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EXPERIENCES OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS AT A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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EXPERIENCES OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS AT A
RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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B.S., Southern Illinois University, 1997
M.S., Southern Illinois University, 2002

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education
in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

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Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Educational Administration and Higher Education.

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

KRISTIN N. SHELBY, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION, presented on March 21, 2018, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: EXPERIENCES OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS AT A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Patrick Dilley

Currently, a gap exists in the research on gay and lesbian students in community colleges. In this qualitative study, I examine experiences of gay and lesbian students in a rural, Midwestern community college. The literature review consists of a review of gay and lesbian student emergence in higher education, coming out, the relationship between sexuality and rurality, and a brief overview of two of the first sexual identity models. This qualitative design incorporates primarily phenomenological and narrative research. Data collection includes narratives from the interviews with nine community college student participants. Data from the participant narratives is organized under four major themes: participant demographics, coming out, campus experiences, and suggestions for campus administrators.

DEDICATIONS

To my beautiful wife, Amanda. Thank you for the sacrifices you made during this enduring process. Your love, support, encouragement, and tough love, kept me going. You make me want to be a better person each and every day. The love I have for you is never-ending. You are my heart and soul and I dedicate this to our story towards one other, and to our forever. All my love. Kristin

To my son, Ethan. Let this be the example that if you work hard enough, you can accomplish anything. Never give up on your dreams, no matter the obstacle. My advice to you as you grow up and make your own path in this great big world is: Be great at what you do, but most of all, love unconditionally and without judgement. I love you. Mom

To my Mom and Dad. Your love and support means more than you will ever know. Thank you for the sacrifices you made, and for shaping me into the person I am today. I love you both and I hope you are proud of the person I have become. All I ever wanted was to make you proud. I love you. Kristin

Finally, to the nine individuals who shared their stories to make this all possible. I enjoyed getting to know each of you, and to you, I am forever grateful. Also, to the countless brave individuals in society who have celebrated or struggled with their sexual orientation. My hope is that the words of this study lead to a path of greater understanding, acceptance, and most of all, love. All my best. Kristin

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To my Committee. Thank you for the dedication you show to each of your students and for the guidance you have given me throughout this process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
DEDICATIONS.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – Review of Literature.....	15
CHAPTER 3 – Methodology.....	41
CHAPTER 4 – Participant Narratives.....	48
CHAPTER 5 – Findings and Conclusions.....	110
REFERENCES.....	141
APPENDICES	
Appendix A – Interview Questions.....	149
Appendix B – Human Subjects Approval Letter.....	151
Appendix C – Email to Campus Instructors.....	152
Appendix D – Flyer for Campus Bulletin Boards.....	153
Appendix E – Consent to Participate in Research.....	154
Appendix F – Themes of Research.....	155
VITA.....	156

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My Story

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a two-parent, white, middle-class home in rural middle-America. I was an only child until my brother came along when I was nine. My happy place was playing softball, soccer, and basketball, riding four-wheelers with my cousins, and playing with my friends. I recall only ever having one Barbie doll growing up, and honestly believe that was a wishful gift by someone, perhaps my parents, to make me “more of a girly-girl.” Despite their various attempts, I was a tomboy who felt incredibly out of place and uncomfortable in a dress; like it was not meant to be on my body. My secret celebrity crush was Olivia Newton-John from *Grease*; yet, I never understood why, until later.... Even at my earliest recollection, I knew I was different.

My elementary school years were uneventful; what one might describe as fairly normal, except for one thing, my struggle to make sense of who I was. I had just as many male friends, probably more, than female. Playing sports was a centerpiece in my life. It was my escape from reality where I did not have to think or question, I could truly be me. One thing I do recall from my youth was the awkwardness of sleepovers. My role when we “played house” was always the masculine one. I remember several of my friends saying, “I would totally be your girlfriend if you were a boy.” For some reason, that always stuck with me. As uncomfortable as that was to hear one of my friends labeling me as “different,” it was incredibly liberating; almost a validation of my own feelings.

Middle school and junior high is where the true struggle began. At the age where hormones raged, the pressure to be “normal” existed stronger than ever. I did all the things I was

“supposed” to do. I had boyfriends and went to dances; however, it just never felt right. Playing sports was still my escape and remained a centerpiece in my life. In seventh grade I met a girl. Not just any girl, this was different. We spent hours talking on the phone and became very close friends. She was the first one to say there was something “different” about me. Something she’s never felt with any of her other friends. I wanted to tell her how I felt a million times, but didn’t. I tried to deny my feelings, but my heart raced whenever I saw her and all I wanted to do was be around her, yet I could not. She went to high school the next year and our friendship drifted apart. Neither of us ever admitted or acted on our feelings.

That was the first time I suspected that I might be gay. It was also the first time I was asked by my Mom if there was something wrong with me, then she asked if I were gay. I denied it because I was so afraid of not being “normal,” but mostly disappointing my family. In hindsight, I wish I would have said yes. There were so many times over the next 10-plus years that I regretted denying it. I would have given anything to have had the courage to say “yes” when I had the opportunity. For the first time in my life, I entered a very dark, depressing place, and felt a sense of aloneness I had never experienced.

High school was a time of more mixed emotions. The fear of disappointing my family drove me to suppress my true feelings about my sexuality and live a miserable, heterosexual life. Growing up, I had never met anyone who was openly gay, so it generally was not accepted in my rural town. I also did not have the luxury of the internet and Google to help me process or understand my feelings. On top of it all, my friends made fun of people who they assumed were “gay” and “homo,” so I tried to ignore my feelings and act straight to earn their approval. It seemed every relationship I had with my family and friends felt like a lie because I had to hide

who I really was. I started drinking to mask the pain and misery I felt inside. The drive to earn a college basketball scholarship probably saved my life.

My first experience around an openly gay person was on my college basketball team in 1991. Despite my new experience, I remained in the closet during college. I never felt safe, supported, or courageous enough to be openly out. The same pressure existed among my new circle of friends/teammates that existed in high school. The girls on the team who were straight would talk about how shameful and disgusting it was to be gay. I continued living a miserable, unhappy life. I never dated and I remember one of the baseball players asking me if I liked girls. Obviously, I denied it and said I just was not interested in dating anyone. The one thing that made me happy in college was playing basketball and eventually softball. Although I was happy participating in my sport, there were no support centers or resources at my community college to help me understand my sexuality.

After community college, I moved back home with my parents and worked while I commuted to a university. As a commuter, I did not really get involved in campus life, or seek the resources to help me. I cannot say why I did not. The thought did not enter my mind back then. I suppose years of suppressing your feelings and hiding your sexuality became my “normal.” Who knows; perhaps if I had lived on campus, I would have found the support I desperately needed, or, even people like me who were questioning their sexuality and longing for a place to fit in and figure it out; something I did not have at my community college, or at home.

My career choice did little to encourage an open lifestyle. I chose to be an elementary teacher because I had a passion for teaching and loved kids. I taught second grade and coached high school basketball in a rural school district close to my hometown. It was 1997, and little did I know, but the events of that spring and summer would change my life forever. That was the

year I fell in love with my eventual wife and mother to our child. For the first time in my life, I was truly happy. Every day that I woke up, I knew there was something to live for. Even if that something were still my biggest secret, I could finally share my true feelings with someone. Lingering in the back of my mind, however, was the thought of coming out to my friends and eventually, my family.

It took a few years, but I decided first to come out to my best friend, who responded, “I knew all along, and I was wondering when you were finally going to tell me.” She went on to say that she loved me no matter what and this changed nothing with our relationship. To this day, the conversation we had in that restaurant remains one of the most vivid and liberating memories in my journey.

I left the teaching profession for a job working in a community college, moved out of my parents’ house for good, and was finally free. My partner and I’s love for each other strengthened and withstood a long-distance relationship. Conversations shifted about spending the rest of our lives together, but there was one problem, neither of us had come out to our parents. In 2002, at age 30, I wrote a letter to my parents disclosing my sexuality and my relationship. It did not go well. Though I was happy in my personal life with my relationship, there was a gaping hole in my heart from being rejected by the people who were supposed to love me unconditionally. My parents did not speak to me for six months. During those six months, however, my Mom mailed books claiming sexuality was a choice and was against God’s will. She encouraged me to see a Christian counselor; someone who could “fix” me. I kindly asked her to stop trying to change who I was. My sexuality was not a choice! I did not spend 25 plus years of my life, some in very dark, depressing places, to think it was a choice. I knew it was not. I was born this way, and finally, I was free.

I am happily married to the same beautiful woman I met twenty years ago. We recently we built our forever home together in a wonderful, accepting community, and have a son who is the center of our universe. My relationship with my parents is as good now as it has ever been. Yes, it was a process, but above all, love and acceptance prevailed.

Purpose of Study

In this qualitative study, I will examine experiences of gay and lesbian students attending a rural Midwestern community college. When I attended a community college in the early 1990s, there were no resources to help me understand my sexuality. The overall campus climate was heterosexually oriented; reflective of the times. There was no internet or Google, nor were there people like me I could turn to for advice. I was left to figure everything out on my own, which in turn, led to years of confusion, depression, unhappiness, and personal struggle.

It is difficult, even today, to determine the extent of supportiveness community colleges offer gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Is the campus climate more inviting and safe for LGBT students? Are resources easier to access due to Google, or other sites? Much of the literature examines gay and lesbian students in a four-year setting, yet not much literature exists on community colleges. The purpose of my research is to add to the existing body of literature by examining experiences of gay and lesbian students at a Midwestern community college.

Since the inception of Joliet Junior College in 1901, the nation's first community college, higher education became a reality for those who before could only dream of college. Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer (1996) state that with the addition of community colleges, colleges no longer operated for sons and daughters of the wealthy and educated; now colleges were open to ethnic minorities, lower-income groups, and to those whose academic past had been

marginalized (1996, p. 27). As more community colleges opened across the country, this provided women and other minority groups an immediate open-access entry into institutions of higher education. Even with the open-access enrollment, community colleges have been criticized “for failing to acknowledge or adapt to the diversity in their student populations, resulting in stubbornly low transfer rates and consistently high dropout rates” (Shaw, Rhoads, & Valdez, 1999, p. 3). Clifford Harbour and Gwyn Ebie contend that LGBTQ students in community colleges are marginalized because of their identity (2011, p. 7). It is quite possible that many gay and lesbian students are expected to conform to the rules and practices that higher education administrators set for students. From my own lens, as a lesbian and a former community college student-athlete in the early 1990s who was not openly out, I feared coming out, feared that I would not be accepted in social groups, by my teammates, and most of all, by my family.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges’ *Fast Facts* (2016), 45% of all U.S. undergraduate students, as of fall 2014, attended community colleges. Fall enrollment at public two-year institutions grew from 5,697,388 in 2000 to 7,218,038 in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, Table 199). In those same institutions, “less than eight percent of accredited U.S. institutions of higher education offer protective policies inclusive of sexual identity; and approximately three percent include gender identity and expression” (Rankin, et al. 2010, p. 6). Although colleges and universities are the source of much queer theory, they have remained substantially untouched by the queer agenda (Renn, 2010, p. 132). Kristen Renn states that “colleges and universities have evolved to tolerate the generation of queer theory from within but have stalwartly resisted the queering of higher education itself” (2010, p. 132).

The mission of college diversity and inclusion committees are generally to make positive impacts on issues of diversity and inclusion across campuses. Patrick Dilley (2000) contends that teaching diversity should not be limited to the marginalized, and that multiculturalism can and should be used to demonstrate multiplicities within groups, especially within the homogenous non-other (2000, p. 70). Sadly, discussions and, most importantly, actions supporting the inclusiveness of gay and lesbian student groups, are often nonexistent. Conversations about diversity are consumed with black and white student issues, often leaving out issues of gay and lesbian students. Is this coincidental, or a result of being undereducated in regard to gay and lesbian student needs? Regardless of reason, there is “an absence of literature examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community college students” (Garvey, et al., 2015, p. 528). According to Jason Garvey and his colleagues, the dearth of research examining LGBTQ students at two-year institutions leaves scholars and practitioners without empirical evidence to substantiate this claim at community colleges (2015, p. 528).

What is known and understood about gay and lesbian youth today is that the way they live their lives, the way they express their sexuality and their identities is profoundly different from previous generations (Dilley, 2010, p. 187). Today’s millennials feel that their generation has accepted their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 263). According to Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin, one of the biggest changes has been the age at which students disclose their sexual identity. From the 1970s through 1990s, queer-spectrum individuals who planned on going to college waited until they were on campus and had developed new friendships before they came out, becoming “aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others (2011, p. 1159). According to Mary Rasmussen (2006), “a person may be selectively

‘out’ in some situations or to certain people without generally disclosing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity” (p.21).

Beemyn and Rankin state that today’s youth are coming out in high school, and increasingly middle school (2011, p. 1159). Could this be, in part, due to the resources available for gay and lesbian youth today, or the ease of posting something to social media? Ritch Savin-Williams (2016) indicates that is it easier for some to come out than others; many youths, according to Savin-Williams, have a coming out story about the first time they disclosed their sexuality. Some, he says, are quite memorably scary, while others are merely a pro-forma event – “Oh yeah, I probably should have told you.” (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 175). Savin-Williams goes on to say that there are more gay and trans individuals now represented on broadcast, cable, and streaming shows (2016, p. 265), supporting the notion that mainstream society is warming to gay TV characters, gay athletes, and gay performers. How might this level of comfort with peers be extended into higher education?

Cohen and Brawer posit that community colleges are resources which should be used by individuals throughout their lifetime, as well as by the general public to assist with community issues (1996, p. 276). Since community colleges are extensions of their communities, they should provide all students, including gay and lesbian students, with a safe, supportive, and welcoming environment full of opportunities and resources needed to succeed. Empirical evidence will educate colleagues, administrators, and community members on the needs of gay and lesbian students in hopes of promoting a safe environment where education can be the true focus. Dilley (2000) posits that if all students can analyze their cultures, beliefs, and actions through multicultural education, then we have managed to wed student development, critical theory, and pedagogy. Dilley goes on to say multicultural education is not about a change of politics, or even

curricular content, as it is about fostering a more complex understanding of life, and of our perceptions of reality (2000, p.70).

Significance of Study

Currently, a gap exists in the research on gay and lesbian students in community colleges. According to Kate Tompkins (2012), much of the research on gay and lesbian student experiences is conducted in the four-year environment, often ignoring two-year institutions, or generalizing research from four-year to two-year institutions (2012, p. 2). Comparisons, between community college and four-year college student experiences is muddy, at best. Significant differences exist between the types of students in attendance. Generally, students who enter community colleges, have lower academic ability and aspirations, and are accompanied by the many issues faced by those from low socioeconomic status (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 50).

Community colleges are often the only option students have to obtain the skills needed to transfer to a university, or, gain a vocational certificate to aid in future employment. Many students who choose to attend community colleges do so because of open-access and lower admission standards. In an open-access, or open-admission institution, anyone, upon completion of a high school diploma or equivalency, is accepted for admission. This differs from most four-year colleges and universities with selective admission standards. To many students with limited academic ability and/or funding to pay for college, community colleges are an attractive option. According to Camille Jarrell (2004), two-year colleges provide flexibility and opportunity for disadvantaged (high-risk) individuals who might not otherwise attend college (2004, p. 514).

In this study, I attempt to close that gap by examining experiences of gay and lesbian students in a public, rural, Midwestern community college. The community college used for this study is a two-year public community college with open-access enrollment. The community

college is located in a predominantly white setting serving multiple predominantly white counties with populations ranging from 20,000 and 70,000, and a median household income between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (2015 United States Census Bureau). The campus setting, according to the National Center for Education Statistics *College Navigator* tool, is considered small/suburban, with a full-time enrollment between 4,000 and 5,000 students and a faculty to student ratio of more than 20 to 1. Both two-year associate's degrees and certificate programs are offered.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the study. First, I identify as lesbian and attended a community college. Data analysis will consist of participants' experiences, not my own. I will however, interject my experiences as they are relevant to the study. Second, this study only includes gay and lesbian students at a single community college. I recognize there are other non-heterosexual groups; however, I chose to narrow my focus to these two groups of students to better connect with the literature from four-year institutions. Examining student experiences of gay and lesbian students allows me to dive deeper into these populations rather than merely touching the surface of all. I also recognize that the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the results of this study are to entire population of gay and lesbian students, therefore I will not suggest as such.

Gary D. Shank (2006) states that generalization is an effort toward simplifying our understanding of some phenomenon. He goes on to explain that qualitative research is not always about simplifying our understanding and we should embrace generalizability only when it seems to fit our aims (2006, pp. 112-113). Generalizability is not a purpose of this study. Rather, I will add the experiences of gay and lesbian community college students to the existing literature from four-year colleges and universities.

Sample size could potentially be small, which I acknowledge. I am relying on participants who volunteer to be interviewed; therefore, I cannot guarantee a large number of students, or a homogenous group of gay and lesbian students. I am also relying on the willingness of faculty and staff to make an announcement for participants. Finally, community colleges have larger numbers of non-traditional students than do universities, yielding a chance that both narratives might not be present in this study.

My aim with this study is to add to the existing literature and begin a conversation about gay and lesbian student experiences in community colleges. Since most research is conducted at four-year institutions, I want to focus my lens on the community college, rather. My aim is for others to use this research and explore other groups of non-heterosexual student experiences in community colleges.

Research Questions

A number of scholars explore the phenomenon of coming out (Savin-Williams 2005, 2016; Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2015; Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; and Rosario, 2009). This project does not; rather, it seeks to understand the post coming-out experiences of gay and lesbian students at a Midwestern community college.

A significant gap exists in the literature regarding gay and lesbian student experiences in community colleges. Why study students attending community college, one might ask. In 2014, almost half of all student enrollment nationwide attended community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, Table 199). If almost half of all students nationwide attend community colleges, why then, does research not exist? The following research questions guided my study as a starting point for future research on gay and lesbian community college students.

1. What are the experiences of gay and lesbian students who currently attend a rural Midwestern community college?
2. How does the community college environment influence identity development in gay and lesbian students?

Included in Appendix A are the interview questions I asked each of the participants.

Definition of Terms

The following terminology provides the reader with a better understanding of how words are defined within the research. There are times throughout this project I will use the term “non-heterosexual” in place of LGBT (defined below).

Bisexual (Bi): A person who is sexually attracted to members of either sex, though not necessarily simultaneously (Sanlo, 1998, p. 414).

Civil Union: A term that describes a state-based relationship recognition for same-sex couples offering some or all of the state (though not federal) rights, protections, and responsibilities of marriage (GLAAD.org).

In the Closet: A figure of speech used to describe hiding one’s sexual orientation from others (Sanlo, 1998 p. 413).

Coming Out: The process of disclosing one’s sexuality publicly (Sanlo, 1998, p. 413).

Community College/Junior College: A two-year higher education institution that falls into the categories of Associate’s or Associate’s Dominant as defined by the Carnegie Classification system (Tompkins, 2012, p. 7).

Gay: Adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., *gay man, gay people*).

Sometimes *lesbian* (n. or adj.) is the preferred term for women (GLAAD.org).

Heterosexual (Straight): A person who is physically, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to people of the opposite sex (Sanlo, 1998, p. 414).

Homosexual: A person who is physically, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to people of the same sex (Sanlo, 1998, p. 415).

Lesbian: A woman who is physically, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to other women (Sanlo, 1998, p. 414).

LGBT, also GLBT: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (Sanlo, 1998, p. 414). Sometimes when the Q is used at the end of LGBT or GLBT, it can mean “questioning” (GLAAD.org).

Out of the Closet: Making one’s sexual orientation known to others (Sanlo, 1998, p. 414).

Queer: An adjective used by some people, particularly younger people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (GLAAD.org).

Sexual Orientation: The scientifically accurate term for an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations (GLAAD.org).

Transgender (adj.): An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with their biological gender (GLAAD.org).

Conclusion

This qualitative study examines the experiences of gay and lesbian students at a rural Midwestern community college. I used phenomenological and narrative research and interview

participants to add narrative of gay and lesbian student experiences in community colleges. This research utilizes sexual identity development models and queer theory on gay and lesbian student experiences in community colleges and will guide the development of my research questions, interview questions, and data analysis. The following review of literature presents background on the experiences of gay and lesbian students in higher education, the coming out process, and sexual identity development models.

In Chapter 2, I lay the foundation for my research by detailing the emergence of “known” gay and lesbian students in higher education. I also describe the process of “coming out” by exploring models of sexual identity development. In Chapter 3, I describe the qualitative methodology utilized in the study. In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of each of the participants’ narratives organized into the main themes of the study. In Chapter 5, I organize findings from the participant narratives in accordance with emergent themes from the study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this review of literature, I lay the foundation for my research by presenting a brief snapshot of the emergence of “known” gay and lesbian students in higher education. I also describe the process of “coming out,” and explore models and stages of sexual identity development to provide further understanding to readers. Additionally, I account for the current classroom climate for gay and lesbian students in both high school and college. Finally, I explicate sexual identity development models and queer theory on gay and lesbian student experiences in community colleges.

Gay and Lesbian Student Emergence in Higher Education

Institutions of higher education were not created to educate the masses. In its inception, higher education was created for, and accessible to, affluent white men (Thelin, 2004). Patrick Dilley (2002b) posits that a new minority group visibly emerged on the national scene in the 1960s, consisting of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and queer individuals (Dilley, 2002b). Gay and lesbian students have always been among the student body in higher education, but for those who were openly gay, it was not a welcoming experience. Many likely hid their sexuality out of fear of discrimination or physical harm. The concept of being “out” as it is understood today, did not exist. Sonja Ellis (2008) discusses that the perception of a negative campus climate has meant that GLBTQ students often felt excluded, experienced homophobia and heterosexism, and had an overall negative perception of their collegiate environment. Homosexuality was viewed as a disease that all should avoid.

William Tierney and Patrick Dilley (1998) identify Willard Waller’s 1932 book *The Sociology of Teaching* as the foundational—and methodologically absent—text guiding scholars’

and educators' approach to homosexuality and homosexual teachers before the 1970s (Renn, 2010 p. 133). To Waller (1932), homosexuality was a deviant, contagious, and dangerous disease that could and should be avoided in the schools by firing teachers who demonstrated homosexual traits including "carriage, mannerisms, voice, speech, etc." (Waller, as cited in Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 51). Books such as this one, ignited discrimination towards non-heterosexual students and teachers, for that matter. Deans and administrators in higher education adopted the principles from Waller's book to guide student affairs practices.

Administrative positions were set up on college campuses to rid anyone of engaging in non-heterosexual acts. According to Kristen Renn (2010), colleges and universities, following a similar philosophy designed to eradicate deviance from campus, routinely expelled male and female students caught in—or suspected of engaging in—compromising same-sex activities (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Faderman, 1991; MacKay, 1992). Ironically, student affairs administrators put in place to support students, were quietly removing students who publicly engaged in non-heterosexual acts. Deans of men and deans of women, typically charged with keeping order on campus by enforcing disciplinary codes, were instrumental in the process of removing students identified as homosexual deviants (Dilley, 2002a; Bailey, 2002). Renn (2010) posits that these expulsions were generally kept quiet, and there was no reason at the time to conduct studies of homosexual students or of their experiences, identities, or presence on campus (2010, p. 133). At some institutions, however, students were kept on campus to ensure they would receive proper "treatment" for their so-called disease. During this time, homosexuality was viewed as a "treatable disease." The students who were allowed to stay on campus were often referred to counseling to be "cured" of their disease. Student affairs professionals were often convinced by campus medical staff to keep a student on campus and enlist him or her in psychological

treatment (Bailey, 2002; Dilley, 2002a, 2002b). Renn (2010) posits that professionals felt that “treating mentally ill students was within the mission of the college counseling profession, and keeping students in higher education was a way to offer them treatment that they might not get if they returned to disapproving families” (p. 133). This ill-advised method continued in institutions of higher education until homosexuality was officially removed from the list of mental disorders.

