FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN GAY MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

WILLIAM ANDREW WILSON

(Under the Direction of Richard H. Mullendore)

ABSTRACT

To add to the literature on assisting gay male college students, the purpose of this study was to examine friendships between gay male college students. The study was conducted at three institutions including a large, public research university, a two-year public college, and a highly selective, private research institution. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students?

2. How do friendships between gay male college students affect their experiences in the collegiate environment?

3. What role does friendship with other gay male college students have on the identity development of gay male college students?

4. What impact does institutional type have on gay male friendships?

A sample of 12 self-identifying gay males participated in this study with four participants representing each institution. Each participant took 24 photographs of inanimate objects to show how they describe their gay male friendships in college and how these friendships affected their
collegiate experiences. Using these photographs, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. These data were analyzed to identify themes related to the research questions.

The results of this study provided interesting information about friendships between gay male college students. First, gay male college students described their friendships with other gay male college students as uniquely meaningful, involving sexual attraction, a friendship hierarchy, and familial support. Second, emergent themes that illustrated how these gay male friendships affect their collegiate experiences involved culturally pressured body image, as well as serving as cultural guides through gay culture and as fundamental support mechanisms. Third, data suggest that gay male friendships also aided participants in their identity development via their essential role in initially sharing their sexual orientation, using friends as comparisons to benchmark behavior in gay culture, and integrating their sexual identity with other identities. Finally, institutional type affected gay male friendships in college as it related to validating students’ sexual identity through academic courses, resource availability, participant place of residence, and visible signs of support.

INDEX WORDS: Gay male college students, Friendships, Identity development, Peer relationships
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by

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DEDICATION

Without the support, encouragement, and love of my partner, Matthew Ward Engelhardt, this dissertation would not have been possible.
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Prior to leaving Atlanta to travel to Athens for my admissions interview for this doctoral program, I visited Emory University’s Winship Cancer Institute to receive my daily injection of white blood cell boosters to keep my chemotherapy on schedule. Over the subsequent four months, the drugs eradicated my body of lymphoma. Now, almost three years following my last chemotherapy treatment, I live a healthy life that I treasure greatly. I remain forever indebted to my nurses, physicians, and loved ones who helped me survive.

Cancer survivors, a tenacious bunch of fighters, continually inspire me. Sadly, many who sought treatment with me did not respond positively. Therefore, I remain a humble servant of their legacies. Pursuing an education has never felt like more of a privilege.

I feel strongly that I have been preparing for this terminal degree my entire life. My former teachers deserve a great deal of credit for their patience and dedication to my success. I especially wish to thank my professors at Winthrop University and Virginia Tech. David Rankin, a Winthrop legend, taught me two crucial life skills during my freshman year: how to edit my work and how to challenge myself. Mel Goldstein, Chair of Winthrop’s psychology program, gave ample latitude to explore student affairs as a profession. Joan Hirt, my advisor at Virginia Tech and mentor, shaped my identity as a scholar-practitioner, pushed me to develop strong research skills, and found Sanford’s elusive optimal mismatch of a bit more challenge than support.

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While gay male friendships fascinate me, I also remain interested in friendships between gay men and heterosexual women. As such, my long-term friendship with Jennifer Conlan provided reality checks, hysterical laughter, and swift kicks in my tail. Having completed our Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees together, I always felt something was missing with the doctoral program. I should have known it was my “pretend girlfriend.”

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Bette Midler sings, “Oh, you got to have friends, the feeling's oh so strong. You got to have friends to make that day last long” (Klingman & Linhart, 1995). Indeed, as this popular tune suggests people are motivated to spend time with others and desire to build stable and close relationships with specific people. Relationships differ from person to person in their quality, quantity, and development process (Rybash, Roodin, & Santrock, 1991). Some people have many distant friends, while others have a few close friends. Even though relationships vary drastically, certain commonalities exist.

Psychosocial development theorists (Erikson, 1980; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) identified managing interpersonal relationships as an important growth issue. Erikson (1980) suggests that young adults face an intimacy versus isolation dilemma. Specifically, he suggests that during young adulthood, men and women face developing intimacy with friends, romantic partners, family members, and colleagues. Failing to achieve intimacy may result in loneliness and isolation (Erikson, 1980). Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe how college students manage their interpersonal relationships as one vector of their psychosocial development model.

College students negotiate relationships every day. From roommates to significant others, college students attempt to create and negotiate these important interpersonal relationships. With such emphasis placed upon relationships, college students who unsuccessfully cultivate and maintain relationships often feel lonely, sad, insecure, and isolated (Rybash, Roodin, & Santrock,
Conversely, successfully maintaining relationships, especially with peers, can provide an empowering support network to navigate difficult transition issues.

Sanlo (1998) and Wall and Evans (2000) state that college students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) struggle fitting into collegiate life throughout their student tenure. According to Rhoades (1995), gay men in college often struggle navigating friendships as they transition to college. Furthermore, D’Augelli (1991) suggests that gay men specifically struggle finding their niche as they adjust to college.

The fact that gay male students experience difficulties in colleges has been partly attributed to hostile environments for people in the LGBT community (Rhoades, 1995; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997). D’Augelli and Rose (1990) found that widespread homophobia existed in university communities with 98% of freshmen having heard disparaging comments toward lesbians or gay men. Not only do students hear hostile language, but also experience fear for their personal safety on many campuses (D’Emilio, 1990; Kaplan & Colbs, 2000).

While hostile environments exist, increasing numbers of students are arriving at college already identifying as gay (S. Chesnut, personal communication, November 14, 2003). Therefore, researchers must look closely at how to ease these students’ experiences in college. Several scholars who have examined how support networks impact sexual identity development state that these groups positively impact the psychological development of gay men (Troiden, 1989; Kahn, 1991; Rhoades, 1994; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Evans & Broido, 1999). While several scholars have looked at gay male friendships (Nardi, 1999; Grant, 2002; Kocet, 2002), a gap in the literature exists in understanding friendships between gay male college students.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay males. Specifically, this study examined how these friendships affect their college environment. The study also investigated what role friendships between gay male college students plays in their identity development.

To explore this topic, the researcher used a qualitative research method known as a multiple case study approach. From data collected in interviews using photo-elicitation with twelve college students at three institutions in the Southeast, the researcher looked for themes to inform conclusions about how gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay men and their impact on the environment as well as identity development.

Research Questions

This study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

1. How do gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students?

2. How do friendships between gay male college students affect their experiences in the collegiate environment?

3. What role does friendship with other gay male college students have on the identity development of gay male college students?

4. What impact does institutional type have on gay male friendships?

Operational Definitions of Key Terms and Concepts

It was important to define several terms for this research project. For clarity and consistency, the researcher used the following definitions:

College student is defined as an enrolled full-time student at the institution under study.
**Gay male** is defined as a man who is attracted both sexually and affectionately to other men.

**Friendship** is defined as a relationship where “someone who likes and wishes to do well for someone else who believes that these feelings and good intentions are reciprocated by the other party” (Reisman, 1979, pp. 93-94).

**Significance of the Study**

The outcomes of this study describe gay male friendships in college, the effect of these friendships on the collegiate experience, the identity development of gay male college students, and the impact that institutional type may have on gay male friendships. Given the struggles that gay male students face in college that have already been identified in the literature, a number of constituencies will find this research highly valuable in enhancing their climate for gay male college students.

Scholars who specialize in college student development may use these results to inform their models and theories. For instance, Chickering and Reisser (1993) discussed that psychosocial development includes managing mature interpersonal relationships. Specific information about type of interpersonal relationships may inform their model.

Student affairs practitioners might use the results in designing and implementing services for working with gay male college students. These practitioners have the ability to link students through educational, social, and service programs. Using these results in this study, student affairs practitioners can not only justify programs but also design them to maximize their impact on their target population.

Faculty members may also use these findings. Specifically, faculty who teach material related to sexual orientation, human development, and LGBT studies can utilize these findings
when exploring their research and teaching. Furthermore, faculty members might find the findings helpful in offering a supportive and inclusive classroom setting.

Family members of gay male college students might also utilize the results in this study. Family members may use the results to learn more about their loved ones’ experiences. Moreover, family members might learn how they can help facilitate relationships to support their loved one.

Finally, this study could also be useful to gay male college students. Gay male college students might utilize these findings to understand how their friendships with other gay male college students impact their collegiate experience and development. With this knowledge, they may feel more supported and confident in pursuing their friendships with other gay men.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, participants’ comments were self-reported. While the comments given by participants reflect their experiences, these self-reported comments may not honestly reflect reality. Participants may have altered their experiences for a variety of reasons including hiding negative experiences or shyness.

Another limitation of the study includes the use of volunteer participants. Since participants volunteered for the study, the data may not reflect experiences of those who did not volunteer. For instance, those who volunteered may have had experiences that differ from others.

Additionally, this study used a small number of participants. The use of a small number is a limitation in part because participants may not represent the full spectrum of developmental stages in the overall gay male college student population. A wider variety of the developmental levels may have produced different results.
Finally, another limitation of the study involves the researcher’s insider status. Since the researcher identified as a gay male, served as an administrator at one of the institutions under study, and enrolled in graduate-level classes at another institution, some insider bias exists. The knowledge associated with these characteristics may have led to a bias in conducting this research.

Organization of the Study

This study is reported in five sections: an introduction, a literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. The introduction explained the importance of friendships and the role they play in the lives of gay college students. It described the research questions, operational definitions of key terms and concepts, and stated the study’s significance and limitations. In the literature review, relevant literature included topics such as friendships, LGBT friendships, young adult friendships of gay men, and theories of homosexual identity development. The methods section included a discussion of qualitative research, case study approach, subjectivity, sampling, procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness and authenticity, and profiles of the three institutions under study. The findings section included participant profiles and descriptions of themes that emerged from participants’ comments that respond to the research questions posed in this study. Finally, the discussion section explored these findings and provided suggestions for future practice and research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature revealed four areas related to the present study. The first area focused on various elements of friendship. These studies examine friendship theories, the life cycle of friendship, male friendships, and college friendships. Since friendship is one aspect of gay male friendships, this literature seemed particularly germane. The second area, gay male friendships, was relevant because knowing the existing studies relating to friendship and sexual orientation is essential to understanding friendships between gay males in college. The third section examines two studies on friendships between young adult gay males (Grant, 2002; Kocet, 2002). Finally, two theories on identity development of gay men are presented.

Friendship

Friendship Theories

Friendship studies have examined theories of friendship, the life cycle of friendship, men’s friendships, and college friendships. Each is relevant to the present discussion. In reviewing the literature, three theories of friendship emerged. These theories include reinforcement, social exchange, and developmental.

Reinforcement theory of friendship proposes that people like others who reward them and dislike people who do not act according to their desires (Byrne & Clore, 1974; Fehr, 1996). Using classical conditioning, Lott and Lott (1974) describe reinforcement theory as friendship formation based upon a rewards system. For instance, a reward system includes outcomes from friendship such as a listening ear, invitations to parties, or remembering birthdays (Fehr, 1996).
Social exchange theory of friendship posits that people use a cost-benefit analysis to assess their friendships. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) outline that people compare the outcomes of their current relationships with their past relationships. Rusbult (1980) describes this process in that if the costs of a friendship outweigh the benefits of the relationship, people end relationships. Conversely, Rusbult also suggests that in cases where the benefits outweigh the cost, people invest more in relationships.

Finally, developmental theorists of friendship suggest that friendships change over time and move through various stages. Specifically, Levinger and Snoek (1972) outline four levels of pair relatedness that describe friendship levels: zero contact, unilateral awareness, surface contact, and mutuality. Later, Levinger (1983) describes friendship in developmental stages as acquaintance, buildup, continuation, deterioration, and ending.

**Life Cycle of Friendship**

Fehr (2000) describes the cycle of friendship as formation, maintenance, and dissolution. Understanding how friendships begin, remain, and end is relevant to this study. Further, Fehr (2000) states that people use several factors to determine friendship formation. Factors include the environment, individual, situational, dyadic, and convergence of these factors. Environmental factors involve residency, workplace, and rural versus urban settings. Individual factors include the criteria that people use to include or exclude people from becoming friends such as shared core values or particular habits. Situational factors center around the probability of future interactions, frequency of exposure, and availability. Dyadic factors involve reciprocity of liking and the amount of disclosure between people. Finally, Fehr suggests that people combine these factors to form friendships. Once friendships have been formed, the life cycle of friendship turns to maintaining the relationship.
Friendship maintenance deals with how people manage to continue friendships. Numerous studies report that factors in maintaining friendships include communication, affection, time spent together, acceptance, and effort (Rose, 1985; Rose & Serafica, 1986; Rawlins, 1992). In order to deal with friendship maintenance, Duck (1994) posits that people utilize implicit and explicit strategies. Using Duck’s explanation, implicit maintenance strategies involve unintentional efforts (e.g., random topical conversations, time spent together) while explicit strategies are intentional efforts (e.g., cards, calls, shared meals). Using implicit or explicit strategies, scholars point to self-disclosure, social support, and time together as the three major strategies for maintaining relationships (Rose, 1985; Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace, 1993; Honeycutt & Patterson, 1997). Maintenance strategies might not always continue a friendship. Then, deterioration results in the people dissolving the friendship.

Using the same factors considered in forming friendships, friendship dissolution factors include environmental, situational, individual, dyadic, and a combination of these factors (Fehr, 2000). Environmental factors include proximity such as going away to college or changing jobs (Rose & Serafica, 1986; Rawlins, 1994). Individual factors usually involve a change in the criteria used to either like or dislike a friend such as new information regarding an undesirable trait (Wiseman, 1986). Situational factors revolve around a lack of availability and a lower frequency of exposure (Fehr, 1996). Dyadic factors involve changes in common interests (Matthews, 1986; Rawlins, 1994; Wiseman, 1986), reciprocity of liking (Rose, 1984; Rose & Serafica, 1986), and lack of self-disclosure (Baxter & Wilmont, 1986). Rawlins (1994) further suggests that while several strategies might exist for terminating friendships, people usually implore avoidance strategies.
Men’s Friendships

Allan (1989) posits that “men have a greater propensity for friendship, to be more socially active and have larger friendship networks” (p. 65). Since gender differences seem to exist in friendships, it is vital to explore friendships between men. Men tend to have more same-sex friendships than women, but these friendships are not as close as women’s friendships (Tognoli, 1980).

Understanding adult friendships between men, several researchers examined adolescent and childhood friendships between boys versus girls (Allan, 1989; Duck, 2000). As children, researchers describe friendships between boys as activity based while girls are sharing based. Allan (1989) particularly points to the different sports boys play compared to girls. Boys select team-oriented sports such as football, baseball, soccer while girls most often participate in individual-oriented sports such as tennis, gymnastics, and swimming. Several researchers have suggested that friendships have been based in a masculine context (Allan, 1989; Swain, 1989). For example, Allan (1989) states that while even the word friendship is gender neutral that other synonyms such as mate, buddy, and pal have a male context.

