay, and bisexual students understand their sexual orientation.

Practitioners and faculty alike must remain cognizant of the role modeling they are able to do for students. Timothy discussed the influence openly gay and lesbian faculty members had

on his understanding of his own gay identity. Don discussed at length the meaningful mentorship and guidance he received from his lesbian supervisor during graduate school. B.W. referenced the “out” student affairs practitioners on campus who were role models for him, demonstrating what it meant to be a happy and healthy gay man. In many cases, these faculty and staff did not consciously intend to serve as role models and mentors for the participants, but their day-to-day, casual interactions made a lasting impact. Formalized mentoring opportunities between gay staff and faculty and graduate students may provide support to those exploring their sexual identity.

The findings of the study also highlight the importance of language in influencing the participants’ understanding of their gay identity. Don mentioned arriving at Nunn University and hearing the term “partner” used by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual people alike. For Don, hearing the term used widely indicated that not only were there gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in the community, but straight allies as well. The promotion of inclusive language has the potential to go far in promoting communities of acceptance.

Participants often referenced staying busy and becoming overly involved as coping mechanisms to avoid dealing with their sexual orientation. Graduate school with its many obligations provides numerous opportunities for students to continue employing such an avoidance strategy. Faculty and staff should be aware of this strategy and periodically check in with students to ask about their transition and how they see the curriculum introduced in the classroom reflected in their own lives. Such reflective opportunities may shed light on underlying challenges that may not initially be apparent.

Practitioners working with undergraduates may benefit from attending to the ways students use extracurricular involvement to avoid dealing with personal challenges. Participants

in this study used involvement as a means of avoiding the issue of their sexual orientation, but the implications go beyond sexual identity. Students dealing with any sort of personal or life crisis may use the same “being busy” technique to cope. Findings offered understanding on the importance of reflection for graduate students making meaning of their experiences. Similarly, staff working with students in co-curricular activities may find added benefits in incorporating reflective exercises in programs.

Practitioners in student affairs, particularly those working with student engagement in co-curricular programs, should remain cognizant of the need to support the holistic development of students. Collaboration of various departments across campus can support students in their development. For example, the LGBT resource center collaborating with campus ministries to offer programming on fostering faith while exploring sexual orientation is one example of cross department collaborations that may support students fostering multiple identities.

Finally, the findings suggest that future research can build on the work of Renn and Bilodeau (2005) to look at the cross sections of gay, lesbian, bisexual identity and leadership. Renn and Bilodeau’s sample came primarily from students who openly identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and were involved in LGBT organizations. Future research should look at the experiences of closeted gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals involved in non identity based organizations to explore if their experiences are similar to those described in the previous study. Furthermore, researchers may consider replicating the Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) study on leadership identity development, using gay identity as a main criterion for participation in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study investigated the experiences of gay men who first disclose their sexual orientation to others during graduate school. While the study focused specifically on graduate students in student affairs/higher education preparation programs, the findings suggest several broader recommendations for future research.

First, several of the themes that emerged from the data have implications for graduate programs across disciplines. For example, a change in location and the resulting transition are components of many graduate students' experience. Future researchers should examine the transition experiences of graduate students and the impact of those transitions on their identity.

Several participants discussed the influence of faculty, staff, and classmates in their decision to come out. The findings of this study highlighted the role of faculty, staff and students in creating an environment in which participants felt safe to explore their sexual identity. Researchers should continue to explore the role that people and environments play in identity development for graduate students. Furthermore, research studies on the experiences of the coming out process for lesbian woman may shed light on the commonalities and differences in their experiences in comparison to gay men.

Five of the 11 participants spoke about having distant relationships with their fathers in comparison to their mothers. The results of this study provide evidence that the role of parental attachment in relation to gay men's meaning of their sexual orientation is a topic worthy of further research. Finally, although the implications of race for participants' understanding of their sexual orientation were beyond the scope of this study, this is an important area for future research. Both Don and Nelson referenced race as a contributing factor in how they understood their sexual orientation. As sexual orientation research continues to move forward, it will be

important to explore the intersections of race and sexual identity as they pertain to the coming out experiences of gay men. Moving forward, findings suggest further research to investigate the role of institutional type in a person's decision to disclose their sexual orientation. Lastly, quantitative research that looks at the correlation between race and the coming out process has the potential to produce generalizable results that could have broader implications for theory and practice.