The removal of homosexuality from the American Psychological Association’s list of mental disorders in 1973 further cleared the path for keeping students on campus (Renn, 2010, p. 133). Although it was removed, non-heterosexual students still faced abuse, discrimination, and even physical harm. According to Matthew Stewart (2015), African-Americans, women, and other minorities engaged in a fight to gain equal access to the same educational opportunities afforded to upper class Caucasian men (2015, p. 1). Renn contends that colleges and universities have played a role in incubating LGBT/queer activism and activists (2010, p. 132). Furthermore, Beth Bailey (2002) posits that during the time of the Sexual Revolution when sexual activity was only acceptable for heterosexual couples, those attempting to police boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior unintentionally made change possible (2002, p. 8). Many of the events across the country, aimed at promoting awareness and acceptance for the LGBT community, were met with unwelcoming police presence. The violent events that occurred at the Stonewall Inn on that June night in 1969, ignited a new movement from the LGBT community.

The events that occurred on the night of June 27, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York, were fueled by years of oppression and frustration over constant abuse and public humiliation of homosexuals. Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crago (2006) opine that police raids of homosexual bars were common in New York and other American cities in the 1960s; this time, however, bar patrons fought back instead of passively enduring humiliating

treatment (2006, p. 724). John D’Emillio states the Stonewall riots were led by working-class drag queens of color in reaction to persistent harassment by New York City police officers, and sparked a movement on college campuses and in urban enclaves of gays and lesbians (Renn, 2010, p. 133). The Stonewall riots are typically viewed as the spark of the gay liberation movement and a turning point in the history of gay life in the United States (Duberman, 1993; Teal, 1995; Carter, 2004), and they are commemorated in gay pride parades around the globe (D’Emilio, 2002). Others however, would argue differently. The Stonewall riots were not the first time gays fought back against police; nor was the raid at the Stonewall Inn the first to generate political organizing (Murray 1996; Bernstein 1997; Stryker 2002). Armstrong and Crage claim that gay liberation was already underway in New York before Stonewall, and that other events failed to achieve the mythic stature of Stonewall and been virtually forgotten (2006, p. 725). Whatever the reason, 1969 marked a turning point in gay rights movements in cities across the United States, and eventually on college campuses (Dilley presentation, 2017).

After the Stonewall Riots, groups of non-heterosexual students and their allies began formally organizing student associations across college campuses. According to Dilley (2002a), the first known gay student organization—the Student Homophile League at Columbia University—was founded in the same city immediately after the riots. Stewart states the Stonewall Riots of 1969 presented higher education with two problems: (1) the increased visibility of GLBTQ people on campus, and (2) the demand of GLBTQ people for full inclusion within the university/college (2015, p. 16). Stewart (2015) contends there were numerous legal, social, and religious consequences for someone who came out of the closet and publicly identified as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999; Stewart, 2015). After the Stonewall Riots, hardships certainly existed for non-heterosexual

groups and individuals, but the push to be accepted and treated like all other students on college campuses began (Dilley presentation, 2017).

A sense of uncertainty among researchers and college administrators began to emerge with the growth of non-heterosexual groups on campus. As gay and lesbian students became more visible on campuses, student affairs professionals charged with attending to the holistic development of all students, began to take notice, just as they had of the increasing numbers of women and students of color (Renn, 2010, p. 133). Renn states that researchers were uncertain how the newly visible groups fit into the existing models of student development, and the awareness to attend to matters of campus climate and safety, and also to matters of individual identity development, counselors and researchers began to explore ways to understand student experiences and identities (2010, p. 133). For the first time, researchers and administrators took interest in non-heterosexual students and their identities. Researchers need to learn more about a group that, before now, had been discarded as mentally ill, so that student affairs administrators could better serve their student populations at their respective college or university.

Although researchers began to take an interest in understanding student identities, Stewart (2015) states that GLBTQ persons have not always been well received in higher education (p. 2). As researchers began to study non-heterosexual student experiences on college campuses, studies show that although non-heterosexual students are being accepted, a disconnect remains. Campus climate surveys examining GLBTQ student experiences in the 1990s revealed that GLBTQ students often perceived their environment as negative and had different experiences than non-GLBTQ students (Rhoads, 1994). According to Stewart (2015), researchers posit that a negative campus climate and the stress of the coming out process can have a negative effect on students' academic progress (Lopez & Chism, 1993). Additionally, Stewart writes that GLBTQ students

often reported feeling unsafe on campus and in the classroom due to verbal and physical abuse by their peers, comments made by faculty and peers, or the (un)intentional dismissal of their presence on campus (Lease, Cogdal & Londono-McConnell, 1995). Additionally research has tied a negative campus climate to poor academic performance, increased drug and alcohol abuse, and decreased persistence and retention (Willoughby, et.al, 2008). Stewart (2015) states that students who feel they must conceal portions of their identity in a classroom, due in part to heterosexist and/or homophobic behavior of an instructor will suffer academically and psychologically. He goes on to say, on the other hand, that an instructor who fosters an inclusive classroom climate can facilitate positive growth of GLBTQ students (2015, pp. 39-40). If a student's environment has a direct effect on their academic performance, it is imperative to investigate campus experiences and the effect, or lack thereof, they have on student identity development and the coming out process.

Coming Out

The phenomenon of coming out has evolved over the decades as researchers learn more about non-heterosexual youth. Ritch Savin-Williams (2005) describes a cultural shift in this new century regarding same-sex-attracted teenagers leading lives nearly incomprehensible to earlier generations of gay youths. The new gay teenager, Savin-Williams (2005) states, have no interest being labeled as gay. Many youth have same-sex desires and attractions yet have much less interest in naming these behaviors and feelings as gay. Their sexuality is something that cannot be easily described, categorized, or understood apart from being part of their life in general (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 1; Savin-Williams, 2017; Ward 2015).

When looking at how sexuality has evolved over a matter of decades, one should look no further than current media. Savin-Williams (2005) states that the "cultural makeover" since the

modern day gay era has been astonishing. With Ellen DeGeneres's decision to come out on national television in 1997, to the 2003 September-October issue of *Bride's* magazine, which featured a column on same-sex marriage, to "the kiss" shared by Madonna and Britney Spears on the MTV Music Video Awards, to television shows such as *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, images of gayness are mainstays in society (Savin-Williams, 2005, pp. 14-15). Through media, non-heterosexual lifestyles are being normalized in all walks of life.

Not only are non-heterosexual lifestyles being portrayed on television, policies towards discrimination based on sexual orientation are shaping the workplace as well. According to Savin-Williams (2005), nine of the top 10 Fortune 500 companies have policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. Additionally, in 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lawrence vs. Texas*, struck down sodomy laws which made private sexual conduct between gay people no longer a crime (2005, pp. 15-16). More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in 2011 recognizing civil unions, and more recently in the legalization of gay marriage, have all contributed to what Savin-Williams (2005) describes as the cultural makeover in the modern day gay era.

Despite the cultural shift, the decision to come out is often gut-wrenching for the pure fact one never knows for sure how the other person will respond. Elodie Charbonnier and Pierluigi Graziani (2016), drawing from D'Augelli (2002) and Meyer (2003), state the stress individuals feel about coming out is increased by the possibility of rejection (p. 320). Savin-Williams (2016) describes the experiences related by young non-heterosexual youth of coming out in his book, *Becoming Who I Am*. Every youth, Savin-Williams contends, has a coming out story, albeit some more positive than others. Even though the norm reaction is generally acceptance, coming out can often lead to dangerous circumstances for some youth, leading to

rejection, ridicule, and personal attacks (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 175). Coming out can be the most liberating experience, or the most painful. It is an extremely scary situation to expose oneself so deeply to others without knowing how they will react.

Having a support system in place during the coming out process has been helpful to some non-heterosexual youth. Charbonnier and Graziani (2016) state that a large number of LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) adolescents and young adults do not reveal their sexual orientation, especially to their families, fearing that their relationship might not be the same. They go on to say that parental responses to their child's coming out may be a predictor in their social, emotional, and behavioral trajectories, and when revelation leads to parental rejection, it can lead to such things as instability, fear, and anxiety (2016, p. 320). For a 2009 study Caitlin Ryan, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz, and Jorge Sanchez recruited a sample of 224 LGB persons ages 21 to 25, with participants reporting higher levels of parental rejection six times more likely to report elevated levels of depression and eight times more likely to have attempted suicide (2009, p. 350).

Savin-Williams (2016) describes the coming out process as a savvy by most individuals. Many youth disclose their sexuality to a safe person, a close friend, or someone they know will be supportive. This memory, Savin-Williams (2016) contends, will be forever registered in their memory, "not only because of the initial uncertainty about how the other person will react but also because of what it says about your personal journey" (p. 176). Many relationships with peers become stronger, not only because of social acceptance, but also acceptance of oneself.

Despite the uncertainty of how others will respond and the fear of not being accepted, there are benefits to being out. Savin-Williams (2016) shares several stories of individuals who were "out." In addition to this being an extremely liberating time, it is also a time of satisfaction

with the true self. As Savin-Williams (2016) accounts, individuals discover they can be gay and popular (p. 188). In addition, it relieves social pressures of conformity. For example, an openly gay person might not be peer-pressured by friends to date or sleep with someone from the opposite sex. Also, “being out enhances self-development by increasing a sense of authenticity, self-knowledge, and sexual acceptance” (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 189). Being out also relieves stress by unburdening fears about always being careful of which words or actions to use, and when fears are no longer “toxic,” individuals can emotionally blossom (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 189).

John Santrock (2016) characterizes adolescent sexual development as bridging the gap between the asexual child and the sexual adult. During adolescence, individuals experience sexual exploration, sexual fantasies and realities, and incorporate sexuality into their own identity (2016, p. 254). Sifting through multiple sexual feelings and emotions can be quite an overwhelming experience. It often involves learning to manage sexual feelings such as sexual arousal and attraction, developing new forms of intimacy, navigating skills relating to sexual behavior in order to avoid undesired consequences (Santrock, 2016, p. 254). Lisa Diamond and Ritch Savin-Williams (2015) contend that mastering those emerging sexual feelings and forming a sense of sexual identity is a multifaceted, and often lengthy process.

Simone Buzwell and Doreen Rosenthal (1996) state that regardless of sexual orientation, adolescent sexual identity involves activities, interests, and behaviors (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996, pp. 506-507). Although sexual identity involves activities, interests, and behaviors, experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents are vastly different among each individual. Some gay and lesbian adolescents are very open about their sexuality while others not. Some are sexually active, while others not. Regardless of adolescents’ sexual experience, Buzwell and Rosenthal

found that despite possible negative attitudes towards it, adolescence might not be a time of sexual turmoil and anxiety for the adolescents (1996, p. 507).

According to Santrock (2016), there is a belief that most gay and lesbian individuals quietly struggle with same-sex attractions in childhood and do not engage in heterosexual dating, then gradually recognize they are gay or lesbian in middle to late adolescence (2016, p. 255). In contrast to this viewpoint, Savin-Williams (2016) suggests about half of gay youths nationwide report at least one sexual experience with a girl, primarily during adolescence (2016, p. 125). This is only one example of the myths that exist when talking about sexual behavior in gay and lesbian adolescents. Santrock (2016), drawing from Ritch Savin-Williams and Kenneth Cohen (2015), contends that many youth follow the developmental path, while others do not (2016, p. 255). Santrock (2016) concludes by stating that gay and lesbian youth have diverse patterns of initial attraction, often have bisexual attractions, and may have a physical or emotional attraction to same-sex individuals but do not always fall in love with them (2016, p. 255).

A big part of coming out is the “questioning” phase. Savin-Williams (2005) states that with boys, sexual experience with another male is what often leads to one questioning their sexuality. In addition to sexual experiences, those who felt sexually aroused by other males or realized they were not being turned on by women questioned their sexuality. Developing a crush on another male rarely led boys to question their sexuality. One young man whom Savin-Williams (2005) interviewed was having sex with boys and girls, but was not quite ready to call himself “gay.” He felt because he played sports and had sex with girls he was not homosexual (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 158).

Lisa Diamond reports in Savin-Williams (2005) that what provokes a young woman’s first sexual questioning is rarely sexual arousal or experience but rather strong feelings of

attraction for other women and developing an attachment or emotional attraction to another woman. Another potential provocation is exposure to what she calls a facilitating environment, such as taking college courses that discuss gay issues (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 159). These emotional connections between women are the first indicators one might be a lesbian.

The age at which individuals identify as gay is considerably younger than those growing up in the 1960s and 1970s (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 163). Additionally, according to Savin-Williams (2005), the average age of self-labeling for a 2000 teen cohort was 16 for females and 15.6 for males. Despite the similarities in average age of self-labeling, males and females remain at odds in the sequencing of sex and labeling. Traditionally, boys participated in same-sex contact a year or two prior to identifying as gay, while a girl often experienced her first same-sex contact after identifying as lesbian. By the Twenty-first Century, girls are more frequently questioning their sexuality and having sex with other girls at an earlier age (Savin-Williams, 2005, pp. 163-164).

Another phenomenon affecting the process of coming out is appearance. According to Nikki Hayfield (2013), “visibility is inexplicitly interwoven with domination and oppression, subjectification and objectification” (p. 16). Hayfield, drawing from Hutson (2010) and Krakauer & Rose (2002), indicates that lesbians and gay men can choose to adhere to certain appearance norms in order to visibly embody and express their sexual identity (Hayfield, 2013, p. 17).

Emily Kazyak states that, “both lesbian women and gay men gain acceptance in rural areas by doing masculinity” (Kazyak, 2012, p. 826). Further, “scholars define masculinity as encompassing both practices (what people do—gender displays) and discourses (assumptions and expectations about what men and women should be like)” (Kazyak, 2012, p. 828). In both boys and girls, there are those who can be identified as gay or lesbian purely by their mannerisms and

dress, and with others, one would never suspect them to be gay or lesbian simply by their appearance.

Hayfield (2013) conducted a qualitative study of heterosexual students asking questions about the appearance of a lesbian woman, gay man, bisexual woman, bisexual man, heterosexual woman, and heterosexual man. Most of the participants portrayed gay men as feminine, always taking pride in their appearance; similar to responses about heterosexual women. The gay man was characterized as wearing fitted clothing and appearing cleanly shaven. In most of the students' accounts, lesbian women were portrayed as clear opposites of gay men. Some participants used terms such as 'butch' and 'masculine' to describe lesbians, and were portrayed similar to the representation of a heterosexual male. Some of the respondents indicating that 'butch' lesbians did not value their appearance because of their lack of use of make-up. In addition, the typical lesbian was presented as not very girly; wearing jeans and other clothes to show 'masculinity,' having short hair and no sense of style. Only one participant mentioned a lesbian's look would depend on the "type" of lesbian. Hayfield agrees with Eves (2004), that this phenomenon echoes previous literature which highlights the invisibility of femme lesbians within the mainstream heterosexual culture (Hayfield, 2013, p. 19).

Margaret Rosario, Eric W. Schrimshaw, Joyce Hunter and Anna Levy-Warren (2009) contend that even though lesbians are usually identified as either butch or femme, little consensus exists on the definition of what constitutes butch/femme identity. Rosario et al. (2009), mention that research is split on reasons for difference in physical appearance between butch and femme women. Some suggest that masculine/feminine dress signify preference in a partner, while others contend physical appearance is nothing more than how individuals are most comfortable

representing themselves (Rosario et al., 2009, p. 35). This suggests physical appearance alone is a difficult predictor of butch/femme identity.

Sexuality and Rurality

The “coming out process” and how secure one feels about their sexuality can be impacted by their environment. Chris Wienke and Gretchen Hill (2013), state that “existing literature on rural gay and lesbian persons tends to paint a negative picture of rural gay life relative to gay life in urban areas” (Wienke & Hill, 2013, p. 1257). They go on to discuss the difficulty of the social climate, which is generally more hostile towards gay and lesbian people in rural communities. In addition, they suggest there is evidence proving gay people are more often discriminated against in rural communities (Wienke & Hill, 2013, p. 1258). They go on to say that

rural gay residents may be more apt to internalize negative stereotypes of homosexuality.

They may recognize their same-sex attraction at a later age than those in urban areas.

They also may be more likely to form or remain in incompatible relationships, or rely on social networks with those with whom they share little in common (Wienke & Hill, 2013, p. 1259).

Although evidence suggests that life in rural America can be difficult for non-heterosexual people, there are environments, however, where a non-heterosexual lifestyle is very much accepted. Wienke and Hill, contend that there can be positives to growing up in a rural environment. One is the amount of open space, or places of refuge, afforded to its inhabitants to escape the pressures associated with being different (Wienke & Hill, 2013, pp. 1259-60). Wienke and Hill also suggest that “the emergence of the Internet, as well as other informational resources, have narrowed the rural–urban gap by offering a glimmer of hope to gay and lesbian

persons, especially youth, who are unable to find community within rural settings” (Wienke & Hill, 2013, p. 1260).

Acceptance from the place one resides, as well as support, or lack thereof, could potentially impact the progression of one’s sexual identity development. The following sexual identity development models show the processes and stages one often experiences when discovering their sexuality, experimenting with their sexuality, and ultimately, how and when they come out to their friends and family.

Sexual Identity Development Models

Sexual identity models, or identity development models, explore various stages a person experiences when coming out. Brent Bilodeau and Kristen Renn (2005) state that beginning in the 1970s, identity development models sought explain “gay identity” and the coming out process (2005, p. 51). This study will examine the models of identity development as presented by Cass (1984) and D’Augelli (1994), and are among the earliest attempts to establish the framework for what occurs, theoretically, as individuals come to terms with their sexual identities.

According to Robert A. Rhoads, the “closet symbolizes the oppression of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who have been forced to remain silent about their sexual identity” (Rhoads, 1994, p. 61). The closet for most gay, lesbian, and other non-heterosexual people is the “experience of living without disclosing one’s sexual orientation or gender identity” (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. xiii). According to Stewart (2015), the emergence from the closet is termed coming out. He continues to state that understanding the coming out process within higher education is imperative. “Thus, awareness of this process is essential for understanding a segment of the student population” (Stewart, 2015, pp. 17-18).

In order to meet the needs of gay and lesbian students, student affairs professionals, according to Bilodeau and Renn (2005), have sought to understand gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities. After reviewing multiple models of sexual identity, Bilodeau and Renn noted that the stage models are the most frequently used models of sexual identity development; however, the life span models are more useful in describing a wider spectrum of identity development, including transgender identity development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, pp. 25-26). They go on to say that in the past two decades, student affairs professionals have adopted psychological models of sexual orientation identity development (Cass 1979, 1984), as well as scholars (including D'Augelli, 1994; Evans and Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1994) who attempt to describe LGBT identity in higher education settings (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 25). Cass's (1984) Homosexual Identity Formation model, and D'Augelli's (1994) Life Span Identity model are among the most traditional models that explore sexuality identity development.

Cass-Homosexual Identity Formation

One of the models of identity development is Vivienne Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation. According to GLAAD, the term "homosexual" is an outdated clinical term considered derogatory and offensive by many gay and lesbian people. Due to the fact that Cass's work was done in the 1970s and 1980s, I will use the terminology reflective of that time in history. According to Cass (1984), research in homosexuality has moved away from treatment programs and psychological adjustments, towards studying the experiences and perceptions of homosexuals themselves (p. 143). The experiences and perceptions to which Cass refers, is called identity formation. Identity formation is also referred to as sexual identity development, and identity acquisition (Cass, 1984, p. 144). Along with the Cass model, I interpose a study conducted by Mathew Stewart (2015), who attempts to revise Cass.

Cass states that homosexual identity development is characterized by processes. The first process deals with the way in which individuals come to perceive themselves as homosexual; second is the process of the translation of a homosexual self-image into a homosexual identity as a result interaction with others; third, is the process of managing the affective, cognitive, and behavioral strategies in daily life; and fourth, is the way in which the new identity becomes incorporated into an overall sense of self (Cass, 1984, p. 144). Cass goes on to say that self-images (also known as self-attitudes, self-representations, or self-perceptions) are the cognitive components that make up a person's overall self-concept. A homosexual self-image is the internal pictures held with reference to sexual preference, and becomes the basic unit from which identity is built (Cass, 1984, p. 144).

In the 1970s, Cass (1984) states that 10 models exist explaining homosexual identity. Even as different as each of these models are, according to Cass, they are strikingly similar; each consisting of themes such as change and growth, which were hypothesized as central to identity development (1984, p. 145). Cass suggests that uniformly, "identity formation is conceptualized as a developmental process marked by a series of changes, growth points, or stages along which certain experiences can be ordered" (Cass, 1984, pp. 145-146). Cass contends that

progress through the stages is characterized by, firstly, increasing acceptance of the label *homosexual* as descriptive of self; secondly, development of a positive attitude towards this self-identity; thirdly, a growing desire to disclose the existence of this identity to both homosexuals and nonhomosexuals; and fourthly, increasingly more personalized and frequent social contacts with homosexuals. (Cass, 1984, p. 146)

Cass took her model a step further by conducting a study to test the validity. Other models, she stated, made little attempt to detail the changes that occur at each stage, resulting in a vague and

poorly conceptualized picture of the developmental process (1984, p. 146). Cass's model is divided into six stages: (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis.

In stage one, identity confusion, an individual perceives that their behavior and actions may be defined as homosexual (Cass, 1984, p. 147). In this stage, Cass states the individual will either consider the possibility of a homosexual identity, or reject this possibility entirely (1984, pp. 147, 150). Stewart (2015) contends that the underlying question in this stage is, "Who am I?" He goes on to posit that the individual's behaviors, dreams, and/or emotional responses to persons of the same sex may cause a person to question his/her presumed sexual identity. The individual might begin to think they are homosexual, but will not disclose their struggle to others (Stewart, 2015, p. 19).

In stage two, identity comparison, an individual, having accepted the possibility of a homosexual identity, is then faced with feelings of alienation as they struggle with their differences, as compared to nonhomosexual individuals (Cass, 1984, p. 151). Stewart refutes that the isolation and alienation one feels from not being part of the normative heterosexual majority can be strenuous. The individual might seek out others who identify as homosexual; however, for the most part, the individual maintains a heterosexual identity (Stewart, 2015, p. 19).

In the third stage, identity tolerance, the individual seeks the company of other homosexuals to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs. Cass goes on to say that there is a tolerance of the homosexual self-identity rather than an acceptance of it. Also, disclosure to heterosexuals at this stage is extremely limited, with the emphasis placed on maintaining two separate images; a public image where one presents as heterosexual, and a private image which is exhibited when only in the company of homosexuals (Cass, 1984, p. 151).

In the fourth stage, identity acceptance, is characterized by an increased contact with the homosexual subculture, where a more positive view of homosexuality occurs. Cass states that the individual slowly develops a network of homosexual friends and selective disclosure of sexual identity is made to close friends and some family members. Cass refers to this stage as a relatively peaceful and stable time for the homosexual since questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” have been resolved (Cass, 1984, pp. 151-152).

The fifth stage of Cass’s model is identity pride. This stage, according to Cass, is characterized by feelings of pride towards one’s homosexual identity and the feeling of fierce loyalty to homosexual groups (Cass, 1984, p. 152). Stewart (2015) suggests that the individual realizes during this stage, that there is a difference between how he/she views him/herself and how society views him/her (2015, p. 20). Cass explains that a dichotomy begins to develop between those who identify as homosexual and those who identify as heterosexual. The values of heterosexual life (marriage, sex-role structures, etc.) are devalued by the homosexual since they promote the concept of homosexual inferiority (Cass, 1984, p. 152). According to Stewart, an individual’s public and private identity in older adolescence meld into one (Stewart, 2015, p. 20).

In the sixth and final stage of Cass’s model, identity syntheses, according to Stewart, the individual rejects the dichotomy of homosexuality vs. heterosexuality, as created in the previous stage. The dichotomy is replaced with the realization of the similarities between homosexuals and heterosexuals (Stewart, 2015, p. 20). Cass states that even though the anger and pride associated with the previous stage still exist, they exist in less emotional terms. Individuals see themselves as having many sides to their character, only one part of which is related to homosexuality. She goes on to say that a lifestyle is developed in which the homosexual identity is no longer hidden and disclosure becomes a non-issue. Finally, one’s view of self and the

beliefs believed to be held by others are synthesized into one integrated identity uniting both the public and private aspects of life, which promotes a feeling of peace and stability (Cass, 1984, pp. 152-153).