Gender roles have an impact on how men view their friendships with other men. Numerous researchers state that men set limits to sharing vulnerability and affection in their relationships with other men (Swain, 1989; Blöetzner & Adams, 1992; Price, 1999). Swain (1989) states that most men express affection through doing activities together especially gender validating activities such as working, discussing politics, or playing sports. Furthermore, most heterosexual men avoid discussions around interpersonal conflict (Blöetzner & Adams, 1992). Specifically, Wright (1988) writes that male friendships fail to deal with any areas where they might disagree and only focus on the easily-agreeable areas.
In reference to affection, scholars report that male friendships are less intimate and affectionate than female friendships (Ginsberg & Gottman, 1986; Williams, 1985). Given the social stereotypes of male friendships, numerous researchers have challenged these conclusions stating that the research is rooted in heterosexist norms (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Peterson, 1990; Cancian, 1986; Rawlins, 1992; Sherrod, 1989; Fehr, 1996). These researchers contend that research on male intimacy has been based upon a female model. Therefore, the conceptualization and measuring of intimacy does not account for how men might create intimate relationships (Fehr, 1996). For instance, men engage in activities with other men to increase intimacy while women converse to develop intimacy (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Peterson, 1990; Fehr, 1996; Rawlins, 1994).

**College Friendships**

Several researchers have examined friendships among college students. Rubenstein, Shaver, and Peplau (1979) and Cutrona (1982) suggest that college students must juggle forming and maintaining new friendships while negotiating longtime friendships. Specifically, college freshmen primarily struggle with renegotiating their friendships with family and longtime friends (Shaver, Furman, & Burhmester, 1985). As students progress in college, they decrease their idealistic expectations of close friends in an attempt to lessen the impact of people not meeting their expectations (Rubenstein, et al., 1979).

In maintaining college friendships, Duck and Miell (1986) report that first-year college students rated new friends lower compared to high school friends before winter break than afterward. Since during winter break students revisited their high school friends, the researchers concluded that first-year students felt more strongly about their new friends than their longtime friends because their longtime friends no longer met their needs. Furthermore, Rose (1984) also
studied first-year college friendship. Rose stated that 35% of first-year students reported
dissolving a significant relationship during their first semester of college.

Gay Male Friendships

While few researchers have studied friendships in the LGBT community, the research
that exists in the queer studies literature is paramount to informing this study.
Several scholars have stated that friendships between gay men facilitate their psychological
development (Troiden, 1989; Kahn 1991; Rhoades, 1994; Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Evans &
Broido, 1999). In understanding the importance of friendships between gay men, it is important
to comprehend the need for social networks that help gay men accept and negotiate their sexual
identity. Kocet (2002) indicates that these social networks of gay men create a safe space for
such issues as learning subculture norms, problem solving, managing romantic and sexual
relationships, and dealing with hostile environments.

Many gay men refer to others who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender as
chosen families (Penn, 1997). Nardi (1999) states that gay men often experience distance from
their biological families and create familial groups of gay men to fill these voids. These groups
of gay men often function in similarly supportive ways as biological families. Support from these
chosen families include daily contact, emotional support, financial assistance, sense of history,
and understanding of the oppression facing gay men (Nardi, 1999; Wooline, 2000). Since
biological families may or may not understand or combat the discriminatory issues surrounding
gay identities, the support network of other gay men often fills a gap so gay men can manage the
issues facing them as minorities (Peplau & Spalding, 2000; Rivers, 2002).
Young Adult Friendships Between Gay Males

Studies regarding the friendships between gay men in their young adulthood have been limited. A literature search revealed only two studies (Grant, 2002; Kocet, 2002). Each author conducted the study as a requirement to complete a doctoral dissertation.

Grant (2002) examined the role that gay men’s friendships play in the lives of gay men compared to those of heterosexual men. Grant studied 31 single, Caucasian gay men and 31 single, Caucasian heterosexual men. Grant had participants complete various network inventories and a qualitative questionnaire to measure social support. The results from Grant’s study suggest that both gay and heterosexual men benefit similarly from the social support and intimacy of their friendships. In regards to family relationships, heterosexual men had closer family relationships. However, both heterosexual and gay men described their friendships as more meaningful than relationships with their family members.

Meanwhile, Kocet (2002) implored a qualitative research methodology to study the impact that gay men’s friendships have on psychological well-being. Specifically, he used personal interviews, observations of participants, participant journals, and a focus group of gay men. Kocet selected three gay men of differing sexual identity developmental stages to provide information. The results reveal that friendship and social networks have a powerful influence on the psychological well-being of gay men. As a result, Kocet suggests a Conceptual Model of Gay Male Friendship Networks. This model outlines that psychological well-being is impacted by gay social network facilitators (e.g., gay bars, gay bookstores), a gay social network (i.e., people who are gay and known to the subject), gay friends, a gay community (i.e., LGBT community center, LGBT nightlife), and identity disclosure (i.e., coming out). Furthermore, the model posits
that students who disclose their identity benefit from increased support and sharing, higher self-esteem, gay identity synthesis, and decreased psychological distress.

Gay Identity Development

**Homosexual Identity Development**

Vivienne Cass (1986) suggests a model of homosexual identity formation based upon her work with Australian gays and lesbians. She posits that homosexual identity changes with each person, situation, and period in time. Furthermore, she stresses that individuals make choices and, therefore, not all people experience all the stages and time spent in each stage varies depending upon those choices and circumstances. As the seminal theory on homosexual identity development, Cass’s work has been the subject of subsequent research that supports this model (Brady & Busse, 1994; Levine, 1997; Troiden, 1989).

Cass outlines six stages in her model of homosexual identity formation. In Stage One, Identity Confusion, individuals have an initial awareness of their same-sex thoughts, feelings, and attractions. Reactions to these feelings may range from rejecting the thoughts, feelings, and attractions to seeking additional information regarding the issue.

Advancing to the next stage occurs when individuals accept the possibility that they are gay or lesbian. Stage Two, Identity Comparison, results in individuals comparing society’s heterosexual assumptions to the possibility that they may be gay or lesbian. Many individuals in this stage remain publicly identifying as heterosexual but privately attempt to reconcile their homosexual behaviors. During Stage Two, individuals may seek out sexual experiences with the same sex or listen intently to others’ reactions about their views on sexual orientation issues. Trying to find support initially to manage their sexual identity development remains a hallmark of this stage.
Movement to Stage Three, Identity Tolerance, involves individuals seeking out other gays and lesbians. Cass specifically describes that interactions with other gays and lesbians remain critical to how these individuals view themselves. As a result, positive interactions can foster further development while negative interactions may result in a moratorium on development.

Further development will result in positive associations with individuals’ homosexual identity. In Stage Four, Identity Acceptance, individuals accept their gay or lesbian identity as positive for the first time. At this point in the model, peers play the most influential role in determining individual behavior.

After developing a positive connotation with their homosexual identity, individuals who move into Stage Five, Identity Pride, focus almost exclusively and proudly on their sexual identity. This sense of pride in their homosexual identity results in negative feelings toward heterosexual society, and individuals immerse themselves in the homosexual community. In this stage, individuals openly and solely identify as gay or lesbian in efforts to propel sexual orientation issues and their identity forward.

Finally, Cass describes the last stage of development as when individuals meld their homosexual identity with their other identities. In Stage 6, Identity Synthesis, individuals no longer use sexual identity as the sole measure but integrate this identity into their other identities.

Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development

D’Augelli (1994) offers a life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development. D’Augelli’s model is based upon the suggestion that sexual identity is constructed socially with social circumstances and environment shaping this identity pervasively through life. This model posits that sexual orientation identity development is not formed through
sequential stages starting at adolescence and continuing forward. D’Augelli further notes that unique barriers may exist in expressing a homosexual identity because it is not a visible identity and has social as well as legal costs.

D’Augelli outlines three interrelated variables that influence this identity formation: personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. Personal subjectivities and actions involve the perceptions and emotion that people have regarding their sexual identities as well as their sexual behaviors and how they make meaning of those particular behaviors. Interactive intimacies involve the impact that peers, romantic partners, community, and, especially, families have on people. Lastly, sociohistorical connections include rules, laws, and social norms of the environment and how these beliefs have been promulgated over time.

With these variables in mind, D’Augelli proposes that six interactive processes for LGB identity development continue throughout the lifespan of those who identify as LGB. The first process involves exiting heterosexual identity which mandates recognition that feelings and attractions are not congruent with heterosexual feelings. This process may include simply acknowledging these feelings to oneself and/or sharing these feelings with others. The second process includes developing a personal LGB identity status. This process involves understanding better what it means to identify as LGB by comparing and contrasting real-life experiences with myths about the LGB identity. The third process is developing a LGB social identity where people seek to form a support system of those who accept their nonheterosexual orientation. Gauging reactions and dealing with changing life events (e.g., breaking up with a partner, starting a new job) characterize some of the challenges of this ongoing process. The fourth process involves people identifying as LGB to their parents. D’Augelli states that this disclosure
can take time and is particularly confounding for college students who rely upon families for financial and emotional support. The fifth process is developing a LGB intimacy status. Due to the invisibility of the LGB population, understanding romantic relationships may be more precarious and difficult than heterosexual relationships. The sixth process involves entering the LGB community which includes differing levels of commitment to social and political action. While some choose never to take these steps, others endanger their careers, homes, and families to propel the community further.

Summary

This review of the literature revealed the trends that have occurred in research related to friendships of gay male college students. Studies have investigated friendship by examining friendship theories, life cycle of friendship, men’s friendships, and college friendships. The findings on this topic suggest that while some theories and models regarding friendship exist, more models are needed on different populations. Researchers have studied male friendships primarily in terms of gender differences, and results illustrate that friendships between men vary. However, since the college student population has not been examined closely, additional research is needed.

Next, with limited literature on gay male friendships and, specifically, friendships between young gay males, this review identified only one study that investigated friendships of young adult gay men ages 25-35. While Nardi (1999) and Grant (2002) looked at gay male friendships throughout their lifespan, only Kocet (2002) studied friendships of young gay men. Kocet found that friendships assist young adult gay men with their developmental tasks. Along with these developmental tasks, the results suggest that young adult gay men with close friends have increased psychological well-being. Finally, a brief review of the limited literature
examined homosexual identity development. Since no clear conclusions seem evident, these areas need further exploration.

While these studies provide insight into various topics related to friendships of gay male college students, no study has concentrated on how gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students. Furthermore, no researcher has investigated the role that gay male friendships have on the experiences of gay males in the collegiate environment or the affect these friendships have on their homosexual identity development. Since Kocet (2002) examined friendships between gay men ages 25-35, this study adds further to the literature on this topic.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine friendships of gay male college students. Gay
male participants at three institutions participated in interviews using photo-elicitation to inquire
about their friendships with other gay men. Specifically, this study explored the following
research questions:

1. How do gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male
college students?
2. How do friendships between gay male college students affect their experiences in the
collegiate environment?
3. What role does friendship with other gay male college students have on the identity
development of gay male college students?
4. What impact does institutional type have on gay male friendships?

Qualitative Research

The researcher intentionally chose a qualitative research design because of the nature of
the subject and the research questions. Since the research questions seem difficult to answer
quantitatively, no current research exists that explains these relationships and experiences, and
since the topic should be explored deeply, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this
study.

Merriam (1998) proposes several defining characteristics of qualitative research. First,
qualitative researchers approach problems from an interpretive paradigm meaning that
individuals construct meaning based upon their experiences. Furthermore, truth and reality are subjective rather than objective. Second, qualitative research uses an inductive research strategy. An inductive research strategy includes studying a small sample and making generalizations about the larger population by looking for themes to develop theories or hypotheses. This contrasts with quantitative research where findings from larger samples are utilized to predict to the overall population. Third, qualitative researchers are the data collection tool as opposed to objective and impartial administers of the study. Qualitative researchers spend a great amount of time in the setting of the experience under study and use their knowledge about phenomena to answer the research questions.

In student affairs, it is important to remember that many of the staples of student development theories utilized qualitative designs (Chickering, 1969; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Baxter Magolda, 1992). Furthermore, Schuh and Upcraft (2001) state that qualitative research can be instrumental in theory building in student affairs.

Case Study Approach

Merriam (1998) outlines five types of qualitative research: biography, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. In this study, the researcher utilized a multiple case study approach. Creswell (1998) and Merriam (1998) state that case studies investigate bounded systems that can be single entities or units that have distinct boundaries. These scholars state that case studies can include people, groups, programs, policies, communities, or processes. Furthermore, a case study can access multiple sources of information in order to research a particular topic.

In keeping with the descriptions of case studies by these scholars, the current study was bounded in a number of ways. First, the study examined men who identified as gay. Second, the
study only looked at those gay men who attend college at three institutions under study. Third, only gay men in college who had friendships with other gay men in college were investigated. Finally, only those participants who agreed to participate were included.

The current study used two data sources: photographs and photo-elicitation interviews. These data sources provided increased richness of the data and enhanced trustworthiness and authenticity.

Merriam (1998) specifically discusses characteristics of case studies. First, case studies provide a heightened understanding of the experience under study by providing rich, thick, descriptive data. Second, case studies typically generate data for the formation of themes for conclusions that provide assistance in garnering better understanding. This study produced this type of description and emerging themes regarding gay male friendships in college. Finally, Merriam suggests that case studies are highly focused on a phenomenon, situation, program, or event.

Personal Subjectivity Statement

Peshkin (1988) believes that subjectivity of the researcher can be virtuous because it is the foundation upon which qualitative researchers make a distinctive contribution that results in a joining of personal qualities and data. Subjectivity, as defined by Peshkin, includes the particular identities, beliefs, and persuasions of the researcher that might impact the data. Peshkin suggests that researchers should identify and monitor their subjectivity throughout the research study to ensure that their subjectivity is enhancing the understanding. Peshkin (1988) states that, “one’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life” (p. 17).
Exploring the subjectivities of the researcher in this study, several are important to mention. First, the researcher identifies as a gay man. During his college years, he began openly identifying as gay even though he had suspected as much most of his life. The researcher coming out as gay while in the collegiate environment may play a role in his interest and might influence the study. Second, the researcher highly values his friendships. While some may value family more highly than friends, the researcher views his friends as his chosen family. The researchers’ friends who identify as gay men have a shared experience that differentiates their friendships from others. The researcher has worked in higher education as a student affairs administrator for eight years. During this time, he has advised several LGBT student organizations, published articles and presented workshops on LGBT issues, directed a social justice center, managed a Safe Zone program, and served as on an LGBT advisory board to a university president. These experiences of working closely with collegiate LGBT issues have shaped the researcher’s view of the role these settings play in the lives of gay men.

