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CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

RICK BROWN

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

2016

Dissertation Chair: Dana Levitt

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS  
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## ABSTRACT

### CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS

by Rick Brown

As institutions of higher education have become increasingly cognizant of the need to ensure a welcoming campus climate for all members of their student populations, they have begun to undertake campus climate studies to assess student experiences and perceptions. While the majority of studies have been quantitative in nature, in-depth qualitative studies have been conducted in recent years. These studies have started to provide institutions with opportunities to really hear and understand the experiences of their students. The purpose of this study was to hear and understand the reported experiences of LGBTQ college students with campus climate at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic university, with the hope that the institution will be able to utilize the data to help ensure as welcome a campus climate as possible. Four themes emerged from the interviews with the students: “*I choose to disclose my identity (ies);*” “*I refuse to be bound by gender binaries;*” “*Can’t I be LGBTQ and religious;*” and, “*The importance of a physical and a symbolic space.*” Based upon the themes, other findings, and the students’ descriptions of their experiences, recommendations for best practices are offered.

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## CHAPTER ONE

In recent years, campus climate assessments have become increasingly more crucial in assisting U.S. institutions of higher education in examining student retention and persistence rates, in addition to assessing student satisfaction. Since 1966, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has conducted research on college students, including administering a Freshman Survey, a Senior Survey, and a Diverse Learning Environments Survey (CIRP, 2015). Similarly, since 1999, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) organization, through Indiana University, has studied college students in order to assess “good practices” in undergraduate education (NSSE, 2015). In addition to these national research projects, a growing number of colleges and universities have begun administering their own campus climate assessments in order to obtain data on the experiences of students, faculty, and staff. While these surveys have tended to yield useful quantitative data, deep qualitative studies, particularly focusing on how students experience college, have not been as prevalent. As institutions grapple with issues of student retention, persistence, and satisfaction, it has become incumbent upon college administrators to understand the actual experiences of their students. In addition, studies of college student experiences have not often been inclusive of all students’ experiences.

### **Student Retention, Engagement, and Satisfaction**

A good deal of research has been conducted on student retention rates and why college students have not persisted towards graduation in greater numbers (e.g., Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, & Boone, 2012; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004;

Morrow & Ackerman, 2011; Veenstra, 2009). According to Reason (2009), “student retention has been *the* primary goal for higher education for several decades” (p. 659). However, he also explained that efforts to improve retention seemed to be ineffective, with attrition rates enduring. Exemplifying how long this has been a concern, a 2002 U.S. Department of Education report noted that just slightly over half of students who began a bachelor’s degree program at a four-year college or university completed their degrees at that same institution within six years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002).

In the past two decades, student satisfaction and engagement have been viewed as intertwined with student retention and persistence. A growing body of research demonstrates how satisfaction and engagement affect college students’ experiences on campus (DeWitz & Walsh, 2002; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Hu, 2011; Powers, 2008; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Kuh (2009) has gone so far as to claim: “when the history of higher education is rewritten years from now, one of the storylines of the first decade of the twenty-first century likely will be the emergence of student engagement as an organizing construct for institutional assessment, accountability, and improvement efforts” (p. 5). Indeed, assessing college student satisfaction and engagement have become key aspects of surveys of campus climate in recent years. Powers (2008) describes satisfaction in college as involving much more than academic study, particularly equating higher levels of life satisfaction with high degrees of campus involvement, engagement, and social participation. Likewise, Hu (2011) describes engagement in educationally purposeful co-curricular activities as being directly related to student learning and to personal development. Satisfaction, often measured by

engagement, again, is instrumental in how students respond to or interpret campus climate.

### **Campus Climate and Marginalized Populations**

In order to assess satisfaction, campus climate surveys increasingly have examined the climate for diversity (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). Harper (2008) and Harper and Quaye (2009), for example, examined cross-cultural learning and student engagement as related to creating inclusive campus environments. They emphasized the educational benefits of diversity, particularly in the co-curricular, non-academic life of students, finding that students who had a greater understanding of and appreciation for diversity were more likely to be satisfied with their experiences.

While early surveys of campus climate for diversity focused on addressing issues of race and ethnicity, more recent surveys have focused on the climate for other marginalized populations including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students (Hurtado et al., 2008). Indeed, focus on LGBTQ students and how they experience collegiate life has become increasingly important for institutions of higher education as significantly more research has begun to be conducted on LGBTQ bullying and harassment, and how it often continues from K-12 settings into college. Students who experience bullying and/or harassment in college are much less likely to have a positive impression of campus climate.

Decades of research have indicated that suicidal ideation and behavior is a significant problem among LGBTQ populations (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013). This has begun to be acknowledged as an area of particular concern for



LGBTQ college students as highlighted by extensive media coverage of the suicide deaths of several LGBT youth in recent years, including that of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University first-year student (Johnson et al., 2013).

Clementi's death was one of five suicides of LGBTQ youth, and the second of a college student, during early fall of 2010 (The Advocate, 2010). Clementi's death and those of other LGBTQ college students who committed or attempted suicide have been attributed to individuals' concerns over treatment based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Campus Pride, a national LGBTQ advocacy group for college students and campuses, stated that these relatively recent occurrences of LGBTQ youth suicides were cause for much concern. The organization has called repeatedly for national action on youth bullying, harassment, and the need for on-campus safety and inclusion for LGBTQ college students (Campus Pride, 2016). As discussed throughout this study, it is crucial for *all* students to feel safe and welcome in order to experience a positive campus climate.

Incidents of LGBTQ bias, harassment, and bullying for adolescents and college students have come under greater scrutiny in recent years. Researchers have begun to examine the continuation of bullying from K-12 into college settings (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Chapell et al., 2004; Hughes, 2001; McDougall, 1999), for example. In its 2013 survey of 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21, GLSEN (Gay and Lesbian Straight Education Network) found that 74.1% of LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation and 55.2% because of their gender expression, and 36.2% reported being physically harassed at school

because of their sexual orientation and 22.7% because of their gender expression, while 55.5% of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation and 37.8% because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2016). Prior to entering college, the number of teenagers who have committed suicide in recent years due to bullying and/or harassment over their sexual orientation/identity (actual or perceived), and the resulting publicity and public outcry, has caused a re-examination of attitudes and policies toward LGBTQ bullying and anti-bullying initiatives (Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Hanlon, 2009; Poteat, 2008; Russell et al., 2011; Swearer, Turner, Givens, Pollack, 2008). Examining bullying and harassment (both actual and perceived) can be relevant to LGBTQ college students, as bullying issues often continue into college. Best practices to prevent bullying and harassment, both in K-12 settings and in college, are often part of efforts to create welcoming and safe campus climates.

### **Campus Climate for LGBTQ Students**

General findings on the impact of bullying and harassment, and on creating safe spaces, are consistent with research on LGBTQ students in college settings. In 2003, the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force commissioned a study “Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People: A National Perspective.” Author Susan Rankin (2003) found that more than one-third (i.e., 36%) of LGBTQ undergraduate students had experienced harassment within the past year; derogatory remarks were the most common form of harassment (i.e., 89%), with students most often the source of harassment (i.e., 79%); 20 % of all respondents feared for their

physical safety because of their sexual orientation or gender identity; and 51% concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation.

Similarly, in 2010, Campus Pride commissioned The State of Higher Education for LGBT People. LGBTQ students were found to be significantly more likely to experience harassment (i.e., 23%) than non-LGBTQ students (12%), and LGBTQ students were significantly less likely to be comfortable with the overall campus climate (70%) than were non-LGBTQ students (78%; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Other researchers have reported similar findings. Evans and Broido (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with lesbian and bisexual women at one university, with many of the women reporting hostile residence hall environments. Similarly, Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig (2004) conducted a study at another university and found that LGBTQ college students experienced campus climate more negatively than did non-LGBTQ students. Oswald and Wyatt (2011) surveyed 34,208 U.S. college students and found that LGBTQ college students were more at risk for mental health issues due to “environmental responses to their sexual orientation” (p. 1257). The authors found that sexual minority students had stressors unique to them including sexual stressors, discrimination, victimization, and heterosexism. Woodford and Kulick (2015) studied data from 381 sexual minority college students and found that heterosexism on campus was associated with decreased academic and social integration for sexual minority students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the studies cited above, there has been a dearth of research, particularly qualitative research, on LGBTQ individuals, including college students. Singh and Shelton (2011) reviewed all issues of four leading Counseling journals over a ten-year period (1998-2008) and found that only 12 empirical studies about LGBTQ individuals had been published in these venues across this time frame. Bieschke, Paul, and Blasko (2007) found that over a seven-year period (2000-2007), only three qualitative studies (out of a total of seven) explicitly examined the experiences of LGBTQ clients in counseling. There has also been a lack of research on the lived experiences of LGBTQ college students (Fine, 2011; Longerbeam et al., 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). While there have been a growing number of quantitative studies of LGBTQ students in recent years (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Jacobson, Daire, & Abel, 2015; Kirsch, Conley, & Riley, 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015), there have still only been a small percentage of qualitative studies (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Pryor, 2015).

Collectively, the research and findings of entities such as GLSEN, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and Campus Pride lend credence to, and indeed suggest urgency for, further study of campus climate for LGBTQ college students. As previously argued, issues of retention, persistence, and satisfaction are paramount for colleges and universities as they grapple with retaining and graduating their students. In order to assess satisfaction (which greatly impacts retention and persistence), numerous institutions of higher education have begun to commission studies of their campus climate, with outside consulting agencies typically being utilized for such purposes.

According to Rankin (2012), campus climate includes “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential” (University of California, 2015). The University of California statement on campus climate includes the language “quite simply, students thrive in healthy environments, free of the negativity of discrimination, where inclusion and respect for diversity is the daily norm” (University of California, 2015).

In the decade since the 2003 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force study by Rankin, a number of studies have been conducted concerning LGBTQ students’ perceptions of their campus climate (Brown et al, 2004; Fine, 2011; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, 2005; Tetreault, et al., 2013; Yost & Gilmore, 2011; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). In addition, studies have been conducted regarding non-LGBTQ students’ attitudes toward LGBTQ students (Chonody, Rutledge, & Siebert, 2009; De Welde & Hubbard, 2003; Evans & Broido, 2005; Grzanka, Miles, & Zeiders, 2016; Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013, Jayakumar, 2009; Jurgens, Schwitzer, & Middleton, 2004; Monto & Supinski, 2014). These more recent study results have echoed findings of the 2003 Rankin study, suggesting that LGBTQ students experience bias, intimidation, harassment, and bullying in high numbers. The findings in these studies are important as they reflect the overall satisfaction and comfort that students have with campus climate. Institutions can also utilize their campus study results to review and/or revise policies and procedures for studied populations and for overall populations.

In the past decade, a growing number of quantitative studies have been conducted in relation to LGBTQ college students. Brown et al. (2004), for example, studied perceptions of campus climate at one institution and compared perceptions of LGBTQ students, non-LGBTQ students (general students), residence assistants (RAs), faculty, and student affairs staff. The authors found that LGBTQ students perceived the campus more negatively than did the other cohorts studied; RAs demonstrated more positive attitudinal changes towards LGBTQ students than did general students and student affairs staff members were more likely to confront homophobic remarks than were faculty (Brown et al., 2004).

Longerbeam et al. (2007) utilized data from 34 universities that participated in the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs; responses from LGBTQ students were filtered out in order to explicitly assess their campus involvement and satisfaction. While the authors found demographic similarities between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students, they found important differences in three areas: intellectual outcomes, peer interaction, and co-curricular activities. In discussing the differences in how students experienced campus climate, the authors cited a particular limitation of their study as “unintentionally implying that the norm is the heterosexual college experience” (Longerbeam et al., 2007, p. 221). In short, the studies described above strongly suggest that the concept of “heterosexuality as the norm” is at the heart of the need for more campus climate studies of LGBTQ populations. The bias in this concept is indicative of the way LGBTQ students historically have been marginalized on campuses.

Additionally, Tetreault et al. (2013) surveyed 77 LGBTQ students at another university in order to gauge their perceptions of campus climate and to assess their needs. The authors found that students who felt the need to hide their identities (not come out) were more likely to consider the campus climate as less positive and safe. Students who were not out were also more likely to be closeted around other students than around faculty or staff.

Most of the studies referenced have consisted of quantitative surveys of LGBTQ students' perceptions of campus climate. Although researchers tend to cite the anonymity of these studies as leading to more openness and honesty in results, there is limited depth and richness in the results. Research focusing on LGBTQ college students has begun to become more qualitative in nature. In-depth studies of small groups of students, typically from one campus, have begun to be conducted (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Stevens, 2004). The researchers have all cited the exploratory nature of their studies as necessitating in-depth interviews. As stated earlier, study results can aid institutions in reviewing or revising policies and procedures.

The research conducted by Renn and Bilodeau (2005), Longerbeam et al. (2007), and others has been important in beginning to examine the experiences of LGBTQ college students. However, experiences of LGBTQ individuals have been mostly neglected in research undertaken on college student involvement, engagement, and satisfaction. In his study on heterosexism and homophobia and LGB college students, Fine (2011) noted so little research had been conducted that it was unknown whether LGB students were less likely to remain in college or persist towards their degree.

Garvey and Inkelas (2012) reiterated earlier research when they claimed that understanding student satisfaction is vital for higher education because of its strong correlation with persistence and student academic success. They discussed the importance of faculty and staff interactions with students, yet noted that only one article (Sweet, 1996) had specifically addressed faculty/staff satisfaction appraisals by LGB students. Lack of research on, and understanding of, the experiences of LGBT college students, coupled with a prior focus on quantitative research, lends credence to the need for more qualitative research on the ways that LGBTQ students experience college.