D'Augelli – Life Span Model

According to Bilodeau and Renn (2005), no identity development model can fully address the intersection and complexities of non-heterosexual identity; however, Anthony D'Augelli (1994) proposes a “life-span” model of sexual orientation development that takes social contexts into account in ways early stage models, such as those like Cass’ (1979, 1984), did not (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28). Bilodeau and Renn posit that the “D’Augelli framework addresses issues often ignored in other models, presenting human development as unfolding in concurring and multiple paths, including the development of a person’s self-concept, relationships with family, and connections to peer groups and community” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28). In D’Augelli’s model, sexual orientation is fluid at certain points and more stagnant at other times. Also, that human growth is intimately connected to and shaped by environmental and biological factors (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28).

Similar to Cass’s (1979, 1984) sexual identity model, D’Augelli’s model consists of six processes. D’Augelli (1994) also developed six interactive processes by which gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) people navigate the coming out process. His model views identity as a social construction, based on the experiences an individual has within his/her environment (Stewart, 2015, p. 21).

First, exiting a heterosexual identity: In this stage, individuals begin to recognize that their feelings and attractions are not heterosexual. They may begin to disclose to others that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual. This is a period of questioning and self-discovery.

Second, developing a personal lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity: In this stage, individuals challenge internalized myths about what it means to identify as GLB. Through contact with others who identify as non-heterosexual, the individual will learn to develop a GLB identity. This is often accomplished through a relationship with others who have already navigated the process. Third, developing a lesbian, gay, or bisexual social identity: In this stage, individuals create a network of support from people who both know and support their sexual orientation. Fourth, becoming a lesbian, gay, or bisexual offspring: In this stage, individuals disclose their GLB identity to their parents and redefine their relationship with them in light of their identity. Fifth, developing a lesbian, gay, or bisexual intimacy status: In this stage, individuals learn to form intimate relationships with others in light of their sexual identity, either gay, lesbian or bisexual. Sixth, entering a lesbian, gay or bisexual community: The final stage is comprised of individuals becoming committed to social and political action. (Stewart, 2015, pp. 21-22)

Although D'Augelli's model is presented in a linear manner, the coming out process does not always follow a linear pattern, and may even skip stages. Individuals make decisions to come out (or not come out) at different junctures in life. There is no cookie-cutter approach that fits all individuals and their decisions; yet, still useful understanding the phenomenon of coming out.

Similarities and Differences between Models

Unlike Cass's linear model, D'Augelli's model is more fluid: individuals who are coming out can enter one stage while spending no time in another. Stewart (2015) states that a strength of D'Augelli's model is that it does not limit movement in a linear pattern, but rather recognizes how the coming out process can be a dynamic journey for the individual (Stewart, 2015, pp. 22-23).

In addition, the non-heterosexual linear stage development models recognize there are multiple facets with which one discloses their sexual identity to others, and focuses “on the resolution of internal conflict related to identification as lesbian or gay, and informed what is commonly termed the coming-out process” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, pp. 25 -26). Stewart (2015) contends that “coming out is not isolated to the individual, but occurs within a larger social context” (Stewart, 2015, p. 24). The life-span approach examines the interaction of sexual identity development, along with other significant factors such as race, gender, social class and culture (Hunter, 2007; Rasmussen, 2006).

According to Stewart (2015), the stage models were developed in the 1970s and based on studies with relatively small sample sizes and comprised in most often of Western Caucasian men (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Hunter, 2007). Stewart also contends that researchers often asked adults to reflect back on their experiences of coming-out to develop the models, leading to a lack of research on adolescents/teenagers and college-aged students (Stewart, 2015, p. 23). Stewart (2015) also cautions there is a danger in using any one model in isolation to understand a complex and personal process. “Examining both the stage models and the life span approach provides one with a picture of how an individual may progress in exiting one sexual identity and assuming another” (Stewart, 2015, p. 25). Bilodeau and Renn state the diversity of adolescent experiences of identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, highlights the need to consider multiple developmental models (2005, p. 27).

Gay and Lesbian Student Experiences in College

As important as understanding sexual identity development models is for the development of gay and lesbian students, it is not merely enough. Along with that understanding comes a need for a supportive, positive learning environment that takes an interest in the students

it serves. Elizabeth Cox and Jesse Watson suggest that for community colleges to truly be the “people’s college,” they must continually reexamine their environment to ensure all who attend are welcomed into an inclusive environment (2011, p. 3). Jason Garvey, Jason Taylor, and Susan Rankin (2015) state that while community colleges are heralded for their commitments to open access, diversity, and social mobility (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Griffith & Connor, 1994), community colleges have also been criticized for failure to adapt to the diversity in their student populations (Garvey et al., 2015, p. 528). Garvey et al. (2015), drawing from Harbour and Ebie (2011), go on to state that this debate is far from settled, but is relevant to the degree that LGBTQ students in community colleges are marginalized because of their identity and “as a result of individual behaviors, institutional policies and practices, and social beliefs and conditions that they cannot control” (Garvey et al., 2015, p. 528).

Ronni Sanlo (2012) noted that “few community colleges acknowledge the presence of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff on their campuses, and there is extraordinarily little data or documented experiences of this population” (Sanlo, 2012, p. 47). Garvey et al. (2015) state that by 2011, Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2011) note that no additional empirical, theoretical, or applied publications have appeared in the literature since Ivory’s (2005) publication. Further examining the lack of research on this population, Garvey et al. (2015) state from Ivory (2005), there were only six published articles on LGBTQ community college students as of 2005 (Garvey et al., 2015, p. 529).

Despite the lack of research on LGBTQ community college students, a wealth of research exists on LGBTQ students in four-year institutions. Garvey et al. (2015) summarize research trends conducted at four-year institutions. In a recent review of LGBTQ research in higher education, Renn (2010) identifies three strands of LGBTQ scholarship: visibility, campus

climate, and identity and experiences. Most relevant to this study is work related to campus climate and student experiences. The most comprehensive data on campus climate and student experiences, and the data used for this study, are from *The State of Higher Education for LGBT People* (Rankin et al., 2010). Overall, these results support previous national surveys reporting relatively high levels of anti-LGBTQ perceptions and experiences on college campuses (Garvey et al., 2015, p. 529).

The study on *The State of Higher Education for LGBT People*, by Susan (Sue) Rankin, Genevieve Weber, Warren Blumenfeld, and Somjen Frazer was one of the first national studies at a four-year institution. Campus climate was examined from all Carnegie Basic Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education in all 50 states (2010, p. 8-9). More than 5,000 LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty were surveyed and researchers found that almost a quarter of the LGBTQ respondents, and about one third of the trans-identified respondents had experienced harassment or violence on campus because of their sexual or gender identity (2010, pp. 10-11).

The lack of data on community colleges prompted Garvey et al. (2015) to replicate Rankin et al. (2010) study on *The State of Higher Education for LGBT People*. Participants in the study by Garvey et al. (2015) were LGBTQ students at a two-year institution. The focus of their mixed methods design was to examine students' perceptions of campus climate at two-year institutions. Their findings in the qualitative section reflected similar stories regarding the influences of campus climate for LGBTQ students; with several students mentioning the impact of classroom experiences on overall campus climate. Analysis of the open-ended questions confirms that many students do not feel supported by faculty, and concludes that faculty have a unique influence on LGBTQ students' perceptions of not only the classroom, but the environment and campus climate (Garvey et al., 2015, pp. 535-536).

In conclusion, Garvey et al. (2015) suggest a strong relationship between the classroom environment and the perception of campus climate at two-year institutions for LGBTQ students. This translates to, “what students experience within the classroom and among faculty largely governs and predicts their attitude and perceptions of campus climate” (p. 537). They go on to state that these data support existing literature on LGBTQ student experiences in four-year institutions. Finally, evidence from this study shows the classroom environment, in particular faculty interactions, are influential in students’ overall perception of the campus environment.

Queer Theory

Patrick Dilley (1999) writes that “to understand/imagine queer theory, one must make distinctions between queer as a quality (essentialism) and queer as an attribute (constructionism)” (Dilley, 1999, p. 459). According to Stewart (2015), queer theory emerged in the late 1980s through a series of lectures by scholars in the fields of history and humanities who focused on gay and lesbian subjects (Stewart, 2015, p. 29). Nikki Sullivan contends that queer theory “is constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledge and identities” (Sullivan, 2003, pp. 43-44). Stewart (2015) argues that queer theory calls for new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender. Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1994) posit the hallmarks that developed from queer theory are:

- (1) a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied on different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides;
- (2) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general ...;
- (3) a rejection of civil-rights strategies in favor of politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and anti-

assimilationist politics; (4) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer 'readings' of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualized texts. (Stein & Plummer, 1994, pp. 181-182).

These, along with sexuality and gender, are the keys to understanding queer theory.

Queer theory, according to Max Kirsch (2000), rejects the male-female and heterosexual-homosexual binary. Sasha Roseneil adds that queer theory suspends the classifications of gay, lesbian, bisexual, masculine, and feminine because they are not inclusive or useful (2002, p. 33). Stewart (2015) explains how social constructs impact queer theory.

The gender of the individual who one has sex with becomes the defining dimension of sexuality, over and against other dimensions of sexual behavior. From this singular dimension of sexual behavior, society has constructed certain expressions of sexuality which are natural (heterosexuality), and others which are unnatural (all non-heterosexual behavior). Creating this binary category of sexuality allows for one societal group (heterosexuals) to have power over all others and label them as deviants. Furthermore, this binary socially and politically marginalizes those who do not identify as heterosexual (Stewart, 2015, pp. 30-31).

Queer theory challenges what the dominant culture has constructed as socially acceptable and calls for resistance and the formation of new ways of thinking (Stewart, 2015, p. 31). Queer theory rejects what is normal and advocates for an appreciation of each individual and what he/she stands for in society.

Conclusion

In the conversation about what is "normal" in society, who gets to decide what normal looks like? In community colleges, and higher education in general, policy has typically been

constructed by middle to upper-class white men. Even though community colleges have open access admissions, is what they stand for truly inclusive to all students? In particular, are gay and lesbian students given the support they need to feel empowered to be who they are and what they stand for in society? In this study, I used the dichotomy of queer theory and student experiences in community colleges to begin to shape the conversation with participants in this study. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology I utilized to ask questions and make sense of the students' answers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The study was qualitative in design, incorporating primarily phenomenological and narrative research. John Creswell (2007) identifies five traditions of qualitative inquiry: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. According to Creswell, "a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (1997, p. 51) and is used when "understanding the essence of experience" (1997, p. 78). Since this study examined gay and lesbian community college students currently enrolled, or one year removed, each student had those "lived experiences." Narrative research "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54) and is used when "exploring the life of an individual" (2007, p. 78). This study examined a specific phenomenon during a certain time period in the lives of the participants; specifically, the participant's stories while attending the community college.

Researcher bias was a potential limitation to this study. I am a lesbian woman, who was also a community college student. I have my own lived experiences and have experienced my own negative aspects of being a lesbian community college student, as both in and out of the closet. I also recognize the generation differences between myself, and traditional-age community college students. Our lived life experiences differed. Additionally, I identify as a lesbian woman; therefore, I can never know what it is like to be a gay man. In this study, I eliminated bias by recognizing my own lived experiences and kept them separate from the participants'. I

consciously avoided making assumptions about students' lived experiences and presented the data as it was shared with me.

Respondent validation was used to ensure participant responses were as they intended. Maxwell (2005) characterizes respondent validation as the solicitation of feedback from your participants regarding your data and conclusions. This method rules out the possibility of misinterpreting participant meaning and perspectives. It is also a way to identify researcher bias and misunderstanding of what was observed (2005, p. 111). Participants were provided with a transcript of their interview, and were free to add or remove any response. It was also communicated to participants that by reviewing the interview transcript and themes, they could ensure the intent of their responses were reported accurately. To establish trustworthiness and validity, these data were triangulated through interviews, observations of the campus climate, and document analysis. Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen defined the concept of triangulation as using many sources of data, rather than just one; multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you are studying (2007, pp. 115-116).

Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2008) posit that qualitative researchers have "the desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge" (p. 16). This study was designed to do just that. By sharing the stories of gay and lesbian community college students attending a rural, public, Midwestern community college, connections were made using sexual identity development models and queer theory to digest the dichotomy of student experiences and support from faculty and administrators.

The community college was located in a predominantly white setting serving multiple predominantly white counties with populations ranging from 20,000 and 70,000, and a median

household income between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (2015 United States Census Bureau). The community college used for this study was a two-year public community college with open-access enrollment. The campus setting, according to the National Center for Education Statistics *College Navigator* tool, was considered small/suburban, with a full-time enrollment between 4,000 and 5,000 students and a faculty to student ratio of more than 20 to 1. Both two-year associate's degrees and certificate programs were offered.

Data Analysis

Human Subjects approval (Appendix B) was obtained to conduct this study as a protection for both the researcher and the participants. Once Human Subjects approved the research project, I began reaching out to faculty and staff via email (Appendix C) to ask for help recruit possible participants. Faculty and staff were instructed to read a verbatim segment in my email to help recruit participants. Interested participants were asked to text or email me for questions about the study, and if they were willing to participate. To ensure the opportunity reached a maximum number of participants, a colorful flyer (Appendix D) easily identifiable with gay and lesbian students was copied and posted to all campus bulletin boards. I wanted to make sure potential participants meeting the criteria of the study were aware of the opportunity. Since the instructor had the opportunity make the announcement was voluntary, I felt this was the next best method for combatting lack of willingness from faculty and staff.

When the participants initially contacted me, I told them a little about myself and shared only the topic of the study. The participants only knew the general area of my research (gay and lesbian student experiences at a community college) prior to the interviews. Questions or concerns from the students were addressed at that time, and a time and location was set to meet to conduct the interviews. I let the participants choose the location and time to ensure they were

comfortable. I reminded them that it needed to be a place where they could speak freely and openly, and was also suitable for an audio recording of the interview.

Maxwell contends the process of negotiating a relationship with your participants is complex (2005, pp. 82-83). I found this to be true. I made small talk with the participants before actually beginning the interviews so they felt as comfortable as possible with me. Steven Seidman (1998) states it is possible to have too much rapport, as well as too little (1998, pp. 80-82). Additionally, Maxwell (2005) suggests in qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means from which research is constructed. These relationships have effects not only on the participants in the study but also on the researcher, and ultimately the research design (Maxwell, 2005, p. 83). I agree there is a delicate balance for a researcher, as it was in this study. What I experienced was that some interviews flowed better than others, which had a lot to do with how much rapport I had at the beginning with each participant. Those I connected with more organically seemed to talk more openly.

Participants had to either be gay or lesbian, currently enrolled, or out of the community college for no more than one year, therefore, random sampling was not appropriate due to the size and specific criteria for the study. Participants were selected by what Maxwell (2005) refers to as purposeful selection. In this strategy, persons, activities, or settings were deliberately selected in order to provide information that could not be collected from other choices (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Since this study was based on gay or lesbian community college students who were either currently enrolled, or had been enrolled within the past year, I utilized purposeful selection to choose participants.

The primary source of data collection was in the form of interview data. Interview data were collected by digital/audio recording and consisted of predetermined interview questions and

sub-questions. The interview limit was no longer than 60 minutes, so the interview instrument was designed accordingly. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with a Consent to Participate in Research Form (Appendix E), which included permission to record the interview with a digital recorder. Participants were reminded of their rights and told they could opt out of the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. I answered any questions or concerns they had, then asked each participant to sign the consent form. A scanned copy of the consent form was emailed to the participants immediately following the interview.

The participants were persons with whom I had no previous working relationship with. There were nine participants in this study. Five identified as lesbian women, and four identified as gay men with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years-old. Six were traditional college students, and three were non-traditional college students. Three were African-American, all of whom were lesbian women, while six were white. Of the nine participants, only two did not participate in college-related extracurricular activities or clubs. Three were intercollegiate athletes, one participated in an extracurricular club related to her major, and three students did participate in past semesters, but were not currently active in an extracurricular activity.

Maxwell (2005) points out that in qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument and relationships have an effect on the research as well as the research design (2005, p. 83). Although participants were only given the general topic of the study, self-selection bias could exist with no way to completely eliminate it. In this case, I took what the participants said at face value, and without knowing their backgrounds, made an assumption these were their true lived experiences. What I eliminated in my interview questions were leading questions that elicited a perceived desired response, or responses that made the participants' experiences sound better or worse than they really were.

Once the interviews were complete, I sent the digitally recorded audio files to a transcriptionist before the coding process began. Maxwell (2005) posits that coding is the main categorizing strategy in qualitative research. The goal of coding is to rearrange the data into categories that facilitate comparisons that aid in the development of theoretical concepts (2005, p. 96). All files were transcribed, by a transcriptionist, into Word documents and sent to me when completed. Since it had been a while since some of the interviews were conducted, I quickly read through all of the interview transcripts as a whole. I made generic notes of interesting findings in the margins of each of the interview transcripts before reading them more carefully. After re-familiarizing myself with each interview transcript, I then read through the transcripts again, this time more slowly, and put the notes from each participant narrative into an Excel document with headings from the interview questions.

Concurrently while reading the interview transcripts and recording summaries of the participants' narratives into the Excel document, I recorded relevant terms and phrases from the interview narratives. I looked for words and phrases that were repeated, as well as those that were outliers. I then wrote those words and phrases onto Post-it notes and rearranged the Post-it notes into four main themes and sub-themes that came directly from the interview transcripts. These words and phrases became the themes document (Appendix F), which guided the organization of Chapters 4 and 5. Creswell (2007) says that in order to bracket one's experiences: "investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (p. 59). I made an effort to be unbiased by using direct quotes of the participants' responses in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

This section provides the reader with study design and methodology for data analysis. It details the methodology for the study and the strategic decisions for data analysis. In Chapter 4, the participant narratives connect the literature with lived accounts from nine individuals who attend a rural Midwestern community college.

CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

The participants in this study each have a unique story to tell. In this chapter, I provide an overview of each of the participants' stories as they relate to this study. The participants for this study include: four white, male students who identify as gay; two are traditional-age college students and two are non-traditional college students. Five of the participants identify as lesbian; two of whom are white and three African-American. Only one of the female students is a non-traditional college student.

These participant narratives provide an insight into some of the issues gay and lesbian students face in their personal lives, in school, and in the community. The following narratives are organized and presented along the four major themes of this study, which are: the coming out experience, their campus experiences, and the participant's suggestions for campus administrators. Beginning the section for each student participant is a short paragraph of details about the student's life, to contextualize his or her comments.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was a 21 year-old white female, traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate in Applied Science degree. She was married and identified as openly gay to her family and friends. Her mannerisms were characterized as "feminine" by the way she dressed and carried herself. She participated in a club related to her degree area, as well as a club focused on student leadership.

Coming Out

When I asked Elizabeth to tell me a little about her coming out process. She said she first came out to her parents when she was 13 years old. Her mother dismissed the idea and responded

with a “sleep with whomever you want, but make sure to try men first” response; almost like she did not care or hoped it was a phase and being with a man would cure it. Elizabeth described her first coming out experience:

Well, I had tried to come out to my parents when I was much younger, when I was like 13. Pretty much my mom was like, here, you have free reign to go screw whoever you want. You should try men first. I went crazy and finally I decided this [being with girls] is what I like better. I already knew this a long time ago, but here you go.

Elizabeth decided to come out again at age 18, with a much different response from her mother. The day she came out, she described feeling like she was “panicking and freaking out.” She said she tested the waters and came out to her manager at work, then to her mother later that same day. Elizabeth said she felt the need to come out because she did not want to lie about it any longer. When she told her manager she was dating a girl, her manager agreed that her mom was going to “kill her.” When I asked her to tell me how she came out to both, she said:

The first person that I told was my manager and I just went in and was like, my mom is going to kill me. She said, “Whoa, who are you dating now?” I said, “A girl.” She said, “Oh, yeah. She’s gonna kill you.” So, she was the first person I came out to. When I came out to my mom, I was sitting at work. I was panicking and freaking out because I felt the need to come out to her because I didn’t want to lie. She pulled up to show me my sister’s dance pictures or something. I was smoking a cigarette, which she didn’t know either and she said, “What the hell are you doing?” I said, “I don’t know. I’ll talk to you when I get home.”

So, I just went back into work. Then, I came back out. When I told her originally, she said, “Well that’s fine. You know you can love whoever you want, but it’s going to be

the same as boys. You can't spend the night. She can't spend the night here. You're not allowed to be alone at home." That's fine. I told her on a Saturday or Sunday. Monday rolled around and it was my only day off work. I was working full time and I was working a lot. I told her I was going to go hang out with [her girlfriend]. She said we would talk about it over dinner. I told her I was not talking about it over dinner. I said, "That's my entire day and I'm not doing that. I'm going to go hang out with [her girlfriend]." She said, "No, no, no." I said, "Okay, well you can tell me no all you want. I'm going to do whatever the hell I want."

I went and hung out with her, came back home and it had just really been bothering me all day long, just eating at me. So, I packed up part of my stuff. I came to dinner and she had changed her tune completely saying, "I don't want you seeing her. This is ridiculous." So I got up in the middle of dinner and I said, "Well, fuck you then" and left. I cried and I don't even know how I made it to [anonymous town]. I ran off in every one of those little ditch things on the way there. I think that my mom was probably the hardest. I told my grandma and she said, "Okay, whatever."

With my dad, my girlfriend and I had been dating like a week and I just went over there. She [her girlfriend] went to the bathroom and I said, "Oh, yeah, dad. By the way, this is my girlfriend." He said, "Well I kind of figured that." That's about how all of that went. My mom was definitely the worst though.

Elizabeth had apparently experienced feelings of attraction towards other girls before she was a teenager and tried to come out for the first time. When asked how, and if, Elizabeth looked up information to learn more about her sexuality, she said:

Really, the internet. I feel like it's way more accepted now and talked about. It's easier to find things if you want to know. I don't really do anything, but it's definitely easier than when I was in middle school because people didn't talk about it.

The second time she came out, Elizabeth experienced a wide range of emotions, including rejection and a rapidly eroding relationship with her mother, which caused her to move out. At the same time, Elizabeth's father and grandmother were both supportive of her relationship with her girlfriend. Based on those experiences, I asked what advice she would offer someone currently thinking about coming out.

Do what makes you happy. Be you. People aren't going to like you throughout your entire life. People are going to probably tell you to go to hell or that you're going to go to hell, but you just kind of have to be who you are.

Campus Experience

When asked to describe her overall experience at this community college, instead of focusing on herself, Elizabeth chose instead to describe how the college's faculty layoffs affected students. The environment was not positive and described how it trickled down to the students.

I feel like we kind of got the shitty hand out of all of it because of all of the layoffs and everything. Before the layoffs, I feel like there was a lot more morale and stuff that they had here, so my experience was better, but now I am in a very selective group of people, so I don't feel like the layoffs really affected that group down there too much. I feel like it's pretty good.

When asked how it felt to be openly gay at this community college, Elizabeth said, "Like I said, I'm in a really selective group. There are still people who I know don't feel comfortable

with it, but I feel like everybody has been very accepting around me here.” When I asked how she had been treated by fellow students, Elizabeth said that some people “just don’t get it.”

I did take a sociology class before I was in all of my major classes. We got into the chapter on the LGBTQ community and they [other students in class] didn’t really understand. The way that they were coming across like on marriage, a fellow student said, “Well, I don’t want my son seeing that kind of thing and I don’t want my kids growing up...” I had to look at her and be like, “Okay, well you’re married, right? So if your husband is in some accident and you have to choose whether or not he is on life support, you get to make that choice, right? Well, I get to make that choice, too.” She kind of understood after that, but originally she was very abrasive. She just didn’t get it.