These subjectivities enhance an understanding of gay male friendships in college. Participants may have altered their answers because they were aware of these subjectivities and potentially wanted to please the researcher. Therefore, the researcher continually reminded participants of the purpose of the study, ensured confidentiality, and showed impartiality.

Sampling Techniques

Sample

The sample for this study included twelve traditional-aged college students. Participants were full-time students at the institutions under study during the fall of 2005. Patton (1990) describes sixteen sampling types conducive for qualitative research, including purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and extreme and deviant case sampling. Weiss (1994) suggests
looking for samples that maximize range by looking for contrast in independent variables, dependent variables, context, and dynamics among potential participants. The key to choosing a sampling procedure lies in the research question itself. For the purposes of this study, the researcher used purposive sampling to select participants who served as key informants to the research study.

Key informants are described by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) as important to consider in sampling because the researcher needs participants who can provide the best information about the given topic. Denzin and Lincoln specifically suggest that a “good informant is one who has the knowledge and experience the research requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study” (p. 73).

Therefore, a purposeful sample of traditional-aged gay college men was selected. Gay male students were defined as students who self-identified to the researcher as gay male students. The researcher felt that gender and sexual orientation identification should be left to the participants.

For purposes of this study, traditional-aged students were defined as 18 to 25-year-old students who initially enrolled at the university in the fall following their high school graduation and who remained continuously enrolled for each year thereafter prior to the time of the study (October, 2005). Academic standing (e.g., 24 credits to be considered a sophomore) was not used to determine classification because the number of earned credits did not seem to relate directly to developing friendships. The time students had enrolled at the university under study seemed to have a greater impact on the development of friendships.
Sample Selection

To select participants, the researcher asked the advisors to the LGBT student organizations at the three institutions under study to allow the researcher to recruit participants from listservs, group meetings, and to follow up on names provided by administrators and faculty who work closely with male gay college students. This type of sampling in qualitative research is called snowballing. Additionally, the researcher posted flyers on campus and the LGBT electronic bulletin boards that described the nature of the study, the requirements to participate, and the incentive for participating (see Appendix A). Interested students were asked to call or Email the researcher for further information.

Respondents who contacted the researcher were screened to determine if they met the selection criteria (e.g., enrolled full time, identified as gay and male). Patton (2002) refers to this technique as establishing a purposive sample. Because the study’s design called for a sample of twelve participants, the first three students from each institution under study who contacted the researcher and met the criteria were selected for inclusion in the study.

Sample Selection Criteria

The researcher created certain criteria to screen potential participants. During initial phone conversations or Email correspondence, the researcher asked the volunteers a series of questions to see if they met the criteria Fundamental Support Mechanism for inclusion in the study (see Appendix B). The researcher designed these questions to identify participants who both met the criteria Fundamental Support Mechanism for inclusion in the sample and willing to fulfill the requirements as participants in the study. For instance, criteria for all participants included having friendships with other gay men and possessing a willingness to discuss them.
Since participants were required to discuss their friendships with other gay men, it was important for them to have friendships with other gay men.

At the end of the telephone conversation, the researcher assessed whether callers met the criteria. If they met the criteria, the researcher informed the respondent about the participation requirements and incentive for the study. If the respondents continued to express interest, they were selected to participate and the researcher asked them to schedule an interview time. Names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses of those selected to participate were compiled by the researcher. Appendix B outlines the protocol the researcher used to screen potential participants.

The sampling techniques resulted in the selection of twelve participants, three from each institution under study.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures for this study included conducting individual interviews with participants after they had taken photographs representing their friendships with other gay male college students and the impact these friendships had on their experiences in the collegiate environment. Prior to collecting the data, the Institutional Review Board for Research on Human Subjects at each campus under study approved the study and participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix C).

Photo-Elicitation

If a single picture is worth 1,000 words, a picture and an interview offers a compelling method for those interested in research to consider. Relatively few researchers in education and even fewer in student affairs have utilized photo-elicitation (Dempsey & Tucker, 1994). Scholars in sociology, anthropology, public health, urban planning, and journalism have used this method
As a part of the qualitative research tradition, photo-elicitation research includes a variety of methods.

“Photo-elicitation” can be defined as “the use of photographs to provoke a response” (Hurworth, 2003, p. 2). Still photographs taken either by the participants or presented from other sources (e.g., family photo albums, pictures generated by the researcher) are utilized to stimulate the interview process (Tucker and Dempsey, 1991; Harper, 1994). Definitions of photo-elicitation in student affairs literature appear rarely and do not differ greatly (Perka, Matherly, Fishman, and Ridge, 1992; Harrington and Lindy, 2002; Lease, 2003). For instance, Lease (2003) states, “Photoelicitation is an interview technique in which developed photographs are used as tools for data collection. The participants began by discussing the contents and rationale behind taking each picture, and probative questions based on the pictures and the overall purpose of the study followed” (p. 5).

Photo-elicitation has been used as a method for examining phenomena since the mid-1950s (Harper, 2002). Collier, the leader of a Cornell University research team, reported the first study using photographic methods in 1957. Collier’s study investigated the quality of housing using photographs in some interviews but not others. From the research, Collier concluded that photographs sharpened participants’ memory and minimized misunderstandings. Collier stated, “The pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repletion of conventional interviews” (p. 856).

Understanding researchers’ rationale behind using photo-elicitation emerged as a theme in the literature. Interviews typically rely upon verbal skills to describe experiences or images. Walker (2000) suggests that individuals do not always possess the Fundamental Support Mechanism verbal skills. Therefore, utilizing photographs taken by the participants and asking
interview questions elicited by these photographs assists researchers in overcoming one of the challenges of interviewing.

Even on a physical level, responding to visual stimuli differs from responding to verbal stimuli (Harper, 2002). Specifically, Harper describes that reacting to visual images produce more intense brain energy than processing words alone because processing words and images accesses even more brain usage. Harper further posits that a photo-elicitation interview does not function simply as “an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information” (p. 13).

Another reason researchers have stated they use photo-elicitation is it bridges gaps between strangers (Collier, 1979; Collier & Collier, 1986). Since researchers rarely know their interview participants, photographs taken by participants can serve as metaphorical bridges between researchers and participants. Collier and Collier (1986) conducted a study that found that photographs used in interviews acted as a catalyst for rapport compared to interviews without photographs.

Not only can photographs bridge rapport and increase comfort, photographs can also explain cultural differences. Some examples of photo-elicitation that explore cultural differences involved studying school children (Diamond, 1996; Wieniger, 1998; Salmon, 2001), gifted college females (Lease, 2003), African American students explaining impressions of predominantly white universities (Douglas, 1998), and international students illustrating American culture (Ziller, 1990). Since the current study seeks to understand the perspectives of gay men, this method seems appropriate.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, photo-elicitation allows researchers to use multiple methods. Triangulation, having independent measures of data, is a way that qualitative
researchers can increase trustworthiness and authenticity in their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Using photographs and interviews allows researchers to have more than one method of data collection.

Participants in the study met with the researcher who explained the instructions for taking the photographs outlined in a prompt sheet (see Appendix D). The researcher stressed that participants should take photographs that describe their friendships with other gay men and illustrate how these friendships affected their experiences in the collegiate environment. Participants were instructed that they could take pictures of anything except other people because confidentiality issues would not allow for others to be photographed. The researcher gave disposable cameras to participants, and scheduled appointments for participants to return the cameras so the researcher could develop photographs prior to the interview. The researcher also indicated that once participants had been interviewed they would receive a $25 incentive, and the balance of their $50 incentive once they participated in the member checks. At the end of this instructional period, participants gave consent to fully participate.

Participant Interviews

Interviewing participants is among the most common data collection method of qualitative research (Patton, 1990). When utilizing a multi-case study design, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that interviews provide the richest of data for comparison. Specifically, Rubin and Rubin (1995) offer that interviewers should use three types of questions while interviewing: primary questions to start and shape the conversation, clarifying questions to elicit responses and to gain specific examples, and subsequent questions that more deeply explain the answers to the primary questions. These scholars also suggest that researchers remain flexible to shifts within the interview while remaining focused on the purpose of the research study.
Limitations exist in regards to interviews as a data collection method. The most basic limitation remains that participants may not provide truthful answers (Walford, 2001; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This limitation may be assuaged by meeting with participants on multiple occasions. For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted multiple meetings with the participants. Since rapport may strengthen between researcher and participants with each meeting, participants may become more truthful with heightened rapport. Weiss (1994) notes that “despite all the ways in which interview material can be problematic, richly detailed accounts of vividly remembered events are likely to be trustworthy. Nor does apparent inconsistency always demonstrate invalidity” (p. 150).

With the interview tradition, limitations, and ways to mitigate the limitations in mind, participants in the study were interviewed by the researcher. Several scholars suggest that interviews should include an instructional period, protocol, and a semi-structure questioning period (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Patton, 2002). Therefore, a protocol was employed at these meetings to avoid differences in instruction and to guide questioning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The protocol was created with special attention to word choice, order, and the information needed from participants (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The protocol used to guide the interviews is provided in Appendix E.

During the meetings, the researcher reiterated the study’s purpose and reviewed the requirements and responsibilities of participants. The researcher also explained that after all the interviews were completed and meetings transcribed that they would need to meet again to review the transcription. A list of predetermined questions is included in the guide in Appendix E. While these questions were used to guide the conversation, the researcher used the questions as a guide and also asked follow up questions as needed to fully develop interview content.
Data Analysis

The data in this study were collected to examine the friendships of gay male college students with other gay men. In analyzing the data, the researcher needed to analyze the interviews with twelve gay male college students at the three institutions under study. The primary purpose of the photographs and the interviews was to collect data on how gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students.

The photographs provided visual information that illustrated how participants described their gay male friendships and how these friendships affected their collegiate experiences. Therefore, the first section of interview questions dealt with better understanding the participants through their demographics and experiences. The second set of interview questions related to how participants described their relationships with other gay men. The other questions were concerned with how participants explained how these friendships impacted their experiences in the college environment and upon their identity development.

Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the tapes of the interviews and scanned the photographs. From this transcript, the researcher coded each document using the demographic data collected during the interview. By immediately listening to tapes, transcribing, and scanning photographs after each interview, the researcher could become more familiar with the data as the interviews progressed.

To analyze the data collected in the interview, the researcher used the constant comparative method. The researcher carefully examined the survey responses for repeated words, phrases, and concepts (Merriam, 1998). These repeated words, phrases, and concepts were grouped according to common ideas and assigned to themes. For instance, each time participants mentioned meeting a friend through a student organization, these comments were
placed in the Student Group theme. Each time participants wrote about maintaining a relationship using email, these comments were placed in a Technology theme.

Authenticity and Trustworthiness

Authenticity refers to the consistency with which data collected relate to the research questions posed in a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study’s authenticity was enhanced in two ways. First, interview questions were reviewed by several experts to ensure they would elicit information pertinent to the research questions. This qualitative technique, called peer review, is one way of enhancing authenticity. Peer reviewers include an administrator of an LGBT Life Office along with faculty from the College of Education and School of Social Work who have substantive knowledge of the topic, population, and qualitative methods.

Second, the researcher conducted member checks. Member checks, a technique frequently used in qualitative research, allow participants opportunities to modify their responses or to evaluate where researchers identified major themes of their responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, member checks were conducted after the researcher had transcribed the interviews and the participants reviewed and modified transcripts.

Trustworthiness refers to the truthfulness of the data. While there is no way to know whether respondents have been honest, certain steps can be taken to enhance trustworthiness. For instance, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that collecting data from two or more sources enhances trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness in this study was enhanced in two ways. First, data were collected by analyzing participants’ photographs and transcribed interviews along with the modifications made by participants to those transcriptions. By having participants modify their responses in writing, the researcher obtained three forms of data. These data sets provided the researcher
information to compare when drawing conclusions. Trustworthiness was also enhanced by collecting data common to the population. Since other students had friendships, numerous other participants could have been selected to participate in the study and similar data would have emerged.

Campus Profiles

Caudill College

Caudill College (“Caudill”), classified by the Carnegie Foundation as an Associate’s College, is a two-year public institution enrolling approximately 5,200 students (3,100 full-time, 2,100 part-time) and focuses on business, general studies, and social sciences. The college does not offer on-campus housing with 71% of students living in the host county or a contiguous county. About 45% of the students are male and 98% reside in the state. The campus is located in a suburban town about 45 miles from a major metropolitan Southeast city.

LGBT life on campus includes a student organization advised by three faculty members with resources provided by the Student Government Association. The campus does not have a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, domestic partnership benefits, or staff allocated to work specifically with LGBT issues. The surrounding neighborhood of the campus has no visible support for the LGBT community (i.e., bookstores, bars).

Ward University

Ward University (“Ward”) is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a Doctoral/Research (Extensive) institution. A private institution, it enrolls approximately 11,800 students (6,300 undergraduate and 5,500 graduate and professional) in a vast array of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs that include liberal arts, business, law, medicine, theology, nursing, public health, and humanities. At the institution’s main campus,
approximately 3,200 undergraduate students, or 51%, live in residence halls with all freshmen and sophomores required to live on campus. Twenty-eight percent of the students reside in the state and 56% of the students are female. The institution is situated in a suburban neighborhood of a major metropolitan city in the Southeast.

Ward’s LGBT Life includes a presidential advisory board on LGBT issues, an Office of LGBT Life, and several LGBT student organizations. The university provides domestic partnership benefits, endorses a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, and pays for two full-time professional staff members to work exclusively with the LGBT population at Ward. The affluent suburb surrounding the institution is home to several gay-centered establishments including gay-owned restaurants, bars, and a bookstore.

University of the Southeast

The University of the Southeast (“Southeast”) is a public institution that enrolls approximately 31,000 students (23,000 undergraduates, 8,000 graduate and professional) and is classified as a Doctoral/Research (Extensive) institution by the Carnegie Foundation. Students enroll in a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs including arts, sciences, journalism, education, law, and agricultural sciences. Approximately 7,200 students, or 22%, live on campus and all non-local freshmen are required to live on campus. 84% of the students reside in the state, and about 55% are female. The campus is located in a county of about 98,000 people.

Southeast’s LGBT life includes a LGBT student organization, a part-time advisor in the Office of the Dean of Students, and resources allotted through the Student Government Association. The campus has a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation but does
not include domestic partnership benefits. The surrounding city includes several gay-owned establishments including bars, coffeehouses, and restaurants.