Summary

To conclude, the findings of this study illuminated a number of factors that influence gay men's decision to disclose their sexual orientation during their student affairs/higher education administration graduate programs. Six themes emerged from the data: 1) the fluidity of coming out; 2) the key roles of faculty, staff, and students; 3) a sense of freedom experienced as a result of being in a new location; 4) the influence of the academic program; 5) the ability of the curriculum to engage students and personalize their learning; and 6) the impact of reflection in supporting gay men in making meaning of their sexual orientation. The conversations with participants introduced several implications for teaching and practice.

Faculty working with graduate students, may aid students in their own development by engaging them in classroom discussions that engage them in discussion on diversity and inclusion self-reflection activities that allow them to explore their own identities. Moreover, practitioners may consider ways in which they incorporate intentional discussion around classroom learning in their conversations with graduate students which they supervise. The interviews with participants offer suggestions for areas of future research. Moving forward, scholars should consider research agendas that explore gay men's understanding of their sexual orientation in concert with their environment, family, and emotional well-being.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

EMAIL SCRIPT

Dear Student Affairs Colleague,

My name is Darren Pierre and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. You are receiving this email because you are either a program coordinator for a student affairs/higher education program, or may know someone who fits the criteria of the study I am conducting.

I am currently carrying out a research project and would like you to consider sharing this information with current or former students/colleagues. I am studying the coming out experiences of gay men who first publicly disclosed their sexual orientation while attending a graduate program in student affairs/higher education administration.

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of gay men coming out, factors that lead to a student's decision to disclose their sexual orientation, influence of their graduate program on their decision to come out, and how that decision to disclose their sexual orientation impacts their work today. Those who choose to participate, will be asked to participate in two interviews.

The first interview will last 90-120 minutes and will focus on individuals lived experiences. To frame the conversation, individuals will be asked to draw a timeline indicating significant life milestones, events, and decisions prior to coming out. The second interview, lasting 60-90 minutes will focus specifically on their time in their graduate program and the coming out experience. Based on availability, interviews will be conducted face-to-face or via Skype.

To participate in the study, participants must 18 or older self-identify as gay man, first disclosing this identity during graduate school (between the years 2008 and 2012) in a masters level student affairs/higher education academic program. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any time. Individual's participation in the study will also remain confidential. While the results may be published, individual's identity will be protected. Those who meet the criteria of the study, and elect to participate, will receive a \$25.00 gift card for participation of the study

I encourage you to share this information with others in your professional network. I am happy to answer any questions you or potential participants may have about the study. You may contact me at 301-641-9472, or depierre@uga.edu. In addition potential participants may contact the principle investigator, Dr. Diane Cooper, faculty member at the University of Georgia, College of Education, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at dlcooper@uga.edu or by phone at 706-542-1812.

Sincerely,

Darren Pierre
Doctoral Candidate, College Student Affairs Administration

APPENDIX B
PROTOCOL FOR INITIAL SCREENING

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. As I mentioned, my name is Darren Pierre and I am conducting research to fulfill the academic requirements of my program under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services in the University of Georgia's College of Education. This research study explores the coming out experiences of gay men while in a student affairs/higher education administration programs. The goal of this study is to learn how to better support gay men in graduate school with additional implications for teaching and practice.

I would like to ask you some question(s) to determine if you qualify for this study. This should take less than 5 minutes of your time.

Before enrolling participants in this study, I need to ask you some questions to determine if you are eligible to take part in it. I will now ask you four yes-or-no questions about you to do determine eligibility of the study. Since some of these questions may be sensitive in nature and I want to minimize any potential discomfort for you, I will ask that you do not respond aloud until I finish asking all the questions. After I ask you the questions, I will ask if you responded yes to all of the questions, therefore, you will not have to disclose specific sensitive information.

As a reminder, your involvement in this study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or stop this phone interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Do you understand these instructions?

If no, explain the process again.

If yes, proceed with the script.

Please remember not to answer aloud as I ask the questions, just remember the answers.

Screening Questions:

- Are you over the age of 18?
- Do you identify as a gay man?
- Did you (or do you) attend a higher education/student affairs preparation program between 2008 to the present?
- Did you first publicly disclose your sexual orientation while in a higher education/student affairs preparation program?

Did you answer yes to all of these questions?