### **Research Question**

The research question guiding this study is as follows:

What do LGBTQ college students report about their experiences with college life and campus climate at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic institution?

### **Significance of the Study**

LGBTQ college students' experiences of their campuses are key indicators of campus climate. As more college campuses are undertaking studies of their campus climate, it is incumbent for campus administrators to seek an understanding of how *all* members of their community experience the campus climate/environment, and to continually seek improvements. Qualitative research with LGBTQ college students will contribute significantly to greater understanding of how LGBTQ students experience campus climate. It may also be helpful to understand how students experienced K-12, and the transition into college, with a focus on how and when (if at all) students have come out.



The lack of research on the experiences of LGBTQ college students, coupled with the rise in incidents of anti-LGBTQ bullying (or at least the rising emphasis on addressing this issue), and the growing number of LGBTQ high school students who are seeking LGBTQ-supportive college environments (Burleson, 2010; Lipka, 2011), point to the need for more research on creating welcoming climates and safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ community on college/university campuses. This is particularly important as there has been a lack of research on how LGBTQ college students experience college (Fine, 2011; Longerbeam et al. 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). As there is much research that indicates the importance of satisfaction and engagement to student retention and persistence (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Morrow & Ackerman, 2011; Reason, 2009, Veenstra, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), it is even more pressing to conduct research with this under-researched population.

Research on campus climate for LGBTQ students has additional relevance as there is growing evidence that LGBTQ high school students are making college choices based on perceptions of how welcoming campuses are of LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012). Burleson (2010) stated that campuses send signals to prospective LGBTQ students concerning the levels of support they can expect to find. Signals include the presence or absence of LGBTQ student organizations, LGBTQ resource centers, LGBTQ staff and faculty and special-interest housing options. A supportive campus environment for LGBTQ students is often predicated on the existence of an LGBTQ student organization (Kane, 2013). Lipka (2011) discussed the importance of colleges and universities improving resources

for LGBTQ students, including campus centers and special interest housing. Burleson (2010) suggested that college administrators need to consider how the needs of LGBTQ students are being addressed in the college admissions process, what LGBTQ-affirmative programming is being offered, and how faculty, staff, and current students can reach out to prospective LGBTQ students. This gives particular relevance to the need for more research on campus climate for LGBTQ college students, as study results can inform policies and procedures.

The questions that Burleson (2010) asked administrators to consider are consistent with the mission of Campus Pride, a national, non-profit organization working to create a safer college environment for LGBTQ students. Campus Pride seeks to develop programs and provide services to assist college campuses to become more inclusive and welcoming of LGBTQ students (Campus Pride, 2016). Campus Pride and Burleson (2010) both focus on whether or not a campus has an LGBTQ Center. More LGBTQ students are entering college open about their sexual orientation/identities and are expecting a supportive campus environment (Student Affairs Leader, 2006). Assessing campus climate for existing LGBTQ students is a crucial part of the process of creating and maintaining a welcoming and supportive environment.

Given recent historical social events in the United States, this is a particularly fascinating time to research the experiences of LGBTQ college students. In December 2010, President Obama signed the Don't Act, Don't Tell Repeal Act, ending the policy of concealing sexual orientation/identity in the military (Estrada, Dirosa, & Decostanza, 2013). In June 2013, the US Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act,

which defined marriage as legal only between a man and a woman (Klarman, 2013). These two significant actions, coupled with the fact that numerous polls now show growing acceptance of LGBTQ individuals by younger Americans would seem to indicate that LGBTQ college students might be experiencing campus climate differently now than at any earlier point in history. As the site of this study is an institution in New Jersey and, as New Jersey legalized same-sex/same-gender marriage in fall of 2013, this study is particularly timely. The continuation of LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and intimidation in K-12 settings, coupled with increasingly LGBTQ-supportive policy initiatives, makes it even more important to hear and document the actual experiences of LGBTQ college students.

The few existing qualitative studies on LGBTQ college student experiences all point to the need for further research (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Stevens, 2004). Most of these studies, however, have not specifically focused on campus climate. As mentioned, understanding and improving campus climate for college students has become a focus of most institutions in recent years. Campus climate for LGBTQ students has become an area of particular significance as there has been a growing spotlight on LGBTQ bullying and harassment in K-12 and college settings.

Without doubt, research on campus climate for LGBTQ students will have significance for all areas of an institution. LGBTQ students will seek assistance in any number of ways related to their identities, notably with Counseling Centers and Career Development Centers. In fact, an increasing number of Career Development Centers are offering specific LGBTQ career resources (e.g., Bridgewater State University, 2015;

University of Pennsylvania, 2015). There are also implications for Admissions and Enrollment Management, as there is growing evidence that LGBTQ high school students are making college choices based on their perceptions of the degree to which a campus is “LGBTQ-friendly” (Burlison, 2010; Lipka, 2011). Additionally, there are implications for Residence Life, as a growing number of campuses are offering gender-neutral housing and other services to promote a comfortable living environment for LGBTQ and all students (Ramapo College, 2015; Rutgers University, 2015).

While it was not possible to conduct a large-scale, multi-campus study, it was beneficial to seek to understand the experiences of college students at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic institution. The findings from this study, while being particularly helpful for the institution where the study took place, will also potentially have implications for further study and possible resonance in other similar institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical lens for this study was one of college student development, specifically the development of LGBTQ college students. The work of Cass (1979, 1984) and D’Augelli (1994) particularly guided interviews with study participants and analysis of interview data. Cass (1979) posited a six-stage model of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) identity development known as Homosexual Identity Formation. This model was the forerunner to most models of LGBTQ/sexual minority identity development, and is typically cited as one of the pioneering identity development models. D’Augelli (1994) posited a life span approach to sexual identity development, describing six developmental tasks that needed to be accomplished. His life span approach was more

fluid than earlier stage models, including Cass', and appeared to complement the work of stage models. Both Cass and D'Augelli had the concept of "coming out," disclosing one's sexual orientation/identity (Taulke-Johnson, 2008), embedded in their models (as do almost all LGBTQ identity development models). As such, "coming out" was an important construct in interpreting data in this study, and will be elaborated upon in chapter 2. The timing of when students in the study came out (and in other campus climate studies) could have implications for expectations of campus climate.

### **Conclusion**

Studies of campus climate have become increasingly important for college administrators as they try to improve the environment for all populations. Historically, little to no attention has been paid to marginalized populations. This has begun to change in recent decades with emphasis on assessing the experiences of women, students of color, and other groups. In the past several years, attention has begun to be paid to the experiences of LGBTQ college students. In researching, examining, and attempting to understand the experiences of the LGBTQ college students in this study, the results of a comprehensive literature review is presented in chapter 2. In chapter 3 I discuss the research methodology of the study, including how students were invited to participate, and the inherent risks and benefits of the study to participants and to the institution. I present the study results in chapter 4, and implications for best practices on college campuses in chapter 5.

### Definition of Terms

**Bisexual.** An individual who is attracted to and may form relationships (emotional, romantic, or sexual) with both women and men (Veltman & Chaimowitz, 2014).

**Campus climate.** Part of the institutional context that includes community members' attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations around issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity (Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pederson, A. R., & Allen, W. R., 1999).

**Coming Out.** Disclosing one's sexual orientation/identity (Taulke-Johnson, 2008).

**Gay.** An individual whose primary sexual orientation is to members of the same gender or sex (Veltman & Chaimowitz, 2014).

**Heterosexism.** The valuing and normalizing of heterosexuality; an oppression which intersects with other forms of oppression (Chinell, 2011).

**Homophobia.** Fear and hatred of LGBTQ individuals (Chinell, 2011).

**Lesbian.** A girl or woman whose primary sexual orientation is to other girls or women (Veltman & Chaimowitz, 2014).

**LGBTQ.** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (Renn, 2007).

**Oppression.** The exercise of power to disenfranchise, marginalize, or unjustly ostracize particular individuals or groups (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010).

**Privilege.** The benefits, advantages, and immunity from oppression enjoyed by members of the dominant culture (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010).

**Queer.** "In contemporary usage, an inclusive, unifying, sociopolitical and self-affirming umbrella term encompassing a broad range of sexual and gender expression, including people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or any other nonheterosexual

identity. Queer is a reclaimed term, which was previously seen as derogatory, but many people within the LGBTQ community are comfortable using this term” (Veltman & Chaimowitz, 2014, p.5).

**Sexual minority.** (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or people questioning their sexual identity): A term that has come to include anyone whose sexual identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender orientation lies outside that which is considered typical or normal by the dominant culture (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010).

**Sexual orientation.** An individual’s physical and/or emotional attraction to a particular gender (Human Rights Campaign Fund, 2015).

**Transgender.** An individual whose gender identity or expression diverges from culturally defined categories of sex and gender (Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of Literature**

The first part of this chapter focuses on models of identity development, including that of college students as well as LGBTQ college students. Models and theories of identity development were a lens through which students in the study were viewed. The section on identity development also includes discussion of “coming out” (the process by which LGBTQ individuals disclose their sexual and/or gender identity to others), with an emphasis on how the timing of this may affect LGBTQ college students. The second part of the chapter discusses campus climate, with specific attention to campus climate for LGBTQ college students: how they experience campus life and how non-LGBTQ students perceive them. This section also briefly examines issues of LGBTQ bullying in K-12 and college settings, how this often continues into college, and how bullying and anti-bullying efforts impact campus climate. The final part of chapter 2 examines policies and procedures on college campuses, and how they help shape how LGBTQ college students experience college and campus climate.

### **Identity Development**

In order to have a better understanding of the development of LGBTQ college students and how their development may influence their experiences of campus climate the following sections will briefly describe theories of identity development, including psychosocial, moral, and intellectual and ethical development. Theories of college student development will also be delineated. Finally, theories of LGBTQ identity development will be discussed.



## Psychosocial Development

In discussing identity development, it is helpful to begin with Erik Erikson and his theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's work greatly influenced numerous theorists and researchers who came after him. Psychosocial development posited that personality changes throughout life, and is a diverse process spanning several decades (Whitbourne, Sneed, & Sayer, 2009). Erikson argued that the conscious self, or ego, is the central structure of personality, and, that as the ego begins to evolve, certain qualities begin to develop that enhance individuals' adaptive responses (Whitbourne et al., 2009).

In Erikson's eight psychosocial stages, individuals have a task or "crisis" to overcome or resolve before they are able to move or progress to the next stage. Erikson's eight stages are as follows: *basic trust vs. basic mistrust*, covering the period of infancy; *autonomy vs. shame and doubt*, covering early childhood; *initiative vs. guilt*, covering play age; *industry vs. inferiority*, covering school age; *identity vs. identity confusion*, covering adolescence; *intimacy vs. isolation*, covering young adulthood; *generativity vs. stagnation*, covering adulthood; and *integrity vs. despair*, covering old age (Erikson, 1950, 1959).

According to Erikson's stages, individuals who do not successfully resolve earlier stages are not able to move on (or to as successfully move on) to the next sequential stages, and thus may become "stuck." The term "identity crisis" is closely associated with the psychology of Erikson; the concept of crisis is not meant to necessarily have a negative connotation (Atalay, 2007). Atalay (2007) argues via Nicholas DiCaprio's work that "by crisis, Erikson does not mean overwhelming stress, but rather a turning point in

the life of the individual, when a new problem must be confronted and mastered”

(DiCaprio, 1974, p. 60).

Erikson’s fifth and sixth stages, particularly stage 5, are typically associated with traditional-aged college students. Stage 5, covering adolescence, postulates identity vs. identity confusion as the central conflict. This conflict, or “crisis,” or “task to be mastered,” is redolent of issues involving struggles over sexual/affectional orientation and identity. While many individuals today struggle with this in K-12 settings, students often still struggle with this in college. Vaughan and Waehler (2010) specifically reference Erikson’s fifth crisis as important in developing “a positive personal and social identity that is broadly shared with others” (p. 94) relevant to coming out. Many models of LGBTQ identity development (which will be discussed later) reference Erikson’s fifth stage as well (e.g., Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1981, 1982; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989).

### **Moral Development**

Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, and his emphasis on resolution of crises, were an important precursor to the concept of moral development. Blimling (1990) stated that identity development and moral development are related, and that a student’s ego identity must be considered when discussing character development. Conceptions of character development and moral development of college students were at the heart of the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. In his 1958 doctoral dissertation, Kohlberg proposed his own theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1969), and continued to refine it over the next few decades. Based on the work of Jean Piaget,

Kohlberg's theory attempted to explain the development of moral reasoning. He also attempted to reaffirm the idea of John Dewey that development should be the goal of education, particularly undergraduate education (Good & Cartwright, 1998). Kohlberg described six stages of moral judgment: Level I. Pre-conventional, included Stage 1: heteronomous morality, and Stage 2: individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange; Level II. Conventional, included Stage 3: mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and interpersonal conformity, and Stage 4: social system and conscience; Level III. Post-conventional or principled, included Stage 5: social contract or utility and individual rights, and Stage 6: universal ethical principles (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Good and Cartwright (1998) described Kohlberg's stages as follows:

Stage 1: Goodness and badness are determined by physical consequences of an act;

Stage 2: Right action consists of that which satisfies one's own needs;

Stage 3: Good behavior is equated with whatever pleases or helps others;

Stage 4: Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake;

Stage 5: Providing a rationale for choosing among alternate social systems with right action being defined in terms of societal consensus;

Stage 6: Right resulting from self-chosen ethical principles that apply to all humankind. (p. 2).