Summary

This study was designed to examine friendships that gay male college students have with other gay men. Additionally, the study explores the impact these friendships have on the participants’ collegiate experiences and identity development. In order to obtain data, the researcher solicited photographs and conducted personal interviews with twelve gay male college students. The data collected enabled the researcher to respond to the four research questions posed in this study.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

To explore friendships between gay male college students, participants took photographs that described these friendships and how the friendships affected their collegiate experiences. After the photographs were developed, participants chose the photographs that best symbolized their friendships with other gay men and how these friendships influenced their experiences as college students. Participants then discussed these friendships in a semi-structured interview using the photographs as stimuli for dialogue. Specifically, a sample of twelve self-identifying gay male college students, four participants at three institutions in the Southeast, was used to explore the following four research questions:

1. How do gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students?
2. How do friendships between gay male college students affect their experiences in the collegiate environment?
3. What role does friendship with other gay male college students have on the identity development of gay male college students?
4. What impact does institutional type have on gay male friendships?

To analyze the data once the interviews were conducted, the researcher organized the data by scanning the photographs into computer files and transcribing the interviews. Using the constant comparative method, each transcript was reviewed repeatedly and common thoughts
categorized as themes. Likewise, photographs relating to comments that emerged as themes were also categorized.

The results from this study are presented in this chapter. First, this chapter begins with profiles of participants. Second, the emergent themes that respond to the research questions are described. Several quotations from participants are included to enrich understanding of each theme. When possible, participants’ photographs are also used to illustrate quotations further. Some quotations do not have accompanying photographs because not all comments referred to photographs. Finally, a summary of the results section is presented.

Participant Profiles

The sample for this study included 12 participants who identified as gay males enrolled full-time at one of three institutions. The researcher interviewed four participants from three institutions. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 including two seniors, four juniors, four sophomores, and two freshmen. Two students were African American, one student identified as Latino, and 9 were White. Table 1 provides a summary of participant profiles. To protect the identity of participants, the researcher allowed participants to choose their pseudonyms in lieu of using their names. The researcher chose pseudonyms for participants who did not wish to select one. The following sections provide brief sketches of each participant:

Cain

Cain is a senior at Ward University majoring in sociology. Cain is a White male who grew up in a suburban mid-Atlantic state. He chose to attend Ward University because it was the highest ranked school that accepted him. Cain came out during the summer between his sophomore and junior year at Ward. He has shared his sexual orientation with his family and friends. Cain plans to attend law school following his graduation from Ward.
Table 1
Summary of Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<td>Harry</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>White</td>
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Jeremiah

Jeremiah is an African American junior at Ward University. He is majoring in comparative literature and a foreign language. Jeremiah grew up in a mid-sized town in another southern state located about 100 miles from Ward. He chose Ward University because of its proximity to his home and the financial package awarded him. Jeremiah began identifying as a gay male during high school and serves as a leader in the LGBT student organization at Ward. Jeremiah plans to attend law school once he completes his undergraduate degree.

Josh

Josh, a White male, is a junior at Ward University majoring in music and a foreign language. Josh grew up in a metropolitan area in a southern state. He began identifying as a gay male at the age of 15. He feels that his family and friends have been accepting of sexual orientation. Josh held several jobs on campus including working in the LGBT Office at Ward. He chose Ward partly because of its reputation for inclusive LGBT practices. Josh plans to pursue a doctoral degree in musicology following his undergraduate experience.

Melvin

Melvin, a junior at Ward University, lived in the suburbs of a major southern city until coming to college. During his first year at Ward, Melvin came out to his parents and friends. He feels both his parents and friends have reacted quite positively. Studying anthropology with a minor in linguistics, Melvin plans to pursue a doctoral degree in anthropology with a focus on media studies. He chose Ward by secretly reviewing rankings of inclusive institutions and those with LGBT student organizations.
David

David is a sophomore at Caudill College majoring in social science education and a foreign language. A White male, David lived most of his life in a suburban town outside of a major southern city but now lives with his parents in a rural area. David chose to attend Caudill because he enjoyed his experiences participating in a dual enrollment program while in high school. While David is out to some friends and work colleagues, he has not shared his sexual orientation with his parents because he fears they will disown him. David works two jobs in order to attend college. At both work sites, he has shared his sexual orientation. When he graduates from Caudill, David plans to attend Southeast University to complete his undergraduate degree in education. Then, David plans to pursue an advanced degree in an effort to become a college professor.

Jack

Jack, a Latino student, lives at home with his parents in a rural southern town. A sophomore at Caudill College, Jack, who is not openly out to anyone other than a few gay male friends he met on the internet, chose Caudill because he had participated in a dual enrollment program during high school. Jack plans to continue his academic career at University of Southeast. He is majoring in psychology and biology with hopes to attend medical school to study AIDS. Jack is involved on campus and works a part-time job at an off-campus restaurant.

Mike

A first-year student at Caudill College, Mike is an English major who hopes to work as a journalist after completing his undergraduate degree at University of Southeast. Mike, who is White, lives at home with his family. His family does not know that he identifies as a gay male. Yet, Mike has shared his sexual orientation with several classmates and professors whom have
all been respectful of his choice. Even though Mike was accepted at several other institutions, Mike chose to attend Caudill College because it defrayed costs.

**Forrest**

A White student from a suburban southern town, Forrest is majoring in political science at Caudill College. He does not identify as a gay male while at school because he fears that his family, with whom he resides, would discover his sexual orientation. Furthermore, he is concerned that openly identifying as a gay man would hurt his chances at pursuing a career in politics or the military. Forrest, a freshman, plans to transfer to a four-year school in Washington, DC. Once he transfers, he will consider his options for being more open about his sexual orientation. Meanwhile, he does have a close circle of gay male friends whom he met through the internet and local gay bars.

**Lance**

Lance is a senior at the University of Southeast majoring in advertising. He plans to work in an advertising firm in a major southern city once he completes his degree. A White male who grew up in a suburban town outside a major southern city, Lance came out to his family and friends during his tenure at Southeast. Lance is currently involved with the advertising club and the LGBT Resource Center.

**Jacob**

A first-year student at the University of Southeast, Jacob is a linguistics major who grew up in a suburban southern town prior to attend college. Jacob is heavily involved in political activities including LGBT activism. He has come out to his mother, aunt, and friends while attending Southeast with mixed responses. After graduation, Jacob, a White male, would like to
open a clothing store, and plans to finance this business venture with the profits from his services as a language translator. Jacob chose Southeast because he was accepted during early decision.

**Matt**

An African American junior from a rural southern town, Matt is a junior majoring in psychology and women’s studies at the University of Southeast. Matt began openly identifying about four months prior to participating in this study even though he had a same-sex relationship with his freshman roommate two years earlier. He chose Southeast because his freshman roommate, who was a high school friend, encouraged him to attend. Matt hopes to be a stay-at-home father and has no post-graduate aspirations other than finding a man to support him.

**Harry**

Harry is a junior, English major at University of Southeast who grew up in a suburban southern town. After graduation, he plans to pursue a Master of Arts in Teaching to become an English teacher. Harry’s family is a highly conservative and Christian. While Harry has shared his sexual orientation with his friends and brother, he has not shared it with anyone else. In fact, he waited to come to college to identify more openly as gay. Harry works several hours a week in an office in the Division of Student Affairs and volunteers in the LGBT Office.

**Themes**

Several themes emerged from the data that directly answer the research questions posed in this study. First, themes that describe how gay male college students described their friendships with other gay male college students included: a) uniquely meaningful, b) sexual attraction, c) friendship hierarchy, and d) familial support. Second, themes that emerged that illustrate how these gay male friendships affect their collegiate experiences included: a) culturally pressured body image, b) guides through gay culture, and c) fundamental support
mechanism. Third, emergent themes related to the role gay male friendships have on identity development included: a) essential when coming out, b) comparisons to gay males, c) integrated sexual identity. Finally, themes that emerged relating to the impact that institutional type has on gay male friendships included: a) academic validity, b) resource availability, c) place of residence, and d) visible support.

These themes emerged from examining the photographs and interviews of 12 college students using a multiple case study approach. Each participant’s photographs and interview transcripts were reviewed separately before considering all photographs and transcripts together. Initial themes and transcripts were shared with participants with their comments also considered. To preserve the integrity of participants’ comments, the researcher did not alter the quotations used throughout this chapter to illustrate themes. While some quotations use improper grammar and slang language, making corrections to quotations may have impacted the meaning and candor of participants’ comments.

Describing Gay Male Friendships in College

Themes that illustrate how gay male college students described their friendships with other gay male college students included: a) uniquely meaningful, b) sexual attraction, c) friendship hierarchy, and d) chosen family.

Uniquely, Meaningful Relationships

Consistently throughout interviews, participants made clear distinctions regarding how their gay male friendships differed in meaningful ways from any other relationships. Participants distinguished these relationships as special and unique. Participants discussed how shared experiences of identifying as a gay male made these friendships between gay men uniquely meaningful. For instance, Jacob, a first-year student at Southeast, stated, “It definitely is easier
trying to talk to someone who already knows what you’re trying to say.” Specifically, participants compared their gay male friendships most closely with their heterosexual female friendships, but participants were clear that distinctions existed. Another example of a comment that suggests this theme is from Lance who explained:

I have straight female friends. I can’t be completely open. I mean, I can but it doesn’t mean that it’s connected and it’s rare that I’m able to get across those things. It’s so easy with these two guys.

Another example of this theme would include comments from Josh, a junior at Ward, who discussed how gay male friends better understand experiences compared to other friends who are not gay men. Josh stated:

Of course, there is also being able to understand the other in that. Like, I know what you’re going through. I can certainly understand your experiences better than my heterosexual female friends can understand my experiences.

Melvin also commented not only on how special his gay male friends are but also what he seeks in regard to these friendships. To illustrate these friendships, he took a picture of a painting that a friend gave him (Figure 1). Melvin commented:

This is a painting that my friend did for me and it is of me. I thought it was appropriate. It is just two boys laying on the grass with one, and that would be me, with his head on the other’s chest. And it is depicting for me with regards to friendship compassion and love is what I want from my friendships.

**Sexual Attraction**

Sexual attraction between gay male friends emerged as a theme in regards to how participants described these friendships. Sexual attraction included both when the participants
faced their sexual attractions to their friends and/or participants who were the objects of their friends’ sexual attraction. Comments that might suggest this theme included Melvin’s description of how he is concerned with how gay men engage in sexual behaviors with their friends. He used a picture of his nightstand that featured a condom, necklace, and coins on it (Figure 2). Melvin stated:

This is my nightstand. As you can see, it is the Trojan, mint flavored something condom. I don’t know. I just thought the condom was important. With friendships, there’s a lot of promiscuity going on in the gay community and a lot at Ward. I fell into some of that but not as much as some other people who I have met. I guess that shows the down part to being gay and how friendships can lead to other things. I guess you expect that when you have people who are attracted to one other. I don’t know. It just bothers me that so much casual sex and stuff that goes on. I think it just shows a part of gay friendships.

Jeremiah also described the challenges of managing sexual attraction between gay men who are friends. He stated:

I think that it is always possible that you could find yourself attracted to them or to the same people and that could sort of invite some kind of competition. It could put a strain on friendships.

Forrest, a Caudill student, described the awkwardness of remaining friends with another gay male after engaging in sexual behavior. Forrest said:

Most of my gay male friendships have some level of sexual tension. There are friends who I have hooked up with and those that I haven’t. I know that the ones I haven’t just aren’t my type. The ones that I have hooked up with tend to have a bit more awkwardness when sex is discussed. It’s like I know what is in their pants. So, it is weird.
Matt, a Southeast student, also shared that he had sex with the majority of his gay male friends. He also took a photograph of a book entitled Sex Tips for Gay Guys that he and his friends used (Figure 3). Matt commented:

> Sex tips for gay guys. I have had sex with most of my friends. So, my friends and I like to look at it. It’s not that I’m having a lot of sex but it’s nice to know what to do when the situation arises.

**Friendship Hierarchy**

Another theme that emerged involved how participants differentiate between their close gay male friends from gay males with whom they were not as close. Participants used a hierarchy to refer to distinguish their close friends from others. Comments that suggest this theme include those from Cain, a Ward student, feels that his close friends differ from some other people who consider him their friend. He said:

> Lots of people think that they are your friend but I don’t want them to be my friends. Well, a lot of them are the kind of gay people that I don’t want to be a part of. They do coke and ex. They want to hook up with each other. They think I’m attractive. I don’t like that. Gross. I don’t like the games. I don’t need to be friends with them. I like mine. I trust them and they are similar to me.

Josh, another Ward student, felt similarly in that he differentiates between his friends and other gay men. Josh even hypothesizes that his friends are not friends with other gay men because their interests vary widely. Josh commented:

> I don’t feel like I fit into the mainstream gay scene or population. I’m aware of that. My friends, my small group of friends and I talk about why we’re so not interested in going to this club or taking crystal meth and dance all night. Why is it that we sit around and
talk about books or world health problems or languages? It seems so different. To find other gay males who are like that, it is kind of weird. There are not many of us. So, we realize that we’re different from other people. I guess what I’m alluding to is fitting in in the gay community, too. That’s something that’s challenging because I’m not like some of the other gay guys.

Mike, a student at Caudill, also commented about his friends and other gay men who claim to be his friend. Mike specifically places some importance on the location of his interactions with these other gay men. Mike said:

There are lots of people who say that they are your friend. You know, you see them in a club and they are all about you. Um, you know, the high-pitched voices and squeals of recognition. I, um, don’t think of them as my close friends. They are just bar buds. My close gay male friends are few but really mean a great deal to me.

Jacob, a Southeast student, offered that his friendships mirror concentric circles. Jacob describes that his closest friends are situated near the center with less meaningful friendships represented by the outer circles. He particularly focuses on how he uses the term friends only with his closest friends and others are termed acquaintances.

Um, sort of my view on friendship in general, I sort of view interpersonal friendships as giant circles. In the middle is you, right around you are your closest friends that are a few people. Then, right outside of them toward the edges are people that you might call friends but I usually call them um my acquaintances. I think most people call them friends. A lot of things that I talked about are those masses and not necessarily my closest friends. The closest friends are more the ones who’ve helped me feel comfortable with myself. The people on the peripheral are important too.
Familial Support

Several participants described their friendships as familial or as the family they have chosen. Not only did several participants comment that they feared rejection from their biological families, but also felt a particularly familial bond to their gay male college friends. Comments that suggest this theme include those from Josh, a Ward student, who compares his friends to a family. Josh stated, “Um, well, I think because of our circumstances we’re pretty close. I mean, we’re like family. So, it’s like we’re together and we have to stick together.” Josh also commented that one of his gay male friendships mirrors that of a brotherly relationship. He also offered that he feels that explicit sharing and their shared experiences as an underrepresented group helped cultivate this familial bond. Josh said:

My one friend that I consider him my brother except I tell him things that I wouldn’t tell a brother if I had a brother. You know, we know the most intimate secrets of our lives.

And it’s because we’re united in this oppression.

Jack, a Caudill student who lives at home with is parents, described how having gay male friends helps him cope with a possibly unsupportive biological family. He stated:

My family would flip out if they knew I was gay. So, in many ways, my gay friends are the family of choice. I hope that my family comes around but I know these guys will always be here for me regardless of what um my biological relatives think about me being gay.