If no, thank you for your interest in this study, but unfortunately you are not eligible to participate in this study. Thank you so much for speaking with me today.

If yes, thank you. You are qualified to participate in this study. Are you still interested in doing so?

If no, thank the student for his time.

If yes, I would like to ask you some more questions regarding participation requirements of this study:

- Would you be willing to participate in a 90-120 minute face-to-face interview to tell me more about yourself focusing our time on those significant life experiences leading to coming out?
- In a second interview, would you be willing to discuss specifically your experience in graduate school and the coming out process? –This would be in a 60-90 minute face-to-face interview

If yes, I would like to now get some information about you and arrange a convenient place/time to meet to discuss the study and obtain your consent to participate. If you would like to choose a location for us to meet, we can do that, we can also meet virtually using Skype, or I can arrange for a safe and secure location where we can meet. Which would you prefer?

Name: _____ Telephone: _____
 Email: _____ Meeting Time: _____
 Meeting Location: _____

Again, thank you so much for speaking with me today. If you have any other questions regarding this study, please call me at 301-641-9472 or e-mail me at depierre@uga.edu You may also contact Dr. Diane Cooper at 706-542-4120 or dlcooper@uga.edu.

If you have any questions or problems about your rights as a research participant, please call The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia at 706-542-3199.

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to take part in a research study titled “Exploration of the Coming Out Experiences of Gay Men in Student Affairs/Higher Education Preparation Programs,” which is being conducted by Darren Pierre ([301-641-9472](tel:301-641-9472), depierre@uga.edu) from the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services in the University of Georgia’s College of Education under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper ([706-542-4120](tel:706-542-4120), dlcooper@uga.edu), from the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services in the University of Georgia’s College of Education. My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits which I would otherwise be entitled. If I decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as mine will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless I make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

This research study is about the coming out experiences of gay men while in a graduate program in student affairs/higher education administration. The goal is to understand the experiences of gay men in student affairs who first disclose their sexual orientation while in graduate school. The intended outcome is that through this study, information obtained can better inform student affairs practice and teaching. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to:

- Meet individually with the researcher for two interviews either via Skype or face-to-face based on the availability of the researcher and interviewee. The first interview will last 90-120 minutes. This initial interview will focus on significant life experiences leading up to the actual act of disclosing sexual orientation. During the initial interview I will be asked:
 - Questions related to significant life experiences from childhood to the point of graduate school and disclosing I am gay
 - I will be asked to draw a time-line that displays those major milestones, decisions and events that mark my life up to the point of disclosing my sexual orientation. If I elect to be interviewed over Skype, I will be asked to show the researchers my drawing via the Skype video function to aide our discussion.

In a second interview that will last 60-90 minutes, I will be asked the following:

- Questions related to my experience in graduate school
 - Questions related to my decision to disclose my sexual orientation
 - Questions related to my sexual orientation
- I will be provided the opportunity to review my interview transcripts for accuracy or clarification; however, I may waive my opportunity to do so.
 - I will potentially be asked to respond to follow-up questions that may arise as the researcher conducts the study.
 - Once both interviews are complete, I will be able to review a draft of the research findings and provide feedback; however, I may waive my opportunity to do so.

The total estimated duration of my participation in this study is expected to be between 3-6 hours, but may vary depending on length of interview and any follow-up.

I will receive a \$25 gift card as an incentive for my participation in this study.

I may not benefit directly from this research outside of the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between my lived experiences, my time in graduate school, and my sexual identity. The findings of this research may lead to college educators having a greater awareness and understanding of the experiences of gay men and the struggles they may face. It is the aim of this research that this greater understanding will create better, safer environments for gay men to explore their sexuality.

As a result of participation, I may come to a greater sense of self-understanding or awareness through the reflective process inherent in interviewing. Discoveries of this nature may be healing or painful. The potential for revealing painful discoveries is expected to rarely—if ever—occur, and the degree of discomfort is expected to be minimal given the nature of the questions. The primary risk involved in this research is a potential risk of a breach in confidentiality, especially for those participants who are being interviewed via Skype. For this reason, the researchers will encourage me to have my interview conducted in person or will give me the option of having my interview conducted via the telephone if I am uncomfortable with the limitations of data security for internet communications. Also, in an effort to protect the confidentiality of participants who will be interviewed via Skype, the researchers will not record the interview via Skype, but will use their own outside audio-recording device.

Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. The only people who will know that I am a research subject are members of the research team. No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others, without my written permission unless required by law. I will be given the opportunity to create a pseudonym, or will be assigned one, for the purposes of data collection and corresponding research reports. The key linking the pseudonym code to my identity, as well as all audio files will be maintained in a password protected electronic document in the researcher's computer files and will be destroyed after the final report has been written, which will be no later than May 31, 2014.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at (301) 641-9472.

At the beginning of my interview the researcher will confirm that I have read this informational consent letter and ask me if I have any questions. Then, I will be asked to verbally indicate whether or not I agree to 1) participate in the research and 2) give my permission for my interviews to be audio-recorded. I will print a copy of this letter to keep for my records.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

First Interview

Opening:

The participant is thanked again for their willingness to participate in the interview. Context is given for the study: Participants will be told that the researcher is looking at the experiences of gay men in student affairs/higher education administration programs. – What that experience was like? What factored into the decision to disclose their sexual orientation. Participants will be told that the intention of the study will further advance how we think about student affairs teaching and practice. Basically, how does student affairs holistically continue to provide inclusive environments for people who are exploring their sexual orientation.

First Interview

Introduction:

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your current work?

What interests you about participating in this study?

In my own experience, I feel it is important to get to know people in context. This interview is to get to know you and more about your lived experiences. The second interview is to learn about your coming out experience.

So on a sheet of paper, I want you to share with me what are those significant experiences – whatever those experiences are that are significant for you, I want you to depict those on a timeline for me (some of those may directly relate to coming out, some of those may not). Another way to look at it, I want you to tell me your story, that is, share those major milestones, decisions or events that mark your life.

Once you have completed your timeline, I am going to ask you to talk me through it. I will be taking notes throughout our conversation today. At the end of today's conversation, I will be taking the sheet of paper with your timeline on it to aid me as I analyze my notes. If you would like me to send you your timeline back to you, I am happy to do so once the study is complete. So please only include your pseudonym on the sheet, the timeline will be kept confidential in a locked drawer. Do you have any questions before we begin?

*Timeline activity

Ok, now I am going to ask you to describe the events, milestones, and decisions you placed on your timeline and why those were important to you.

Probing questions:

Are there other people, places or events that are not described on this timeline?

What did you want to be when you grew up?

Tell me about your family and where you grew up?

What was middle and high school like for you?

Who were your friend groups during adolescents, what sort of activities were you involved with?

How did you decide to go to college where you did?

Tell me about your undergraduate institution and that experience?

What was your major(s) during college?

What activities were you involved with?

How did you perceive the campus climate to be for people who were openly gay?

Thank you. The next interview we will discuss specifically your time in graduate school and the coming out process. Also, there may be follow up questions asked about today's interview during our second conversation.

Second Interview

Again, thank you continuing on with this study. I have had the chance to review the transcript from our last conversation and I have a couple of follow up questions.

*Will ask any follow up based on initial interview

I want the majority of our time today talking about your time in graduate school and the coming out process.

Tell me about what got you into student affairs.

Probing questions

How did you decide to pursue your masters in student affairs?

How was the transition from college to graduate school?

How did you find community during graduate school?

How did you decide to attend your graduate school institution?

How was your experience at that institution?

How large was your graduate school cohort?

What were the people in your cohort like? Were there openly gay people in your program?

Switching gears, please share with me the story of your coming out as a gay man.

Tell me about your interactions with openly gay people while in your graduate program? Who were they?

Did you perceive the faculty in your program to be supportive of gay students?

How did you perceive the campus climate to be for openly gay students?

With respect to sexual orientation, tell me about the surrounding community of where you did your graduate education? Did you find it to be gay friendly?

Probing Question

Were there other factors that led to your decision to come out?

Was there a person of significance that influenced your decision to come out?

How did people respond when you shared with them your sexual orientation?

How did people within your graduate program specifically respond to your sharing your sexual orientation?

Looking back now, are there ways your coming out as gay impacts your work today?

As you reflect back, how do you feel about your coming out process?

Are there ways your graduate program could have been more supportive in that process?

What is your understanding of your gay identity today?

Thank you for your time, if necessary, once all interviews are transcribed, may I reach out to you again if I have any additional questions?