No matter what people do to try and spread awareness, there are some who are extremely closed-minded. She described a specific instance of a pretty sensitive conversation on marriage equality she had with one of her classmates outside of her program.

Based on her appearance as feminine, Elizabeth can blend in with other girls who identify as straight. When asked how she had been treated by faculty, Elizabeth felt those instructors inside her program of study have been supportive; in particular, one instructor who she referred to as an “ally.” She described her academic program of study as a small, tight-knit group of students and instructors. They spend hours together and know each other extremely well. Outside of her program, Elizabeth did not feel the need to out herself to those instructors and students.

I actually have an instructor right now that I feel like is an ally. She has said before that in the past there were many, many years where she was actually with women, but some of the things that she says still come across like, “Ooh, maybe you should have said that a different way.” We had an assignment where I didn’t give her the answer that she wanted

to hear pretty much. It was like, what is going to make you feel uncomfortable. What do you think you can do? I said, “Negative things with religion, whatever.” She is a very religious person and said, “Well, I understand religion. What about a conservative gay rally?” She is Black, so she says, “I can go out and say *nigger, porch monkey*, whatever.” “Well, it’s the same for you. You experience that every day, so it doesn’t bother you. I experience this every day, so it doesn’t bother me either. So, I don’t feel like you should’ve brought that up.”

That’s really the only thing that I can think of. Most of the time, I don’t tell people [that she is gay]. You don’t need to know if you’re my gen ed science teacher. If someone sees me with someone, good for you, but I don’t go up and tell people. I spend eight hours a day, two days a week in the same classroom with one teacher, so obviously they know.

When asked how she thought her experiences were as compared to students who identified as straight, she described how uncomfortable she felt filling out forms that make you list “wife” or “husband.” People who identify as straight fill out forms without even thinking twice about it. People in a relationship other than straight, are automatically “outed” by this question. Elizabeth said she wished this question could somehow be removed, or changed to say “spouse” instead.

I don’t know about everybody else, but if you go and fill out papers and it says relationship, I hate that question. I don’t want to have to put down wife or husband. I put down spouse. I had come in with my sister who is straight and she just wrote down husband, like it was easy, and I dread that question. On the inside, I’m thinking, “please don’t let it be on there. They don’t need to know.” I sign up to do things in places. I’m going to a silent weekend, which is an emersion experience held by a different college.

I've gone before, but you still have to give an emergency contact. I hate to put that on there, because you have to put down spouse, but now they know I'm a lesbian and I can't protect myself anymore.

When asked if Elizabeth had noticed the Safe Zone signs on campus, she said she had. Elizabeth was glad that students had a support area to turn to if and when they needed someone. When asked if she would seek help from someone who displayed a Safe Zone sign, she said would just seek help from whomever she needed help from; not necessarily from someone who exclusively displayed a sign. She said she did not feel it necessary to out herself to get help.

It's good to know that if something were to happen, there's somebody that I can give it to that is going to support me and know that there is somebody there. I'm just going to go seek help. It's like I said, "I'm not going to be like, hi, I'm Elizabeth and I'm gay."

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

If she were able to speak with administrators at this community college, Elizabeth would tell them this community college needs a support group for LGBTQ students; presently there are none. Elizabeth felt strongly that having a network of students who are like you increases your success rate. She said that life-long relationships are built that way and that would help more students succeed.

I think we need something here for LGBTQ students, like a support group or club because we have nothing. Like you're [she referred to my research at this community college] having issues right now trying to find people and that's because there is no way to identify us. I feel like a major part of your culture is identifying with other people of your culture and you can build relationships and find people like you. You advance more and you improve yourself more if you're around people who are like you.

When asked if she would encourage other gay and lesbian students to attend this community college, she said, “Yes. I haven’t really had any extremely negative experiences here or anything like that, so I feel like it’s a very safe place to be.” Elizabeth mentioned one thing she would change about her experience at this community college:

I would want to take more initiative in trying to form a club. Now, I just feel like I’m so hyper focused on what I’m doing that I don’t have time. In the beginning, when I was just taking gen eds [sic] and everything, I wish I would have done more to make that group possible.

Erica

Erica was an 18 year-old Black female, traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate in Arts degree. She identified as openly gay to her family and friends. Her mannerisms would be characterized as “butch” by the way she dressed and carried herself. She was an intercollegiate athlete at this community college but participated in no other extra-curricular clubs or activities on campus due to the time commitment of her sport.

Coming Out

Erica came out to her aunt and oldest cousin at the age of 12. She felt comfortable coming out to them because of their close relationship. Coming out to them first, Erica said, made coming out to her mom, and other people, easier. Erica came out to her mom her freshman year in high school. She said it was hard telling her mom and chose to come out to her via text message. Erica said her mom’s initial reaction was that Erica was confused about who she was, but later came to realize Erica was in fact was a lesbian. Erica said her mom was supportive of her sexuality. When asked to describe how she came out to different people in her life, Erica said:

I was 12 when I came out. I came out to my aunt first because I had a good relationship with her. Then, I came out to my oldest cousin. It was hard telling my mom. She's the one that birthed me. My freshman year in high school, I texted my mom and told her that I think I like girls and she was like, well let's have a talk about it. We ended up having a talk about it. She is a Christian woman so she was telling me that maybe I was confused because I was so young. She finally realized as I kept getting older that I was for real about the situation. She got used to it. She asks me about girls now and all types of stuff, so she's okay with it. She jokes around, but that's just my mom.

Erica said the community in which she grew up was also accepting and supportive. She described her hometown as a bunch of people who were related to her. She said many of them knew she was different at an early age. She said she had always dressed like a tomboy, never wore dresses, and jumped and played like the boys. This was why her coming out was no surprise to those in her community.

When asked to describe how accepting her community was for openly gay people, Erica said:

The community is very acceptable. My hometown is basically all of my family. When I got older, the community knew because growing up they would say I was jumping over walls and never liked to wear dresses. I would cry and stuff like that. I feel like I was accepted, but that's it.

Erica was very young when she realized she was gay. To learn more about her sexuality, Erica did what many do and searched the internet for whatever she wanted to learn about. When asked to describe what she used, she said:

Google. Because there are so many sexualities. There's a lot of them. I never knew there were so many. To me, I'm just me. I'm just myself. I'm not going to say I'm something, you know. I know all types of them. Somebody told me there are so many of them, so I wanted to learn about it.

Having come out when she was so young and lived as an openly gay woman, Erica provided specific advice she would give another person who was thinking about coming out:

I would say think about it before you come out. If you're willing to come out, go to somebody who is real close to you and that's easy, because if you have someone that's close to you, they're going to understand because they're always going to love you no matter what. If you come out to people that you feel comfortable coming out to, then it's going to be easier for you to come out to everyone.

Campus Experience

When describing her overall student experience at this community college, she said, "It's been a good experience so far. It's different than high school." Erica felt the students at this community college treat her as a normal person. "It's okay to me because I feel like ain't nobody talking. I guess it's acceptable. Nobody stares, like I'm just a regular person." When asked if she thought she was treated the same or differently than students who identified as straight, she described how gay students are often joked about. She said students did not do it to be mean, it was a way of joking around and being funny.

People joke around a lot, but that's it. It's just for laughs. Nobody is serious about it, just joking around about you being gay or lesbian. Gay people joke around with straight people like it's funny. It's nothing bad. I've never experienced nothing bad for real.

Like her fellow students, she felt her instructors were also accepting. One of her instructors actually encouraged students to speak up about their sexual orientation when discussing the topic in class. This, she said, was to help others better understand differences among students. When I asked her to describe how she has been treated by faculty and staff, Erica said:

They accept me. Nobody really says nothing to me. The teacher would clarify if you are like that [gay] you can speak up, so I would speak up and tell my side and they would understand it better because someone that is like that would explain it better than they know it because they're not like that.

Erica was not aware what a Safe Zone was and who they were for, so for obvious reasons, she had not noticed them. When I told what they were and asked if she would ever seek help specifically from someone who displayed a Safe Zone sign, Erica responded by saying:

I wouldn't care. I would feel like my teachers do know because of [her sport] anyway, so I wouldn't have a problem with that at all. If I wasn't playing [her sport], I would probably recommend that.

Erica is not unique to all students: in she has teammates and coaches to turn to in a time of crisis. When asked if she would turn to a Safe Zone or resource center, if one existed, for issues regarding her sexuality if she did not have her current support system, she said, "Yeah."

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

When asked what suggestions she would give to campus administrators, Erica indicated the need for more promotion of Safe Zone areas and what and who they are for. She thought many of the instructors do not know they exist, or if they do, never mention them.

I would say if you don't have somebody like the Safe Zone, if you find out about that. A lot of teachers don't know you. People are different and look different being gay or lesbian because no one really knows who you are, so I would say go to the Safe Zone and have some help so teachers will already know when you come in so you won't feel left out.

When I asked if she would encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college, she said she would. She said she has enjoyed her time here and that others should come here.

Yes, I would because everybody is going to know you. Everybody is cool here and it's chill. It's a nice community college honestly. I was telling people that this morning. There was a high school here and everybody I saw I told them to come to [this community college]. It's the best community college here in [this state]. I was just joking around, but still, I was telling people.

There were are few things Erica would change about her experience at this community college. Most involved knowing more people and being involved in the community. When asked what she would change about her experience at this community college, Erica said:

Interacting with more people. I do, but I wish I would have interacted more to know a lot more people in the city. Not knowing people, you're just going to be here bored because you don't know nothing about the city. So, interacting.

Jason

Jason was a 23 year-old white male, traditional-age college student, seeking a Bachelor of Science Degree. Jason attended this community college for one year before he transferred to a university. He identified as openly gay to his family and friends. His mannerisms could be

characterized as “feminine” by the way he dressed and carried himself. Jason did not participate in any extracurricular clubs or activities while he was on campus, but volunteered at two organizations within his local community. When I asked what kind of volunteer work he did in the community, Jason said:

There was a youth center for gay youth in town, and I was there to basically be like a shoulder to cry on and stuff like that. I know how hard some people do have it. I was extremely lucky. In that case, I wanted to be able to help them through it. There were a lot of people that came in that were still in the closet. I would tell them, “Even though you’re here, it’s not like there’s a big flashing sign out front. No one knows why you’re here.” It was really good to be able to talk to people and tell them how to do things.

I just got a new vehicle, so I go to the [gay youth] center and I actually help make sure patients make it to their appointments.... I want to be an oncology nurse and most of them are elderly women. I just love them. It’s very nice. I make sure they make it to their appointments. I take them there and sometimes we go get something to eat. A lot of them live alone and just to have someone there to talk to them is the world to them. I love it and have been through that, so I just like to help other people.

Coming Out

When I asked Jason to tell me a little about his coming out process, he said coming out to his grandmother and sister was easy. After he came out, Jason said his grandmother sent a mass email to the rest of the family that said if any of them had a problem with him being gay, they were not welcome at any of the family gatherings.

Although Jason received love and support from his sister and grandma, Jason said the hardest person to come out to was his twin brother. He described his twin brother as very

masculine and had displayed homophobic tendencies in the past. Jason said he was terrified to have to tell his brother he was gay. His brother figured it out on his own and asked Jason one day if he were gay. When Jason told him, they were both very emotional. After that conversation, the weight of the world was lifted off of Jason, and he said things were back to normal again with his brother. Jason said he and his brother actually lived together, and Jason's friends liked his brother better than him. Jason described his coming out story below:

When I first came out I was 15, going into my sophomore year in high school. I told my sister first and then I told my grandmother and my grandmother just sent out a mass email to the rest of my entire family basically saying Jason is gay. If you have an issue, just don't come to the family get-togethers. I think the hardest person to come out to was my twin brother because he has some issues with gay people and so I was very terrified to tell him. He asked me one day and I started crying. We both started crying. Then everything went back to normal and now we live together.

Jason said his family and friends were very supportive; surprisingly, so was his brother, after their emotional conversation. When he described the support from family and friends, Jason said, "Oh yeah. Even though coming from a small town, they were very, very supportive." When I asked about his community, his response was a bit more indifferent.

Moving back home, it wasn't that bad. It made me grow a thicker skin. Growing up there was kind of rough. It made me build a thicker skin and made me a stronger person.

Coming to [this town] to go to school, I've noticed that it's [sexuality/being gay] not really talked about. It's kind of just like, okay, next topic. It isn't like people are standing around with a magnifying glass about it. The transition is a lot better, especially with the community here or like [another town].

When he was younger, Jason said he had trouble coping with being gay and sought help from a therapist. Therapy was Jason's main source of information about his sexual orientation.

Before I came here, my biggest thing was that I talked to a therapist a lot. Like I said, small town. There was a moment in time that I got really depressed because people were really coming down on me for my sexuality even though I'm not one to flaunt it. I'm not just throwing it out there like here's this and here's this. I normally try to keep to myself. Just for that one fact that they know about me, they made my life hell. So, yeah, I did talk to a lot of therapists. My family was there a lot for me. There were a lot of forums online that I read about other people and how they're dealing with it, so that also helped me kind of cope with what was going on in my life at the time.

Jason said he is very comfortable with his sexuality now. He said he no longer needed to search for information regarding his sexuality.

When it comes to accessing any kind of information, because I've been out for a while now, I really don't look up much anymore. I'm fully accepting of myself and the things that I like and dislike. I don't have to sit there and be like, well, what's this all about. I need to know. I'm very comfortable with my sexuality, so in that way I don't feel like I need to search anymore. It's like I've finally found myself, so it's nice now.

Jason provided very detailed advice for someone thinking about coming out. When I asked what advice he would give to someone currently going through the coming out process, he said:

My biggest thing is not to let anybody tell you that you have to. If you have someone sitting there saying that you just need to come out, you just need to come out, that's going to stress you out a whole lot. Just do what you think is right. If you have gay friends, go to

them if you need to talk. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your family, talk to them. Don't sit there and feel like you have to do anything. Until you are comfortable with yourself, don't come out. If you're not comfortable yet, don't do it because as soon as you put that label on it, then people are going to target you, and if you can't handle it, don't do it.

Campus Experience

Near the beginning of the interview, Jason was asked to describe his overall experience at this community college. His initial response was very upbeat and positive; however, later in the interview, Jason disclosed that he was the target of racial slurs and discriminatory acts from fellow students. When asked about his campus experience, Jason initially said:

Attending this community college has been wonderful. Everyone has been great. I haven't had any problems, but the transfer between both colleges, you know, everyone here is from around here normally, so they're a lot more open to it. When you go to the big university things kind of change because you get a whole bunch of beliefs and everything is just tossed into the melting pot. It was very interesting, so it's nice.

A little later in our interview, when I asked specifically how he was treated by fellow students, Jason opened up about being the target of racial slurs and discriminatory acts by fellow students while attending this community college. When I asked him to explain what happened, he tried to disregard the fact that it was a big deal.

At first, if you don't know that I'm gay just by how I talk and seeing my mannerisms, then there's something wrong with you. I really didn't have any issues. There were some with some of the students, but I didn't want to blow it out of proportion.

I asked him again to tell me what happened, and he finally said, “It was looks and slurs and stuff like that. My biggest thing was, look, I’ve heard it before. Come up with something new and I might clap for you. That’s about it.” I then asked him to tell me what kind of racial slurs they used.

It was just like little things. Okay, because he’s gay he likes little boys. You know, just stupid stuff like that, very uneducated. So, it was like that’s fine if you have your own beliefs and you don’t like me because of it, but you don’t know me enough to actually judge me on that portion. I was like okay, that’s fine. For the most part, I haven’t had any issues with girls. Girls and gay men kind of just go hand in hand.

The men, I think, even though I am gay and they do know I’m gay, they find me threatening still. If it’s because they say I take up too much of their girlfriend’s time, or they think I’m going to hit on them, which is obviously not the case, they’re scared of that. They don’t know enough about it, so in that form, they treat me a lot differently than they do other students. If they sit next to me, I’ve had students get up and move away from me and stuff like that. I’m like, okay, I didn’t want to sit next to you anyway. That’s fine.

Although Jason said he had not had issues with instructors in general at this community college, he did mention a specific instructor conflict that occurred in a sociology or psychology class. The difference of opinion came over an offensive comment made by the instructor. Jason said:

The majority of the professors that I had were all female. Like I said, I never had any issues, but I will say there was one instance, I don’t even remember his name, where I said something and the professor said, “Well you’re not going to get a girlfriend that

way.” I said, “That’s fine, because I don’t bark up that tree anyway.” He was kind of very standoffish and said, “Okay,” and moved on. So, you can’t just assume things. You just can’t assume something about somebody. I told them and then I actually ended up dropping that course because from that moment on I would raise my hand and he wouldn’t call on me or I would want to help out and he wouldn’t let me. It was in sociology or psychology. It was very odd because if you’re in that field, you’re supposed to be more open to things when it comes to the mind and stuff like that. It kind of took me back. I felt like he was in the wrong department. It was mind blowing.

Other than that, I did come across him at my place of work. He came in there one day. This was after I had transferred to [his current university]. He knew exactly who I was right off the bat and he was actually really, really nice. He asked me why I dropped it and I told him I felt like I was being treated differently and wasn’t being treated as equal. He apologized and said, “I’m sorry that you feel that way. I wasn’t trying to do that. I think it was just that I knew that you knew what you were talking about. I knew that you would get the answer right. I just wanted to try to test out other students to see if they could get it right.” I said, “Okay, I understand. That’s fine, but just make sure you let somebody know that instead of just not saying anything and not letting them do anything because it’s going to be like, they don’t like me.” He said, “I’m sorry for saying that.” I said, “I appreciate it.”

When I asked to describe if he thought his experiences at this community college were the same or different as compared to students who identify as straight, he said:

I honestly believe that based on my sexuality I’m treated a lot different. We spoke earlier about the main issues that I talked about when it comes to race. It makes it a lot more

difficult. You have to try harder. Women have to try harder to do a job to prove themselves. In my opinion, you shouldn't have to feel that way. Even in my schooling, I feel like I have to try a lot harder because I don't want people to see me as like, that's the gay guy. I don't want that to be my identifier, so just to try to get out of that it's very typical just to be like, okay, I am not this, I am this. I think I have to work a lot harder than a lot of the other students. It has a lot of similarities when it comes to race. Some people of race have to work harder to get above, so it's kind of like that.

When Jason was asked about the Safe Zone signs on campus, Jason did not recall seeing them. He said he believed it was due to the fact they were put in place after he transferred to the university.

I think they did it after I left, so I actually haven't got to see them. If I just put myself in the scenario of that, I would have to say sometimes when kids get here they don't know everybody. They don't know a lot of people, so if they are lesbian or gay and they are walking around, just to know that if there is an issue or something then they have somewhere to go. That is actually really, really nice. Especially with the age group that community colleges usually go for, which it's normally kids that are fresh out of high school that go to a community college and then go to a four-year university. So, in that aspect of it all for the age group, I'm pretty sure it would do wonders just so they know they're going to be safe in that room with whomever is in the room with them.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

Jason had several suggestions for campus administrators. He said if he could meet with them about his experiences at this community college, Jason would tell them:

A lot of teachers that I have had are very accepting, very nice and very sweet, so in that aspect, just being able to have an open mind is fantastic. I love that. That's the biggest part. If a student feels like they have someone to talk to, then that does wonders. There are some things that they could probably change. Colleges kind of act the same. These kinds of issues just get thrown on the back burner. They say, okay, it's just kind of back there. Out of sight, out of mind and I'm not going to worry about it. These administrators need to actually bring it to the front because it's 2017, and it's a lot more accepting, so you're going to see a lot more students and each student is different. It's not just gay or lesbian. There's that big, long phrase, LGBTQ. There is a large range of people they have to cover and make sure they are going to feel safe. In my opinion, they need to make sure the staff is up to date on the different things. It's one thing for them to know about gay and lesbian, but they also need to know about transgender or bisexual, all of that because they are going to encounter all of those sexualities within their students and they need to know how to deal with situations if they go bad so they just need to be prepared for anything that were to go wrong or awry in the classroom.

In my opinion, professors aren't just teachers. They know, you know what I mean. They've gone through a lot and so they can give you a little bit of advice. That's why normally I get along better with teachers than students. It's just being able to say if this is what's going on, here are all of these numbers you can call, or here are all of the people you can talk to.

Just having the resource of them being able to talk to and get through everything. That would make their college experience a lot better because it would give them peace of mind that they wouldn't be going through all of this, going through school, making

sure they keep their grades up and also struggling with their sexuality. That's too much on the human body.

After sharing what he thought administrators should change, Jason said he would still recommend this community college to other gay and lesbian students.

In actuality, I would say yes. I can understand if someone comes and strictly moves to go to [this community college] to get to [a university] from a different state, I would see where that would be problematic, but like I said, even when I went here, I didn't think I was going to know anybody, but then people were popping up everywhere from my high school and I was like, okay, I can deal with this.

So, I think it would be easier for gay, lesbian, and any sexuality to go here. It's just going to be easier for the ones that have lived around here because that means they have a higher chance of running into someone that they actually know, which is going to make them feel more comfortable. So, it might just be difficult for people to come in outside of the state, but I would think even though it would be more challenging for them, I really don't think it would be that bad.

When I asked what he would change about his experience at this community college, Jason talked about getting more involved on campus. He felt the more people he met, the bigger difference he could make on their perception of gay students. He wanted to be known as Jason, not "the gay guy." He described what he would change below:

I think, in my opinion, the biggest mistake that I made was that I didn't get to meet people. It's just mainly students. You know, I have quite a big personality, so when it comes to that, I think that if I would have been able to make more connections and stuff like that. That's one thing I do regret. Like I said, the part of getting out of this stereotype

of just being another gay guy is the more people you know, that means the more people that know you personally, that helps you get out of it because they don't see you that way. They see you as Jason because of this reason, not because that you're gay. So, that's my biggest thing. I wish I would have been able to sit down and actually have been able to meet more people...

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything I did not ask that they would like to add. Jason provided the most detailed comment of all participants.

The only problem that I've come into that has been major is just the misconception of people of different sexualities. There are so many students that go to colleges, obviously, but it's like they don't fully comprehend. They would say, oh, you chose to be that way so it's your problem and your fault. My biggest thing when people say that is if sexuality is a choice, why did you choose to be straight? That's the biggest thing.

I just think it's difficult because you see all these cases of where gay kids kill themselves and that's so sad, just because of something that they can't control. Like the research you're doing now, it's going to help future people that come into the school. It's very hard to change someone's mind who is older or in the older spectrum. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

If your research can actually help to where the faculty here is also being able to help people of different sexualities, then that's going to change younger people's minds. If you change younger people's minds, eventually the younger people are going to become the older people. In all actuality, what you are doing here, you're not just helping students now. You are going to be helping students and the faculty even. You're going to be helping all of these people for the future also. That's the biggest thing.

This isn't an issue that just needs to be done now. It's going to be an ongoing thing and it's going to help many, many people for years to come. Just the little things like putting the signs on the doors [safe zones], that's going to make it great. I know [at his current university] they have a straight-gay alliance and that does wonders, too. So, it's just the little things, just these little changes. If we can help change the people of my generation, then they have kids and then they get put in that situation, that's going to be better for that child, too. I think it's wonderful just how it's going to help so many people. That's the biggest thing.

Kyle

Kyle was a 19 year-old white male, traditional-age college student, seeking a Bachelor of Science Degree. Like Jason, Kyle attended this community college for one year then transferred to a university where he was a sophomore. He identified as openly gay to his family and friends. His mannerisms were characterized as "masculine" by the way he dressed and carried himself and admitted that most people would not assume he was gay just by looking at him. Kyle did not participate in any extracurricular clubs or activities when he attended due to working outside of going to school.

Coming Out

When talking about his coming out process, Kyle stated that his story was not "the best story ever." I told him that it was his story and was just as important as those of others. His coming out story did not turn out like most, with a supportive mother and not so supportive father. In Kyle's case, it was much the opposite. Kyle lived with his mother, until he came out. His relationship with his mother became strained and later that year, Kyle said he moved in with his father. He and his mother no longer speak because he is gay. Kyle said it was a long process

for him and his father, but they eventually worked it out and are in a good place. I asked Kyle to describe how he came out to his family.