Forrest, another Caudill student who resides with his parents, discussed the high level of support that his gay male friends provide. He also mentions that his paradigm related to how he defines family might move beyond just his biological family to include his gay male friends. Forrest said:
I get so much support um from my gay friends. It really is like they are my family because um I like share so much stuff with them. I call them first to tell them good news. I share my intimate secrets with like all of them. So, I guess um I’m redefining what family is for me.

How Gay Male Friendships Affect the Collegiate Experience

To answer the next research question, the researcher scoured transcripts and photographs to find how gay male friendships affect the collegiate experience. Themes that emerged included: a) culturally pressured body image, b) guides through gay culture, and c) fundamental support mechanisms. This section will outline comments that suggest these themes.

Culturally Pressured Body Image

Participants discussed how their friendships influenced their body images. From dieting to eating disorders, participants described pressure from gay men, including their gay male friends, to have a certain body type. Therefore, a theme of a culturally pressured body image emerged from data. Comments that suggest this theme included Cain, a Ward student, discussed why he chose to take a photograph of diet books to describe how his gay male friendships have affected his collegiate experience (Figure 4). He also describes how he copes with the pressure in gay culture to possess a certain body image. Cain stated:

First is a picture is a picture of books about dieting. They are all about weight loss. I took this picture because, while not specifically my group of friends even though they involved in it have made me a lot more conscious about what I eat and working out a lot. They make jokes about how it’s tough to be gay because you have to spend eight hours a week in the gym. I mean, I’m in fairly good shape and I eat healthy anyway but I see it in now people about what they want to eat and how they balance their meals and how often
they go to the gym and how they complain about this or that or they have to look good when they go to certain clubs and everybody’s shirts are off. You don’t want to be the one kid who is soft and not cut. I haven’t changed how I eat because I really don’t care. I just keep my shirt on but it makes me more aware of my health. Everyone wants to look good but it’s not because we’re going to have our shirts off and there is a motive for it.

Melvin, a Ward student, described how his gay male friends’ aspirations toward a single body type led, in part, to him developing anorexia and bulimia while in college. Melvin’s photograph of a small shirt represents his struggle with eating disorders (Figure 5). He commented:

OK. Well, when I came to Ward. I developed an eating disorder and lost a significant amount of weight. I mean that wasn’t specifically because of the gay community, but there are a lot of gay people especially in the Ward community striving for this one image. I think this is a representation of me and dealing with anorexia and then bulimia. And then that lasted about a year until I saw someone and got help. Now, I’m like back to a normal weight. I thought that was a personal way to show how Ward has affected me and my friendships. I mean, I know a lot of gay men who have some form an eating disorder.

Matt, a Southeast student who began identifying just four months before the interview, discussed his plans for managing his weight by drinking diet sodas and working out daily. Matt now socializes with gay men who are just as attractive and feels that having a certain body type will aide him in competing with other gay men. To illustrate his thoughts, Matt took a photograph of a water bottle (Figure 6). He said:

Water bottle. I’ve become a lot more conscious of what I eat and drink. Um, I drink a lot of Diet Coke and Coke Zero and Diet Sprite in hopes that I won’t get fat. I’m hitting up
the gym everyday next semester. When I wasn’t gay, I didn’t have to worry about getting into this whole stereotype about what a gay male should be. Everyone I hung out with wasn’t exactly attractive and I didn’t have a lot of competition for girls. So, yea, now I have to stay fit.

David, a Caudill student, described that the process of identifying openly as a gay man required making significant changes to how he looked. He felt that coming out was easier if he were more attractive. David commented:

Another reshaping thing. I had hair down to here. I was 270 pounds. I decided that I was not going to come out to my gay friends and stuff because I hadn’t. So, they didn’t know. So, I decided before they knew I was going to do something. So, I started working out, running, cut my hair and all that to reshape my image. So, it would be a little better when I came out. I would be a little better when I came out. So, I would be more in the whole…I mean, I don’t look good but um I look better than I did um which will put me better up than I was. Redoing my image.

Jeremiah, who attends Ward, took photographs of the inside and outside of the on-campus gym (Figure 7 & 8). He took these photographs to illustrate how one of his gay male friendships includes visiting the gym to exercise. Specifically, this friend taught Jeremiah how to exercise. Jeremiah stated:

He (my gay male friend) has also taught me how to workout. This is a picture of the gym and the outside of the gym and inside of the gym where I spend more time than I ever thought I would spend in the gym anyway.
Guides Through Gay Culture

Themes that emerged that illustrate how these gay male friendships affect their collegiate experiences included how participants felt their gay male friends assisted them in navigating the gay culture at their institution. Whether going to gay bars, engaging in activist activities, or acting in a certain way to fit in, participants relied upon their gay male friends as guides to help navigate gay culture. Comments that suggest this theme included Jacob’s description of trying to embrace theater productions. He specifically attributes theater as something that gay men attend. Therefore, since he identifies as a gay man, he must also enjoy going to the theater. Jacob, a Southeast freshman, explained his photograph as the following:

This is the logo of one of the drama productions (Figure 9). I took a picture of this because I tried to embrace the drama culture. I guess, a lot of gay men like the theater so I was like if this is where the gay men are it’s where I guess this is where I need to start going and start to liking. It’s rough. I haven’t managed to stay awake in one so far. I’m going to one tonight. So, we’ll see.

Harry discussed how some of the gay men he met at Southeast’s LGBT student organization have served as benchmarks for his involvement. Yet, he also realized that this type of intense activism was not what he wanted. Harry commented:

This is a picture of the bulletin board in the LGBT Resource Center where they put all the information for the Lambda Alliance (Figure 10). I took it because I’ve met gay males here. I’ve not been to the meeting here lately because well, um, it’s a great activist group but um when you’re just getting into the whole community it’s sort of like you want to just meet people and get to know them than jumping in and doing all this activist thing.
Cain also described meeting other gay male students. He specifically describes how he solicited help from these students in venturing out into a gay bar for the first time at Ward. Cain stated:

Then, I was like you know what’s going on in town. I trust you. So, please take me out.

I’ll probably cling to your side the whole night. Just don’t mind me. It would mean more for me to be there than you would know. He was like sure. So, once he started taking me out more frequently, we’re like good friends. I’ve been that friend for other people there.

Fundamental Support Mechanisms

Several participants discussed how their gay male friendships in college were fundamental to their success during their time at college. Participants repeatedly addressed that their friendships had a dramatic impact on their ability to cope and, thus, succeed in the collegiate environment. Therefore, this theme emerged. Comments that suggest this theme might include Jack’s description of his invisible support group that aides him in navigating the Caudill College culture. Jack’s photograph of the exterior of a bookstore elicited this comment (Figure 11). Jack stated:

Whether it’s like the bookstore or coffee shop, I like knowing that I have this invisible support group here. No one really knows that we all know each other. I mean, it’s only like four of us but it is um is crucial to surviving classes at Caudill. If I didn’t have them, wouldn’t know what to do.

Jeremiah, who attends Ward, discussed the comfort he takes in the commonalities that his gay male friends have. These commonalities come from attending the same institution, their gay identities, and other interests. Jeremiah commented:
But also, I mean, it is just nice to have someone to call up and go see a film with or go get coffee with. Um, and just talk about school, men, what have you. They have similar but not identical perspectives just because they are both gay and in the same environment. They have similar pressures going on.

Josh, who is also a Ward student, outlined how having friends with shared experiences, even negative experiences, bonds friends. Josh also commented on how other underrepresented groups act similarly at his institution by socializing together at lunch. Josh said:

So, having people around you who are sensitive to your experiences and what you’re feeling, that’s pretty important. Um, I mean, it’s why you see de facto segregation at lunch. People you know who are united by their experiences and unfortunately by their oppressions. So, what would I say to a person? I would say that I understand that’s true but go out and make friends.

How Gay Male Friendships Affect Identity Development

To answer the third research question, the researcher looked for comments related to how gay male friendships influenced identity development. Identity development included but was not limited to sexual, racial, and gender identities. Emergent themes related to the role gay male friendships have on identity development included: a) essential when coming out, b) comparisons to gay male friends, and c) integrated sexual identity.

Essential When Coming Out

Participants discussed that their friendships with gay males were essential resources for them when they started sharing their sexual orientation with others. Participants reflected that these friendships helped immensely during this juncture in their sexual identity development. Therefore, a theme that gay male friendships were essential when coming out emerged.
Comments that suggest this theme included Mike’s description of the importance his gay male friends at Caudill played managing his coming out process. He used a photograph of road signs at an intersection to describe this thought (Figure 12). Mike said:

I felt like coming out was a bit of a crossroads but I finally had someone to talk to. I mean, when you spend twenty years into your life, most gay people when they’re adolescents know. It’s not like they are magically one day like, ‘Oh, I’m gay.’ It’s like they know it deep down. When you spend that long fighting who you are and trying to change who you are, you have nobody to talk to about it.

Harry, a Southeast student, commented that his gay male friends assisted him in exploring various aspects of the gay community. He used a picture of the exterior of a gay bar to illustrate these comments (Figure 13). Harry stated:

I think they (my friends) got me out into the world. Um, I think there have been some things that they introduced me to that I like and some things that I don’t. I like going out to the gay bar.

Mike also describes how essential his gay male friends were to his coming out process. Mike, a Caudill student, even attempted to share his sexual orientation but only succeeded once he had gay male friends. Mike commented:

I tried to come out without my um gay friends. It really didn’t work. I was alone and didn’t know um anything. How do you meet people? How do you deal with people? How do you survive? Coming out was hard but thank God I had my friends. They made it so much easier.
In discussing the rewards of having gay male friends, Cain described the confidence he gained from coming out. He also discussed how having friends he could trust at Ward provided a foundation for coming out. Cain said:

The obvious growth of being in the closet to being out of the closet. From being uncomfortable to being comfortable. I mean, there’s also growth in realizing that I don’t need to compensate for things that I don’t like about myself. I can talk about whatever I want. I don’t have to worry about the other kids here from my town finding out and telling my parents or whatever or my brother who goes here and is a freshman. I can say whatever I want. I can go wherever I want and do whatever I want. That’s great. I never felt like that before. So, being here and having people I trust that’s the growth I really like.

Comparisons to Gay Male Friends

Participants discussed how they continue to compare their behaviors to those of their gay male friends. Several comments specifically suggested that participants used their gay male friends in college as benchmarks to assess how they should behave and identify. Therefore, a theme emerged of comparison between participants and their gay male friends. Comments that suggest this theme included Melvin stating that one of the rewards of having gay male friendships in college is having role models. Melvin, a Ward student, said:

My personal growth. Um. I guess accepting myself because I see other people who have accepted themselves. It provides a pretty clear model about how to go about that especially the two people I mentioned earlier. I’ve really grown because of Ward. I mean, these are people that I’ll probably keep in touch with for a long time.
David, a Caudill student, felt conflicted because his interest in cats is not congruent with his gay male friends. David, who also reshaped his image when coming out, was looking to his gay male friends for what to like in college. David commented:

Um, another conflict of interest that I run into is that I’m a cat person. I love cats and I can’t find any gay people who like cats. None of them. None of them like cats. They all want the um little really ugly little dogs with the long hair that they can put bowties on and stuff on. Um, so, every time I say that I’m a cat person they are like oh my God. I love cats. I can’t help it. Hopefully, someday I can find somewhere that I can be happy with cats and music.

Matt, a junior at Southeast, also looked to his gay male friends to gauge his tastes. Using a photograph of a shoe store window display (Figure 14), Matt described his struggle with why his gay male friends are interested in shoes when he has no such interest. He said:

Shoes . A lot of my friends seem to like shoes. I’m trying to get into the whole shoe thing but I’m happy with my one pair of shoes that I wear all the time. But I’m really working hard on trying to like shoes.

Integrated Sexual Identity

Participants discussed how their friendships helped them see their sexual orientation as one of many aspects of their identities. Participants specifically mentioned their movement from a more gay-centered identity to integrating their sexual orientation identity into their other identities. Seeing these comments, a theme of integration emerged. Comments that suggest this theme include Melvin’s description of how his sexual orientation does not consume his identity. Melvin, a Ward junior, said:
I mean it just seems like, hmm, um, it doesn’t seem like just one aspect of a person’s life just say who they sleep with really should bring people together. It is just one small aspect of your entire personality.

Mike, who has been out for two years and attends Caudill, also commented that his sexual orientation does not define his identity. In fact, he remembers when he had a more gay-centered identity. Mike stated:

When I first came out, I was um fascinated by everything that was um gay. I was so proud that I had survived being in the closet. It was a phase that I think you have to go through in order for um it, you know, being gay, to be just a part of you rather than the main part of you.

Josh, a junior at Ward, also made comments suggesting that his sexual orientation is an integrated aspect of his identity. Josh, who has openly identified as a gay male for over six years, illustrated his integrated sexual identity when discussing his peers who just began identifying as a gay male. Josh said:

I feel like there are people who are on a different part of that winding road. They are still very much interested in talking about gay issues or the gay scene or just gay people doing things together seems so fascinating to them. Where I’m like I’ve been there and done that. I don’t need all gay friends. I do things with gay friends that I can’t do with non-gay friends. I embrace the fact that it is one of many parts of me and I’m no longer so um exotic. I’m no longer like it’s so cool now or the identity. Now, I’m like yea it’s OK to be gay. So, finding other people who are like that and who kind of stimulate that growth and kind of growing together that’s something that is a result of college.
How Institutional Type Affects Gay Male Friendships

Finally, to respond to how institutional type impacts gay male friendships, the research compared data based upon their institutional type. Caudill, Ward, and Southeast represent three different types of institutions. Caudill is a two-year college with no resources allocated to LGBT students or LGBT studies courses offered. Ward, a highly selective private institution, has allocated resources for an LGBT center since 1994 and offers LGBT studies courses. Southeast, a flagship public institution, just added resources for an LGBT center and courses. Themes that emerged relating to the impact that institutional type has on gay male friendships included: a) academic validity, b) resource availability, c) place of residence, and d) visible support;

Academic Validity

Academic validity emerged as a theme related to how institutional type impacts gay male friendships because participants’ comments reflect that academic courses on LGBT issues or the avoidance of LGBT issues in courses impacted their friendships and collegiate experiences. For example, Jack, who attends Caudill where they do not offer any LGBT studies courses, said, “I wish that I could just sign up for a gay and lesbian class to meet some people like me.” David, another Caudill student, discussed how he intentionally enrolled in courses that he hoped faculty members would include information related to sexual orientation. David took a picture of one of the classrooms where such a course occurred (Figure 15). In fact, several courses were suppose to cover sexual orientation but omitted it. These omissions led David to feel that his identity David was invalidated. David stated:

So, at school I’ve never ran into anything anti-gay but I never it’s not something that’s talked about here. I took two sociology classes and two psychology classes all with hopes that I would finally have a class where something would be said about gay people or meet
other gay people. There would be a whole chapter in each of the textbooks but the teacher
would skip over it. It was like sometimes when you’re at school it would be cool to have
access to a class or to parts of a class where you’re talking about human growth and
development that you want to hear something that would relate to you and give you
comfort. It’s like you want them to talk about me for once. I mean, I can’t talk about it at
home. I’m not suppose to talk about it at work. Finally, at school, some other people can
get educated too and I’ll finally be able to vent so.