The authors discussed then-recent interest in the moral development of college students. They also referenced works by Lickona (1992) and Mustapha and Seybert (1990) in

acknowledging the importance of moral development and ethical decision making for college students. During the latter part of the twentieth century, Kohlberg's theory was widely known and applied in educational settings, particularly in higher education where it was thought that liberal arts education had a core purpose consistent with his view of moral judgment development (Good & Cartwright, 1998). The concepts of morality, character, and ethics were integral to the work of Kohlberg (Blimling, 1990; Good & Cartwright, 1998; Hayes; 1994), and would come to be viewed as the purview of college administrators. Blimling (1990) posited that colleges and universities should be committed to character (moral) development of their students, and student life staff should facilitate this. With this reasoning, Kohlberg's "higher level" stages 5 and 6 could have particular resonance with LGBTQ identity development as students begin to acknowledge what is right for them.

### **Intellectual and Ethical Development**

While Erikson and Kohlberg presented fairly fixed stages, Perry (1970) presented his scheme of intellectual and ethical development, and utilized the term *position* as opposed to *stage*. He said that *stage* referred to a fairly stable and enduring form or structure, whereas *position* made no assumptions about the duration or time spent in a particular one. Perry (1970) stated "amid the variety and range of structures a particular student uses to make sense of the various aspects of the world at any particular point in time, *position* could express a central tendency in students' meaning making" (p. 7).

Perry's nine positions included basic dualism, multiplicity prelegitimate, multiplicity legitimate but subordinate, late multiplicity, contextual relativism,

commitment to relativism foreseen, initial commitment to relativism, implications of commitment to relativism, and developing commitments to relativism (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Gardner (2009) described the transition from dualism to multiplicity as disequilibrium, where an individual (student) may find an authority figure is wrong; and described multiplicity as the position where an individual (student) could consider diverse views, while not necessarily considering any of them the “right” answer. She described commitment as the ability to remain decisive in response to challenges from others.

Perry’s work bridged theories of child and adolescent development to a more direct focus on the early adulthood of college students (Love & Guthrie, 1999). He also anticipated later adult transition models when he emphasized “the need to understand students in motion and to not imprison them in stages” (Knefelkamp, 2003, p. 12). Perry’s positions foreshadowed some of the life span approaches of later theorists including D’Augelli (1994), who posited a life span approach to LGBTQ identity. Perry’s later positions – 5 through 9 – focused on a commitment to relativism, and focused on the need for students to make commitments, again aligning with “higher levels” of models of LGBTQ identity development.

### **College Student Identity Development**

Erikson’s stages of identity vs. identity confusion and intimacy vs. isolation led to Arthur Chickering’s influential and pioneering model of college student identity development. In *Education and Identity*, Chickering (1969) stated that the concept of identity was an abstract term with different meanings for different people. He postulated

seven dimensions called vectors of development that occur during the traditional college years:

1. Developing competence – intellectual, physical, manual and interpersonal competence
2. Managing emotions – developing an awareness and acceptance of emotions
3. Developing autonomy – functioning with self-sufficiency and self-direction
4. Developing mature interpersonal relationships – acquiring tolerance and appreciation for differences; capacity for intimacy
5. Establishing identity – comfort with body, appearance, gender, sexual orientation; developing sense of self
6. Developing purpose – vocational plans and aspirations; personal interests
7. Developing integrity – humanizing and personalizing values; developing congruence (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993)

Chickering stated that, with these dimensions “I have attempted to move ‘identity’ one step toward greater specificity and concreteness. I aimed to reach a level where connections could be made between these dimensions of student change and educational policies and practices” (Chickering, 1969, p. x). This statement resonates today as institutions of higher education struggle with how policies and procedures impact campus climate, particularly for marginalized groups.

While Chickering’s vectors were introduced as fixed, sequential stages, many of his vectors with their associated tasks are fluid throughout the life of a college student, including establishing identity, interdependence, and developing integrity. The vector of

establishing identity is particularly salient for LGBTQ students as they may struggle with their identity throughout college (and, often throughout life). As with Erikson's stage of identity versus identity confusion, Chickering's vector of establishing identity is also redolent of several LGBTQ identity models (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1981, 1982; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989).

### **Criticism of College Student Identity Development Models**

In her pioneering work *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) criticized earlier theorists, including Erikson, Kohlberg, Perry, and Chickering, for focusing almost exclusively on male individuals. She particularly noted that Erikson's stages of psychosocial development were predicated on male behavior, and that female psychosocial development did not fit neatly into Erikson's model. Gilligan (1982) also criticized Kohlberg's original study for following 84 males only, with women not seeming to fit into his model of moral development. Perry has been criticized for the population of his study: "white, overwhelmingly male, upper-class students at Harvard and Radcliffe - the elite of the time" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 6). In a similar vein, Baxter Magolda (1990) pointed out that "studies of women characterized their moral development by an ethic of care, in sharp contrast to Kohlberg's focus on justice" (p. 555). She also explored gender-related patterns of knowing in order to add depth to Perry's original work, as she found his work non-inclusive of gender differences (Bock, 1999). Chickering partnered with Reisser in 1993 to refine and update his vectors as the original study had been very homogeneous (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Reisser (1995) said that she and Chickering "set out to review research based on the theory and

incorporate new findings, summarize the work of more recent student development theorists as context, and adapt the theory for more diverse student populations” (p. 506). Gilligan, Baxter Magolda, and later Reisser and Chickering shed new light on the identity development of college students by shifting the focus from white, presumably non-LGBTQ male students to a focus on more marginalized populations.

Diverse or marginalized, or underrepresented student populations have been a focus of student development and counseling research over the past 30 years. Women, students of color, non-traditional-aged (older) students, and LGBTQ students have all been acknowledged as having been “left out” of studies by pioneering student development theorists including, Erikson, Chickering, Perry, and Kohlberg. While it is likely that early studies included LGBTQ students, students were assumed to be heterosexual; therefore, differences in sexual orientation were not considered. Haldeman (2007) stated that the “presumption of heterosexuality as the only normal sexual identity and behavior, or heterocentrism, was institutionalized in postwar American culture” (p. 71).

### **LGBTQ Identity Development**

As established above, earlier theories of identity development and college student development were primarily predicated on studies of white males, and presumably non-LGBTQ individuals. Just as other marginalized and/or underrepresented groups began to be researched, first with women students, then with students of color, theories of LGBTQ identity development began to be promulgated. Some of the pioneering theories are



discussed below, including Cass (1979), Coleman (1981/1982), D'Augelli (1994), McCarn and Fassinger (1996), and Troiden (1990).

### **Cass**

Cass' (1979, 1984) Homosexual Identity Formation model was one of the first models to discuss LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual; she did not focus on transgender individuals, nor was the term "queer" being used in identity models at that time) identity development. She stated that identity formation was a developmental process that included a series of changes or *stages* through which experiences could be ordered. According to Cass (1984), progress through the stages was characterized by "increased acceptance of the label *homosexual* as descriptive of self; development of a positive attitude towards the self-identity; a growing desire to disclose the existence of the identity to both homosexuals and nonhomosexuals; and, more personalized and frequent social contact with homosexuals" (p. 146).

She posited six stages of identity development as follows:

1. Identity Confusion – individuals perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as homosexual.
2. Identity Comparison – having faced the potentiality of a homosexual identity, the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-homosexual others becomes clearer.
3. Identity Tolerance – with increasing commitment to a homosexual self-image, the individual seeks out the company of homosexuals in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs.

4. Identity Acceptance – increased contact with the homosexual subculture encourages a more positive view of homosexuality and the gradual development of a network of homosexual friends.
5. Identity Pride – characterized by feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued.
6. Identity Synthesis – positive contacts with non-homosexuals help create an awareness of the rigidity and inaccuracy of dividing the world into good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals. (Cass, 1984, pp. 147-152).

Cass' pioneering research on developmental stages for LGB was the standard for many years, and led to other theories of stage identity development for LGBTQ individuals. As such, Cass has been selected as a theoretical model through which to view this study. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### **Coleman and Troiden**

Two theorists who followed Cass included Coleman and Troiden. Coleman (1982) posited a similar five-stage model that consisted of precoming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and integration. She was less rigid in the hierarchical nature of stages than Cass, articulating the need to repeatedly revisit earlier stages throughout adulthood (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Troiden (1988; 1989) proposed a four-stage model as follows:

Stage 1: Sensitization – occurred prior to puberty, emerging perceptions of self as possibly homosexual.

Stage 2: Identity Confusion – adolescence, idea that feelings and behaviors could be regarded as homosexual.

Stage 3: Identity Assumption – homosexual identity is established and shared with others.

Stage 4: Commitment – adoption of homosexuality as a way of life.

Troiden believed that people were not born perceiving their sexual orientation as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. Rather, he said that sexual identities developed slowly, over a long period of time (Troiden, 1988). Troiden also was less rigid in his view of stage progression stating “in the final analysis, however, homosexual identity is emergent: that is, it is never fully determined in a fixed or absolute sense and is always subject to modification and further change” (Troiden, 1989, p.112). Most stage models of LGBTQ identity development include an initial stage where individuals incorporate multiple defense strategies to counter recognition of LGBTQ feelings (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This is typified by Cass’ Identity Confusion stage and Coleman’s Precoming Out stage. Individuals then progress through stages until they eventually integrate their LGBTQ identities with their overall identities. This is typified by Cass’ Identity Synthesis stage, Coleman’s Integration stage, and Troiden’s Commitment stage. Although many LGBTQ identity development stage models are similar in trajectory and philosophy, Cass’ is the most cited model, and has formed the foundation for subsequent work on LGBTQ identity development (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). As such, it is being

utilized in this study as one of the primary theoretical lenses with which to view participants.

### **Criticism of Cass and Stage Models**

While Cass' work has been considered pioneering, and while it is still considered relevant, she has faced criticism for her focus on a stage model approach in which individuals must progress linearly from one stage to the next. Later stage models of development began to discuss the fluidity or less rigidity of stages, leading to critiques of Cass' HIF and stage models in general. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) stated that stage models do not adequately describe all non-LGBTQ identity processes. They noted that women, bisexual people, people of color, and adolescents did not necessarily fit neatly into stage models. Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000) discussed limitations of Cass' original study (1979) as being based only on the experience of gay males, and her 1984 follow-up study as being based on questionnaires and self-ratings of 109 males and 69 females. The researchers specifically noted criticisms of Cass' model as not applicable to lesbian identity development (Degges-White et al., 2000).

Research on lesbian identity development has often focused on the fluidity of development for women, contrasted with the rigidity of traditional stage models of identity development (Adams & Phillips, 2009; Downing & Roush, 1985; Julian, Duys, & Wood, 2014; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed a model of lesbian identity development and used the term *phases* as opposed to *stages* "because of the greater flexibility implied, and although we outline phases in a progression, we conceptualize the process as continuous and

circular” (p. 521-52). Their model consisted of the following: Phase 1: Awareness; Phase 2: Exploration; Phase 3: Deepening/Commitment; and Phase 4: Internalization/Synthesis (it should be noted, though, that the final stage or phase for most models has focused on synthesis or integration, where individuals are able to view their sexual identity as a part of their whole being). McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) model was also noteworthy as it consisted of individual sexual identity and group membership identity.

LGBTQ identity development models, particularly stage models, have also been criticized for not being inclusive of individuals of color (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Kennedy and Oswalt (2014) stated one of the major limitations of Cass’ study was the lack of inclusion of ethnic and racial differences. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) noted that people with multiple identities, for example, LGBTQ individuals of color, have more challenges with identity development. Adams and Phillips (2009) discussed ethnic-related variations of Cass’ model, and focused on the experiences of two-spirit (Native American identities that follow the parameters of alternate gender roles) lesbian, and gay Native Americans. Where Cass’ HIF model was predicated on individuals having to navigate a heterosexist society, some of the participants in Adams and Phillips’ (2009) study experienced their identities as natural parts of their selves, with little discomfort or alienation from others.

### **D’Augelli**

D’Augelli (1994) posited a life span approach to sexual identity development. He described six developmental tasks that needed to be accomplished:

1. Exiting heterosexual identity – recognition that one’s feelings are not heterosexual, and telling others that one is LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual – as with Cass and other earlier theorists, D’Augelli did not specifically discuss transgender individuals, nor utilize the term “queer”).
2. Developing a personal LGB identity – challenging internal myths about what it means to be LGB.
3. Developing an LGB social identity – creating a support network of people who know and accept one’s identity.
4. Becoming an LGB offspring – disclosing identity to parents and redefining relationships after disclosure.
5. Developing an LGB intimacy status – recognizing the complexity of relationships compared with intimacy status for non-LGB individuals.
6. Entering an LGB community – making degrees of commitment to social and political action. (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito; 1998, p. 96-98).

D’Augelli stressed the unique developmental situations for each individual, including responsiveness to environmental factors, and said that individuals could move fluidly back and forth between developmental tasks as opposed to the sequential nature of tasks (Stevens, 1994). This model described identity *processes* that functioned independently, and were not ordered in stages (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

### **D’Augelli and Cass as Theoretical Lens**

While D’Augelli’s emphasis on life span and fluidity in identity development was in many ways a reaction to stage models, or perhaps a natural next “phase” in the

evolution of identity development models, Cass' Homosexual Identity Formation model (HIF) is still utilized today. Her HIF was the forerunner to many of the models, stage and other, which were developed later. The persistence and predominance of stage models in literature and practice lend some credence to their accuracy as developmental processes (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

For this study, the identity development models of both Cass and D'Augelli were utilized. As referenced above, most LGBTQ identity development models have a final stage or phase that focuses on identity synthesis or integration. As such, Cass (final stage of Identity Synthesis) and D'Augelli (final developmental task of Entering an LGB Community) are being utilized as theoretical lenses with which to view this study. The concept of coming out figures prominently in the models of Cass and D'Augelli, particularly in the stages/tasks referenced above; as such, these theories can help to determine best practices for institutions of higher education (discussed in chapter 5).