I was 13. It wasn't the best story ever, but my mom found out and she didn't really appreciate it, I guess you could say, so I moved in with my dad later that year and I've lived with him ever since. My mom and I really don't speak anymore because of it, which I think we've both just come to terms with that and have moved on. My father really doesn't mind. It has been an experience. You feel a little bit different in terms of general society, but other than that, that's basically how it happened. It was a long process, but we got through it. My dad really doesn't mind it at all.

Kyle lived in a community that he described as "neutral" towards people who identify as gay. He said the people in his community are not the most supportive, but said people did not discriminate against it.

[This] may not be the best town for gay people at all, but I would say they don't discriminate against it. I would say they are about neutral with it. They don't promote it, but yet, again, don't discriminate against it at all. The high school wasn't bad about it. They pretty much supported anything that I wanted to do or anything like that, so it was good.

Kyle had been openly gay for several years. Kyle recalled feeling, at times, like he was the only person around his town that was gay. He took refuge in gay-focused material and learned he was not the only person from a small town who identified as gay, and that his feelings were normal. When I asked to describe what websites, social media sites, or printed literature he used to learn more about his sexuality, Kyle responded:

I feel like I may have [visited websites] and it may have been those teenage dating apps if anything, but I can't think of anything specific. I know I would go through gay focused magazines and I feel like that helped me quite a bit just because you hear people talking about it and when you come from a community like I did where there is not many of us gay people, it kind of gives you a view that I'm not the only one so it helps you there.

Kyle said his advice for someone currently going through the coming out process would depend on the circumstance. When he came out, he said he felt a sense of liberation. Conversely, his relationship with his mother became so strained that he moved out and they no longer speak. He is thankful for his father and even though it was a long process, they are in a good place.

Obviously, I think it would depend on the circumstance, how their parents would feel if they lived with them anymore. The advice I would give them is don't rush into it, but at the same time definitely confront it. I remember when I wasn't out, it was one of my biggest drawbacks. I felt like I actually couldn't be myself and I know some people feel that way until they do come out and they finally realize, hey, I'm liberated and I can do whatever I want. My biggest advice to them would be basically to realize that you are your own person, so definitely accept it.

Campus Experience

Kyle was able to talk about his campus experience in retrospect since he attended a university after one year at this community college. He said when he was attending this community college, he thought it was very diverse; however, not as diverse as the university. He said he met many people from many different places, which was exciting and way different than his high school. I asked Kyle to describe his overall campus experience at this community college.

It's the same as my first year of college in general. It's exciting. I've met a lot of new people. It's very diverse. Not as diverse as maybe a university, but you meet way more people from way different places, so that aspect of it was great. Other than that, it was just getting used to everything.

Kyle judged his experience at this community college as more accepting than he thought it would be. He said this community college does not show a lot of support for students who identified as gay, but at the same time, he said he had not experienced any discrimination here. Kyle said people he met here really did not seem to care that he was gay.

I would say [the community college campus] was more accepting than what I thought it would be just looking back from high school. The people that I met really didn't care. I think it's simply because they're going to college and they have a more broad view on life anyway, so I think that was helpful. In general, I didn't see a lot of support for it, but at the same time I really didn't see anybody discriminating against it at all.

Kyle thought he was treated well by fellow students while he attended this community college. Some students were curious when they found out he was gay, but in general, it was a positive experience.

I felt good. Sometimes maybe I don't fit the stereotype where people would really think that of me. At the same time, if they did find out I really felt they were very understanding of it. They actually were curious to know about it. I feel like in a way we kind of do live a little bit of a different life, just the way we're viewed and all that. In general, it's good.

Kyle's experiences with faculty were positive as well. The only class sexuality was discussed was in sociology. He indicated the instructor stayed neutral to elicit students' views on

the topic. Kyle said the views about homosexuality in class were neutral, which he thought was good.

When I was here, the most that it ever got brought up was in my sociology class just because we were studying diversity. Maybe it was just because of the class and what people were studying, but I felt like everybody was supportive of it. They [faculty] never looked down on it. We were more like studying why it is such that people may look down on it, etc. The instructor was pretty supportive. She tried to stay neutral, which was good, just to see everybody's views. Overall, it was good.

I asked Kyle to explain how his experiences were the same or different compared to students who identified as straight at this community college. He pointed out that certain groups or cliques were more accepting of gay students than others. Kyle said he stayed busy with work and did not venture out much while he attended here. Overall, though, Kyle said it was a good experience when he attended here.

I felt like maybe the friend groups, if there are any, could be altered by if you were gay or straight. I know since I was gay there were certain, maybe little cliques, if you want to call it that, that you know you just wouldn't really fit into. I would say it would affect that. Overall, I felt like it was pretty accepting here. I didn't really venture out that much because I was pretty busy. Overall, I felt like they've really been good. I can't think of anything specific off the top of my head.

When I asked if he had seen the Safe Zone signs on campus or if he would seek help from someone who displayed one, Kyle said he did not recall seeing any at this community college, but indicated he would be inclined to seek help from someone who displayed a Safe Zone sign.

He said he would probably feel more comfortable talking to someone he felt safe around knowing that person was supportive.

If I did notice them, I would definitely feel more comfortable going in there and talking to them than someone that doesn't. I know over at [his current university], not to dip into that too much, they have Safe Zones and stuff like that, and I would definitely feel more comfortable going in there than just one that doesn't. I would definitely feel safer talking to them.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

When asked what suggestions he had for campus administrators at this community college, Kyle was very complimentary. He said that he felt if there was any discrimination towards students who identified as anything other than straight, he felt like the administration would handle it properly. He did have some suggestions for change.

What I would ask them to change is to bring more support to it. I don't know if there are any LGBT groups that they could start at the community college, although I am not sure. I would definitely tell them to start those just for the few that may want to be in it. I feel like it would definitely make them feel more welcome and it would also bring more students to the college. I know if they're hurting for attendance that brings more people. So that type of thing would help them in that way. What I could say that they keep doing is if there is any discrimination, I feel like they do tackle it. I wasn't really a part of it, so I'm not sure about that, but I felt like they would.

Kyle had a positive experience attending this community college and said he would recommend other students who identified as gay or lesbian to attend this community college.

I would encourage them to just because I know some community colleges my family members went to that I know they probably wouldn't be more accepted. I think in our community here, being the three large towns of [anonymous state] really, everybody is pretty accepting, so I would encourage them to come here. I also think that a lot of people that come here are from larger communities attempting to go to the university level, so they have more awareness of it so they would be more accepting. If they would go anywhere, I would recommend they go here.

The one thing Kyle wanted to change was to bring more awareness to LGBTQ issues. He said that students who identifies as gay "are human too" and deserve to be treated the same.

I feel like similar to what we are trying to do at the university is just bring more awareness of it. I think that people that aren't aware of the lifestyle, if you want to call it that, and the fact that we're still human. I don't think they understand that quite. If anything, I would bring more awareness to it and show them like, hey, we're human, too.

We operate just the way you do. We just like the same people.

Monique

Monique was a 19 year-old black female, traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate in Applied Science degree. She identified as openly gay to her family and friends. Her mannerisms were characterized as "butch" by the way she dressed and carried herself. She was an intercollegiate athlete at this community college and participated in no other extra-curricular clubs or activities on campus due to the time commitment of her sport.

Coming Out

Monique came out to her parents sometime around the eighth grade. Nothing really influenced her to come out except for the fact she had a girlfriend and wanted to share that with

her parents. She also indicated she wanted do to it to be honest with herself and others. She did not view coming out as a big deal; however, she was not sure if her coming out was a big deal to her parents. When I asked Monique to describe how she came out to different people in her life, she said:

I really didn't even have to come out. I've been a tomboy all my life. Me and my sister were basically like opposite. I always wanted to wear jeans and she always wanted to wear dresses. I think I was in eighth grade, the summer before my freshman year, and I had just told my dad and my mom that I had a girlfriend and they were just okay with it. It really wasn't like a big deal. It wasn't a big deal to me. It might have been a big deal for them, but it wasn't to me.

I asked Monique if the rest of her family, friends, and community were supportive; she replied, "They don't care [that she's gay]. They still love me." Monique described her community as larger [when compared to her community college community] and more diverse than most communities surrounding this community college. She also described how popular she was with everyone when she went back to visit her high school. "I do a lot of stuff with the kids and I go visit my high school and stuff every time I'm in town, so they still love me regardless."

When I asked Monique how she learned more about her sexuality when she was younger- more specifically, if she recalls visiting any websites, social media sites, attended any support groups, read printed material, etc. She responded social media (Twitter) was her go-to site for information as well as meeting new people.

I use Twitter. If I tweet something that pertains to somebody, like they'll retweet it or whatever and then we DM [direct message] and basically that's how I get to know more people who are like me. I use social media I guess you could say.

Monique has been openly gay for some time now. I asked what advice she would give to a person who is thinking about coming out:

To be honest with themselves rather than trying to please other people because you lose yourself trying to make other people happy. I feel like if you're honest with yourself and you care about your own self happiness that nothing else is going to really matter.

Campus Experience

When asked to describe her overall campus experience, she said, "It's been pretty good. It definitely matured me in a bunch of different ways. It really began with maturity for the most part. I'm more on track and more locked in." When I asked how she was treated by fellow students, Monique said, "Pretty good. They still treat me the same. We joke around, but they still treat me the same. It's no different." When I asked what it is like to be openly gay at this community college, she responded, "I think it's fun because we [other gay students] can do a lot of stuff together. We joke around all the time and nobody understands us except for us, so I think it's fun. It's a life-changing experience." In regards to faculty interactions, she said:

They haven't said too much about it [her sexuality]. They still treat me the same.

Normally, I just sit back and listen to what people have to say. I haven't had any experience where I've had to snap on people. So, I just listen. Most people are accepting to it because it's basically a big deal in today's society now, so most people are accepting to it. I haven't had any times or moments where I had to just go crazy on people.

Monique said she had not noticed any of the Safe Zone signs on campus. When I told her what they were and asked if she would seek someone who displays a Safe Zone sign, she responded, "Yeah, I might, because some things you can't really just deal with on your own. Some things you need to say out loud for you to actually understand them, so most definitely

probably.” Monique is an intercollegiate athlete, so in addition to the resources of teammates and a coaching staff she indicated she would seek a Safe Zone, if needed, for issues related to her sexuality.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

I asked what suggestions Monique would give campus administrators.

I would tell them what they are doing well is that they’re treating everybody the same, which some people can’t say they get treated the same. Some people are shamed on about that. What they could change is maybe they could make us [gay students] feel more comfortable here. Sometimes I see where people do look at us different. They don’t have to say nothing, but you can just get that vibe, that feeling when you walk past them and they just keep looking at you. I guess they [faculty and staff] could make us feel more comfortable.

Monique said her experience at this community college has been good. When asked whether or not she would encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college, she said:

Yes, because we all have fun. Even being on a team, and most of my teammates are straight, we still have fun. We can have our gay moments and crack up and then go right back to normal life. I definitely would encourage people to come here.

Monique had a good experience at this community college, but there are a few changes she said she would make; mostly related to her busy course schedule and participation in intercollegiate athletics.

I kind of would just want to switch my time scheduling around so I could have more time to experience stuff. Because I'm an athlete here, I don't have much time to get out and see what all's here, so I would want to change my time schedule around.

Nicole

Nicole was a 27 year-old white female, non-traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate in Applied Science degree. She was married and identified as openly gay to her family and friends. Her mannerisms were characterized as "butch" by the way she dressed and carried herself. Due to off-campus work, she participated in no other extra-curricular clubs or activities on campus.

Coming Out

Nicole described her coming out process as very easy, despite initially being dismissed by her mother. She alluded to the fact that not everyone who comes out was as lucky as she was as far as support. She said she tried to come out at age 17, but her mother rejected the idea and tried very persistently to hook her up with guys. Nicole said this continued for a few years as she experimented with being straight, bisexual, and finally lesbian.

Nicole said when she met her future wife, she knew without a doubt she wanted to exclusively be with girls. Nicole came out again to her mother and her friends at age 19 or 20.

Nicole described her coming out process as:

I think I tried to come out when I was 17 to my mom. She didn't believe me. She said I was just trying to follow the crowd, so that didn't go over very well. I just kind of let it go and just kept on living my life or whatever. I really didn't come out-come out until 19 or 20 when I was like, this is what I want. I went through a phase of being bisexual. I followed the whole straight thing because that is what I was told in life. As time went on,

I was hooking up with guys and I thought this just doesn't feel right. I eventually tried other things and it's a completely different feeling when you're with someone that you actually are attracted to and it's not just doing what, in society, you have been told to do. So, I was probably 19 or 20.

My mom always tried to hook me up with guys until I met my wife. She would go down to the bar and say, "Ok, well, I got this guy's number." I would say, "Okay, mom, you should call him because I'm not." I actually didn't even really consider my sexuality until I moved to Texas, because it's small towns around here. Especially, even just 15 years ago, it was a lot harder to come out. It really wasn't talked about.

Nicole said she really did not consider her sexuality until she moved to a larger metropolitan area. She said her friends knew she was gay before she realized it herself. Her influence for coming out was due to her friends' recognition of her sexuality. She said she thought if they could tell she was gay just by looking and being around her, she figured she should come out to everyone.

My friends in Texas were actually like, I think you might be gay. People were actually telling me before I even really knew. I don't know if it was because of the way I carried myself or if people just kind of knew, so I was like, maybe I should [come out].

Nicole said her family and friends were supportive then, but the community in which she lived was quite the opposite. Making her choice to come out and live as openly gay in a small town was difficult. Based on her experience, an openly gay lifestyle was much more accepting in the metropolitan community in which she once lived. Nicole described community support, or lack thereof, contrasting between metropolitan cities and small towns.

It was so much more accepting over there being in a larger community and being around people who don't judge you as much. I came back here and I still always kind of hid it sometimes like in job interviews and stuff like that. You don't necessarily want them to know right off the bat because it can affect things like that. I would say it started around 17 and at the age of 20, I didn't care. If you were friends and family you knew. It was basically just like job interviews or professional settings that I would still kind of hide that because I didn't really see it as something I should be judged for.

Nicole said she did not look up information pertaining to her own sexuality per se. What she searched for online was information about *other* sexualities. She did mention she had joined a couple lesbian Facebook groups, but that was the extent of it. I asked Nicole what kinds of information she searched for.

Really, what I've looked up is like transsexual, pansexual, asexual, since there are so many different kinds of sexuality out there now, to kind of understand it. It's interesting because even with me being a lesbian and having a different sexuality, even I still have some hard times understanding transsexual and stuff like that. Not that I don't understand them, it is just that I don't understand the process fully because it's something different. Other than that, I never really did any research on stuff like that. I have reached out on communities on Facebook. There are lesbian Facebook groups and stuff that I'm in and stuff like that, but that's about it.

I asked Nicole if she searched for anything related to her own sexuality now that she was older, and she said she really does not. She said she got the most excited when she meets people "like her and her wife" out in the community. Nicole described those experiences as:

I really don't. It's kind of weird, like when you see other people that you kind of know, I do get excited. It's like, "Oh, look, one of us." Out in public, I might meet people. I have a couple of friends. Really, being around here you see some, but it's few and far between which is why I get so excited when I see other people. My wife is in the [anonymous] program and she goes out and does a lot of stuff with communities. She said there are a lot of people in the [anonymous] community that are also gay or lesbian, so I have met some people through that, but me, myself, I am more of a stay-at-home and to myself kind of person.

Although Nicole's coming out process was easy and painless, she encouraged those who were thinking about coming out to be themselves. She said she constantly worried about being judged, and still does honestly, but she said people were going to judge you regardless, so be one's self.

Just be yourself. I think some people try to hide too much. I personally did. I was very adamant about hiding my sexuality with a lot of people. Basically, unless I knew you on a very personal level, you didn't know. That was mainly out of fear of being judged. It really wasn't because I was ashamed of my sexuality; it was because I didn't want to be judged. I think the main thing to remember is that you are going to be judged no matter what and you can't change that. People will judge you even if you're straight. There is always going to be judgment. It's so much easier now, and I'm not very old, but even for me going to middle school and high school here, it was not talked about. If it was, it was usually those people getting made fun of because they were so different. It's not like that anymore. I think it's so much easier for people to say this is who I am and take it or leave it. I think that is a great thing.

She cautioned those thinking of coming out to be prepared for rejection.

It's kind of something that you could talk about for a long time because coming out is not easy. Some people don't accept you and some people that are very close to you don't accept you. It can be really difficult. I got lucky. I really did. I haven't had any family members or friends push me away because of my sexuality, so I am luckier than some.

Campus Experience

When asked to describe her student experience at this community college, Nicole said, "It's been great. I haven't had any problems." Nicole said she had not received any physical or verbal abuse from fellow students. She did say, however, that she had received "looks" from fellow students for being different, but dismissed those looks as no big deal.

She had not had any negative experiences with faculty, but did mention a situation that occurred on multiple occasions in the College's Financial Aid Office.

I really don't notice anything around here. I haven't been verbally abused by anybody or had anything said to me that was offensive. You always get looks here and there, but I don't really fault people for that. Sometimes when you're different you catch their eye. You can't help it. I really haven't had any problems here.

However, we have had instances with the financial aid office actually. Every semester they would make us give them another copy of our marriage license. They said the picking was random, but after the fourth time, we said, "This doesn't seem random. I am randomly getting picked every semester to show my marriage license." It was kind of making me feel like somebody doesn't believe that my marriage is legitimate. We kind of basically told them that we felt like we were being discriminated against, and they quit. Other than that, I haven't had any problems at this campus.

When asked how supportive faculty have been, she said:

I, honestly, have never really had much discussion about it up here. I have never really been in a classroom where it [issues related to sexuality] has come up or been an issue.

Like I said, I've never had a problem with my instructors. It can be apparent that obviously that is my sexuality and I haven't had any problems at all with that.

Nicole did say she felt her experience as compared to students who identify as straight is different. Straight students, Nicole said, did not have to worry about being discriminated against [due to their sexual orientation]. As a person who identified as gay, Nicole said that thought was always in her mind.

There is always the worry about being discriminated against or not being treated fairly, so there is always that worry there. Like I said, I've never really had any problems, but there is always that doubt in the back of your mind. You do worry about people looking at you and what someone is going to think of you or things like that, so that can have an effect, but overall, I haven't noticed really anything like that here thankfully.

When asked if Nicole had noticed the campus's Safe Zone signs, she said she had not. She indicated that towards the end of her degree program, she took most of her classes online, so she was not on campus much. She said, however, that she would be more likely to seek help from someone who displayed a Safe Zone sign.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

If Nicole were able to meet with campus administrators at this community college, she would tell them they were doing well, but would want them to be aware of what happened in the Financial Aid Office. Nicole indicated this may have been just a coincidence, or she could have

made a bigger deal about it than what it really was, but it still upset her that it happened at all. In a meeting, Nicole would tell them:

I would say they are doing well. Like I said, I have never really had problems here other than the financial aid, which that could've just been one person. I'm not really sure. I guess that would fall under faculty and administration, that kind of problem. I'm not really even sure why that happened, and who's to say that maybe it wasn't from discrimination. It could've just been in my own mind, but it's hard to not feel that way when it is happening repeatedly. This campus is pretty open and now we have a safe zone. I think they're on the right track and doing the right things.

When asked if she could change one thing about her experience at this community college, Nicole referenced the faculty layoffs [due to budget problems]. She said she thought the students felt the effect of the layoffs more than what everyone [administrators] probably thought they would. Nicole said she felt moral was low after the layoffs but said it seemed to be better now.

I have to say the worst experience here was when they did the layoffs. It did affect the students. I don't think they thought that the students would see the effect of that as much as they did. Obviously, it was a big deal. People were protesting. Some teachers that I thought very highly of were let go....It kind of makes you feel like where is the loyalty? They let go of people that have been here for a very long time, and it did not make the school look good.

It gave me a very bad image of what internally, as being an employee here, how that must feel. Then, to have it directly affect the students is kind of like it's not being handled properly. So that was probably the worst experience I had here. Dealing with all

of that and having my teachers switched, the morale here was just so low. It feels like it has gotten better, but it does affect school.

Nicole said she had a good experience at this community college. She was treated well by fellow students, faculty, and staff; with one exception. I asked if she would encourage other gay and lesbian students to attend this community college.

Yes, because it's really open here. At least from the time I've been here, I never really had to worry about my sexuality affecting anything like my grade or how I was being treated, at least by the instructor, which is the most important part.

Paul

Paul was a 25 year-old white male, non-traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate of Applied Science Degree. He identified as openly gay to his family and friends. His mannerisms were characterized as "masculine" by the way he dressed and carried himself. Paul did not participate in any extracurricular clubs or activities due to the demands of his program, but he had participated in choir in past semesters. Prior to attending this community college, Paul obtained a Bachelor's degree from a university in an urban setting. He returned to this community college to pursue a field in the area of applied technology, where a specific job-related skill is learned.

Coming Out

Paul described growing up in a religious household. His parents divorced when he was young, but he spent equal time between his mother's and father's homes. He described having a closer relationship with his mother than his father. Paul said the first indication he might be gay happened in middle school. Paul remembered coming home and telling his father that someone at

school said he was “gay.” He asked his father what that meant, and his father’s reaction terrified him. Because of that experience with his father, Paul was afraid and denied he was gay.

I will always remember coming home from middle school one day. Somebody had told me I was gay. I asked my dad, “What does that mean?” He went all hellfire and brimstone. I was like, okay, not me, moving on. I said I was not going to be that.

In addition to what happened with his father when Paul was in middle school, something happened with his mother when he was a sophomore in high school. Paul said his mother caught him watching gay porn and asked him if he was gay. Paul could have come out to her and admitted he was gay, but after seeing his mother’s reaction, Paul initially denied it until a few years later.

Part of my coming out experience was actually when my mom caught me watching gay porn [around his sophomore year of high school]. She sat me down and said, “If you’re gay, it’s fine. We can help you.”

Also, you have to understand that I grew up in a very Christian household. I was crying. She was trying to be supportive. She said, “I’ll accept you. It’s fine. We still love you.” I said, “No, no, no. I’m not gay. I promise, I’m not gay.” By the end of my senior year of high school, I decided I was done with this. I can’t pretend to be something I’m not.

Paul said the first person he willingly came out to was a friend he described as his “lesbian preacher friend” at church camp. He said she was one of his biggest supporters. Even though Paul said he was “super scared,” he eventually came out to each of his friends one at a time.

I came out to my friend on a church retreat. That was interesting. She was very accepting and very loving. Through those friends, I came out one at a time. I was super scared. The few friends that I had told kind of encouraged me to at least tell my mom.

Paul decided to come out to his mother his freshman year in college. Paul said he thought when he finally came out to his mother that she would be supportive, but her reaction was much the opposite. He said she wanted to “fix him” rather than support him. Paul said his mother also outed him to other people when he was not ready.

I went up to my mom, and I told her. She was no longer the loving, supporting mom that she was before she found me with the gay porn. She was much like, “Oh, well. We can fix you. We can get it cured.”

I went to get counseling. Through all the things she put me through with all of that, I stopped filtering myself whenever all of that was happening. I was in college when all of this was happening as well. I was at a university. Whenever I would come home from the gay counseling, I would tell her that guy was full of shit and he didn’t know what he was talking about. She said, “Well, you know, you need to try it.” I said, “No, no. He was full of shit. This is exactly what he said and exactly how he said it. He is lying. I can see it.” My mom basically outed me to my stepdad, my pastor and everyone that I told her not to, because I wasn’t ready.

As bad as the coming out situation was with his mother, Paul said coming out to his father was worse. He said he did not come out to his father by choice; he was outed by his stepmother. He said he initially thought he could confide in his stepmother, but something in their relationship changed. Paul said instead of him coming out to his father in his own time, she

marched in one day and told Paul's father that Paul had something he wanted to tell him. He felt he had no choice.