Even though Southeast offers courses that address sexual orientation, Matt struggled with a
faculty member who failed to understand the sensitive topic of identifying as a gay male. Matt,
who had only been openly identifying for a short time, felt invalidated in this academic
environment. Matt said:

The issue of sexual orientation is a really touchy one in the classroom. I took this human
sexuality course this summer and we talked about homosexuality. The teacher um asked
if anyone was homosexual. Of course, I didn’t raise my hand. I knew two other guys in
the classroom who were also um homosexual and they didn’t raise their hand either. It’s
just. I don’t know. You don’t feel comfortable expressing your sexual orientation or
telling people that you’re gay in those classes or most classes.

Harry, another Southeast student, discussed the benefit of enrolling in a gay and lesbian studies
course by taking a picture of his course packet (Figure 16). The opportunity to learn more about
his sexual orientation and meet other students who identify as gay men validated him. Harry
commented:

Mainly, I think the best thing is that this is a picture of the course packet in women’s
studies or gay and lesbian studies that I’ve been taking. I think it’s great that Southeast
has the women’s studies program because I’ve been able to meet other people and learn about the theory of sexuality. It has been great for me. It’s something really good about the climate because they have a program like this at Southeast. I’ve met some people from this class in groups. Maybe, we’ll become friends or maybe not. It was nice to meet them anyway.

Jeremiah, who has taken several LGBT studies courses at Ward, agreed that offering students are often validated through the curriculum offered. Jeremiah also discussed the social opportunities to engage with not only other gay men but also allies. Jeremiah said:

I’m pretty sure that an LGBT studies curriculum would really help with our credibility as a minority. You see it with women and racial groups. I see it with our LGBT classes. People see that it is an issue. Plus, they can see who feels similar to them or who, at least, wants to um learn more about heterosexism, homophobia, and life as queer.

**Resource Availability**

Resources and the lack of them emerged as a theme in how institutional types affected gay male friendships. Students at Ward and Southeast have resources devoted to engaging the LGBT population while Caudill did not. Participants at Ward and Southeast mentioned their access to these resources while participants from Caudill describe their struggle with their lack of resources. Comments that describe this theme include Josh’s description of the LGBT center at Ward. Josh, who took a picture of the office space, has worked in this center for two years (Figure 17). Josh said:

So, um, here at college, one of the important things that I wanted to mention is this is a picture of the Office of LGBT Life. Um, I think having this office there and cultivating this very organized and feeling of community and presence of queer people in college . It
has helped me not only connect with other people and it gives a sense of normalcy but also probably I have met some of my friends through the events put on by the office or the fact that there is a student group supported by the office. It’s a social space. It’s a space of support, understanding. It’s a safe space. Yea, um, I think the Office has played a vital role in my experience in college.

Even though the LGBT center at Southeast had only opened a few months prior to the interviews, Harry already realized that the LGBT center could serve as a way for him to meet other gay males. Harry’s picture of the LGBT center was used to elicit his comments (Figure 18). Harry commented, “I’ve been volunteering at the Resource Center. So, I’ve been able to meet some people, other gay males, and just sort of interact.” David, a sophomore at Caudill, described his difficulty in accessing the gay-straight student organization. David’s challenges included not only the logistics of finding the organization’s meeting, but also his internal struggle with attending a meeting.

There is nothing other than the Caudill College Alliance. It’s a gay-straight alliance but they don’t say that. Basically, I want to really bad. It’s one of those things where I’m a chicken. I mean, a room full of gay people. I mean I don’t know how many go. I mean, I walked by a couple of times to try to get an eye. I mean there are five or six but at the point that I was at… I mean, now, I’m use to going out to lunch with my friends everyday and things like that. At that point, it was like a big step um to come out and walk into a room full of people and say, ‘Hey, I’m David. I’m gay. Um, I’m here to be in your club.’ More than anything, I was really, really nervous.
Place of Residence

Participants repeatedly mentioned their place of residence and how it impacts their friendships and collegiate experiences. Therefore, place of residence emerged as a theme. As mentioned earlier, each institution differs in their residency issues. Ward requires freshman and sophomores to live on campus, Southeast requires just freshmen, and Caudill does not offer on-campus housing. Comments that suggest this theme include Josh’s depiction of how the environment of residence halls provides a connection that is lost for off-campus students. He took a picture of some food that he makes for his friends when they visit (Figure 19). Josh has lived on campus throughout his collegiate career and was employed by Ward’s Office of Residence Life. Josh said:

I would say that the structure of dormitory life or an apartment at college like this lends itself to socializing around cooking and food. Whereas, if we all lived in different apartments off campus we might not be able to just come over and cook. So, that’s just something about how my relationships in college of how are affected by the architecture or the physical state of the dorms.

Lance, a Southeast student and residence hall employee, discussed how his residence hall experience allowed him to connect with likeminded people by taking a picture of his residence hall (Figure 20). He also described how the college environment, in this context a residence hall, would allow people opportunities to expand their views. Lance commented:

I have friends from the dorm for instance who are interested um in gay rights and stuff because um they know me and um they’ve met my boyfriend. It kind of builds in their mind. So, it would be nicer if we had more liberals but it’s still in college. It’s harder for
people to be close minded. In the business world, you might have more to lose but not in college. It’s a good time to start building that ability to be out.

Several participants lived off-campus with most Caudill participants living with their families. Jack described his difficulty navigating his sexual orientation while living with a close-knit Latino family. Jack, who attends Caudill, said:

Living at home with my family, um, isn’t exactly the best thing for me but I can go over to some of my friends’ apartments and hang out. Being Latino, my family does a lot of bonding. So, sneaking off to just get some oxygen is, um, like not as acceptable. I wish we had dorms. I can’t wait to go transfer just so I can have some privacy.

While living on campus was a positive experience for some participants, Harry described his struggle with a homophobic roommate during his first year at Southeast using a photograph of his freshman residence hall (Figure 21). Thankfully, the residence hall staff managed the conflict effectively. Harry, who is now a junior, said:

Um, this picture represents a really bad experience. I lived in the dorms freshman and sophomore years. Unless you know someone, they stick you with a random person. I was unlucky enough to get a big homophobe as a roommate. Luckily, he moved out after the fall semester. It was very trying. He would get really drunk and stuff and start insulting me. I was able to talk luckily to the RA and get things worked out. It was a pretty tense situation. You’re living with someone who you know hates you. Especially now that they are requiring freshmen to live on campus with people you don’t know and don’t know how they will feel about you. I’ve been able to meet some friends in the student commons. It’s very relaxed and cool.
Visible Support

Participants looked for visible signs of support for LGBT students at their institutions. These signs of support impacted their friendships because it allows them to look for indicators that the culture accepts gay men. Participants also used these indicators to determine how to find gay friends. Comments that reflect this theme included Forrest, a Caudill student, who reported that he searched his campus for signs of support. While he only could refer to one community member who he knew identified as an ally, he attributed this lack of visible support to his difficult experience finding gay male friends:

I’ve looked and looked for signs that someone at Caudill is accepting. Other than one faculty member in student activities, I really can’t name anyone. I wish we were more open. I mean, it isn’t hostile here but, um, just nonexistent. This makes it so hard to find friends of any kind. I mean, you don’t want to put your true self out there if you don’t know the response you’ll get.

Harry, a Southeast student, identified that staff members identifying as gay men aided him in feeling more comfortable about his sexual orientation. He also mentioned feeling more comfortable at work because he knew others understood him better. Harry said:

I work in the student center. A lot of my supervisors or higher ups are gay. I’ve been able to build friendly relationships, working relationships with them. It’s great just have um, you know, people who are higher up who understand.

Jacob spoke about how seeing a table sponsored by the LGBT student organization at a summer session of new student orientation excited him about the climate at Southeast. He also followed up with that organization once he began his college career which resulted in Jacob meeting other gay men. Jacob said:
When I was here at Orientation, Lambda had a table at the activities fair. So, I was like, “Yay.” It would have never happened at my high school. So, I was interested from the beginning. So, I came to the first meeting and met some people there.

Jeremiah also commented about how visible support at Ward helped enhance the climate for gay men. Jeremiah, a junior, took a picture of the t-shirt he mentions as visible support (Figure 22). He was involved with the LGBT student organization that made the t-shirt. Jeremiah stated:

Ward seems to have made great strides toward that with the t-shirts that say, ‘We’ve been gay friendly since 1992. What about you?’ It did spur the university and also reaching out to other communities like the city as a whole.

Summary

This chapter presents the results as it relates to the four research questions posed in this study. The results reported revealed very interesting patterns and trends that can be used to respond to those questions. First, themes that describe how gay male college students described their friendships with other gay male college students included: a) uniquely meaningful b) sexual attraction c) friendship hierarchy d) familial support. Second, themes that emerged that illustrate how these gay male friendships affect their collegiate experiences included: a) culturally pressured body image; b) guides through gay culture; c) fundamental support mechanism. Third, emergent themes related to the role gay male friendships have on identity development included: a) essential when coming out b) comparisons to gay males c) integrated sexual identity. Finally, themes that emerged relating to the impact that institutional type has on gay male friendships included: a) academic validity; b) resources availability c) place of residence d) visible support. A discussion of these results and their implications for future practice and recommendations for additional research are provided in the final chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore friendships between gay male college students. The study addressed several research questions including how gay male college students described their gay male friendships, how these friendships affected their collegiate experiences, how these friendships affected their identity development, and how institutional type affected friendships between gay males in college. The study was qualitative in nature using multiple case studies to explore these research questions. Specifically, four participants at three different types of institutions (private, public, two-year) (N=12) took photographs to describe their gay male friendships and how those friendships affected their collegiate experience. After developing those photographs, the researcher used the photographs as stimuli during a semi-structured interview. Data analysis occurred using the constant comparative method. Each participant’s photographs and interview transcripts were reviewed separately before considering all photographs and transcripts together.

The study’s findings parallel the research questions that guided this study. First, themes that describe how gay male college students described their friendships with other gay male college students included: a) uniquely meaningful, b) sexual attraction, c) friendship hierarchy, and d) familial support. Second, themes that emerged that illustrate how these gay male friendships affect their collegiate experiences included: a) culturally pressured body image, b) guides through gay culture, and c) fundamental support mechanism. Third, emergent themes related to the role gay male friendships have on identity development included: a) essential when
coming out, b) comparisons to gay males, and c) integrated sexual identity. Finally, themes that emerged relating to the impact that institutional type has on gay male friendships included: a) academic validity, b) resources availability, c) place of residence, and d) visible support.

Scholars and practitioners should remain cognizant of the limitations present in the study. Specifically, they should use caution when generalizing these findings to their gay male college students. Since this study was qualitative in nature, these findings, as in all qualitative studies, provide rich, descriptive information that answer the research questions rather than specific and predictive outcomes. Scholars and practitioners should be cautious to generalize because the sample in this study only included 12 participants. Specifically, these 12 participants may not represent a variety of developmental levels. Another limitation of the current study that readers should consider includes the fact that these 12 volunteers may differ from those who did not volunteer. Scholars and practitioners should certainly consider their environments and students in order to apply these findings rather than to generalize.

Even with these limitations, findings in this study have important implications for scholars and practitioners who work with gay male college students. As discussed earlier, higher education struggles to combat homophobia and heterosexism (Rhoades, 1995; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997). By knowing more about friendships between gay males in college, practitioners can harness these friendships to assist gay male students in successfully navigating institutional culture, improving their collegiate experiences, and facilitating their identity development. Scholars can utilize these findings to build upon the very limited available literature on gay males and their friendships. Specifically, these findings could be used to spur future research to explore gay male friendship groups or friendships between gay male students and heterosexual females.
The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings as they relate to the current literature. The chapter also includes a discussion of the implications for student affairs practice. Furthermore, this chapter outlines recommendations for future research on this topic.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore friendships between gay male students in college. Specifically, a sample of 12 self-identifying gay male college students, four participants at three institutions in the Southeast, was used to explore the following four research questions:

1. How do gay male college students describe their friendships with other gay male college students?
2. How do friendships between gay male college students affect their experiences in the collegiate environment?
3. What role does friendship with other gay male college students have on the identity development of gay male college students?
4. What impact does institutional type have on gay male friendships?

Descriptions of Friendships Between Gay Male College Students

Exploring how gay male college students described their friendships with other gay men served as the foundation for this study. The findings suggest that these gay male college students describe these friendships as extremely meaningful and different from other friendships. Since participants described these friendships as meaningful and unique, these findings differ from the literature on male friendships where researchers do not control for sexual orientation. Earlier studies suggest that men’s friendships include limited sharing and low levels of affection (Swain, 1989; Blietzner & Adams, 1992; Price, 1999). Conversely, the current study shows a clear theme of sharing and affection. For example, Melvin’s picture (Figure 1) showing two men holding
each other on a grassy field illustrated his desire to have friendships that include high levels of
love and compassion. Regardless to how long participants identified as a gay male, their
comments suggested that their gay male friendships were more meaningful than their other
relationships. Even though Cass (1986) might suggest increases in the value of these friendships
during the Identity Pride Stage followed by a decrease in the Identity Integration Stage, these
participants maintained the same level of meaningfulness regardless. Therefore, in understanding
how gay male college students describe their gay male friendships, the study uncovered a
difference from earlier studies related to men’s friendships in their descriptions of meaningful
friendships that include high levels of sharing between these gay men.

Because participants also repeatedly described sexual attraction as a part of their
friendships, sexual attraction became a theme for how they described these friendships. While
some participants discussed their disdain for promiscuous gay men, most participants
characterized sexual attraction as awkward but not abhorrent. For some participants, sexual
activities occurred at the start of friendships with gay men. For instance, Forrest commented that
he found it awkward to discuss sex with those friends whom he had sexual contact. Forrest best
illustrates this thought when he states, “It’s like I know what is in their pants. So, it’s weird.” The
very little research available on gay male friendships does not address this issue.