### **Coming Out**

Theories of LGBTQ identity development are intertwined with the concept of "coming out," disclosing one's sexual orientation/identity (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). Hanley-Hackenbruck (1989) defines coming out as "a complex process of intra- and interpersonal transformations, often beginning in adolescence and extending well into adult life which lead to, accompany, and follow the events associated with the acknowledgement of one's sexual orientation" (p. 21).

Until the late 1960's coming out was viewed as a single event, rather than a process (Evans & Broido, 1999). It consisted of the first time an LGBTQ-oriented

individual identified themselves as such to another individual who identified as LGBTQ. Later theorists, specifically Cohen and Savin-Williams (1996), posited that coming out had two components, first to oneself, and then to others. This concept is similar to elements of both stage and life span approaches to identity development, and, as discussed below, are key components to campus climate for LGBTQ individuals.

It is important to begin to realize how students' experiences may differ based on their degree(s) of "outness." Gortmaker and Brown (2006) found significant differences in how LGBTQ students experienced campus climate depending on whether they were out or "closeted" (not out), with "out" students perceiving the campus more negatively and less safe, and closeted students feeling the need to remain closeted. The authors concluded that it was incumbent upon college campuses to conduct climate surveys in order to assess the experiences of LGBTQ students, and to create safer environments.

Other more recent studies have found positive correlations surrounding LGBTQ college students and the coming out process. According to Vaughan and Waehler (2010), "disclosing one's sexual minority status to others has strong roots within the field of psychology" (p. 94), and echoes Erik Erikson's successful resolution of the task of identity achievement versus role confusion. Rossi's (2010) study of 53 young adults (ages 18 to 25) included 87% who were current or recent college students. She found that disclosing one's sexual minority status, while initially stressful, ultimately instilled greater confidence in most participants. Craig and McInroy (2014) conducted research with 19 youth in Canada, aged 18 to 22 years old, and studied the effects of new media on coming out. The authors found that online engagement played an important role in



coming out, and influenced participants' lives offline, again helping develop greater confidence. Matthews and Salazar (2014) presented an integrative, empowerment model for assisting LGB youth in the coming out process. The authors stressed that this was a theoretical model, and encouraged qualitative research with individuals "who have successfully navigated through the coming-out process" (Matthews & Salazar, 2014, p. 113). Finally, Riggle, Gonzalez, Rostosky, and Black (2014) discussed an intervention study with 52 college students that focused on the positive aspects of identifying as LGBTQ.

The process of coming out figures prominently in the identity development models of Cass and D'Augelli. While it can be a lifelong process, it can be tied to Cass' early stages of Identity Comparison and Identity Tolerance, and D'Augelli's early phases of Exiting Heterosexual Identity and Developing a Personal LGB Identity. As Cass and D'Augelli's models are theoretical lenses for this study and, as one of the secondary study questions focuses on coming out, identity development and coming out can be connected to campus climate for LGBTQ individuals.

### **Intersectionality**

In utilizing the theoretical lens of Cass and D'Augelli's identity development models, particularly in relation to coming out, it is important to consider the concept of multiple, or intersecting, identities. Often described as "intersectionality," this concerns "the context within which an individual experiences multiple dimensions of identity" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). One of the earliest and most acknowledged studies of this concept was the Multidimensional Identity Model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). While

this model was primarily focused on multiple oppressions, it suggested four ways of identity resolution for individuals who belonged to more than one oppressed group:

1. Identifying with only one aspect of self (e.g., gender or sexual orientation or race) in a passive manner. That is, the aspect of self as assigned by others such as society, college student peers, or family.
2. Identifying with only one aspect of self that is determined by the individual. That is, the individual may identify as lesbian or Asian Pacific American or woman without including other identities, particularly those that are oppressions.
3. Identifying with multiple aspects of self, but choosing to do so in a segmented way, frequently only one at a time and determined more passively by the context rather than by the individual's own wishes. For example, in one setting the individual identifies as Black, yet in another setting as gay.
4. The individual chooses to identify with the multiple aspects of self, especially multiple oppressions, and has both consciously chosen them and integrated them into one's sense of self (Jones, & McEwen, 2000, p. 406).

It is important to be cognizant of the Multidimensional Identity Model in researching campus climate for LGBTQ individuals. As stated by Poynter and Washington (2005), "gay does not always imply white" (p. 42). The authors joined other criticisms of LGBTQ identity development models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) as focusing primarily on white individuals, and not exploring identity development of LGBTQ individuals of color. In recent years, studies

have begun to be undertaken to try to understand the experiences of LGBTQ college students of color (Estrada & Rutter, 2006; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008). This has begun to lead to a richer understanding of the experiences of a diverse range of LGBTQ college students.

In addition to considering intersectionality with racial/ethnic/sexual orientations/identities, it is also important to be cognizant of the intersection of religious/spiritual identities with sexual orientations/identities. Beagan and Hattie (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with 35 LGBTQ adults to explore their experiences with religion and spirituality. The authors found that individuals' responses to conflict with religious identities included staying, leaving, or integrating their religious and sexual identities. The strategy of integrating identities is consistent with findings from the current study, and is discussed in the results section in chapter 4.

### **Campus Climate**

“...I can't help thinking back to my days as a doctoral student in education not so very long ago ... when, hoping to conduct a research study on the quality of life for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students (GLBT) on my own campus, I was blocked from doing so by the institutional Powers That Be. You see, they just couldn't have me asking students, even anonymously, questions related to their attitudes and opinions about sexual practices and orientation, much less questions about their own sexual practices and orientation. My, how times have changed.” (Curtis F. Shepard, Ph.D., in Rankin, 2003, p. iii).

“To some, colleges and universities are ‘ivory towers’ isolated from the larger society. A closer look shows that this country’s academic institutions are reflections of our larger society, struggling with the same social issues and prejudices. Over the last century many academic institutions have gone from being the exclusive domains of mostly wealthy, white men, to including and welcoming women and people of color. Similarly, it is only recently that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people have had any opportunity to express themselves freely or pursue scholarship about GLBT issues” (Lorri Jean, in Rankin, 2003, p. v).

The two passages above are from the preface to the report of the national study on campus climate for LGBTQ students conducted by Susan Rankin (2003), and serve as illuminating thoughts on the history of the study of campus climate for LGBTQ college students.

### **Students of Color**

According to Brown et al. (2004), researchers have studied college campus environments for over 5 decades to assess how students experience life at college. The authors reference studies of college and university environments by Stern (1958) and Pace (1963) as evidence of at least how long some of these studies have been occurring. Brown et al. (2004) also state that some studies have been focused on assessing the campus environment for specific campus populations including women and ethnic minorities and use the term *campus climate*. Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, and Cuellar (2008) state that examining campus climate for diversity is important to institutions of higher education as they enter an era of “evidence-based practice” (p. 204). The concept

of evidence-based practice underlies national campus climate assessment instruments including CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) and NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement). This concept is particularly important as campuses have attempted to be more proactive rather than reactive in addressing issues of campus climate for all populations, with a focus on marginalized populations. As has been previously argued, results of campus climate studies can help institutions implement or revise policies and procedures to create more welcoming environments.

Over the past thirty years a number of campus climate studies have been undertaken to begin to understand experiences of students of color on college campuses (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cureton, 2003; D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Pewewardy, & Frey, 2002; Rankin, & Reason, 2005; Whitmire, 2004). The most prevalent recurring theme in the vast majority of these studies is that students of color have perceived or experienced their campus environments as more racist and/or hostile than have White students, even if White students have recognized or acknowledged racial harassment at similar rates as have students of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005). D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) found that African-American students in their study perceived a much more hostile campus climate than did White students. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) found that African-American, Latino/a, and Asian-American students were more likely to perceive pressure to conform to stereotypes than were their White counterparts. Hurtado (1992) found that White students perceived racial tension at much lower rates than did African-American or Latino/a students. Radloff and Evans (2003) explored perceptions of campus racism as

products of home environments prior to college; White students from predominantly White neighborhoods had limited exposure to racism and, thus, perceived it much less frequently in college.

Harper and Hurtado (2007) examined fifteen years of research on campus racial climates, and then conducted their own study of racial climates at five PWIs (predominately White institutions). They classified nine themes related to campus racial climate which included self-reported racial segregation, racial gaps in social satisfaction, and White student overestimation of satisfaction of students of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The three themes listed above are very similar to findings in campus climate studies of LGBTQ populations. In particular, majority culture assumptions about the experiences of marginalized populations is a primary reason for conducting more studies of marginalized populations. It is important to assess the experiences of LGBTQ students by hearing from them directly.

### **LGBTQ Students**

Over the past decade, a number of studies have been conducted with LGBTQ college students to ascertain their perceptions of campus climate (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Evans, Reason, & Broido, 2001; Fine, 2011; Garvey & Inkelas, 2012; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Rankin, 2006; Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). This research was borne out of similar studies referenced in the previous section assessing campus climate perceptions for marginalized

and historically underrepresented student populations. Research has also been conducted on general campus climate with specific questions about LGBT students, or specifically on others' perceptions of LGBTQ students (Chonody, Rutledge, & Siebert, 2009; De Welde & Hubbard, 2003; Evans & Broido, 2005; Grzanka, Miles, & Zeiders, 2016; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013; Holley, Larson, Adelman, & Trevino, 2007; Jayakumar, 2009; Jurgens, Schwitzer, & Middleton, 2004; Lambert, Ventura, Hall, & Cluse-Tolar, 2006; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Monto, & Supinski, 2014; Newman, 2007; Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013; Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012; Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

### **Hostile Campus Climates**

Campus climate studies conducted specifically with LGBTQ students have yielded recurring themes. Perhaps the most overarching theme is that LGBTQ students have continually perceived and experienced campuses as more hostile environments for themselves than they perceive for non-LGBTQ students, echoing findings from campus climate studies of students of color (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Hurtado et al., 2008). In a 1989 campus climate study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at Yale University, D'Augelli found that 26% of respondents reported threats of physical violence, 50% reported at least two incidents of verbal assault, and 48% felt that future harassment was likely to occur. Other studies have reported similar findings, indicating that LGBTQ students have experienced hostility because of their actual and/or perceived LGBTQ identities (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). Additionally, studies have indicated that LGBTQ students feel marginalized and often

excluded on campus (Brown et al., 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997).

In a study commissioned by the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), Rankin (2003) surveyed 1,669 self-identified LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff from fourteen institutions of higher education. She found that more than one-third of participants (36%) had experienced some form of harassment within the past year, with derogatory remarks being the most common form (89%). Results also found that 20% of the respondents feared for physical safety because of sexual orientation or gender identity, and that 51% concealed their gender identity or sexual orientation in order to avoid intimidation (Rankin, 2005).

Campus Pride's 2010 *The State of Higher Education for LGBT People* (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010) discovered similar findings to Rankin's comprehensive study. In this quantitative study, LGBTQ students were found to be significantly more likely to experience harassment (23%) than non-LGBTQ students (12%), and LGBTQ students were significantly less likely to be comfortable with the overall campus climate (70%) than were non-LGBTQ students (78%; Rankin et al., 2010). One respondent said "professors have pathologized my experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community by claiming that participating in activism within the LGBTQ community is indicative of mental illness" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 5). Another student said "my safety is a serious concern for me" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 5).



### **Transgender Students**

The experiences of the two students quoted above are particularly indicative of the experiences of transgender students at colleges and universities. Pryor (2015) researched the experiences of five transgender students at a large Midwestern public institution. He identified themes including coming out, interaction with instructors, and peer (non) support in the classroom. While the students' experiences varied, they all reported incidents of marginalization by instructors and peers. Similarly, Garvey and Rankin (2015) researched the influence of campus experiences on the level of being out among trans-spectrum students. Trans-spectrum is defined as “androgynous, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, transfeminine, transmasculine (Garvey & Rankin, 2015, p. 374). The authors found that trans-spectrum had high levels of negative perceptions of campus climate, classroom climate, and curriculum inclusivity. Concerns for climate for trans-spectrum, or transgender, students, figure prominently in the current study, and are discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Bullying and Harassment**

Concerns for safety have also consistently been part of the experiences of LGBTQ students and/or students perceived as LGBTQ in K-12 settings. Incidents of bullying, harassment, and bias towards LGBTQ individuals are prevalent in K-12 settings, and follow into college settings as well. According to Whitted and Dupper (2005), bullying is “the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse” (p. 168). Craig and Pepler (2007) posit one condition of bullying that is crucial to

understanding its complexity: bullying is aggressive behavior imposed from a position of power that can include knowing another's vulnerability (e.g. sexual orientation/sexual identity). In the case of sexual orientation/sexual identity, the dominant US culture ascribes vulnerability to being LGBTQ or to being *perceived* as LGBTQ. The definition of bullying is often debated, however bullying is continually recognized as a major problem for youth due to negative outcomes for bullies, those who are bullied, and bystanders (Langdon & Preble, 2008).

Recent research by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) supported many of the findings of bullying research with the LGBTQ population. In 1999, GLSEN began collecting data on the school experiences of LGBTQ students to better understand LGBTQ issues in school, and how to create safe and affirming schools for LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2011). In its 2009 survey of 7,261 middle and high school students, GLSEN findings included: 84.6% of LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed, and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation; 72.4% heard homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," frequently or often at school; 61.1% of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation; and 29.1% of LGBTQ students missed a class at least once and 30.0% missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns (GLSEN, 2011).