My dad was the worst one. I didn't choose to come out to him. I had told my stepmom. Whenever my mom found me watching the porn, she told me I had to tell my dad that I was watching porn. She wasn't going to make me tell him that I was watching gay porn, but I had to tell him that I was watching porn. So, I told him. I didn't tell him I was watching gay porn. I just told him I was watching porn. I didn't really get in trouble for it. I told my stepmom that I wasn't watching regular porn. She said, "I kind of always knew that you were [gay], but I was just waiting for you to come out, but this is something that you need to tell your dad." I said, "No, I can't tell my dad." She said, "No, you can."

It got to the point, I think I was dating somebody at that time, and I was dependent on their car to go to and from places, so she had let me go a few times to see the person I was seeing. So, she ended up blackmailing me. She said, "I'm going to tell your father that you've been going to see this guy using our car, and then you'll never be able to use our car again."

I think it was right before Thanksgiving because I remember having to go up to [anonymous town] to visit my family and having this super awkward tension. When I came out to my dad, it was the day before Thanksgiving. My stepmom said, "You're doing this today, right now, you don't have an option." So, she went into the living room and told my dad that I had something to tell him, came back and got me, put me into the living room and then he said, "So, what do you have to tell me?" I said, "Do you remember that time I was watching porn?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, it wasn't normal porn. It was gay porn."

He just sat there. He didn't say anything. I tried to justify it. I said it was something I was still struggling with and trying to figure out who I am, that I thought he needed to know and I still loved him. He just sat there.

My stepmom, who was kind of like the mediator between this, or the instigator, looked at my dad and said, "Well, do you still love him?" He still just sat there. He never really responded. He said, "Well, yes, but I don't think you're gay."

We had this huge argument. We did not see eye to eye at all. He wasn't seeing my side. He was almost attacking me, not physically, but very much verbally. We still, to this day, don't really talk at all. The only times that we have talked have been arguments. He's accused me of throwing my stepmom under the bus, that I'm the reason their relationship isn't that good and things like that.

Paul said his friends had all been supportive. His paternal grandparents, whom he lived with while going to school, had many of the same reactions as his mother. He described them as "very biblical." Paul said his grandparents used to ask him all the time if I was seeing anyone; now they no longer ask.

Paul said he felt more discomfort in this rural community than the urban community in the university setting. He said he felt he could be himself more freely in the urban university setting than in this rural community college setting. Paul said he felt like he had to hide his sexuality here and put on a "straight front" around people he does not really know.

I can be myself on this campus [he is in a program with a small cohort of students] and around my friends. In that small little basement area I can be myself because the people know me and they know what to expect. I know them and I know that they're not going to do harm to me for whatever reason. Definitely in public around these areas I very much

feel like I have to put on a straight front. It's like whenever I'm out in public I can't be this way. I have to suppress it, hide it and put on the acceptable front.

Paul said when he was struggling with his sexuality, he did not recall receiving any information about it while he was in high school. He relied on Google and his lesbian friend for information.

I guess I would have to refer back to my lesbian preacher friend back home because she was the first person I came out to. I would just go to them. Really, my resources were going to her, us Googling it and figuring it out. I would ask questions that both of us didn't know, and we would Google it.

Also, whenever I was coming out, my lesbian preacher friend, me, and a few other people would always go to the CLC, which is like the Christian Life Center. It was this house where the campus pastor was at, everybody that taught religion or professors, their offices were there. It was this huge house that was like the go to spot. We would hang out and talk or whatever. Really, I was struggling with my Christianity and being gay because at the time I was wanting to keep both. I was very passionate about both.

I would ask the pastor there about some resources and what I could read. She would give me pamphlets about this and that. She would say, "I don't know if this one is good or not, but we got this one." Sometimes it would be against everything. I would be like, "I didn't like this. This didn't mesh with what I feel."

Also, I don't see that here, but again, this is a small community college. That was a small four-year college. I knew the people I needed to go to there. Here, I don't really know. If I was in that situation, I don't know where I would go here. But there, I knew

exactly where I needed to go. I knew those people had it and the information was readily available.

Paul went through quite an experience when he came out to his parents. Although he indicated he was not a good advice giver, Paul offered his time and support to anyone who needed it; perhaps because that is what he wished he had. Paul came across as a genuinely caring individual who would sincerely listen and help whenever he was needed. Paul even jokingly offered to lend his gay porn collection to anyone in need. I asked what advice he would give others who were in the process of coming out.

I'm not a good advice giver. I would just tell them to tell me what they were thinking of doing. I would try to talk to them and tell them if they ever need anything just text me. I would say I'm available if they need me and just let me know, I would stop what I'm doing and come to them. I would give them my porn collection. [hahaha] I don't have resources to give them. I would just tell them if they need to talk we would talk.

Campus Experience

Paul was in a unique situation because he had already obtained a bachelor's degree when he began an associate degree in Applied Science at this community college. When asked to describe his overall campus experience, Paul said it had been great. Paul admitted he felt a bit disconnected from the rest of the student body because he was in such a small program, housed away from general education classes.

For me, just because of the program I'm in, I feel disconnected because I don't have to take any general ed [sic] classes, so all of my classes are done in the basement [where his academic program classes are located]. I really only interact with those people. So far, it's been great, just not a lot of interaction around the campus.

When I asked Paul what it is like to be an openly gay student at this community college, he reflected on the distinction between different physical spaces on and off campus.

I can be myself on this campus and around my friends. In that small little basement area I can be myself because the people know me and they know what to expect. I know them and I know that they're not going to do harm to me for whatever reason. Definitely in public around these areas I very much feel like I have to put on a straight front. It's like whenever I'm out in public I can't be this way. I have to suppress it, hide it and put on the acceptable front.

When asked how he has been treated by faculty and staff, Paul was indifferent. He could not say faculty have been overly supportive, but "It hasn't been negative." Paul described a situation where he had a difference of opinion with one of his instructors.

Here recently, this semester, I understand now, but at first had a discrepancy and I spoke with the professor about it. We were in class discussing the current trend of the gender-queer terminology, how people like to use terms such as "their," "theirs," and all that stuff, and the whole "zee/ze" [when a person's gender is unknown], and that whole thing. We were just discussing it and what does it mean.

Obviously, they all ask me because I'm in the community and have friends that are gender-queer, things like that. They look to me for all of those things and it's fine. I was going to answer them and I did. We talked about it and it was great. Then, the next week we talked about religion, religious signs and religious interpreting and I expressed to the professor that I understand that religious things will come up.

Since all of that stuff, I've had really bad experiences in churches so I just stopped, and I don't do the whole religion thing anymore, which is fine. I don't really

want to tell them, “Oh, we don’t need to do religion because I’m against it.” That’s fine. I understand in everyday conversation that religion is going to come up and I am going to have to interpret it. I understand that. So, that’s why we were discussing religion.

However, I thought we were going to discuss general religion things that are going to come up like “praise the Lord, Amen, or let His light shine through you,” but no, we were getting into Bible verses and delving deep into what they mean and the history of the Bible. I said, “I don’t think I’m going to need this unless I’m specifically going to interpret at a church. I thought this was going to be definitely much more general, like what you’re going to encounter in everyday things as opposed to this is what we’re going to talk about because you might interpret church one day.”

I expressed that concern to the teacher and she said, “Well, other students have to listen to your whole gay stuff,” and she brought up the pronoun question. She said, “We were talking about pronouns. We had to talk about the gender-queer community and stuff like that and they didn’t complain.” I said, “Yeah, but now we’re talking about religion and we only discussed the pronoun thing.” Part of our mid-term was we had to interpret a Bible verse. I said, “They’re not graded on my culture, but I’m graded on this religion stuff. I don’t think that’s fair.” So that was a little bit of a different aspect. I understand where she was coming from. I still don’t agree with the assignment, but I’m not too worried about it.

I asked how his experiences have differed or been the same as compared to students who identify as straight, he replied, “I don’t think I’m a good person for that question,” due to his limited interaction with students outside of his program.

Paul said he had noticed Safe Zone signs on campus. He said his university had them also. Nonetheless, Paul does not particularly like the idea of a Safe Zone area.

The first thing I think of whenever I see those is that's a target area. I don't know if I would feel comfortable going to that person. First off, A) because I don't know them; and B) because if I don't know them and there's a group of people around that work with them every day and they see me, I don't know them and they know that I don't know them because I'm a new person, I show up and I'm coming to talk to them, I don't know how that would make me feel. Everyone knows that I'm coming to talk to them about gay things because I knew they were the one with the gay logo on it. I don't know. That's just me.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

When asked what he would tell campus administrators about his experience at this community college, Paul said he did not think he was a good person to answer this question due to his limited interaction on campus. He did say, however, "I don't think they should change anything. The only one discrepancy that I had was that one with the religion, but that was because it was a grade. It wasn't really focused on the gay thing."

Although Paul was indifferent about his experience at this community college, he did say he would recommend his academic program to students. I asked if Paul would specifically encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college.

I would encourage them to attend the [his academic] program. I can't speak for the rest of the college. I could also speak for the music program and the theater program. I've been involved with those, so if they were coming in for those programs, I would be all for it, gung-ho, do it, but I can't speak for the rest of them.

Paul said he would not change anything about his experience at this community college so far, but did mention the lack of resources for gay and lesbian students as compared to the university he attended. Also, having a support system outside of Safe Zones might benefit students who were struggling with issues related to their sexuality.

I think a support system in itself that I don't think you get necessarily through programs at a school. I think you get it through friends. My support group is one of my best friends, and really if I ever have anything, or I need anything that I need to talk about or get off my chest, whether it's related to gay things or not, I can talk to her about it. For the people who don't have those relationships or those connections, I don't know the best way to get that to them.

Tasha

Tasha was a 20 year-old black female, traditional-age college student, seeking an Associate in Arts degree. She identified as openly gay to her family and friends. Her mannerisms would be characterized as "butch" by the way she dressed and carried herself. She was an intercollegiate athlete at this community college and participated in no other extra-curricular clubs or activities on campus due to the time commitment of her sport.

Coming Out

As best she can remember, Tasha came out to her mother when she was in eighth grade. Her influence for coming out was unique, as was the way she told her mother. Tasha said a message on a shirt worn by Beyoncé really spoke to her. The shirt said, "Girls can date girls too." Tasha thought if Beyoncé wore something like that, then maybe she should send a picture of it to her mom. Tasha said, "Beyoncé is one of my favorite singers. I thought maybe she supports it so

I should just send this to my mom. I wanted everybody else to kind of share and know who I really was.”

I told my mom, but it was in like a weird way. I sent her a picture of Beyoncé and she had on this shirt that said, “Girls can date girls, too.” She asked me if the shirt pertained to me and I said, “I think it might.”

Tasha described her community as very supportive towards gay people. She grew up in a larger metropolitan community of just under 50,000, with a moderate gay population. Tasha said, “They were accepting. Where I’m from a lot of people are gay.” Along with the support from her mother and her family, it helped to also feel supported by her community.

I asked how she learned more about her sexuality-more specifically, if she visited any websites or social media sites, or attended any support groups, or read printed literature to learn more about her sexuality. “No, not really. I think I just asked older people questions, people who are older than me, if I needed to know something.”

Tasha’s method of coming out was quite unique and the advice Tasha gave for others who were thinking of coming out was simple and practical.

To tell their parents even though they probably don’t want to. It would probably make them feel a little better about it instead of hiding it. I know their friends probably know because my friends knew before my parents knew.

Campus Experience

When asked to describe her experience at this community college, Tasha said, “It’s been decent actually. I like it. It’s been fine.” When I asked how she had been treated by fellow students, she said, “It’s fine. Nobody judges me. They [fellow students] don’t ask questions

really. It's good to me because I don't like to answer them." When asked how faculty had responded when issues of sexuality came up in class, Tasha answered:

It's awkward. I can feel how it gets awkward when they know I should probably answer the question, but I'm not going to answer the question they're asking because they're pointing to me. They assume, but they don't really know for sure.

I asked if she were treated the same or differently than students who identified as straight; "It might be similar, but just like the questions you get asked in class; you get pointed out. Other than that, it's the same." Straight people are not pointed out or asked questions about being straight, so that was one big difference Tasha observed.

Tasha said she had not noticed the Safe Zone signs. When she found out what they were and who they were for, Tasha said it would not encourage her to seek help from someone only because they displayed one. If she needed help, she would find help. She is unique from others in that she had teammates and coaches to turn to in a time of crisis.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

If she could meet with administrators at this community college, she said she would tell them, "I don't think they need to change anything really." She would like them to know, however, that, "We [gay students] don't like to be pointed out, so I don't know, maybe some training for faculty and staff about not assuming." Otherwise, she said, "It's pretty comfortable here." Tasha would not hesitate to recommend other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college.

Will

Will was a 29 year-old white male, non-traditional college student, seeking an Associate of Applied Science Degree. He identified as openly gay to his family and friends. His

mannerisms were characterized as “feminine” by the way he dressed and carried himself. Will did not participate in any extracurricular clubs or activities due to the demands of his program and his job, but he had participated in band and theater in past semesters.

Coming Out

When I asked Will to tell me about his coming out process, he first described when he realized he was gay his junior year of high school. Will said people began asking him at school if he was gay or bi, and after a month or so of those interactions, he realized he was gay. He came out to his parents on National Coming Out Day, and Will said they have been supportive since.

I’m pretty vanilla in general. I didn’t figure out that I was gay until I was 17, which the whole suppression idea implies a level of personal knowledge, which I am pretty sure I didn’t have. I was a junior in high school. We went on a marching band trip and one of the saxophone players, a year younger than me, was coming on to me. I didn’t really stop him and then I gave him a hand job on the band bus on the way back. Then, for about a month people would ask, “Are you gay, or are you bi?” I was like, “I don’t know. This is crazy.” A month later, I was like, “No, I’m really gay. Like REAL gay.”

I asked Will to name the most influential factor was for coming out. He replied he wanted to share who he really was with his family and friends. He also said coming out was something to be done because hiding the fact that he was gay was not fun. Will described how he came out below:

It was a thing to be done. It was *me*, and so not sharing that part of me was, of course, hiding and that was not particularly fun. Also, I think it was National Coming Out Day when I told my parents. I think it was. It was a Tuesday or a Thursday. It was in the fall. I

came home from marching band practice, sat my parents down at the kitchen table, took really deep breaths and then told them.

I was 18 when I told my parents. I, of course, got the questions like, “Have you ever been with a girl, or how do you know?” I said, “Mom, you’re petrified of heights. Did you know that before you got up to that height?”

Within a year, I think my mom made a joke about it. One of my friends, Alison, and I were going to do something. She said, “She’s a good kid. It’s a shame you’re gay because you could marry her.” I said, “Yeah,” but that was the moment went it was like, alright, everything is fine.

Will said his friends in high school were supportive as well. He said, “My friends were there in high school and we grew up in an age in high school that, maybe it was my group of friends, it was very much like, ‘Well, that’s cool. New world. Yay!’”

The communities in which he lived, he recalled, were different. He recalled how stressful it was not being out; especially during his jobs working summer camps around the country. Will remembered being very guarded with who he told at first. He stated that hiding that part of himself was not fun, but felt he had to for his summer jobs.

Honestly, growing up in the woods I didn’t really spend much time in and around the community at such time. I worked at a summer Girl Scout camp, the one on [place to remain anonymous], so that would be the closest to the community. Maybe, sometime within a year, it was kind of like pick and choose how it [him being gay] came up and stuff like that, and I was a little antsy about it, but after that, I thought it was a lot of work and it doesn’t matter. If it comes up, it comes up, and that’s fine. I didn’t really hide it, but I would definitely pick and choose, like avoiding this subject, avoiding this topic,

steering here or there, depending on who you were with. That was a lot of work and not worth it. We're waiting for the day when the assumption [of being gay] is not an important thing. It's a question before it's assumed.

Will had lived in several places while working summer camp, both rural and urban. He experienced all types of environments. I asked him what kinds of resources he used to learn more about his sexuality, specifically if he visited any websites or social media sites, or read any printed literature to learn more about his sexuality when he was younger.

Throughout the years in all of the places that I've lived across the country, I have always done my best to find gay friends, find a gay group of friends or a social group. Back when I was 17 or 18, or even just after high school, not particularly. As extroverted as I can seem, I've always been a pretty secluded person in general. A lot of questions I would have on stuff like that, and also being as lazy as I am, I really wouldn't go out to find the answers. I would just sit and mull over it and wonder, or maybe ask a friend if it came up, but not particularly, no. I just kind of ran with it. There is less shying away from the public eye or the shame feeling if I ever go to access information now. I'm 29 years old and I'm very well adjusted and that's fine. So, that much has changed.

Will had been out for a number of years and suggested some practical, and heartfelt advice for others.

I think the best suggestion that I could give to them and that I would be likely to give would be that no matter what happens, be yourself. If it's necessary, make sure you have a place to live that's not what you had before and just be yourself, your own human, and at some point in time you have to stop responding to everyone else's ideas, ideals and thought processes and listen to your own.

Campus Experience

Will said his overall experience at this community college has been good; especially within his academic program. Will said he had a few annoying situations along the way, but overall, it had been good. Describing his overall student experience at this community college, Will said:

Within the program it has been really good. With the generals, I am slightly annoyed especially because we had to take a placement test and it turns out the placement test was only to determine if you need remedial levels, so that was annoying. Other than that, it has been good. The student thing sucks because you immediately turn broke. I've supported myself in the real world for ten years and now I'm broke all of a sudden.

When I asked Will what it was like being openly gay at this community college, he admitted the topic did not really come up much. The self-description he provided was that he was "rather gay," so those around him knew without being told and he never experience any problems while he was here. He described his program of study to be relatively small, so he was most comfortable around his classmates. Will said he did not "connect" much with a lot of the traditional-age college students at this community college; however, he said most are curious to know more, which created quite an "interesting" atmosphere.

Honestly, it [being gay] doesn't come up that much, but a part of that is being a non-traditional student and, therefore, not connecting with a lot of these peer groups that I have in my general ed [sic] classes. It really doesn't come up that much. Also, I am rather gay, so I'm sure most people have figured it out by now. Sometimes it comes up and usually after the subject is broached, there's a moment of almost circus level of like, "Oh,

I know a gay person and we can talk about it. Let's talk about it." "Well, here's the deal. You have to ask your questions. Let's get through this and move on with our lives."

When I asked how he was treated by fellow students at this community college, Will replied, "Just fine." Will said his instructors had all been supportive so far too. He said:

Being only in my second semester and being in such a specific program [program to remain anonymous], I haven't really had that many instructors outside of the [program]. Those in the [program], of course, I see fairly frequently. Last semester I had psychology and speech and then this semester I have bio [biology] and English. My teachers, in general, have been pretty young. Psychology was probably the oldest one, but she was also a psychology teacher. Also, Psychology was a bigger class so specific attention didn't come up that often either.

In the [anonymous] program, a lot of the [program-specific] stuff that we talk about a lot of the times I'll be able to find parallels because it is a minority group. I'll be able to find parallels and I readily share those and everyone chimes in. In one class this semester, I have a 16 or 17-year-old home-schooled girl and one person from very rural [bordering state]. It's all just fine. I think mostly it is the fact that wherever I go, my attitude is that I'm pretty alright with it and that just kind of carries over to everyone else when it comes to conversation and things like that.

Will could only come up with one example for how he was treated differently than a student who identified as straight. Will said the "selection pool" for dating was extremely limited for someone who identified as gay. Gay people in the rural community here have to "settle" for something less than ideal because there is not many potential partners, in Will's view.

It doesn't apply as much to a community college, but of course, a lot of college for a lot of kids is going and being away. Community college, I guess, is less so. Being away and having freedom away from where I grew up, exploring, finding yourself and stuff like that, and of course, exploring your sexuality, be you straight, gay, bi, whatever.

Really, the only anecdote that I can come up with is there is one other person in my program who is a gay man. When I first met him, I didn't find him particularly attractive or anything like that. He was nice and we eventually we got to talking, and then I started dating him.

Within a month, I met another person that actually gave me butterflies, and then all of a sudden it dawned on me that I had picked him out and started dating him just because he was the only thing around. In that regard, there is a bit of alienation when I focus on that aspect of myself. There has been some alienation because, like I said, there are two of us in the program, which the program is fairly small.

I think maybe this is all based on assumption, but I am very confident in my assumptions. There are a handful of us around the campus, but it's just a small group. It's just that tiny bit of alienation. Like most humans, we really want that kind of companionship, so when it's devoid of it, the why for a specific person starts decreasing and decreasing and it becomes more of because they're there.

When asked if he had noticed the Safe Zone signs on campus, he said he was not sure. If he did, Will said he had not paid any attention to them. Will said he often tunes things like that out (Safe Zone signs), especially, he said, if he were not seeking help. I asked if he would seek help from someone who displayed a Safe Zone sign, and he said he more than likely he would not.

I feel like I've seen it, but I think a point of having grown up in [town to remain anonymous] is pretty alright when it comes down to it, but when you get outside of [town to remain anonymous], like in [smaller town to remain anonymous], the difference is pretty astounding. The further you go from it, it is pretty astounding. My parents live in [town to remain anonymous] now and that's a fun place [insert sarcasm]. In seeing any of the Safe Zone signs, I feel like I have noticed them, but it kind of brushes past my consciousness because there is this idea that it really doesn't apply to me and my sub-group, probably because of the area and general attitudes that can be held around the area. I see it and it just brushes right past. Also, I'm so mule-headed, I don't know when I would ever be seeking help.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

Will had a unique take on going back to school. He said his college classes had no effect on his sexuality and his sexuality had no effect on his classes. Will was complimentary of how he was treated at this community college and said there was not much that needed to change. He would suggest, however, that instructors should be made aware of how they present lectures and classroom materials.

Will explained that everything was presented in the dichotomy of a man and a woman. If he could meet with campus administrators at this community college, Will would tell them:

I think, again, a by-product of me being nearly 30 is that I'm here at the college only for the classes and the classes apply nothing to my sexuality whatsoever. My sexuality does not apply to the classes whatsoever. As far as that, there is really nothing that would need changed.

It hasn't happened to me-I haven't run across this, but in any class, especially when you start talking about classes like in the sociology, marriage and family and things like that, or even psychology, which again, in my psychology class, I didn't notice it at all...presenting everything in the dichotomy of man, woman, hetero relationships, like everything being presented that way. No matter a teacher's ideas on the subject. A lot of the times it will be that's what they know and that's standard. Getting rid of that is instrumental to becoming more accepting and more knowledgeable as a whole, suddenly being like that's a thing, two men can marry each other, etc.

Having an active queer student body would be exciting. Making sure all classes are taught in a non-hetero normative fashion. Other than that, there's not much I would change.

When asked if Will would encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college, he had two responses. He explained that the college's main objective was not to promote the gay experience. Consequently, if a student sought a gay experience from a college, he would tell them to attend elsewhere. If the gay experience did not matter, like for him, he would definitely recommend this community college.

For me, sexuality had no bearing on where I was going. I came from here. I grew up here. I was moving back to be closer to family. My high school GPA was terrible and this had a good [academic] program, so that was the only choice. My sexuality had no bearing on the decision whatsoever. So, if it is the right college for you, then yes, I would encourage that. If your sexuality is a huge factor or a huge thing you are looking for out of going to a community college somehow, then not necessarily.

It kind of boils down to the fact that the college isn't flying rainbow flags everywhere. It's not the college's main thing and it wasn't my main thing in looking for it. If it is your main thing, then there's probably some kind of student body somewhere [else] that is more active.

I don't know how big the community college is, but generally I feel like we're probably on the small side of average, if I had to guess at the demographics. Being smaller with less of a student body, therefore, you get less that fit into sub-groups of any minority. That is probably why. I know all of us that are in the program, we're all busy and we don't have time to do things like running another group and stuff like that.