Finding that sexual attraction is a major component of gay male friendships in college
makes the researcher ponder if the issue of having sex with a friend in gay male friendships
mirrors the sexual tension between heterosexual males and females who identify only as friends.
In fact, researchers have found that sexual attraction remains a major barrier in friendships
between heterosexual males and females (O’Meara, 1989; Kalmijn, 2002). Even though
participants did not view sexual attraction as an issue in all of their gay male friendships, they
consistently commented that sexual attraction affected gay male friendships in college. One reason may be that young single gay men may be looking more for sexual partners than friends when initially meeting new gay men in college. Regardless, the sole commonality between gay male college students remains their homosexual orientation. If gay male college friends are sexually attracted, participants’ comments suggest that it changes the way they describe their friendships. For most participants, sexual attraction complicated their gay male friendships. Yet, the potential deterioration of these friendships was ameliorated by participants’ awareness that sexual attraction presented certain challenges in these friendships and the high value that they place upon these friends.

Furthermore, friendships may deteriorate because the awkwardness may take its toll especially if friends cannot agree on how to resolve the sexual tension. Rusbult (1980) described the social exchange theory of friendship where friends assess whether the benefits of friendship outweigh the costs. Using this theory of friendship, it seems that sexual attraction in friendship would need to be coupled with some other benefits in order for the gay male friendship to endure. While participants discussed the costs of sexual attraction, they did not attribute the awkwardness to the dissolution of these friendships. Therefore, the researcher surmises that gay male friendships might include some coping mechanism for offsetting the cost of sexual attraction. Otherwise, the negative impact of sexual attraction would likely lead to these friendships dissolving.

To address the emergent theme of friendship hierarchy, Fehr’s (2000) discussion on friendship formation, maintenance, and dissolution might be helpful. In such, she uses several factors to determine each part of this friendship life cycle. The friendship hierarchy theme fits with Fehr’s work in that she posits that individuals choose their friends based partly on
individual factors. Fehr posits that individuals choose their friends based partly on individual factors. Individual factors include the criteria that people utilize to screen people from becoming friends such as certain behaviors or values. Participants in this study clearly delineated between their close gay male friends and other gay men. Comments suggested that these participants did not wish to befriend gay male college students who exhibited such behaviors as engaging in sexual acts with friends, abusing alcohol and illegal drugs, and frequently partying. Participants were aware that some of these behaviors fit certain stereotypes about gay men, but their comments suggest that they have little interest in forging close friendships with those who engage in such behaviors.

Kocet (2002) also studied behaviors among gay male friends. He discussed in his Conceptual Model of Gay Male Friendship Networks that gay male friendships vary in their closeness. However, he does not discuss that gay men make distinctions about the closeness of friendships based on certain behaviors that are incongruent with their values. Kocet merely discussed that more sharing might lead to closer gay male friendships. The finding in the present study describing that gay male college students utilize a friendship hierarchy reflects Kocet’s findings. Yet, no other study has described finding that gay male college students use their personal values to guide their friendship selection. Possibly, gay male college students have a strong value system that they access in making decisions regarding how close they become with friends.

Given several earlier studies of gay male friendship suggest that gay men refer to the LGBT community as chosen family (Penn, 1997; Nardi, 1999; Wooline, 2000; Grant, 2002), it is not surprising that familial support emerged as a theme in the present study. The fraternal relationships between these gay male college students filled a support gap. As found in these
earlier studies, participants compared their friendships to their biological families who may or may not remain supportive should these families know about the participants’ sexual orientation. In fact, several participants looked to their gay male college friends for support because they anticipated very negative responses from families. Relying upon other gay male college students for such support is unique compared to most other minorities because parents and families are typically members of that minority group. Finding the support from these peer relationships allows gay male college students to receive it from very credible and empathetic sources.

Friendships Between Gay Male College Students Affect Their Collegiate Experiences

The present study also examined how friendships between gay male college students affected their collegiate experiences. From the findings related to this research question, these friendships had both positively and negatively affected these college students’ experiences. While no one friend was solely positive or negative, these friendships had key influences on participants’ collegiate experiences.

A primarily negative influence on the collegiate experience involved how these friendships influenced the body images of gay male college students. Therefore, culturally pressured body image emerged as a theme. While some comments describe how these friendships influenced a moderate awareness in health issues, most comments related to pressures to possess an ideal physique. For instance, participants’ photographs and accompanying comments related to diet books (Figure 4), extra-small t-shirts (Figure 5), water bottles (Figure 6), and gyms (Figures 7 & 8) all illustrate the pressure that gay male college students feel from their gay male friends to conform to a certain body image. Several participants even discussed how they revamped their wardrobes, hair styles, and physiques upon coming out. Most tragic, several participants stated they developed eating disorders as a result of the pressure.
Body image disorder literature suggests that gay men develop eating disorders more frequently than heterosexual men (Herzog, Bradburn, & Newman, 1990; Burroughs & Thompson, 2002; Russell & Keel, 2002). However, earlier research does not suggest that gay male friendships influence body image disorders. The results in this study offer that gay male friends work together to enhance each other’s body image in response to enormous cultural pressure to achieve a certain body image. These friends shared diet tips, encouraged exercise, and, consequently, often exacerbated the need to attain certain body image ideals. Given that body image disorder literature states that gay male culture pressures gay men into feeling negatively about their bodies (Burroughs & Thompson, 2002), this aspect of gay male friendships in college might be a coping mechanism to offset the cultural pressures. Conversely, these friendships may exacerbate the cultural pressures related to body image issues by glorifying idealized body images, degrading those who do not possess the ideal physique, and supporting the attainment of the ideal body image. Participants’ comments related to working out, sharing diet tips, and patronizing gay dance clubs with their gay male friendships suggest these possible negative outcomes. While these friendships varied regarding their positive or negative influences, culturally pressured body image emerged as a way that gay male friendships affected the collegiate experience.

Just as gay male friendships might assuage body image issues by offering strategies to offset cultural pressures, findings in this study show that these friendships are utilized to navigate gay culture in general. Participants spoke extensively about how they viewed their gay male friends as guides through gay culture. Therefore, guides through gay culture emerged as a theme. Since gay male college students may not have ventured into gay bars, participated in LGBT student organizations, or shared their sexual orientation with others, they rely upon their gay
male friends to ease anxiety related with experiencing gay culture. Cain, for instance, felt so relieved that his friends accompanied him on his first visit to a gay bar in his college town. Since his gay male friends had patronized this gay bar in the past, Cain used them as guides.

Having cultural guides is consistent with Kocet’s (2002) findings related to gay males establishing a social network. He found that one aspect of creating a social support network involved learning subculture norms. Certainly, gay male college students are trying to learn subculture norms and have visible support when they initially engage with the gay community. Comments suggested that gay male college students only utilize their friendships to navigate gay culture during the first few engagements. Once these gay men have experienced an aspect of gay culture, they have created a paradigm to use and no longer rely so heavily upon their friends as guides.

Gay male college students found comfort in their gay male friendships for a plethora of reasons. In fact, they relied upon these friendships so much that comments suggested that these friendships were fundamental support mechanisms during the collegiate experience. Literature related to college friendships describes them as major influences on behavior in college (Rose, 1984). Furthermore, literature suggests that gay male friendships fill voids in these men’s lives and help them navigate heterosexist environments (Peplau & Spalding, 2000; Rivers, 2002). The findings in this study confirm the existing literature. Specifically, these findings suggest that friendships between gay male college students dramatically affected their collegiate experiences. These friendships manifested as coping mechanisms, ameliorating oppression, and serving as primary support mechanisms. While institutions offer support to gay male college students through staff, programs, allocated space, and policies, participants mention negative experiences and anxiety that earlier researchers have also found (Rhoades, 1995; Engstrom & Sedlacek,
Having friends who have shared identities and provide fundamental support remained paramount for participants managing their collegiate experiences.

Friendships Between Gay Male College Students Affect Their Identity Development

Chickering and Reisser (1993) posit in their model that managing interpersonal relationships remains one aspect of psychosocial development. Certainly, these gay male college students viewed their interpersonal relationships with other gay men as a catalyst for growth. However, they primarily referred to identity development as it relates to their sexual identity development. Given the nature of the study and their awareness of the study’s purpose, participants limited their comments to how they had grown as gay men as opposed to a more holistic individual. Some may point to participants’ limiting comments as an indicator of a more pronounced sexual identity. Yet, the researcher suggests that the study’s purpose and focus on gay male friendships may have produced more comments related to sexual identity than any other.

From participants’ comments, findings suggest that these gay male college students rely heavily upon their gay male friends when coming out in college. Therefore, a theme emerged that these friendships were essential in coming out. Both Cass (1986) and D’Augelli (1994) offer that gay men try to make sense of their homosexual feelings and initially share their sexual orientation selectively. Cass suggests, in Stage Three, Identity Tolerance, that individuals seek out other gays and lesbians. She also places an emphasis on the importance of these interactions in fostering further development. For example, if individuals have positive interaction, then they advance in the model. Should individuals have negative interactions, they remain at this stage in the model.
Meanwhile, D’Augelli (1994) identifies several interrelated variables that influence LGB identity formation. Variables include interactive intimacies, personal subjectivities and action, and sociohistorical connections. Interactive intimacies include peer relationships along with romantic partners, community, and families. Given these variables, D’Augelli posits that six interactive processes continue throughout the lifespan. The first process involves recognizing homosexual feelings and attractions and sharing these feelings with others.

Both Cass and D’Augelli’s models value peer influence as catalyst for growth. Findings in this study showed that participants credit their gay male friendships as essential when coming out as gay males remain consistent with these models of sexual identity. For instance, Mike’s comments that “Coming out was hard but thank God I had my friends” best summarizes not only this theme, but also how important these friendships are to coming to terms with sexual orientation.

In coming to terms with their sexual orientations, participants repeatedly discussed comparing themselves to their gay male friends in order to determine how they should behave. As such, a theme emerged that gay male friends are used as comparisons. Specifically, gay male college students used their friends to benchmark a number of things including how to live openly as gay men and what topics or hobbies interest gay men. For example, Melvin’s comments illustrate his thoughts on using his friends as role models. He stated, “I guess accepting myself because I see other people who have accepted themselves.”

Meanwhile, others participants found their comparisons left them confounded because their interests or lack of interest in particular areas did not mirror what other gay men professed. For example, David professed an interest in cats but claimed that he “can’t find any gay people
who like cats.” Similarly, Matt is trying to develop an interest in shoes simply because his friends are interested in shoes.

In relating this finding to the literature on sexual identity development using comparisons based upon peer behavior suggests that these participants may be in Cass’s (1986) Stage Four, Identity Acceptance. In this stage of Cass’s model, individuals who have accepted their gay identity as positive use their peers as the most influential factor in choosing how to behave. D’Augelli (1994) discusses a similar comparative process in his second process where individuals compare and contrast their experiences with myths about LGB life.

While some participants compared behaviors to make sense of their identity, some participants made comments that suggest their friendships helped integrate their sexual identity into other aspects of their identity. Hence, the integrated sexual identity theme became apparent. For instance, Melvin commented, “It (his sexual orientation) is just one small aspect of your entire personality.” Cass (1986) suggests that gays and lesbians, in the last stage of sexual identity, blend their sexual identity with other identities. As a further example of this stage, some participants remembered when their gay identity was more pronounced. Forrest, for instance, commented that he “felt like everything was gay, gay, gay. I now know better.” Participants could also identify peers who were in earlier stages of what Josh called, “a winding road” when referring to sexual identity development. He said, “It’s frustrating to see them because I feel like that was a long time ago for me.” The perspective of former gay-centered identities reflects that some participants may be in this integrated stage of Cass’s model.

Role of Institutional Type on Gay Male Friendships in College

While no literature exists related to how institutional type affects gay male friendships in college, students attending different institutions may have not only different experiences, but also
the institutional type may affect their gay male friendships. Caudill, Ward, and Southeast represent three different types of institutions. Caudill is a two-year college with no resources allocated LGBT students or LGBT studies courses offered. Ward, a highly selective private institution, has allocated resources for an LGBT center since 1994 and offers LGBT studies courses. Southeast, a flagship public institution, added resources for an LGBT center in Fall 2005 and have offered LGBT courses for several years. By including participants from three institutions, themes emerged that suggest institutional type affected gay male friendships.

Participants commented that academic courses have a powerful impact on their gay male friendships. As such, the academic validity theme surfaced. At Southeast and Ward where LGBT studies courses are taught, participants had avenues not only to learn more about themselves but also felt they could meet new gay male friends and allies. However, even though Southeast offered courses on LGBT issues, at least one faculty member who taught a human sexuality class inappropriately asked students to disclose their sexual orientation in a lecture setting. Such behavior invalidated students and isolated them from their classmates. However, because the participant knew other gay males in the class who also did not disclose their sexual orientations, he felt validated in not sharing. At Caudill, where no LGBT classes were offered, participants sought out classes that might include sexual orientation. Sadly, Caudill participants found professors omitted the information. Disregarding the information sent distinctive messages of discrimination to these gay male students.

Another interesting finding as it relates to how institutional type affects gay male friendships involves the resource availability theme. Participants at Caudill, where no resources are available to support LGBT issues, struggled to connect. David, a Caudill student, mentioned his strategic method to learn more about the LGBT student organization. Conversely, students at
Ward and Southeast, where they have allocated resources for staff and space to support their LGBT students, continuously mentioned that these resources facilitated their friendships. Even though the LGBT center at Southeast had only opened three months prior to conducting this study, students never mentioned it as new resource. Ward students, where the LGBT center has been open for 12 years, mentioned this resource at the same rate. The researcher feels that such resources make such an immediate and significant impact on facilitating gay male friendships that participants hardly thought to mention Southeast’s new resource.

Finally, a participant’s place of residence played a role in how institutional type affected gay male friendships so much that it emerged as a theme. Ward requires freshmen and sophomores to live in on-campus housing. Southeast only requires freshmen. Caudill does not offer on-campus housing. Caudill students, who either lived with or remained closely connected with their families, all struggled bonding with their gay male friends. These participants mentioned needing to make excuses to visit their gay male friends because their families were constantly present in their lives. Furthermore, Caudill participants remained in the communities in which they grew up while attending college. While participant who attended Ward and Southeast created distance from their hometowns, Caudill participants struggled to establish relationships with openly gay men because they remained cognizant that their families may discover their sexual orientations.

Participants from Southeast and Ward described that living together with other college students helped facilitate their friendships with other gay male students. While living together may facilitate friendships with other gay male college students, participants struggled with instances of homophobia and heterosexism in the on-campus facilities at Southeast and Ward. Thankfully, the participants felt the residence hall staff at Ward and Southeast managed these
situations well. Therefore, these participants remained living on campus which continued their positive friendships especially those with their gay male friends.

While participants did not mention their socio-economic status, the institutions under study differ greatly in their cost. For example, Ward, a private institution, costs about $43,000 per year for tuition, room, and board. Meanwhile, as public institutions, Caudill costs approximately $2,000 per year for tuition and Southeast costs about $8,000 per year for tuition, room, and board. While Ward costs drastically more than Caudill and Southeast, it would be dangerous to make the assumption that Ward participants are the most affluent. Even though Caudill students discussed working more than Ward or Southeast students, Southeast and Ward participants did not mention financial issues. Therefore, some level of socio-economic status differences may exist.