Issues of bullying continue into, and are prevalent in, institutions of higher education as well as K-12 settings, as demonstrated by the suicide of college students including Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University in 2010. Adams and Lawrence (2011)

examined bullying in higher education, and studied whether students bullied in K-12 settings continued to be bullied in college. They commissioned a study of 269 undergraduate students at a Midwestern state college, asking questions concerning whether or not bullying continued into college. Findings indicated that students who were bullied in high school and/or junior high school continued to be bullied in college, with examples including being called names, being excluded from activities, and being physically abused (Adams & Lawrence, 2011).

### **Non-LGBTQ Students**

While important data has been gleaned by researching the experiences of LGBTQ college students, fascinating and telling data has also been collected by researching the attitudes of non-LGBTQ students towards LGBTQ students. Brown et al. (2004) utilized a multiple perspectives approach to compare perceptions of LGBTQ students. They surveyed LGBTQ students, students from the general student body, resident assistants, faculty members, and student affairs staff members at one research institution. The results particularly supported previous LGBTQ student campus climate surveys that demonstrated different campus community groups had different perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students reported perceiving the campus more negatively than did general students, resident assistants, faculty, or student affairs staff. LGBTQ students also indicated they had more knowledge and interest in LGBTQ topics and participated more in LGBTQ-related activities (Brown et al., 2004).

The study by Brown et al. (2004) illustrated other factors in perceptions of LGBTQ students by demographics including gender, religion, class year, parent/family

views, fraternity/sorority affiliation, and having a friend or relative who is LGBTQ. Female students tend to consistently view LGBTQ students more positively than have male students; students who identify as non-religious, Jewish, non-Christian, or from more liberal Protestant denominations have had more positive views of LGBTQ students than have students who identify as Catholic or from more conservative Protestant denominations; upper class level (junior and senior) students have had more positive views of LGBTQ students than have lower class level (first-year and sophomore) students; students from families that have been more accepting of LGBTQ individuals have viewed LGBTQ students more positively than have students from families who have not been as accepting of LGBTQ individuals; students who have not been affiliated with a fraternity or sorority have had more positive attitudes toward LGBTQ students than have students who are affiliated with a fraternity or sorority; and, finally, students who have a family member or friend who is LGBTQ have been more accepting of LGBTQ students than have students who do not think they have a family member or friend who is LGBTQ (Brown et al., 2004; Hinrichs, & Rosenberg, 2002; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013; Woodford et al., 2002).

As multiple campus climate studies of LGBTQ individuals have begun to be conducted in recent years, both single campus and multi-campus studies, the need for more of these studies is becoming clearer. Data gleaned from studies can be aggregated to help determine best practices for institutions to create more welcoming and supportive campus climates. However, it is also important for individual institutions to survey their own students in order to determine the specific climate on their unique campuses.

### **Policies and Procedures**

The philosophy of Campus Pride is that “every student has the right to a safe learning environment where they can live, learn, and grow academically and socially. As a result, campuses have the power and responsibility to enact policies, programs, and practices that work to enhance the campus environment for all students, including LGBTQ and Ally students” (Campus Pride, 2016). To this end, Campus Pride publishes an index to measure how welcoming, inclusive, and respectful college campuses are for people who are LGBTQ. Institutions voluntarily complete a self-assessment with questions that correspond to eight “LGBT-friendly factors.” The factors include Policy Inclusion, Support and Institutional Commitment, Academic Life, Student Life, Housing, Campus Safety, Counseling and Health, and Recruitment and Retention Efforts (Campus Pride, 2016).

### **Recruitment**

The areas listed above have become more important in recent years as increasingly students who identify as LGBTQ are seeking colleges and universities they perceive as “LGBTQ-friendly” (Burlison, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012). Prospective college students may be coming from environments where they have had tremendously negative experiences based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and are seeking a more positive environment (climate). They may also be coming from environments where they have had fairly positive experiences in somewhat supportive environments, and are seeking that same type of college environment. As the average age of beginning the coming out process for

LGBTQ individuals is now 16 (as opposed to 19 to 23 in the 1980's), colleges and universities are starting to pay greater attention to outreach to potential LGBTQ students (Young, 2011).

In a survey of 119 LGBTQ high school, college undergraduate, and graduate students, Burlison (2010) researched factors that affect college attendance. Attending a "gay-friendly" campus ranked fairly high, with 67% of respondents considering this fairly or very important. The findings in this study were similar to those in a qualitative study conducted by Taulke-Johnson (2010) in the United Kingdom. In interviews with seventeen gay male undergraduates, students reported a desire to move away from heterosexist and homophobic home communities toward collegiate communities they perceived as more supportive and accepting (Taulke-Johnson, 2010).

Institutions of higher education are beginning to acknowledge that students are making college decisions based upon their perceptions of LGBTQ-friendly campuses. For example, Dartmouth College has added "LGBT community and/or gender identity" to a list of interest areas that students can check off on their applications (Young, 2011, p. 39). The University of Pennsylvania e-mails information about their on-campus LGBT student group to applicants who come out or mention sexual identity in their admissions application. Western Michigan University takes current LGBTQ students on recruiting visits to speak to high school Gay-Straight Alliance groups (Cegler, 2012). Cegler (2012) also reports that the University of Southern California (USC) arranges for LGBTQ applicants to be hosted by current students who live on the Rainbow Floor, an LGBTQ-inclusive housing area.

### **Gender-Inclusive Housing**

USC's Rainbow Floor is similar to the gender-inclusive housing option that US college housing departments have introduced in recent years. This option allows students to share residence hall spaces (rooms, suites, apartments) regardless of their gender identity (Willoughby, Larsen, & Carroll, 2012). This "rapidly growing collegiate movement" existed on at least 54 US colleges and universities (National Student Genderblind Campaign, p. 1, as cited in Kilen & Belz, 2011). In just two years, campuses with gender-inclusive housing or campaigns numbered at least 100 (Burney, 2014). Rutgers University, where Tyler Clementi was a student, now provides gender-inclusive housing options at four locations on campus, including a Rainbow Perspectives Special Interest Section (Burney, 2014).

While gender-inclusive housing options are provided for any student who wants a safer and more comfortable living environment, they are particularly important for students who identify as transgender. Beemyn (2005) discussed several areas of campus life in which transgender students experienced oppressive gender-exclusive policies, including residence halls and bathrooms. The author discussed the policy and practice of assigning housing based solely on a student's birth gender, creating potential crises for students who are transitioning and/or do not identify with their biological gender. As many students in uncomfortable/unwelcoming residence life environments opt to move off of campus and, as students who live on campus are likelier to be retained and to graduate, this is particularly problematic, and lends credence to the importance of assessing campus climate for all members of the LGBTQ community. As emphasis has

begun to be placed on the experiences of transgender students, some institutions have begun to respond. In early September, 2014, Mount Holyoke College, an all-women's college, announced that all students who identified as women would be eligible for admission, not just women who identified as *cisgender* (individuals whose gender matches their assigned sex).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a review of literature related to this study. An overview of theories of identity development was provided, referencing the work of pioneering theorists including Erikson, Kohlberg, and Perry, and pioneering college student identity theorist Chickering. Critiques of the homogeneity of these and other theorists were examined including those by Gilligan, Baxter Magolda, and Chickering and Reisser. An overview of theories of LGBTQ identity development was provided including the work of Cass, Coleman, Troiden, D'Augelli, and McCarn and Fassinger, with rationale as to why the researcher used the work of Cass and D'Augelli as the theoretical lens of this study. As part of the discussion of LGBTQ identity development models, the phenomenon of "coming out" was discussed. Finally, an overview of campus climate studies was provided, particularly describing the need for more studies on LGBTQ college students.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how a small, self-selected group of LGBTQ college students reports experiencing campus climate within the context of one particular institution, and how these students make meaning from their experiences. The study also examined the self-reported coming out experiences of these students, with a view to analyzing the extent to which “how” and “when” they came out seems to have (or have not) impacted or informed their satisfaction with their campus climate. Additionally, students were asked to discuss their experiences within the context of a “post DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act)” and “post DADT (Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell)” world. To reiterate, the research question that guided this study was as follows:

What do LGBTQ college students report about their experiences with college life and campus climate at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic institution?

### Theoretical Framework and How It Informs the Research Design

Designing a robust qualitative research design requires a strong theoretical framing that guides decision-making and ensures coherency across the research question, data collection methods and analytic approach (Merriam, 2015). As reviewed in chapter 2, theories of college student development, and, more specifically, theories of LGBTQ identity development (with a focus on college students) were central to this study. It was important to have a clear understanding of theories of the development of individuals, and particularly college students (Chickering, 1969, 1993; Kohlberg, 1973; Perry, 1970) as a framework for this study in order to understand LGBTQ student identity

development because it affords important insights into how LGBTQ college students may experience college life and climate. The work of pioneering student development theorists has laid the groundwork for many studies of college students over the past 50 years. Subsequent research and studies on college students have built upon the work of these early theorists and have contributed to an understanding of how college students (primarily traditional-aged college students aged 18-22 years) develop, particularly through a psychosocial lens.

Similarly, although more recently in terms of historical development, research on LGBTQ individuals, particularly college students, has built on the work of earlier theorists of LGBTQ identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Additionally, studies of LGBTQ individuals' coming out experiences (again, particularly college students) have drawn usefully upon theories of student development and LGBTQ identity models. The intersections of student development theory and LGBTQ identity development models, with a focus on coming out, are at the heart of the theoretical framework of this study. Identity development is key to helping understand how LGBTQ students experience college life. As discussed previously, the LGBTQ identity development models of Cass and D'Augelli provided the primary theoretical lens for this study. To reiterate, the 6 stages of Cass' HIF (Homosexual Identity Formation) model are as follows: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. The six developmental tasks in D'Augelli's life span model are: exiting a heterosexual identity, developing a personal LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) identity, developing an LGB social

identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community. As such, the particular theoretical orientation for this study calls for research participants' own accounts of their experiences, including their coming out experiences (and, remaining cognizant of the fact that earlier theorists did not necessarily address transgender and queer individuals). This, in turn, strongly suggests interviewing as a key data collection method for the research design for this study in order to collect detailed, in-person accounts from participants.

### **Research Design**

Understanding more about the experiences of LGBTQ college students on one university campus was the focus of this study. Therefore, it was appropriate to use qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methodology is “a radically different way to approach knowing and understanding” when compared to quantitative approaches, and involves trying to understand the complexity of people’s lives through an examination of individual perspectives (Wang, 2009, p. 256). In this way, qualitative research typically values “insider” accounts of what is being studied, rather than researcher interpretations based on the researcher’s own perspective and assumptions. Qualitative methodology is emergent, inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic, and aims at uncovering meanings that people attach to their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). Merriam (2015) lists the following characteristics of qualitative research: it has a focus on meaning and understanding; the researcher is the primary data collection and interpretation instrument; it requires an inductive process; and the product is richly descriptive, gathering much more in depth information than is possible through quantitative means. These characteristics were

important for this study as the researcher must necessarily be the primary instrument in interviewing students as part of understanding how they make meaning of their experiences, and be able to richly describe their experiences as LGBTQ college students.

In order to gain a better understanding of campus climate for LGBTQ individuals and what seems to be happening positively for them, at least within the institution providing the context for this study, a basic qualitative study was conducted. As discussed in chapter 1, much of the research on LGBTQ students and campus climate has been quantitative in nature. In order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of LGBTQ students' experiences of campus climate, and how they construct meaning from these experiences, qualitative research through interviews was utilized. It is incumbent upon researchers to gain a better understanding of how LGBTQ college students report experiencing college life in order for higher education administrators to ensure that best practices for inclusive campus climates are being followed and/or put in place. One-on-one interviews with LGBTQ college students are one of the best ways to gather data and provide space within which they can describe their experiences in their own words, rather than being confined to pre-set answers in quantitative surveys. In summary, the research design for this study comprised one semi-structured interview with 19 self-identified LGBTQ college students. The key elements of this design are described and explained in more detail below.

### **Research Site**

This study comprised one interview with each of 19 LGBTQ students at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic U.S. university (the university will be known by the pseudonym of

Mid-Atlantic). The university is a liberal arts institution of approximately 19,000 undergraduate and graduate students, located in northern New Jersey. According to the institution's website, the student body consists of approximately 15,000 undergraduate students and 4,000 graduate students. Of these, 62% identify as women and 38% as men, and 52% are white students and 48% of the student body are students of color and/or international students. While there are no statistics available on the numbers of students at this university who identify as LGBTQ, assumptions can be made that this number is approximately 3.5 % (Williams Institute, 2011).

### **Population and Participants**

In the literature, there appears to be no universal “ideal number” of participants to interview for this type of study (or for most qualitative studies, for that matter). Participant numbers are often justified by reaching data saturation (the point in data collection where no additional relevant data is found); however, there is often no agreed-upon method of establishing data saturation (Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles, & Grimshaw, 2010). Some studies have attempted to discover and posit an ideal range of numbers of people to interview. Mason (2010), for example, conducted a content analysis of a United Kingdom doctoral dissertation database and found that studies ranged between interviewing 1 to 95 for participants within various types of qualitative studies. Most of the studies with lower numbers of participants used case study, ethnographic, or phenomenological methodologies. Mason (2010) also summarized the work of several other researchers (e.g., Bernard, 2000; Bertaux, 1981; Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994) who posit the lowest acceptable number of interview

participants as ranging from 10 to 60, depending on the type of study. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), as another example, attempted to quantify a practical and workable number of interview participants by reporting findings that data saturation had occurred within twelve individual interviews, with meaningful themes and useful interpretations being developed within six individual interviews.