Of course, if your sexuality is not a main factor in this community college that you're looking for, the hypothetical prospective student that I'm talking to, then it's a great college. I've not run into any issues. There is ignorance everywhere, but I haven't run into any major issues or problems. If they're looking for the gay experience, a university would be a lot better, more people, more resources and all of that. I'm sure near San Francisco there are plenty with very active gay or queer student bodies. For me, it's not a big factor and if it's not a big factor for you, then by all means.

Conclusion

The participant narratives provide a detailed description of the similarities and differences these gay and lesbian students experience in their personal lives and those they experienced while attending this community college. Although this is just a small snapshot of their lives, these narratives provide valuable insight into their experiences as students in this community college. In the findings chapter, I will organize the narratives into four themes and discuss the similarities and differences among the participants.

In the findings, I include demographics from: four white, male students who identify as gay; two are traditional-age college students and two are non-traditional-age college students. Five of the participants identify as lesbian; two of whom are white and three African-American. Only one of the female students is a non-traditional-age college student. I organized participant narratives along four major themes: demographics, the coming out experience, their campus experiences, and the participant's suggestions for campus administrators. These themes work together to demonstrate a comprehensive view of the life experiences of these non-heterosexual students in a rural Midwestern community college environment.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I organize findings from the participant narratives in accordance with emergent themes from the study. I point out the similarities and discrepancies that exist among the participant narratives. The first part of this chapter examines the participants' experiences as they relate to the coming out process and support they received after they came out. I also focus on how the participants accessed information about their sexuality, and the advice they would give others who are in the process of coming out.

In the second part of the chapter I analyze student experiences in this community college and proffer suggestions for campus administrators. I answer the study's two research questions: *What are the experiences of gay and lesbian students who currently attend a rural Midwestern community college?* and *How does the community college environment influence sexual identity development in gay and lesbian students?* Lastly, I posit implications for future research based upon my findings.

Section One: Coming Out

Age When Coming Out

More non-heterosexual people are coming out at younger ages (Beemyn and Rankin, 2011; Savin-Williams, 2016). The participants in this study seem to be following that trend with a fairly equal spread within the age range. The age range for coming out varied among the participants from ages 12 to 20. Erica, Kyle, Monique, and Tasha came out before the age of 15; Jason came out at age 15; and Elizabeth, Nicole, Paul, and Will came out between ages 16 and 20. Elizabeth and Nicole both tried to come out to their parents at earlier ages, only to be discredited and steered back towards heterosexual lifestyles. Elizabeth was 13 when she first

tried to come out, while Nicole was 17. Paul, the participant who reported experiencing the least support from his family, knew he was gay at an earlier time, but came out after he went away to college.

First Proclamation of Non-Heterosexual Orientation

When the participants were asked to whom they came out to first, four of the participants (Kyle, Monique, Tasha, and Will) came out to their parent(s). The other five either came out to a close family member or friend before coming out to their parent(s). Three (Elizabeth, Nicole, and Paul) came out to a friend, and two (Erica and Jason) came out to a relative other than a parent. Tasha was the only participant who did not proclaim her orientation in person, but rather used a photo from Beyonce whom she followed on her social media account, to come out to her mother. Tasha related she was so inspired by the photo she texted it to her mother to reveal her orientation.

Influence for Coming Out

The influences for coming out stemmed from how exhausting it was to hide their sexuality, to wanting to share their true selves with those they loved. Each of the participant's coming out stories were unique, and the amount of support, or lack thereof, varied. Almost all of the nine participants mentioned at some point in the interview why they decided to come out.

For instance, Elizabeth came out because she said she did not want to lie about her sexuality anymore. Jason wanted those he loved the most to know who he really was. Kyle was tired of not being able to be himself, plus he had no choice but to come out to his dad because he needed a place to live. Monique wanted her parents to know she had a girlfriend and wanted to be out in the open about it. Nicole came out because her friends all figured it out. Paul was tired of pretending to be straight. Tasha wanted her family and friends to know who she really was.

Finally, Will came out on National Coming Out Day, but most importantly, wanted to share his true self with those closest to him. Regardless of the influence for coming out, the one common thread among all of these participants, was they just wanted to be supported, loved, and be free to love the person of their choosing.

Support After Coming Out

The coming out process is often terrifying for many non-heterosexual people (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 175). One of the main reasons for not coming out is the fear of rejection by those they love most, along with the fear of rejection or discrimination within social constructs. Each of the participants had a uniquely different home life and received differing levels of support from family and friends. Sadly, not all participants in this study, were supported by their parent(s). Erica, Jason, Monique, Nicole, Tasha, and Will were the lucky ones. After coming out, they had the support of their parents from the beginning. Despite some conflicts along the way, their coming out process was an overall positive experience. Other participants were not so lucky and lost relationships over coming out.

Elizabeth's mother seemed fine with her sexuality when she tried to come out the first time at age 13. She recalled her mother telling her she was just going through a phase and could sleep with whomever she wanted, that Elizabeth needed to try guys first. Five years later, when Elizabeth came out a second time, her mother forbade her to see the girl she was dating, which led to a huge fight and Elizabeth moving out. Luckily, Elizabeth's father was accepting of her sexuality and supported her relationship.

Kyle and his mother no longer speak due to his sexuality. After Kyle came out, he said he and his mother's relationship eroded to the point he had to move in with his father. He had to come out to his father because he needed a place to live. Kyle said it was a process with his

father, who is now fully supportive of Kyle's sexuality. Kyle and his mother, on the other hand, no longer speak.

In Elizabeth and Kyle's situations, they found support in one parent after the relationship with the other was strained. In contrast, Paul's relationship with both parents was strained after he came out. Paul was living with his mother and step-father at the time he came out, but spent equal time with his father and step-mother. When Paul was forced to come out to his father, their relationship ended and Paul said they no longer speak.

On a positive note, the participants had no issues when coming out to extended family members, with one exception. Jason's twin brother had displayed homophobic responses, which terrified Jason. After Jason came out, he said there was a moment of awkwardness and a few tears, but now the two are closer than ever and even live together. Coming out to a close friend or family member who is supportive often makes it easier to come out to a parent.

The community in which one lives often influences coming out. None of the nine participants recalled being presented with resources regarding their sexuality in middle school, junior high, or high school. They were left to discover and explore their sexuality on their own.

Community resources for non-heterosexual people were also lacking. Kyle recalled his community not discriminating against gay people, but neither did do anything to promote it development for non-heterosexuals. Kyle was also the only participant to complement his high school for supporting gay people. Jason's take was much the opposite: his experience in school and in his community made him grow thicker skin. Nicole, Paul, and Will have all lived in larger urban areas and have experienced gay life in rural and urban areas. Each said being gay was much more accepted in urban areas. In their rural communities, they felt as if they had to be guarded with whom they disclosed their sexuality.

These three former urban participants turned out to be my oldest participants at 27, 25 and 29 years of age. Quite possibly, a correlation exists between their ages and feeling the need to be selective with whom they publicly disclosed their sexuality. Another possible correlation might be race: Nicole, Will, and Paul are white, while Erica, Monique, and Tasha are all African-Americans who grew up in different predominantly Black communities. When the African-American students came out, their friends and families were all supportive, as were their communities. Monique even commented that when she goes back to her community, she always pays a visit to her high school, where she is welcomed with open arms. Age when coming out and type of community one comes out to seem to predict feelings of support and/or acceptance.

Accessing Information about Sexuality

The participants all commented about the lack of resources concerning sexuality provided to them in schools. When asked how they accessed information to learn more about their sexuality, all participants said they used the Internet at some point of time to search for information. This is much easier and private than the pre-Internet days. In the book, *Men Like That*, John Howard (1999) shared an account from a personal interview where the participant had to learn about his sexual identity by reading books (p. 11). Now, information can be accessed privately on a personal computer or mobile device without anyone knowing. For example, Kyle used the internet to search for stories about others like himself who were gay in a rural community. This, he said, provided him comfort knowing there were others experiencing the same issues he was.

Other information sources were less affirming. Jason saw a therapist growing up, so consequently much of the information he received was in the form of pamphlets and brochures to help him understand his sexuality, as well as the Internet. Like Jason, Paul also saw a therapist

growing up. This was encouraged by Paul's mother, but Paul said the therapist's role was to try and "fix him," so he stopped going after a while when he realized his feelings differed from those of the therapist.

Paul was unique among the participants in the fact that he attended a university in an urban setting out of high school. Paul had also lived in both rural and urban areas. For advice he turned to were his lesbian friend as well as the urban university's campus resource center, which had brochures and pamphlets with information about sexuality and being gay. Kyle, Nicole, Monique, and Will have all used social media to network and find gay friends and/or groups. Despite lack of resources provided to them in schools, all nine participants were able to find support and resources to explore their sexuality.

Coming Out Advice

I asked participants to offer coming out advice for someone in the process of coming out given what they know now. Most of the advice centered around things like "being true to who you are because you are your own person," "do what makes you happy regardless of what others think," and "be prepared for rejection." Erica said someone should really think about it before coming out; her advice was to come out to someone close, someone who will understand and support. This will make it easier to come out to everyone.

Nicole cautioned that coming out can be really hard; she finally learned to say, "This is who I am, take it or leave it." Kyle said his coming out advice would depend on the situation, especially the relationship with one's parents. He would not rush into coming out, but at the same time he said coming out feels very liberating.

Jason said not to let anyone talk one into coming out if one is not ready. He said if one is not comfortable with it, then do not do it. Jason said as soon as you come out, one will become a

target, so do not come out if one cannot handle it. Will's advice was to have somewhere else to live in the event of rejection; indeed, after coming out, Elizabeth and Kyle had to do exactly that.

Campus Experiences

Overall campus experience and being openly gay

The overwhelming majority of participants said they had extremely positive overall experiences at this community college. Elizabeth and Paul mentioned that their experiences might differ than the "normal" student because they are in such a small program with the same cohort of students. They felt their experiences had been very positive, but Paul said he felt isolated, at times, from the rest of the student body. Paul was unique to other students since all of his general education classes were fulfilled in his bachelor's program at an urban university in another state. Nicole had shifted to taking most of her classes online, but she said the experiences she has had, so far, have been great. It is important to note that this question was asked early on in the interview. As we advanced the interview, details of a few negative instances across campus emerged in the narratives. Initially participants indicated overall positive experiences at this community college, yet detailed experiences that were perceived as not positive later in the interview.

When I asked how it felt to be openly gay at this community college, the students' responses were a little more varied. A majority of the participants felt comfortable; however, a few noted troubling instances. Elizabeth made mention again that she was in a more intimate academic setting where all of the students knew each other inside and outside of the classroom. She said that even though not everyone in her program was comfortable with her sexuality, generally everyone had been accepting around her. Paul was in the same academic program as Elizabeth and echoed her comments. Paul said he can be himself on campus around his

classmates because they know him and know what to expect; however, when he was out in public in the rural community, he felt the need to hide his sexuality and put on a straight front in order to be accepted.

Erica, Monique, and Tasha all indicated they shared a common bond because they were intercollegiate athletes. Erica said her experience had been acceptable, that no one really talked about or stared at her; she felt like a normal person. Monique said it was “fun” to be openly gay at this community college. She said she had bonded with other gay students and they could joke around with each other because each share that common bond. Tasha said that no one judged her on this campus.

Male students (coincidentally not athletes) conveyed different experiences. Jason, being a feminine gay man, encountered some issues on campus. He recounted receiving the usual looks and hearing gay slurs from male students. He said they would say “stupid and uneducated” things, such as “because he was gay, he liked little boys.” Jason relayed there were also times where male students actually changed seats in class to avoid sitting by him. Kyle, on the other hand, felt more accepted at this community college than he thought it would be. As a masculine gay male, he said most people he encountered did not really care, and said that those who did know he was gay did not really care. Nonetheless, this description of campus environment is not “fun.”

The one negative aspect Kyle mentioned was that he did not see much support for gay students on campus; nevertheless, he did not feel discriminated against. Nicole, a masculine lesbian, said she did not recall any “abuse” on this campus, but said she felt the stares of certain people because she was “different.” She did recall a specific experience where she felt discriminated against in one of the on-campus offices. As a requirement to prove she was

married to her wife, as she reported on her income taxes, she was asked to show proof of their marriage. She recalled not thinking anything of it initially; however, when she was asked over and over to produce the document, she felt discriminated against, almost as if someone did not recognize her marriage was real. She said she expressed how she felt and had not had to produce the document again.

Will said that, in his experience, gay issues did not come up much. He said when it did, it was almost circus-like, with all his classmates asking him questions. He said he was asked to be the “spokesperson” for all gay-related conversations that came up in class. He said he took it in stride, that someone had to do it. Maia Ettinger (1994) describes this as the *Pocahontas Paradigm*, where perceived sense of entitlement of a heterosexual person outweighs fears of a non-heterosexual person in a particular situation (p. 53). Will is a non-traditional-age student who indicated he did not feel connected to his peers at the current community college. I wonder if this was due to him being a feminine gay man, a non-traditional student, or both.

Other Students

Many of these comments were a result of an issue with a fellow student. Elizabeth had a confrontation with a fellow student in a sociology class who was opposed to gay marriage. She tried to convey to the student her point of view by asking the student how she would feel if her spouse were in the hospital and she would not be the one able to make the decisions for care. Elizabeth pointed out that because of gay marriage, she can now make those decisions for her spouse. Elizabeth admitted that she did not know if her example changed the other student’s mind, but she felt compelled to speak up. Jason, who mentioned several issues he had experienced with fellow male students, said he had never experienced issues with fellow female students. He thought that perhaps the male students felt threatened due to his relatability to the

girls and there was some jealousy involved. If this were the case, he did not understand why: it was not as if he were going to date one of their girlfriends.

Kyle said he was treated well by fellow students. Due to the fact he did not fit the stereotype of a typical gay man, Kyle reflected those he interacted with never really knew he was gay if he did not tell them. Monique said she was treated pretty well. She explained that although she was treated, for the most part, like every other student, she did say she often experienced stares and a negative vibe when she walked by certain groups of people. As a researcher, I wondered if this were because she was a masculine lesbian, or because she was African-American, or both.

Nicole, who was also a masculine lesbian, recalled receiving the same stares. Although she is white, she felt much like Monique around certain people. Will said he was treated “just fine” by fellow students. Will admitted he was very confident and comfortable in his own skin, so perhaps that had the same effect on how and why he was accepted so openly by fellow students. Perhaps confidence and level of comfort with oneself plays a role in how one perceives acceptance from others.

Instructors

The majority of participants had no major issues with their instructors. Most were issues of insensitivity and faculty asking students to speak up about their sexuality to the class when they were not comfortable doing so. Unless she exposed her sexuality, Elizabeth said, the instructors outside of her program would never know she is a lesbian based upon her looks. Erica felt pressured by an instructor (she could not recall what discipline) who asked her to speak up about what it was like to be gay so that others could hear first-hand what it was like. In the interview, Erica’s body language appeared as though she did not mind being asked to share her

experiences. Perhaps this same confidence Erica displayed in the classroom provided false inclination to the instructor.

Jason encountered in a dialogue with a psychology instructor where, in a joking manner, his instructor told him he would never get any girls “that way.” Jason said the relationship with his instructor, who was male, changed when he explained that “he didn’t bark up that tree anyway.” He said his instructor became “very standoffish,” which caused him to withdraw from the class. Jason said he was surprised that an instructor would treat him that way because he thought instructors were supposed to be open-minded.

Kyle had a much more positive experience in a sociology class. He recalled a time when the class was discussing sexuality. Based on the nature of the discussion, Kyle said he felt like everyone was supportive. He also said that his instructor did a good job of staying neutral so that all viewpoints could be expressed. Kyle spoke of this in a very positive manner. Monique commented that she felt more accepted by her instructors because being gay is more widely accepted in today’s society. Nicole said she had never had an issue with any of her instructors and it was obvious by her appearance she was a lesbian.

Paul said he had a differing opinion with an instructor about a topic related to religion. Paul said she made an insensitive remark by saying the class had to listen to all of his “gay stuff” so he had to listen to her talk about religion. Paul said he had since had a conversation with that instructor expressing his point of view and they worked out their differences. Paul also added that when issues of sexuality came up in class, he was always asked to speak about them. He said he did not mind and always answered all the questions, although some were very personal and embarrassing.

Tasha, much like Paul, had been asked to be the spokesperson for all gay-related conversations. She said that although she felt supported by the faculty, there have been awkward moments. Tasha said it upset her when faculty made assumptions based on her appearance. She said they just assumed and did not know her, and that was uncomfortable. Will said he was treated fine by faculty. He suspected it was, perhaps, due to faculty being more recently graduated in the fields and more open-minded.

Paul concurred with Nicole that sensitivity training was needed for faculty at this community college. This stemmed from a statement made by an instructor which referred to hearing about all of his “gay stuff.” Will also mentioned sensitivity training for all. He suggested that many of the examples provided in class present only the dichotomy of a man and a woman. He would have liked to see all types of relationships present in everything, from advertisements to lectures and activities. He added that dismantling that dichotomy was instrumental in becoming more accepting and more knowledgeable as a whole.

The participant accounts of instructor and staff experiences led participants to call for sensitivity training for faculty and staff at this community college. Participants are hopeful this will alleviate them being called out by instructors to be the spokesperson for “gay” topics and to be more open-minded in choice of wording and presentation of course content.

Experiences as Compared to Straight Students

When I asked students to compare their experiences as gay students to those of straight students, the participants’ answers varied and were wide-ranging. Elizabeth spoke of the dreaded questions on forms where she had to disclose an “emergency contact” and “relationship.” She said that was one thing straight people could just write in without ever thinking twice about it.

She said when she filled it in, she automatically felt “outed” and exposed to those that she might not want to know.

Jason said that because of his sexuality, he had to work harder at everything he did to overcome the stereotype of being known as the “gay guy.” He said he wanted everyone to see him as Jason, not just the “gay guy.” He paralleled how he felt to the oppression women and/or people of color feel. Although Kyle felt pretty accepted, he said gay people live a different life where there is constant conflict over things such as: to whom to come out, safe places to be “out,” and overall community acceptance. He felt that certain circles of friends or cliques could be altered by being gay or straight.

Monique was far more positive in her response. She said that, “we’re all the same honestly.” She said she did not look at straight people differently than gay people. She also commented that straight people did not look at her differently; which did contradict a previous statement. Previously, she recalled a negative vibe and being stared at from certain people on campus.

Nicole said the major difference to her was that gay people always had to worry about being discriminated against. Nicole recalled, other than the issue with her marriage license in an on-campus office, having no bad experiences at this community college. Although she did not recall any bad experiences, she did worry about what others thought when they looked at her. Tasha made reference again that straight people never not get singled out in class because they were straight, where gay people did.

Will’s responses were different and, to me, unexpected reactions to the question about campus experiences. He said that selection pool for dating was very slim for gay people in rural areas, so gay people often had to “make due” with what was out there. A contributing problem

with the selective dating pool, according to Will, was that almost all gay people in rural areas knew each other, or had a friend of a friend in common; which complicated dating matters.

Participants provided a varying narrative on how their experiences were the same or different when compared to students who identified as straight. Six of the nine participants responded with an original response not reflected by the other three participants. Examples ranged from filling out forms, having to work harder to prove oneself, feelings of discrimination, and selection of partners. These responses stood out with the participants of this study when compared to experiences of heterosexual people.

Safe Zone Areas

Select offices, mainly in the student services area at this community college, displayed Safe Zone signs. These signs, displayed on office doors, let non-heterosexual students know where safe offices were located to openly discuss issues related to their sexuality without judgement. When I asked how these Safe Zone signs made them feel, many respondents did not even realize they were there, or for whom. It was an assumption, I believe, on the part of this community college that students would know what a Safe Zone was. I believe that some students probably did know, but a vast majority of the study respondents did not. The participants were not uniform in their responses to the Safe Zone.

Elizabeth did notice the Safe Zone signs on campus and said she was glad they were in place to support or help someone who really needed it. She would not necessarily seek help from someone solely because their office displayed the sign, but she said it was good to know someone was there for support.

Erica, Monique, and Tasha, are intercollegiate athletes with a support system in place in the form of coaches and teammates. None of the three had noticed the Safe Zone signs, or knew

what they were for. When posed the hypothetical question that asked if they were not comfortable going to their coaches and or teammates for support, would they seek the help of a Safe Zone? Erica said she would seek help from anyone, but was happy there was a resource on campus to be used that way. Monique said she might seek help from someone with a Safe Zone sign because she said there were certain things you cannot deal with on your own. Tasha said she would not use the Safe Zone because the help she needed could be provided by her coaches.

Jason and Nicole did not recall seeing Safe Zone signs on campus, but thought there were put up after they left; Jason transferred and Nicole began taking predominantly online classes and was not on campus much. When I asked if he would seek help from a Safe Zone, Jason said he would. He also added that he thought Safe Zones did wonders for those who might be struggling and needed a place to turn. Nicole also said she would definitely seek help from a Safe Zone.

Kyle, like Jason and Nicole, said he had not noticed the signs on campus, but said he would definitely feel more comfortable talking to someone who did not discriminate. Jason spent one year at this community college, then transferred. He added that although he did not notice any Safe Zone signs at this community college, he had noticed them at his university. This led me to believe there were, perhaps, more training and resources concerning issues of serving sexual minority students in a university setting.

Paul said he had noticed one Safe Zone sign in the office area that provides notes for students with disabilities. Paul was not a fan of Safe Zones, for seeking help from someone who displayed a Safe Zone would automatically out someone. Paul said he viewed Safe Zones as target areas and would not seek help or going to someone he did not know. Will said he felt like he had seen them, but could not say for sure. He felt like he had not noticed them because the

idea of a Safe Zone was not applicable to him. He admitted to being rather “mule-headed” and was not the type of person to ask for help.

For eight of the nine participants, Safe Zones were positively received in their efforts to serve non-heterosexual students. Participants felt Safe Zones needed to be advertised so students would know where to turn in a time of need. Also as a resource for faculty for referrals. Several of the participants new nothing about Safe Zones at this community college and felt these suggestions would help others know there was a place to turn.

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

Most students said administrators were doing an acceptable or good job of promoting a safe environment for non-heterosexual students; however, there were suggestions for change. An overwhelming number of participants said more support was needed for non-heterosexual students on campus, evidence that support was missing on this campus. On-campus student groups supporting the rights of non-heterosexual students were absent. Participants wanted to ensure that all types of relationships were present in advertisements, lectures and activities, as well as within sensitivity training for faculty and staff. Elizabeth’s concern was the lack of support groups or clubs for non-heterosexual students; she said presently there were none. Elizabeth said lack of support groups and/or clubs for non-heterosexual students made it difficult for one to find others like themselves.

Erica said she would like to see more promotion of Safe Zones and what they were there for. Jason’s response echoed Erica’s: Jason said he would like for administrators to ensure that support was in place because he said that does wonders for a student; in particular, one who was suicidal. Jason felt like the approach of administrators here was “out of sight, out of mind.” Jason predicted more and more gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students will attend in the

future, and wanted faculty and staff to be prepared to handle the multiple sexualities they will encounter within their student body. Having a readily identifiable resource center, Jason said, would provide those students with reassuring piece of mind that there is someone to turn to. He said that college is exhausting, aside from someone struggling with their sexuality.

Kyle was not as specific as Jason. Although Kyle said he never felt discriminated against, he did mention the need for more support. He, too, noticed the absence of student organizations supporting non-heterosexual students and would have liked to have seen more awareness and support on campus.

Stemming from her experience in one of the campus offices, Nicole suggested sensitivity training for staff. Although she admitted that being asked to produce her marriage license over and over might not have been discrimination, it certainly felt that way. She did say she felt the campus was on the right track, however.

Participants provided these suggestions in hopes of improving experiences of non-heterosexual students at this community college. Most felt administrators did a good job establishing a place of safety and acceptance at this community college, but offered suggestions for change. Participants supported the creation of a LGBTQ student organization on campus along with sensitivity training for faculty and students. Participants indicated these changes would help non-heterosexual students feel supported and welcome at this community college.