Implications for Practice

In addition to adding to the literature, the results of this study provide sufficient data to form implications for future practice. Student affairs practitioners can utilize these findings in a number of ways. However, practitioners should be cautioned in their application of these findings because of the study’s limitations. These limitations must be enumerated again. Limitations to the study include: a) the study is qualitative in nature and generalizations should be specific to the reader rather than quantitatively predictive, b) the study only included 12 participants, and c) the study included only volunteers. Even with these limitations, the findings produced valuable implications for practice.

First, the results suggest that resource availability and visible support affect gay male college students. While numerous campuses have created and supported resources and visible support for gay men, practitioners should use these findings to advocate for further resources and
increased visibility of support for gay men. For example, several institutions have dedicated space, staff, and financial resources to establish LGBT centers to assist students who struggle with their sexual orientation. Increasing efforts such as LGBT centers will certainly assist gay male college students in enhancing their collegiate experiences.

The second implication for practice includes facilitating networks of gay male college students. Since gay men may not be visibly identified, gay male college students might need more assistance in finding other gay male college students than other underrepresented students who have visible minority status. The findings in this study suggest specifically that student affairs practitioners should promote LGBT student organizations, social events, awareness programs, and activism opportunities. For example, student affairs practitioners should include special events for gay male students at the start of each semester. Partnering with LGBT student organizations may facilitate this process. Yet, in environments where these student organizations might not have the capabilities, student affairs practitioners can assist with regularly-scheduled events to facilitate these networks. Furthermore, student affairs practitioners who bring together gay male college students will ultimately help these students with their collegiate experiences and identity development.

Third, student affairs practitioners should actively engage faculty to increase awareness of how academic experiences affect gay male college students. The findings in this study suggest that faculty members play crucial roles in validating or invalidating gay male college students. Participants enrolled in gay and lesbian studies courses felt great pride in making connections with like-minded people. Sadly, others reported feelings of marginalization when faculty omitted or negatively portrayed material related to homosexuality. Therefore, faculty members should understand how sensitive gay male students remain regarding their sexual orientation. For
example, faculty members should not ask students to identify their sexual orientation in class, but they should assume that any class includes a range of sexual orientations. Faculty members who teach courses that include information related to sexual orientation should cover the material. Additionally, many courses should be reviewed to assess the benefit of infusing information related to sexual orientation. More classes that discuss sexual orientation will increase the likelihood that gay male college students will feel validated. Good practices to accomplish this task would involve practitioners presenting to faculty meetings, offering to present to academic classes on LGBT issues, and passive programs such as flyer campaigns or newsletters that highlight LGBT awareness. To engage faculty to address this topic, practitioners may want to involve senior-level support. For example, asking the chief student affairs officer to infuse the topic of non-visible diversity into speeches given to faculty would start this dialogue. Another method to engage faculty around LGBT issues would involve identifying and lobbying champions from the faculty who feel strongly about LGBT issues. Thus, these examples will provide more credibility to the need to validate students’ sexual orientation in the academic arena.

Fourth, student affairs practitioners should increasingly emphasize peer relationships during collegiate experiences. Programs and services in residence life, multicultural affairs, orientation, and academic advising all have opportunities to discuss openly the value of peer relationships especially among underrepresented students. While self-segregation might seem counterproductive, the findings in this study suggest that peer relationships among these minority participants were meaningful and essential. In essence, for students to navigate environments where they are minorities, they must have support systems as their foundation. Given that LGBT students may not have supportive or understanding parents and families, student affairs
practitioners have an obligation to provide support mechanisms for these students. Having like-minded peers who can empathize with experiences offers this primary support mechanism.

The fifth implication for practice related to these findings involves training staff to understand LGBT issues. Using the findings of this study, staff members, especially student activities and residence life staff, have the ability to train students to manage difficult situations while keeping in mind that heterosexism and homophobia exist. For instance, when students struggle with roommates who do not accept their sexual orientation, residence life staff should be trained in how to manage such a situation effectively. Likewise, student activities staff who work with LGBT student organizations should be trained to offer accommodations that support the various levels of identity development. For example, LGBT student groups may not want to promote some of their events (i.e., support groups, dialogue groups) because attendees may not publicly identify as LGBT. Student activities staff should be prepared to offer options that allow a certain level of anonymity for this group. Training staff to remain aware of these issues will hopefully dismantle a sometimes hostile environment.

Finally, the findings in this study suggest that practitioners should offer programming related to combating cultural pressures on gay male students. Student affairs practitioners should offer programs that target gay male college students that focus on wellness and healthy body image. For instance, small-group discussions, passive programs (i.e., posters, flyers), and health promotion forums would assist gay male students in making healthy decisions. Practitioners may also want to involve the LGBT student organization and faculty who teach LGBT studies courses to support these programmatic efforts. Finding ways to enhance students’ wellness will set the stage for lifelong health.
Recommendations for Future Research

The present study was the first study to explore friendships between gay male college students. Since the study was qualitative in nature, it provided rich, thick description of 12 participants’ experiences. Investigating how the current findings compare with other studies would add to the literature. The findings in this study provide several opportunities for future exploration in future research.

Participants distinguished their gay male friendships from all other relationships. Yet, several participants specifically mentioned their friendships with heterosexual females and heterosexual males. A future study that explored the friendships between gay male college students and their heterosexual friends would add to the literature.

Future researchers may also want to explore institutional types more broadly. While the current study included participants from three different institutions (public, private, two-year), participants’ experiences at other institutions may differ. Future researchers might consider using participants from single-sex institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, community colleges, and smaller private institutions.

Institutions with graduate and professional students also have a responsibility to serve those students. Moreover, friendships between gay graduate and professional students may differ in their gay male friendships from undergraduates. Given that the current study only included undergraduate students, future researchers may want to explore friendships between gay male graduate students.

Findings of the current study also suggested that gay male college students struggle with cultural expectations related to body image issues. While the current study reported this finding as it relates to gay male friendships, future researchers might explore the relationship between
body image disorders and gay male college students in a more broad sense. Specifically, researchers may want to investigate the role of media images, familial influence, knowledge of nutrition and fitness, and self esteem among other variables.

The current study was limited to only a few interactions with participants. Understanding how gay male friendships affect college students over several years would provide information related to the long-term affect of gay male friendships. Therefore, future researchers may consider conducting a longitudinal study that explores gay male college students over a longer period of time. Future researchers may also consider including gay male alumni into their sample to investigate a similar issue.

Finally, the current study only investigated gay males in college. Friendships between other underrepresented groups in college would add to the literature. Specifically, friendships between lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals would complement the findings in this study.

Summary

Examining gay male friendships in college uncovered a variety of findings that add to the literature. Specifically, these gay males in college described their friendships with other gay men as uniquely meaningful compared to any other relationships while they struggle with the sexual attractions associated with these friends. Findings also discovered from this research suggest that these gay male friendships impacted the collegiate experience positively in regards to serving as guides through gay culture. Yet, these participants’ friendships negatively affected their collegiate experiences through exacerbating the cultural pressures to conform to ideal body standards.
These friendships also affected identity development in serving as essential ingredients for openly sharing their sexual orientation, benchmarking behaviors, and integrating their sexual identity with other identities. Finally, findings in this study added to the literature in that available institutional resources, visible support, and finding validation in the classroom had positive outcomes on participants’ gay male friendships in college. Additionally, these findings suggest implications for programmatic and policy decisions in student affairs. Likewise, researchers can modify this study for use in future studies.
REFERENCES


Chesnut, S. (November 14, 2003). Personal communication. Atlanta, GA.


NEED $50??

I need help with my graduate research project.

✓ Are you a full-time student?
✓ Are you a gay male?
✓ Are you willing to discuss your personal friendships?

If you’re interested in participating, please call me or Email me.

Andy-404-822-1844   Andy-404-822-1844
wawilso@emory.edu   wawilso@emory.edu

Andy-404-822-1844   Andy-404-822-1844
wawilso@emory.edu   wawilso@emory.edu

Andy-404-822-1844   Andy-404-822-1844
wawilso@emory.edu   wawilso@emory.edu
APPENDIX B

PROTOCOL FOR INITIAL SCREENING

Screening Criteria
The researcher will ask the following questions to determine if respondents meet the requirements to participate in the study.

Are you gay?   YES   NO
Are you male?   YES   NO
Are you a full-time undergraduate student? YES   NO
When did you graduate from high school? 2001   2002   2004   2005
Did you come to college the fall after your high school graduation? YES   NO
Have you remained enrolled in school since high school graduation? YES   NO
Do you have gay male friends? YES   NO

Participant Requirements
If the researcher ascertains that the respondent meets the criteria, then the researcher will inform the respondents of the following participation requirements of this study:

Would you be willing to take 24 pictures using a disposable camera, provided by the researcher, describing your friendships and how those experiences impacted your development and your time at college?
YES   NO

Would you be willing to discuss these friendships in a personal, face-to-face one hour interview to discuss those developed pictures?
YES   NO

Would you be willing to review the transcripts of this interview and make clarifications at a later date?
YES   NO

Participant Information
If respondents affirmed they would complete these tasks, then the researcher collected their information and asked them to choose time for the interview.
Name: ____________________________________________ Telephone: __________________________

Email: __________________________ Meeting time: __________________________
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to take part in a research study titled “Friendships Among Gay Male College Students” which is being conducted by Andy Wilson from the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia (404-727-4079). The research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Richard H. Mullendore, Professor, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, University of Georgia, who may be reached at 706-542-6478 or via email at richardm@uga.edu.

I do not have to take part in this study. I can stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to explore the friendships of gay male college students.

My participation in this study may advance the available literature that will allow institutions of higher education to provide better service to gay male students and enhance the campus climate related to gay issues.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I will read and sign this consent form by October 31, 2005. (Be sure to ask any questions if you have any.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I agree to take 24 photos of inanimate objects that describe my friendships with other gay men and the college environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I will participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher, to be arranged at a mutually convenient time. I understand that this interview will be tape-recorded by the researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I understand that I may elect not to answer any question during the interview without having to explain why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I understand that I will review the transcripts for accuracy. Once the researcher transcribes the interviews, the researcher will arrange a mutually convenient time to review the transcriptions. This meeting will occur within the next six weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>In order to assure that my responses are kept confidential, my name and institution will not be placed anywhere in the data. Audio tapes will be destroyed immediately following the completion of transcriptions and member checks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I understand that I will receive $25 after the interview and $25 after the review of the transcript.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No discomforts or stresses are expected. No risks are expected to any participant. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with me will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with my permission or as required by law.

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: 404-727-4079.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I will be given a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant: ______________________________ Date: __________
Signature of Researcher: ______________________________ Date: __________
Name of Researcher: Andy Wilson Telephone: (404) 727-4079
Email: andy.wilson@emory.edu

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu
APPENDIX D

PHOTOGRAPHY PROMPT SHEET

Thank you for participating in my research project. To complete this portion of your participation, you will take 24 photographs using the provided disposable camera. We will meet at an arranged time for you to return the camera to me so I can develop it. Once the photographs are developed, we will meet to discuss them. Please use the provided prompt sheet to assist you.

- Please use the flash at all times. You press the button located on the front of the camera until a light in the viewfinder appears.
- You can take pictures of anything you feel is appropriate to meet the below instructions. However, because of confidentiality, you CANNOT take pictures of other people.
- If you have a problem with the camera, please let me know as soon as possible. I will provide you with a new one.

Prompts
- Take the first 12 photographs to describe your friendships with other gay male college students.
- Take the last 12 photographs to describe how friendships with other gay male college students have affected your experiences at college.

Once you’ve completed these tasks, please place the camera in a safe location. If you have questions, please contact me at 404-822-1844 or andy.wilson@emory.edu.

Since you will utilize Email, your essay will not be anonymously submitted. However, in order to maintain confidentiality, the Email will be printed, erased from my account, and all identifying information redacted.

If you have questions, please contact me at this Email address or (404) 822-1844.
APPENDIX E

PERSONAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Introductions
   A. Research and researcher’s background

II. Purpose of the Study
   A. To gather information about the friendships that gay male college students have with other gay men.
   B. Friendships include acquaintances and close friendships.

III. Explanation of the Interview
   A. Explain how candor and honesty is needed in this project.
   B. Answer any questions. Explain that some questions may not be answered because it may impact the results, but all questions will be answered at the end of the study.
   C. Have participants sign to give consent.

IV. Interview Questions
   A. Tell me about yourself.
      ▪ Hometown
      ▪ Year in school
      ▪ College/major
      ▪ Career aspirations
   B. Describe your friendships with other gay male college students.
      ▪ What are the challenges?
      ▪ What are the rewards?
   C. Tell me about how these friendships have affected your experiences at college.
      ▪ Describe the environment at this school.
      ▪ What are the challenges?
      ▪ What are the rewards?
      ▪ Some people say that it’s difficult to be gay here if you don’t have gay friends, what would you say to those people?
   D. How do you think your friendships with other gay men in college have impacted your growth?
      ▪ How do you think your gay male friendships have impacted how you view yourself?
      ▪ How do your gay male friendships fit in with other friendships?
      ▪ What are the challenges?
      ▪ What are the rewards?
   E. What else do you think that I should know about your friendships with other gay men?
Figure 1

Melvin’s Picture of a Painting
Figure 2

Melvin’s Picture of a Condom
Figure 3

Matt’s Picture of the Sex Tips for Gay Guys
Figure 4

Cain’s Picture of Diet Books
Figure 5

Melvin’s Symbol of His Eating Disorder
Figure 6

Matt’s Picture of a Water Bottle
Figure 7

Jeremiah’s Picture of His Gym
Jeremiah’s Photograph Documenting the Exterior of Ward’s Fitness Facility
Figure 9

Jacob’s Picture of the Theater
Harry’s Picture of the Bulletin Board in the LGBT Resource Center at Southeast
Figure 11

Jack’s Picture of a Bookstore
Figure 12

Mike’s Picture of an Intersection
Figure 13

Harry’s Picture of a Gay Bar
Figure 14

Matt’s Picture of Shoes
Figure 15

David’s Picture of a Classroom at Caudill
Figure 16

Harry’s Gay and Lesbian Studies Course Packet at Southeast
Figure 17

Josh’s Picture of the LGBT Office at Ward
Figure 18

Josh’s Photograph of Cooking with His Friends
Figure 19

Harry’s Picture of the LGBT Resource Center at Southeast
Figure 20

Lance’s Picture of His Residence Hall at Southeast
Figure 21

Harry’s Picture of His Residence Hall at Southeast
Figure 22

Jeremiah’s Picture of T-Shirt at Ward