For this study (as with many qualitative studies), however, there was no exact way of predicting data saturation. However, drawing on the work of Mason (2010) and Guest et al. (2006), it was likely that themes would be found and data saturation would occur with as few as 10 to 12 interview participants. Participant numbers for the few qualitative studies that have been conducted with LGBTQ college students have typically been close to this: 15 students interviewed in Renn (2007); 7 students interviewed in Renn and Bilodeau (2005); 10 students interviewed in Evans and Broido (2002); 6 students interviewed in Taulke-Johnson (2008); and 11 students interviewed in Stevens (2004). Thus, I aimed at interviewing 12 to 15 participants at the start of my study. However, in order to obtain a demographically diverse sample, this grew to 19 participants in the end.

### **Recruitment**

In terms of access to the institution supplying the context for this study, I was enrolled as a doctoral student at this university for the duration of this study. Moreover, I had previously worked at this same institution for ten years in the Division of Student Affairs, and have maintained close contact with former colleagues in this Division and across the university. The relationships I have with friends and former colleagues at

Mid-Atlantic, coupled with my familiarity with the campus, were invaluable to my recruitment efforts. Study participants were recruited initially and primarily through the Director of the LGBTQ Center. This staff member has contact with numerous LGBTQ students on campus. In addition, the Director works closely with the formal LGBTQ student group on campus, an organization that is student-led and is allied with, but is not under, the LGBTQ Center. The initial recruitment plan was to have the Center Director share with students a letter I had written describing my study in general details and which included a request for volunteers to participate in this study (see Appendix A). As I had a very good collegial relationship with the Center Director, it was anticipated that their encouragement would result in a robust number of students volunteering to participate in the study without undue influence or coercion from the researcher. Additionally, it was anticipated that snowball sampling also would occur, as students might recruit their friends and colleagues. Snowball sampling, or network recruitment/sampling, involves initial participants recruiting friends and colleagues to participate in a given study (Merriam, 2015). This was thought to be an ideal method to use to identify potential participants for this single campus study, as the students who participate in or utilize the services of the LGBTQ Center were quite likely to have contact with numerous other potential study participants.

Initial recruitment materials were sent out in late April 2015. Five students volunteered for the study and were interviewed as a result of this first round of recruitment. I initiated a second recruitment effort in early June 2015 in order to increase the number of participants; as a result, an additional five students volunteered to be

involved and were interviewed. While interview transcripts were reviewed over the course of June and July of 2015, I knew I wanted to recruit at least a few more students in order to attempt to have access to a diverse a group of student identities. As such, a third round of recruitment materials was set in place in late August 2015. An additional nine students volunteered and were interviewed. For this final round of recruitment, the Director of the LGBTQ Center also e-mailed students who had just been through the campus' new student orientation program; therefore, of these additional nine students, five were first year students. I initially was concerned about interviewing students who had only been on campus for two to three weeks, but concluded that they could potentially provide some valuable insights into campus climate as well. All of the students who self-selected to participate in the study completed interviews, and their data included in analysis.

### **Study Participants**

Selection criteria for this study aimed at generating a set of participants that was as demographically diverse as possible, particularly with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ identity status, and class year. This was important to attempt because, in keeping with the focus on identity within this study, there might be differences of experiences related to demographic differences as well. A description of the 19 participants in the study follows (students are identified by pseudonyms). Students were asked at the start of their initial interview to describe themselves in terms of gender identity, ethnic identity, sexual orientation/identity, age, and class year. The terms used



below are drawn directly from their responses to avoid imposing my own demographic categories on them.

1. **Joseph**, a 21-year-old undergraduate who had just completed his first year, who identified as male, Caucasian, and gay.
2. **Morgan**, a 20-year-old undergraduate who had just completed her first year, who identified as female (also identified with pronouns “she” and “her”), Caucasian, and pansexual.
3. **Jenna**, a 22-year-old who had just completed her undergraduate studies and was an incoming graduate (Masters) student, who identified as woman, White/Italian, and lesbian.
4. **Alex A.**, a 30-year-old Masters student who identified as gender-fluid, trans person, Italian-American, and pansexual.
5. **Sam**, a 20-year-old undergraduate who had just completed his third year, who identified as non-binary, White, and queer.
6. **William**, a 21-year-old undergraduate who had just completed his second year, who identified as trans guy, African-American, and gay.
7. **Alex B.**, a 22-year-old undergraduate who had just completed his third year, who identified as “him,” “his,” Black/Haitian, and gay.
8. **Dan**, a 22-year-old who had just completed his undergraduate studies and was an incoming graduate (Masters) student, who identified as man, Caucasian, and queer/gay/androphilic/demi-sexual.

9. **Carly**, a 20-year-old undergraduate who had just completed her second year, who identified as female, Egyptian/Irish/Italian, and lesbian.
10. **Anne**, a 19-year-old undergraduate who had just completed her first year, who identified as female, White, and lesbian.
11. **Lio**, an 18-year-old undergraduate first year student who identified as female, Filipina, and polyamorous/bisexual.
12. **John**, an 18-year-old undergraduate first year student who identified as trans man, White, and straight/likes women.
13. **Greg**, an 18-year-old undergraduate first year student, who identified as male, White/Caucasian, and gay.
14. **Nick**, a 20-year-old undergraduate third year new transfer student, who identified as cis male, White, and queer.
15. **Abby**, an 18-year old undergraduate first year student, who identified as female, Hispanic, and bisexual.
16. **Alexandra**, a 22-year-old undergraduate third year student, who identified as female, White, and lesbian.
17. **Rose**, a 19-year-old undergraduate second year student, who identified as female, Caucasian, and lesbian.
18. **Sophia**, a 23-year-old undergraduate fifth year student, who identified as female, Latina/Hispanic, and bisexual.
19. **Amir**, a 20-year-old undergraduate second year student, who identified as man/male, Hispanic/Latino, and gay.

As I engaged in three rounds of recruitment efforts, I was fairly satisfied with the demographic diversity of participants in the study, particularly with respect to gender, ethnic/racial, and sexual orientation identities.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected by means of one interview per individual for a total of 19 interviews, with each interview lasting between 30 minutes and one hour (most were 45 to 60 minutes in duration). According to Harvey (2011), there is no clear consensus on how long interviews should last, although many researchers conduct interviews that range from 45 to 90 minutes. I have conducted numerous interviews and focus groups in my professional capacity as a Student Affairs staff member over the past 20 years, and also have found that a length of 45 to 90 minutes is an appropriate time span for collecting sufficient information when using semi-structured interviews.

Interviewing 19 students enabled me to obtain a sense of how these LGBTQ students report experiencing their campus climate, and allowed for interviewing a demographically diverse group of participants. As this was a qualitative study of a small number of students at one institution, it is in no way intended to be generalizable. However, conducting individual interviews provided opportunities for rich, in depth conversations with participating students. While the results and reports of these conversations should yield invaluable data for the institution in question, they could also resonate in many ways with other similar-in-kind institutions. “Resonance” is a key dimension of qualitative studies and ensures that such studies are not confined to a single

location or point in time, but rather, collectively, they can help to identify broad trends and patterns that can usefully inform a range of contexts and purposes (Merriam, 2015).

### **Interview Type and Format**

The type of interview employed in this study was semi-structured. According to Merriam (2015), in a semistructured interview, the questions are either more flexibly worded, or the interview contains both more and less structured questions than would be the case in a typical structured interview. Within this approach to data collection, the greatest part of the interview is guided by a small number of pre-constructed questions to be asked or issues to be explored, with neither the exact wording nor order pre-determined. This affords the researcher the flexibility to allow the interview to go where the subject may want to take it.

Perry, Thurston, and Green (2004) have usefully reflected on the process of semistructured interviewing with LGB youth. They particularly focused on the interplay of the concepts of *involvement* and *detachment* between researchers and participants. The authors referenced an earlier study by Elias (1987) in which he claimed that “it is essential to recognize that as human beings studying a social world of which they are always a part, researchers are, inevitably, emotionally involved with, and thus have an emotional orientation toward, the subject of study” (cited in Perry et al., 2004, p. 137). Perry et al. (2004) argued that a researcher who has insider experience and knowledge might bring a heightened sensitivity to and a deepened appreciation of their research participants and relevant issues. They discussed methodologies in terms of cost-benefit analysis, particularly in relation to an interviewer disclosing information about

themselves to interview participants. In my own case, I decided not to disclose information about myself in the interviews (this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

The semi-structured interview guide developed for this study is included as Appendix B. Open-ended interview questions cannot be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No” (Merriam, 2015). These kinds of questions are ideal for semi-structured interviews. In the case of the present study, I began with asking students to describe their experiences in high school, including any extra/co-curricular activities with which they may have been involved. Students were asked to describe why they selected this institution to attend, and how “LGBTQ-friendly” they thought the campus might be prior to coming here (if they remembered thinking about it at all). The purpose of these initial questions was to gauge the level of importance an institution’s reputation might play in attendance. This was followed by a very broad question asking them to describe their experiences at the institution, followed by questions about perceptions of the “LGBTQ-friendliness” of the campus, their experiences with bias/oppression (if any), and what the campus could do differently to improve campus climate for LGBTQ students. Students also were asked to describe any experiences they have had with bullying in their everyday lives on campus and elsewhere, how and when they came out (if they are “out”), and their accounts of their experiences in a “post-DOMA/post-DADT world.” The “structured sequencing” of these open-ended questions yielded rich, descriptive data of students’ experiences of campus life and campus climate. It was particularly helpful to

have the questions loosely structured by beginning with K-12 experiences, moving to the college admissions process and perceptions of Mid-Atlantic, and then asking questions at the heart of the study about their experiences at Mid-Atlantic.

### **Data Analysis**

As interviews with students were audio recorded, it was important to transcribe the recordings as soon as possible in order to compare the audio to the transcript to ensure accuracy of textual representation. In addition to audio recording, I took notes during each interview in order to have a written record of what was said as a back-up to the recording as a kind of index to each interview prior to transcription. I listened to each audiotape within a day of the interview, and then had each audio recording professionally transcribed. In terms of transcript conventions, the transcriber was instructed to transcribe verbatim, but not strict verbatim (not necessarily including every false start, “uh huh,” etc.). A sample transcription page is included as Appendix C. As each transcription was returned, I began initially coding each interview. According to Merriam (2015), the term “coding” has become mystified and is actually “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 173). That being said, having a formalized way of ensuring systematicity of data coding procedures always strengthens the trustworthiness of a study. Thus, I utilized the coding progression described by Saldaña (2009), moving from coding to categories to themes. Examples of codes are provided in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Initial Codes

Initial Code	Definition of code	Examples from the data
Self-identity (self & others')	Individuals talk about choosing their own identities and/or timetables for their disclosure	<p>“If someone hasn’t told you that they’re out, then you can’t assume. It’s inappropriate.”</p> <p>“I felt like he [professor] was very confrontational; he could have given me more of an opportunity to explain and explore what was going on for me.’</p>
Solidarity	Assisting and/or being with other identities in the LGBTQ community	<p>“I use my own identity as a teachable moment. It helps a lot of people.”</p> <p>“I think more queer people should claim their identity and use it as a chance to help people understand better”</p>
Culture	Identification of impact of culture on aspects of students’ experiences	<p>I know most Caribbean kids kids would not do this. In those countries you cannot be gay”</p> <p>“I think religion is the biggest thing that comes into conflict [with being LGBTQ] because Most Filipinos are Catholic.”</p>

After initial open codes were identified (see Table 3.1 for examples), they were re-analyzed and grouped into categories, or sub-themes (Saldana, 2009). Examples of categories are provided in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Categories

Category	Definition of category	Examples from the data
Pronoun use	The identification of an individual by their pronouns (by self or others)	<p>“The instructor asked “Who here identifies as a woman? I didn’t raise my hand. He said “You don’t identify as a woman?””</p> <p>“It should be more of a culture where people are asking people specifically what pronouns they want to be called by, not just going by appearances.”</p>
Intersectionality	Individuals who have multiple overlapping identities (gender, ethnic, sexual)	<p>“My credibility as a Christian was denied because of my sexuality.”</p> <p>“When you’re black and you’re gay, especially if you’re a male, it’s not easy.”</p>
Off-campus impact	The impact of students’ on-campus experiences on their off-campus lives	<p>“I’m the LGBTQ correspondent for the Togetherhood Committee at the Y [place of work]. I’m trying to create a good relationship with [Mid-Atlantic] so that one day we can do something together.”</p>



“I was looking all over the country for different grad schools, but with this new added aspect of my identity.”

Sub-themes were then grouped together into what became four main themes arising from this recursive analytic process. A description of the themes are presented in Table 3.3.