Encouraging Acceptance

When I asked whether or not they would encourage other gay and lesbian students to attend this community college, most respondents said that they would. There were, however, a few caveats mentioned by some of the participants. Elizabeth said she had not had any extremely negative experiences, so she felt like it was a safe place to be. Erica said everyone was cool here

and it was chill. Jason said he would encourage someone local to attend. He felt it would be easier for a person who lived around the local community to fit in better than someone from outside the community. Jason had heard stories of students attending other community colleges that were not as accepting as this one. Jason said if he would recommend someone go anywhere, he would recommend they go to this community college because of the acceptance he felt while he attended.

Monique said she would recommend someone to attend here because it was fun. Due to the openness of the campus environment, Nicole would definitely encourage someone to attend. She said she had never worried about her sexuality having a bearing on a grade she received in any of her classes.

Paul would encourage someone attend his academic program, or the art or theatre programs, but said he could not recommend the rest of the college. Tasha said she would encourage someone to attend because the campus environment was comfortable. Will said his advice would depend upon whether a student were specifically seeking a college for the “gay experience.” In that event, he would encourage them to choose a university instead, but if they were wanting to take classes and earn a degree, without the need for the “gay experience,” then he would recommend attending this community college. For Paul, coming to this community college was due, in part, to his grades, the convenience, and cost. He said this community college was not flying the rainbow flag, nor were there any gay student associations or clubs for gay people, but such campus components was not the determining factor for him.

Suggestions for Change

I asked the participants to share what they would tell administrators to change at this community college. An overwhelming majority said they felt the administration at this

community college was doing well, but at the same time, they called for the need for more support, including sensitivity training for students, faculty, and staff. Elizabeth, Kyle, and Will suggested the creation of student organization for LGBTQ students; currently, there are none. Kyle added that the creation of a student organization would help LGBTQ students feel supported and welcome. Kyle mentioned he did not feel discriminated against, he would just like to see more awareness and support.

Erica was the only participant who mentioned adding more Safe Zones. This was particularly interesting because in the interview, she stated she had never noticed them. She did, however, say she would seek help from a Safe Zone if she felt her coaches could not help her with what she was going through.

Jason wanted administrators to ensure that all students had someone they could talk to. He described how gay issues are often put on the back burner by administrators, although predicted more and more students will be attending this community college as openly gay (or whatever they choose to be). Jason felt that faculty and staff needed to be updated with the differences they could face with their students. He felt being prepared and being resourceful would make the college experience so much better.

Having a knowledgeable faculty and staff would give students a piece of mind knowing they had somewhere to turn. Nicole and Paul's comments stemmed around the need for more tolerance and sensitivity training for faculty and staff. These comments were, I believe, a direct result of a negative experience they had on campus. Nicole with the marriage license issue in the Financial Aid Office, and Paul's experience with a faculty member's comment about having to listen to all of his "gay stuff." Will said there was nothing he would really ask administrators to change, but suggested all types of relationships be represented in ads, lectures, activities, etc. He

stated that information is commonly presented in the dichotomy of a man and a woman. He concluded that the rejection of the hegemony of a heteronormative lifestyle is instrumental in becoming more accepting and more knowledgeable of others.

Conclusion

In this qualitative study, I incorporated primarily phenomenological and narrative research. I interviewed nine participants and organized participant responses into themes under two major research questions. Finally, I analyzed the participant responses to answer the two research questions.

Research Question One: *What are the experiences of gay and lesbian students who currently attend a rural Midwestern community college?*

The experiences of the nine participants attending this rural Midwestern community college could be characterized as mostly positive, but not free from issues that troubled them. Students were first asked to describe their overall experience at this community college. The overwhelming majority indicated it was very good; nevertheless, details emerged later in the narratives depicting a slightly different picture. Instances of racial slurs, non-violent actions, isolation, and judgmental stares occurred. There were also isolated incidents between students and instructors regarding issues surrounding sexuality, as well as perceived discrimination by a major office of student support on the campus of this community college.

When I asked how it felt to the participants to be openly gay at this community college, the respondents' answers varied. Most of the participants said they felt comfortable being openly gay, others felt the need to not disclose their sexuality outside of their core group of friends and classmates. Three of the nine participants are part of an academic program with a small cohort of students, and described a closeness with classmates.

This feeling was absent from other narratives, except, suggestively, for those of the intercollegiate athletes who participated in this study. Three of the nine participants played intercollegiate athletics. The closeness the athletes felt came in the form of teammates and coaches, and some of the overall student body knowing who they were due their respective sport. One participant fully embraced being openly gay at this community college, even describing being gay as “fun,” due to the common bonds she shared with other non-heterosexual students she had met.

Two male participants were attending the community college to take general education classes in preparation to transfer to a university. Their academic reasons for attending this community college were to take general education classes before transferring, yet their experiences were totally contrasting. The male participant who presented as feminine experienced far more negative experiences with faculty and other male students. The male participant who presented as masculine had nothing negative to say about his experiences with faculty and other students. This reinforces the theory that masculinity is a more acceptable trait in society: the more masculine one is, the more accepted and/or normalized their experiences are in mainstream society. Emily Kazyak (2012) contended that “doing masculinity strengthens claims to belonging and thus acceptance for gay men living in small towns” (p. 840).

The issues experienced with fellow students stemmed mostly from lack of education and lack of tolerance for a lifestyle other than heterosexuality. The participants in this study either identified as gay or lesbian, and it appeared, treatment by fellow students was dependent on identification. Males who presented as feminine, experienced harsher conditions in their communities as well as in school. Most notably, Jason, a feminine gay man, whose detailed explanations of gay slurs stemmed directly from heterosexual white males. Those white males

called him epithets to his face, physically changed seats in class to avoid sitting next to him, and made uneducated comments such as “because he’s gay, he must like little boys.” Jason indicated he was never bothered, at least to his face, by any of the females in his classes, only by heterosexual males.

Kyle and Paul, both of whom present as masculine, did not indicate experiencing any of those things with fellow students. The female participants, with the exception of Elizabeth, had no major issue with students. Elizabeth, who is married, engaged in a heated exchange with a classmate over the issue of gay marriage and the rights and privileges of same-sex couples. None of the females interviewed indicated any real issues with other students, other than occasional stares.

The majority of participants recalled no major issues with faculty or staff at the community college; however, there were examples of insensitivity that were evident in the classroom. Participants could not recall the specific discipline, but most who did, indicated they happened in the area of social science. At one time or another, almost all of the openly gay participants experienced what Ettinger (1994) refers to as the *Pocahontas Paradigm*. Participants in this study reported being singled out by faculty and other students and were asked to “speak” for the entire non-heterosexual population when they were not comfortable doing so (Ettinger, pp. 51-54). Participants also indicated they were asked to explain certain personal, and at times, inappropriate, subjects about being non-heterosexual. In addition, certain assumptions were made about a participant due the way she dressed. The participant never recalled opening up to the instructor, yet she was asked to speak up about being lesbian. Another participant actually had to drop a class due to the dynamic relationship change and tension that formed between him and one of his male instructors after he disclosed his sexuality.

When I asked the participants to explain how their experiences might be similar to or different from those experienced by non-heterosexual students, the participants' responses were varied and wide-ranging. The one incident that was reported in the non-instructional, or student service area of the community college, was perceived discrimination. Nicole was asked, multiple times to present her marriage license for proof of marriage. She indicated this might have been due to federal regulations, but felt singled out because she assumed heterosexual people were not asked to constantly "prove" their marriage existed at each visit. Other participants reported experiences that heterosexual people do not have to think twice about, such as being outed by listing "relationship" next to an emergency contact on a form, having to work harder than heterosexual people to prove you can do a job or succeed in a class, being stared at and having to explain what it is like to be gay, and finally, straight people have a much larger dating pool.

Safe Zones

This community college had Safe Zone signs posted sporadically on office doors, mainly in the student services areas. Participants were asked how Safe Zone signs at this community college made them feel and if they would seek help from someone in a Safe Zone. Only two of the nine participants in this study recalled seeing a Safe Zone sign on campus, and, three of nine participants had no idea what a Safe Zone was or whom it was designed to serve. Furthermore, a majority of participants indicated they probably would not seek help from a Safe Zone at this community college, and all but one participant was happy Safe Zones were in place for those needing a place to turn in a time of crisis. Most of the participants in this study have been "out" for some time and spoke rather comfortably about their sexuality. Perhaps, that explained the lack of interest in, or need for a Safe Zone.

I was a bit surprised by the number of participants who knew nothing about Safe Zones prior to my asking; still, encouraged more Safe Zones to be added on campus. Ideally, when community colleges have “safe areas,” the students they were intended to serve should know the spaces exist, which was not the case at this community college. The idea of a Safe Zone was profound enough in a number of participants who thought there should be more. Jason took the concept of Safe Zones one step further by suggesting that administrators need to make sure non-heterosexual students had someone to talk to. He described how “gay issues” are often pushed to the back burner by administrators because it is uncomfortable to deal with, but as more and more students attend community college beyond 2017, it is more important than ever for faculty and staff to be prepared to handle the varying needs of non-heterosexual students. Jason felt being prepared with resources would make the college experience so much better.

Kyle and Jason attended a university one year after attending the community college recalled seeing more Safe Zone signs at their university, as compared to the community college. Kyle speculated this was probably because there was more training and resources offered at the university. Paul, who spoke out against Safe Zones said he would not use one. He felt having a Safe Zone in a visibly public place would automatically “out” someone who might not necessarily be ready to be out. He also viewed Safe Zones as potential target areas and would not feel comfortable talking to someone he did not know. Paul’s perspectives were shaped by an extremely negative counseling experience and a lack of support from his family.

Change Encouraged by Students

When I asked participants what they would tell administrators to change as a result of their experiences, most had a few specific suggestions. The participants said administrators were doing a fairly good job fostering a safe, non-threatening environment for non-heterosexual

students. Most such suggestions were couched in calls for acceptance and equality. First, there was an overwhelming response from all nine participants for visible support within the community college for non-heterosexual students. Participants pointed out the absence of student alliance groups and clubs for non-heterosexual students which, they said, would provide a comfortable place for non-heterosexual students to meet one another. In addition, they called for sensitivity training for students, faculty, and staff to ensure non-heterosexual students are not targets of bullying, harassment, or singled out due to their sexual orientation.

The majority of participants in this study indicated they would encourage other gay and lesbian students to attend this community college. Three of the nine participants, not the athletes, were members of the same academic program consisting of a small cohort of students. Due to the level of closeness they felt with their classmates, they would definitely encourage non-heterosexual students to attend their program. Two of the same three participants said they would also recommend the theatre and arts programs.

In the absence of actual student organizations supporting non-heterosexual students, participants felt these areas were among the “safest” on campus outside of their own programs. Several of the other students stated they would definitely encourage other non-heterosexual students to attend this community college. Will, however, said his response would depend on the type of experience, as well as the options the non-heterosexual student was seeking. If it were the “gay experience” one were seeking, he would not recommend attending this community college, and instead attend a university with far more resources. Will added it was not bad attending this community college, but it was his only option; he said, “This community college was not flying the rainbow flag, nor were there any gay student associations or clubs for gay people, but it works for me.” Will indicated he had to overlook those omissions at this community college due to his

low high school grade point average, and the community college was a much cheaper option. If attending community college was, in part, due to grades and money, he absolutely would recommend this community college to other non-heterosexual students. If grades and money were no object, he encouraged students to go the place that made them the happiest.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked the participants what they would like to see changed at this community college. Again, participants mentioned the need for more support offices for non-heterosexual students, as well as sensitivity training for students, faculty, and staff. They also suggested the creation of a student organization specifically for LGBTQ students; there was not one at the time of the interviews. The participants indicated that the creation of an LGBTQ student organization would potentially make non-heterosexual students feel supported and welcome.

Research Question Two: *How does the community college environment influence identity development in gay and lesbian students?*

What I found with these nine participants was the community college environment had little to no effect on sexual identity development. Rather, it was the surrounding environment in which they lived while growing up that shaped their sexual identity development. By the time the participants entered the community college (some as traditional students just out of high school, others as non-traditional students some years later), their sexual identities were already developed. Research efforts should be focused instead, towards students' experiences while growing up to determine the extent circumstances from their youth shaped their sexual identity development.

All of the participants had come out prior to attending this community college, with ages ranging from 12 to 20 years of age. Four came out to their parents first; which differs slightly

from the norm. The other five participants came out to either a close friend or family member before eventually coming out to their parents. One of the participants used a social media post to help her come out to her mother. The participants' influences for coming out ranged from how exhausting it was to hide their sexuality, to not wanting to lie about it any longer, and finally desiring to share everything about their lives with those they loved.

Parental support was somewhat of a mixed-bag. As was mentioned before, all nine participants had uniquely different home lives and received differing amounts of support from family and friends. Sadly, not all participants were supported by their families. Six of the nine participants had the support of their parents since coming out. The other three participants experienced much harsher treatment when they came out to their parent(s). One moved out of her house the day after she came out after her mother forbade her to see her girlfriend. Another moved out of his mother's house and into his father's house after he and his mother's relationship began eroding in the months after he came out. Another participant was a freshman in college when he was outed to his father by his stepmother. After he came out, the relationships eroded with his mother and father, so he chose to live, instead, with his grandparents while he attends this community college. Three participants still had no relationship with their respective parent, to whom they initially disclosed their sexual orientation. After coming out, these participants, in particular, and had to turn to other family members and close friends for support.

The community in which one lives influences coming out. The participants indicated their respective K-12 schools and communities were not discriminatory, but, as some recalled, those same schools and communities were not the most supportive places for non-heterosexual people. First, none of the participants recalled ever being provided with resources in K-12 schooling on anything other than heterosexual relationships. Non-heterosexual students were left to explore

sexuality on their own. To do this, most participants said they used Google or searched for articles in databases or online magazines. Some recalled using social media to find a network of gay friends.

Three of the participants had the unique perspective of having lived in larger metropolitan cities for a short period of time. They were the oldest participants in my study, and their point of comparison on a number of things was quite interesting. All three indicated a significantly higher number of resources available to non-heterosexual people as compared to rural areas. They also mentioned how a non-heterosexual lifestyle is generally more supported in a larger city, sadly different from the support non-heterosexual people receive in many of their hometowns. In addition, older participants in this study mentioned feeling guarded with whom they disclosed their sexual orientation, whereas younger participants did not. Younger participants had more of the “take me for who I am” attitude when it came to their sexual orientation.

Three of the participants were African-American and grew up in a predominantly African-American community. In each of the participants’ coming out stories, each member of their family, extended family, friends, and community members were supporting of their non-heterosexual lifestyle. While those groups initially questioned the participants’ declaration of non-heterosexual identity the love and support these participants received from their African-American families and communities was refreshing to them. One of the participants even commented about how her high school still welcomes her with open arms each time she visits.

Given all they had been through to now, participants were asked to share coming out advice for someone currently going through the process of coming out. The following are bits of advice from the nine participants on the positive, as well as the negative aspects of coming out. They encouraged someone who was coming out to be true to who they are because they are their

own person. They also said to do what makes them happy regardless of what others think. Also, be prepared for rejection and think about what to do if rejection occurs: have a plan and even a place to live. Participants cautioned that coming out is not easy and to come out to someone supportive and trusting. This will make coming out to everyone easier. If one is not comfortable with being “out,” do not do it. A participant cautioned that once one comes out, one becomes a target, so do not come out if one cannot handle it. Finally, learn to love oneself and to tell others, “This is who I am so take it or leave it.” Other participants cautioned not to rush into it, but to confront it because coming out can be extremely liberating, especially if one has been hiding it for a long period of time.

Section Two: Implications for Future Research

This study was a small yet important missing component in the overall body of literature about gay and lesbian experiences in community colleges. Research should exist for all non-heterosexual groups attending community colleges nationwide. Studies should examine similarities and differences among gender, race, location, and the effect each have on each non-heterosexual group.

If I were to replicate this study, I would probe deeper into some of the emotional responses of my participants regarding uncomfortable situations with family members, within their respected communities, and within their community college experience. I would like to know how they felt they were perceived in society, and what specifically crafted their impressions. In other words, rules and standards are generally always set by those with the most power. I wonder if they responded in this manner because that is what is engrained by society.

In addition, I would also like to see this study extended to a much larger scale to determine if community colleges do, in fact, have particular effects on sexual identity

development. In that case, researchers would need subjects who were early in the coming out process, or in the questioning phase. This would give a base of comparison to my findings here, which indicate the community college environment had little to no effect on sexual identity development. Knowing this would help administrators determine what kinds of sensitivity training and/or printed or online resources would be best suited to educate students, faculty, and staff.

I would also like for future research to examine the extent that masculinity and femininity impacts student experiences. As it appears in my study, the more masculinity one expresses or embodies, the more one is accepted by peers. Perhaps masculine characteristics are closer to societal norms, which are deemed more acceptable. Lesbians who are more masculine or “butch,” are often viewed as “just one of the guys.” Additionally, “femme” lesbians and “masculine” gay males, by appearance and demeanor, can choose to keep their sexuality hidden, as did three of my participants.

In closing, I chose to pursue this topic first because of my own coming out experience, and also because I truly believe in the mission of community colleges; which is to extend educational opportunities not only to the students, but to the surrounding community. I am a former community college student from a small Midwestern town where anything outside of a heterosexual relationship was not accepted. I have experienced some of the same issues as my participants. Second, I want to see and experience true change in my lifetime. Since community colleges are enrolling the highest number of students, what better place to begin. Change starts with each one of us, and if the words on these pages make a difference, I have succeeded.

Community colleges should be safe places for students. Places where judgment and harassment are absent, where support and tolerance are celebrated. Furthermore, the time is now

for community college leaders to sustain an educational environment where non-heterosexual students are viewed as an important component of the student body. Sexuality issues should not be minimized or ignored, as they characteristically have always been. Community colleges should play a greater role supporting non-heterosexual students in the classroom as well as in the community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

(INTERVIEW QUESTIONS)

1. What is your name?
2. What is your major?
3. How old are you?
4. What semester are you in currently? (Ex. First, second, third, graduate?)
5. What is your GPA?
6. What has your student experience been like since attending this community college?
7. Are you currently “out” to your family and friends?
 - a. If no, why haven’t you come out?
 - b. If yes, tell me a little about your coming out process? When did you come out?
 - i. How did you come out to different people in your life?
 - ii. Were they (family and friends) accepting of you when you came out?
 - iii. What was the most influential factor for coming out to these people?
8. What is it like to be an out/closeted student at this community college?
9. How have you been treated by fellow students?
10. Do you participate in any extra-curricular activities or clubs? If so, what are they?

Why did you choose them?
11. What have been your experiences in classes regarding your sexuality? For example, how do faculty respond when the issue of sexuality or sexual orientation comes up?
 - a. Are they supportive, or not?
 - b. How do you realize if they are supportive, or not?

12. Prior to attending this institution, did you visit any websites or social media sites, or attend any support groups, or read printed literature to learn more about your sexuality? Which ones?
13. What is different about how you go about accessing information now as opposed to when you were in high school?
14. Have you noticed the “Safe Zone” signs on the doors of faculty and staff? How do those signs make you feel?
 - a. Would you be more likely to seek someone who displayed a “Safe Zone” sign to help you, or not?
15. How have your experiences as a gay or lesbian student been different or similar to other students attending this community college?
16. What might you change about those experiences at this community college?
17. If you were talking to another student who was currently going through the coming out process, what suggestions would you give them?
18. If you could meet with administrators at this community college about your experience as a gay or lesbian student, what would you tell them about your experience? What would you tell them they are doing well, and what would you ask them to change?
19. If you could change one thing about your experience at this community college, what would it be, and why?
20. Would you encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college? Why or why not?
21. Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to add?

Appendix B

(HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL LETTER)




HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE
OFFICE OF SPONSORED PROJECTS
ADMINISTRATION
WOODY HALL - MAIL CODE 4709
900 SOUTH NORMAL AVENUE
CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS 62901

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ospa.siu.edu/compliance/human-subjects

HSC Approval letter (exempt)

To: Kristin Shelby

From: Wayne R. Glass, CRA 
Interim Chair, Human Subjects Committee

Date: February 17, 2017

Subject: *Experiences of gay and lesbian students at a rural mid-western community college*

Protocol Number: 17058

The revisions to the above referenced study have been approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. The study is determined to be exempt according to 45 CFR 46.101(b)2. This approval does not have an expiration date; however, any future modifications to your protocol must be submitted to the Committee for review and approval prior to their implementation.

Your Form A approval is enclosed.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the USDHHS Office of Human Research Protection. The Assurance number is FWA00005334.

WG:kr

cc: Patrick Dilley

SIU.EDU

Appendix C

(EMAIL FOR INSTRUCTORS TO ANNOUNCE IN CLASS)

Dear Instructors,

My name is Kristin Shelby. I am a doctoral student in Educational Administration and Higher Education at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. The purpose of my study is to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian students in a rural Midwestern community college. Participants in this study will be interviewed using a set of pre-determined questions that will take approximately 60 minutes. All responses and identities of the participants will be kept confidential.

I need your help by reading the following announcement to your class.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Kristin Shelby

“A doctoral student from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale is examining experiences of gay and lesbian students in a community college and is in need of participants. If you identify as gay or lesbian and would be willing to participate in an interview, please contact Kristin Shelby at kshelby@siu.edu or call/text 618-XXX-XXXX. Interviews will take approximately 60 minutes and responses and identities of the participants will be kept confidential. For more information regarding the project, please contact Kristin. Participation (or non-participation) will have no influence on course or college standing.”

Appendix D

(FLYER FOR CAMPUS BULLETIN BOARDS)



If you are gay or lesbian, I need your help!

My name is Kristin Shelby and I am a doctoral student from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale studying experiences of gay and lesbian community college students. If you are willing to participate in an interview, please contact me via email at kshelby@siu.edu or text/call 618-XXX-XXXX. Interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. Responses and identities of the participants will be kept confidential.

For more information regarding the project, please contact me via email kshelby@siu.edu or text/call 618-XXX-XXXX.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618)453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix E

(CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH)

I _____ (print name), agree to participate in this research project conducted by Kristin Shelby, doctoral student in Educational Administration and Higher Education, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

I understand the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian students in a rural Midwestern community college.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and may refuse to answer any question without penalty. I am also informed that my participation will last approximately 60 minutes.

I understand that my responses to the questions will be audiotaped, and that these tapes will be transcribed/stored and kept for 365 days in a locked file cabinet. Afterward, these tapes will be destroyed.

I understand that my responses will be handled confidentially and my name will be changed for the purposes of reporting the data as to protect my anonymity.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to: Kristin Shelby, 618-XXX-XXXX and kshelby@siu.edu, or her advisor, Dr. Patrick Dilley, Educational Administration and Higher Education, 618-453-6087 and pdilleyphd@me.com.

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ to have my responses recorded on audiotape.”

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ that Kristin Shelby may follow up with me via email and/or phone to ensure accuracy of my responses.”

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ that Kristin Shelby may quote me anonymously in her paper.”

Participant signature and date

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618)453-4533. Email:siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F

(THEMES OF RESEARCH)

Themes from Interviews

Demographics

- Age
- Ethnicity
- Academic program
- Traditional/Non-traditional student
- Mannerisms
- Extra-curricular activities

Coming Out

- Age you came out
- Person you first came out to
- Influence for coming out
- Support for coming out
 - Were parents supportive?
 - Was family supportive?
 - Was community supportive?
- How did you access information about your sexuality?
- Coming out advice for others

Campus Experience

- Overall student experience
- How does it feel to be openly gay at this community college?
- How were you treated by fellow students?
- How were you treated by faculty and staff?
- How are your experiences the same/different as compared to straight students?
- Safe Zones on campus

Suggestions for Campus Administrators

- What would you tell administrators to change about your experiences?
- Would you encourage other gay or lesbian students to attend this community college?
- What would you change about your experience at this community college?

VITA

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Dissertation Title:

Experiences of gay and lesbian students in a rural Midwestern community college

Major Professor: Dr. Patrick Dilley