The themes will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Table 3.3 Themes

Theme	Definition of theme	Examples from the data
<i>I choose to disclose my identity(ies).</i>	Students described concerns with assumptions made about their own and other’s gender and sexual identities	<p>“One of my professors – I hadn’t event outed myself to her – she had mentioned something about men and masculinity in the media. She literally turned to me and said in front of the entire class ‘Dan, as a gay man, what do you think of this?’ ”</p> <p>“I went to the Counseling Center and I did the initial phone intake, finding out who I should come and see. I mentioned a bad relationship and the intake person assumed it was a boyfriend, assumed I was straight.”</p>
<i>I refuse to be bound by gender binaries.</i>	Students describe concerns about services for themselves (as a trans identified individual) or others who identify as trans, due to non-inclusive	<p>“I wish there were more gender-neutral bathrooms. The buildings that I often have classes in, there’s just like normal bathrooms. I feel like, a little bit</p>

	policies and procedures.	awkward in the bathrooms.”
Can’t I be LGBTQ <i>and</i> religious?	Students describe the importance of their/others’ religious beliefs and/or the conflict between their religious identities and their sexual identities	<p>“I’m very different because I’m very religious. I was always troubled because the whole getting married is a sacrament. I want to get married in a church somewhere so it’s... -but I’m not converting.”</p> <p>“I’m very involved with the LGBTQ Center. I’m also very involved with the faith and spirituality center. I know that’s almost an impossible task. It’s like putting two magnets together-they’ll just repel.”</p>
The importance of a physical and symbolic space	Students describe the importance of an LGBTQ Center on a college campus	<p>“I really love how – if I went to another college, I know I would recognize that the LGBTQ community is not as strong and that would bother me because I do like having that safe space, not just for me, but for everyone.”</p> <p>“[Because of the Center] my experiences have been absolutely amazing. So amazing that I want to stay in college for the rest of my life. That’s why I’m going into higher education.”</p>

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### **Researcher Position**

Study participants were LGBTQ college students who were asked questions about their experiences in college that related to their sexual orientation. There was also a focus on their coming out experiences in order to explore how this may have impacted their experiences at Mid-Atlantic. As I am a gay man who came out in varying degrees in college, there was potential for me to hold strong assumptions about what information/experiences the participants would describe to me, particularly with participants who shared my own college-aged demographic characteristics. I had a variety of positive and negative experiences with campus climate in college, and I didn't want to make assumptions about others' experiences. As such, I needed to bracket and set aside my assumptions as much as possible in order to be cognizant of how the questions I asked, how they were worded, and how I prompted for more information from participants may have been shaped by my own experiences and assumptions. During the interview and in reviewing the interview transcripts, I paid particular attention to my responses to students who shared similar college age demographic characteristics to me in my own experiences. There was also the question of whether or not I should disclose my sexual orientation to participants, either prior to the interviews or during the interviews. The benefit of doing so was that study participants might be likely to be more willing to share as they might feel a connection with me. A possible drawback was that participants might feel too comfortable and might share information they thought I would like to hear, or provide fewer details in their descriptions because they assumed I could fill in the gaps based on my own experiences. In the end, I decided not to disclose my

sexual orientation to the participants, because I felt it was best for the students to not feel many demographic connections to me (other than anything they might perceive/intuit).

In addition to the personal biases/assumptions that I held, there was the potential for professional bias. As my professional position at the time of data collection included responsibilities for student life and campus climate at another higher education institution within the same state, I needed to guard against my tendency to want to “rescue” study participants, or make promises that I could influence policies and procedures on the campus being studied. As such, I needed to be constantly vigilant and aware of my personal and professional feelings and practices/reactions during interviews. In order to assist with this, I discussed these concerns with a “critical friend” periodically through the data collection process. This individual was a good friend and colleague at my institution who had completed her PhD a few years prior to me. As interviews occurred where students had particularly negative or hurtful experiences with campus climate and campus policies, I discussed my reactions (or my attempt to not react) with my critical friend. Examples of this include the following:

1. A student described assumptions made about her identity (ies) by Counseling Center staff. I perceived this to be particularly egregious, and needed to examine my thoughts and feelings about the issue, and make sure that I had not “betrayed” my thoughts/feelings during the rest of that interview.
2. Students described incidents that occurred with professors in class. Having taught classes myself, and having numerous faculty friends and colleagues, I had to guard against strong reactions here as well.

3. When I was interviewing students who matched my “coming out” demographics in college (white, 18/19 year old male), I had to especially attempt to remain as neutral as possible.

While it was impossible to be completely objective and neutral, I feel that I was able to remain aware of how my biases might affect data collection and interpretation. For example, I discussed example 1 above with my critical friend. As she was also a counselor in a campus counseling center, we were able to discuss my potential biases with a student discussing counseling center staff. I also discussed my own coming out experiences in depth with my critical friend – prior to commencing research and throughout the process – in order to continually check my potential biases.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter opened with a summary of the theoretical lens through which the study was conducted in order to set the scene for justifying research design decisions. The lens of college student development and LGBTQ identity development was utilized in order to examine how LGBTQ college students have experienced campus climate, and how these students make meaning from their experiences. I described, justified, and evaluated the research design and methods for this study. I also described the research site (mid-sized mid-Atlantic public institution), sample size, recruitment methods, and data collection and analysis processes. Finally, I discussed my own researcher position and bias and explained how I addressed them. In the next chapter I present the results of this study in the form of four key themes that emerged from the data analysis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Overview

In addition to the themes that emerged in this study, the questions in the interview guide provided rich insights into students' experiences. The interview guide (see Appendix B) was roughly grouped into the following categories: experiences in high school and prior; experiences with bullying/harassment (K-12 and/or college); coming out, including viewing students' coming out narratives through the lenses of Cass' (1979; 1984) and D'Augelli's (1994) identity models; perceptions of "LGBTQ-friendliness level" of Mid-Atlantic University (prior to attendance); and experiences at Mid-Atlantic University. Depending on how students responded to questions (and, as these were semi-structured interviews, students often redirected/reframed the order of questions), bullying/harassment and coming out were often intertwined with K-12 experiences.

**Coming out.** Part of the reason I was interested in coming out experiences, including timing, was based on exploratory interviews I did with two college students a few years ago at another institution. One student had come out in middle school and one student had come out his first year of college. As a result, it seemed that their initial experiences of campus climate were vastly different. I was curious how the timing of coming out might affect other students' experiences of campus climate. As my theoretical framework for this study was college student and LGBTQ identity development, specifically the models of Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994), I attempted to place the students in one or more of Cass' stages and one or more of D'Augelli's

developmental tasks based on each student's coming out narrative. Cass used the term *homosexual* for her Homosexual Identity Formation model (1979), and D'Augelli used the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* for his identity development model. Neither theorist focused on transgender individuals, or any of the pantheon of identities that individuals use today, including queer and pansexual. However, I still attempted to "categorize" non-homosexual (Cass) and non-LGB (D'Augelli) identified students utilizing Cass' (1979, 1984) and D'Augelli's (1994) models. As a reminder, Cass' model is as follows (1979, 1984):

1. Identity Confusion – individuals perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as homosexual.
2. Identity Comparison – having faced the potentiality of a homosexual identity, the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-homosexual others becomes clearer.
3. Identity Tolerance – with increasing commitment to a homosexual self-image, the individual seeks out the company of homosexuals in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs.
4. Identity Acceptance – increased contact with the homosexual subculture encourages a more positive view of homosexuality and the gradual development of a network of homosexual friends.
5. Identity Pride – characterized by feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued.

6. Identity Synthesis – positive contacts with non-homosexuals help create an awareness of the rigidity and inaccuracy of dividing the world into good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals.

For this study, I have tweaked Cass' model as follows:

1. Identity Confusion – individuals perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as LGBTQ.
2. Identity Comparison – having faced the potentiality of an LGBTQ identity, the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-LGBTQ others becomes clearer.
3. Identity Tolerance – with increasing commitment to an LGBTQ self-image, the individual seeks out the company of other LGBTQ individuals in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs.
4. Identity Acceptance – increased contact with the LGBTQ subculture encourages a more positive view of LGBTQ individuals and the gradual development of a network of LGBTQ friends.
5. Identity Pride – characterized by feelings of pride towards one's LGBTQ identity and fierce loyalty to LGBTQ individuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while non-LGBTQ individuals have become discredited and devalued.
6. Identity Synthesis – positive contacts with non-LGBTQ individuals create an awareness of the rigidity and inaccuracy of dividing the world into good LGBTQ individuals and bad non-LGBTQ individuals.



D'Augelli's model is as follows (1994):

1. Exiting heterosexual identity – recognition that one's feelings are not heterosexual, and telling others that one is LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual – D'Augelli did not specifically discuss transgender individuals).
2. Developing a personal LGB identity – challenging internal myths about what it means to be LGB.
3. Developing an LGB social identity – creating a support network of people who know and accept one's identity.
4. Becoming an LGB offspring – disclosing identity to parents and redefining relationships after disclosure.
5. Developing an LGB intimacy status – recognizing the complexity of relationships compared with intimacy status for non-LGB individuals.
6. Entering an LGB community – making degrees of commitment to social and political action.

For this study, I have tweaked D'Augelli's model as follows:

1. Exiting non-LGBTQ identity – recognition that one's feelings are LGBTQ, and telling others that one is LGBTQ.
2. Developing a personal LGBTQ identity – challenging internal myths about what it means to be LGBTQ.
3. Developing an LGBTQ social identity – creating a support network of people who know and accept one's identity.

4. Becoming an LGBTQ offspring – disclosing identity to parents and redefining relationships after disclosure.
5. Developing an LGBTQ intimacy status – recognizing the complexity of relationships compared with intimacy status for non-LGBTQ individuals.
6. Entering an LGBTQ community – making degrees of commitment to social and political action.

Table 4.1 provides a listing of the 19 study participants and where I thought they fit in Cass' and D'Augelli's models. The students' coming out experiences are detailed with more information in Appendix D.

Table 4.1 Students categorized within Cass and D'Augelli models

	Cass	D'Augelli
Joseph	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Community
Morgan	Stage VI – Identity Synthesis	LGBTQ Intimacy Status
Jenna	Stage VI – Identity Synthesis	LGBTQ Community
Alex A.	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Social Identity
Sam	Stage VI – Identity Synthesis	LGBTQ Social Identity
William	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Intimacy Status
Alex B.	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Identity Status
Dan	Stage VI – Identity Synthesis	LGBTQ Community
Carly	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Offspring
Anne	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Intimacy Status
Lio	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Social Identity

John	Stage V – Identity Pride	LGBTQ Offspring
Greg	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Offspring
Nick	Stage VI – Identity Synthesis	LGBTQ Community
Abby	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Social Identity
Alexandra	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Intimacy Status
Rose	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Offspring
Sophia	Stage IV – Identity Acceptance	LGBTQ Offspring
<u>Amir</u>	<u>Stage V – Identity Pride</u>	<u>LGBTQ Offspring</u>

It was helpful to attempt to categorize students' coming out experiences in order to add to discussions of best practices for chapter 5. However, I want to acknowledge the irony of perhaps being perceived as pigeonholing/forcing students into categories, when the whole purpose of this qualitative study has been to focus on the experiences of "individuals."

There is a caveat that should also be addressed with my use of Cass/D'Augelli as theoretical lenses for viewing students in this study. While Cass and D'Augelli were pioneering theorists in LGBTQ identity development (again, I added the "T" and the "Q"), their models were promulgated in 1979 and 1994 respectively. My study was conducted in 2015, and the majority of participants were between 18 and 22 years of age. Many of the students in the study self-identified with terms including gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-queer, and androphilic. These terms did not exist or were not in wide use during the research that led to earlier stage or life span models of identity development

(e. g. Cass, D’Augelli, Coleman, Troiden, McCarrn & Fassinger). As such, my “tweaking” of Cass and D’Augelli (adding “T” and “Q”), likely does not go far enough and is not nearly inclusive in terms of identity (ies).

Additionally, stage models such as Cass’ (and, really all identity stage models, including Erikson and Chickering) seem to imply that the end stage is the “highest” level to be attained, and that individuals are not really self-actualized until they reach this “final” stage. And, life span approaches – while more cyclical in nature – seem to imply that the last phase is also the most developed. As I reference earlier, many final stages/phases even are titled words such as “integration” and “synthesis.” Still, given my brief critiques of Cass and D’Augelli and other earlier theorists, I found it useful to utilize them as framing models for viewing coming out experiences of students in this study.

While I do not necessarily envision a day where all colleges and universities will provide an option for demographic information about sexual orientations/identities, a few campuses have begun to do so (e.g., MIT, University of Iowa, Elmhurst College). It could be posited that individuals who feel comfortable enough to self-identify as they are considering entering college, and often at a “traditional” age of 18 or 19, might be expecting different things, or in need of different things, than students who choose not to identify as LGBTQ, are uncomfortable doing so, or may not realize they may be so. It could also be posited that if the numbers of students who identify as LGBTQ are significantly lower than might be expected (based on average population demographics), then policies, procedures, and programming might need to be adjusted. These issues are all related to the discussion and actual burgeoning field of campus climate, specifically as

it affects LGBTQ students. Thus, the coming out narratives of the students in the study will be referenced in the next chapter in discussions of best practices.

**High school/prior experiences and bullying.** Bullying also was not the major focus of this study, however it is intertwined with campus climate/environment, and it is not atypical to find that many of the students in the study would have experienced some forms of bullying or harassment in K-12 settings. Studies have shown that students who experience bullying in K-12 settings are often likely to experience issues in college (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Chapell et al., 2004; Hughes, 2001; McDougall, 1999). And, as almost half of the students in this study had experienced bullying in K-12, I was a bit surprised that none felt that they had experienced it in college. Nonetheless, addressing the issues of bullying and harassment will also figure into discussions of best practices for creating welcoming campus environments. Students' experiences with bullying or harassment prior to college are highlighted in Appendix E.

**DOMA/DADT.** One of the questions in my interview guide asked students if they viewed/experienced things differently in a "post DOMA/DADT world" (Defense of Marriage Act; Don't Ask, Don't Tell). While not having specific expectations of answers, my hunch was that students might have some opinions on this. However, the overwhelming majority of students had not really given it any thought, and I had to probe a bit to explain what I meant in asking the question. As students in the study were primarily 18 to 22 years old at the time of their interview (2015), most of them were in high school when DADT was struck down in 2010, and were just 16 to 20 when DOMA was struck down in 2013. It seems that these issues – LGBTQ individuals being

“allowed” to serve openly in the military, and marriage equality – just did not resonate with most of the students. It is likely that were this type of question asked of older LGBTQ individuals, thoughts and experiences would be quite different.

### **Themes**

As identified in Chapter 3, there were four key themes that were constructed by means of data analysis and that directly address the research question driving this study: What do LGBTQ college students report about their experiences with college life and campus climate at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic institution? These themes are: “*I choose to disclose my identity;*” “*I refuse to be bound by gender binaries;*” “*Can’t I be LGBTQ and religious;*” and “*The importance of a physical and symbolic space.*” While there were a number of codes and categories that might have led to the construction of other themes, the weight of evidence pointed to these four as being most salient in relation to the research question, and, as such, are the focus of this chapter.

***I choose to disclose my identity.*** This theme was constructed out of students describing concerns with assumptions made about their own and others’ gender and sexual identities. Half of the students in the study described situations where they had identity assumptions made about them and/or witnessed/experienced assumptions being made about others, with the “assumers” demonstrating pre-conceived notions or beliefs about the students’ identities. These assumptions often were reported as having negative effects: students being “outed” where they had no control of the situation (s) (not having choices); students feeling awkward when erroneous assumptions were made about their identity(ies); students experiencing others making the “default” available identities

heterosexual and cis-gender. Wood (2005) describes similar experiences in interactions on campus where she faced “an environment that assumes a universal (and therefore ‘natural’ and ‘righteous’) heterosexuality. This assumption of my heterosexuality renders me incoherent” (p. 431). As such, students were highly conscious of the notion of assumed heterosexuality. Participants described assumptions made about them that occurred in class and assumptions that occurred outside of class. Each of these is discussed in turn below.

*In-class assumptions about gender identity.* Alex A. described an experience she had in class:

I don’t remember exactly what we were talking about, but the instructor asked, “Who here identifies as a woman?” I didn’t raise my hand. I don’t know if he thought I wasn’t paying attention or what, but he said “You don’t identify as a woman?” and I said no, and I talked about being female but not identifying with the word ‘woman’ and the stuff that it means. Now I wish I could go back and state it more clearly and more in line with how I actually identify, but I think that was a turning point to me to be like, what is going on here? I’m grateful for what I learned from it [the experience], but at the same time I felt like he was very confrontational about it and could have taken it a little more gently, given me more of an opportunity to explain and explore what was going on with me.

Dan had similar experiences in classes and recounted how he felt he had to educate faculty and other classmates. He explained:

One of my professors – I hadn't even outed myself to her – she had mentioned something about men and masculinity in the media. She literally turned to me and said in front of the entire class “Dan, as a gay man, what do you think of this?” To me, I was like “Oh, okay, I didn't realize I was a spokesperson for the entire gay male population.” The other thing I do remember is that she called me out on it, which wasn't necessarily a negative then, but definitely wasn't something that professors should do. Assuming identities and also outing in front of an entire class isn't necessarily a positive thing to do. Lucky for me I am an out, proud leader in the queer community. God forbid it was someone else who wasn't really out.

Alex A. and Dan's descriptions of their experiences in class emphasized the potential loss of control that students might feel when choices of disclosing identities are taken away. This loss of control over when and how to come out can be disempowering (Cohen & Savin Williams, 1996; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Rossi, 2010; and Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). And, as with Cass' (1979, 1984) and D'Augelli's (1994) framing identity theories, coming out, particularly *choosing* when and how to come out, is an important part of an individual's identity. Alex A. and Dan were the only two students who described specific instances of faculty assumptions about identity. I think this may be emblematic of where they each were in their education levels: Alex A. was a 30-year old student enrolled in a Master's program, and Dan was a 22-year old student who had just finished undergraduate studies and was enrolled in a



Master's program. Dan was also highly attuned to issues of LGBTQ advocacy, and had worked with the campus LGBTQ center for two years.

*Out-of-class assumptions.* Cases of assumption making by others were reported as occurring in other environments, as well. Anne described how sad it was for her that people still assumed she was straight, that the default assumption was that everyone was straight, unless they were “stereotypically” LGBTQ. She said:

I went to the Counseling Center and I did the initial phone intake, finding out who I should come and see. I mentioned a bad relationship and the intake person assumed it was a boyfriend, assumed I was straight. As soon as I said it was actually a girl, she was like “Oh, my gosh, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed that.” I was like great, but that’s fine, I understand that is still currently what people assume, especially if it’s not immediately specified. It’s okay, but...

Lio described how people “assumed that I’m straight. Especially since I’ve only dated boys so far, I guess I understand where they get that notion from, how everyone just assumes the default is heterosexual. Honestly, I think it’s annoying, kind of like how people try and guess my race [Lio is multiracial].” Rose described people saying, “You don’t look like a lesbian,” and “people have told me I’m too young to know I’m a lesbian.” Similarly, Alexandra explained, “People tell me all the time that I don’t look gay – I’m still trying to figure out what that means.”

Jenna recounted how difficult it was when people made assumptions about her, particularly as it related to with whom she was in a relationship. She said

I've gotten a lot of assumptions. I gave a speech at a Safer Space conference about questioning and about how when I was dating a man, everyone assumed I was heterosexual and when I dated a woman, everyone assumed I was a lesbian, but no one ever asked me. People assumed my identity instead of just took what I was telling them. Sometimes I try and explain whoever I fall in love with is who I fall in love with. If I so happen to fall in love with a man or someone who is trans, or gender non-binary, or whoever, it doesn't make me less of a lesbian. That's something that's really hard for people to understand.

Joseph described his experiences with Safe Space training, where he learned about assumptions. He said "if someone hasn't told you that they're out, you can't assume. It's inappropriate to assume. It's disrespectful." He also recounted his own assumptions when he attended the training "when I went to the Safe Space training – because I assumed – you're not supposed to assume – I assumed that most people were gonna be LGBTQ. It wasn't. The majority wasn't."

Students were very passionate when describing struggles to claim their own identity(ies), or advocating for others to be able to claim their identity(ies). Assumptions made by others seemed to be particularly important for students as they described their campus experiences, whether it was assumptions that other members of the campus community might make about their identities or the identities of other members of the LGBTQ community, or assumptions that they had made at times themselves. The latter involved LGBTQ students realizing that they could be "guilty" of making assumptions as well, as exemplified by Joseph's realization that he had made assumptions during Safe

Space training. Study participants had their own thoughts on addressing assumptions made by others about them; this will be discussed later in chapter 5.

In attempting to interpret findings related to this theme, it may be helpful to look at the demographics of the students who recounted experiences here. Of the ten students who described experiences relating to “*I choose to disclose my identity,*” eight were white students and two were students of color. Comparing this with the overall racial/ethnic demographics of the study, 12 students were white and 7 students were students of color, showing that 2/3 of white students described experiences related to this theme, while slightly less than 1/3 of students of color in the study described experiences concerning assumptions. Of course, this was a qualitative study with no intent to generalize, and the 19 study participants all self-selected. However, it is interesting to consider the racial/ethnic differences in describing experiences described by this theme. It could be posited that, at least within this study, white students were perhaps more likely to be attuned to experiences concerning assumptions about sexual/gender identity than were students of color. This could also be tied to the concept of intersectionality, in that perhaps students of color may have more resonance with other aspects of their identities than with sexual/gender aspects. Or, that people making assumptions about students’ identity (ies) resonated less with students of color than did other experiences.

Interestingly, the two students of color who did recount experiences concerning others’ assumptions about identity, Lio and Abby, were female-identified students who described being assumed to be straight or non-LGBTQ. This was similar to other gender demographics with students describing identities and assumptions. Six of the ten

students identified as female, and one identified as gender fluid and trans, and almost all of their reported experiences involved assumptions being made about their sexual orientations/identities. As was described above, they experienced people assuming the default and dominant identity of non-LGBTQ. As the gender demographics of the 19 study participants was fairly even in terms of male-identified and female-identified students, it is interesting that 2/3 of female-identified students described experiences concerning assumptions about identity, while less than half of male-identified students did so. Again, while acknowledging this is a qualitative study with no attempt to generalize, it may be that for this study female-identified students were more likely to report experiencing assumptions about identity than were male-identified students.

Demographics of student experiences of “*I choose to disclose my identity*” can be helpful in understanding their overall experiences with campus climate. Over half of the students in the study described the importance of choice in relation to disclosing sexual identity/orientation, echoing the concept of coming out as theorized by Cass (1979; 1984) and D’Augelli (1994), and others. This can be helpful in discussing the implementation of best practices for policies and procedures related to campus climate for LGBTQ students, as will be discussed in chapter 5.

While not a separate theme, the tenet of advocating for other members of the LGBTQ community was described throughout the interviews in this study as well. As Dan described “assuming identities and also outing in front of an entire class isn’t necessarily a positive thing to do. God forbid it was someone else who wasn’t really out.” And, as Joseph described “if someone hasn’t told you that they’re out, you can’t

assume. It's inappropriate to assume. It's disrespectful." The desire to advocate or awareness of the importance of advocating or "looking out" for others leads to a discussion of another theme that emerged in this study: I refuse to be bound by gender binaries.

**I refuse to be bound by gender binaries.** Campus climate for transgender individuals was described by many of the students in the study. As only four of the students in the study identified as transgender, I thought it noteworthy that so many other students considered themselves allies in advocating for transgender individuals. Across participants, regardless of their sexual identities, concern with campus climate and experiences for transgender people seemed to be important. Experiences that were related to this theme cut across all demographics in this study: gender identity, ethnic/racial identity, sexual orientation/identity, and class year, with thirteen of the nineteen students describing some experiences with, or hopes for, transgender advocacy.

One of the areas of hoped-for change that students described the most was that of pronoun use. While this will be discussed more in chapter 5, the topic of pronoun use (often called "preferred name" or "claimed name", as recounted by students in the study) has become prevalent on many college campuses. This issue was prevalent in this study's data as well.

**Pronoun use.** The topic of pronoun use was described by almost all of the students who described experiences related to "I refuse to be bound by gender binaries." Pronoun use was such a prevalent topic in participant comments that I initially considered it a separate theme. However, upon further reflection, I placed it as a large sub-theme of

“I refuse to be bound by gender binaries” because all of the discussions about pronoun use centered on gender-inclusive language, particularly for transgender-identified individuals. For some of the students, this was discussed in the context of classroom and faculty interactions. In recounting an experience with a group project in a counseling class, Alex A. said

We took turns being the therapist. I would write about what I did and how the group responded. It was in third person, so it would be in one voice, so I would go ahead and use my pronouns in there. I think somebody actually edited it to use female pronouns. They used female pronouns to refer to me when I was a member of the group and they were the therapist and that was awkward for me. I imagine it might have been awkward for them too, now that I think about it.

Dan described two separate classroom incidents, with two different faculty members. In referencing a particularly egregious situation, he said

Some of the professors don't even realize what they're doing, or what they're saying. I remember one professor – we had to write scripts for a TV show, and get a lesbian character in the script. One of the characters was actually a bisexual and had an affair with a man. The professor was like, “I don't care if this character – good, you made the characters interesting. I don't care if they're bisexual, or trisexual, or transgender, or transvestite.” He used all these words. I was like “No, stop, stop, stop.” Then, again, in the news there was something about trans people, and he started using the wrong pronouns. I was like “You're an educator. You should be aware of these things.”

In describing another faculty member who was trying to use appropriate language, Dan said

The professor, although she was really trying hard to get it right, kept saying “Oh, she *this* and she *that*.” Lisa kept saying, “No, ‘they’, no, ‘they, them, their.’” I was right there with them being like, “Yeah, ‘they, them, their.’ Excuse me.”

Then other classmates would cheer her [the professor], I was like “no,” and trying to stop them. The professor was really trying hard to make it right, but she just wasn’t trained. She didn’t know, and was really trying hard to correct herself.

This experience was particularly frustrating for Dan as other classmates seemed to be challenging the “political correctness” of Dan and Lisa. As recounted above with the theme of “*I choose to disclose my identity(ies)*,” Alex A. and Dan seemed particularly attuned to how aware (or how unaware) faculty were of LGBTQ issues.

Carly felt that all faculty members should be Safe Space trained (a training designed to develop competencies for working with LGBTQ youth; Byrd & Hays, 2013) “even if they don’t have LGBTQ students in their class.” She said “also, I think the professors should – when you’re introducing yourself on the first day of class or the first week of classes, you should be asked to say your name and your pronouns.”

Some of the study participants described the awareness of pronoun use that they had discovered at Mid-Atlantic University. Morgan said “High schools are not really taught about LGBTQ issues and what they go through, what they are, who these people are, and how they identify. I’ve never known about pronouns before coming to Mid-Atlantic. I didn’t know that people could identify as ‘they.’ ” Alex B. was one student

who, when I asked about gender identity, said “him, his.” He said “I know the Center here does a lot with that in terms of using preferred pronouns, particularly for people that are transgender.” William said “people should be a lot more open, and it should be more of a culture where people are asking people specifically what pronouns they want to be called by, not just going off appearances.”

Some students particularly emphasized how welcoming Mid-Atlantic was because of pronoun use. John recounted how during Orientation his Peer Leader introduced herself and said “my name is..., my pronouns are she/her/hers. I’m pronoun-friendly, so we’re gonna go around and say our pronouns.” John said there was another transgender student in the group in addition to himself, and they both felt very included. Nick said that when he moved into his LGBTQ campus housing “all the resident hall people were wearing name badges that not only had their names, but had their pronouns on them. That was really cool.” Greg, in referring to some campus staff, said “even the stuff they put on, I can tell, is very accepting, and the little pronoun buttons that they have.”

Two students had different perspectives on pronoun usage. Alex A. said  
It’s also familiar and a lot easier to go along with that [conventional and assumed pronouns] than to try to convince them to use gender-neutral pronouns, which are really new and different. People just seem to have a hard time getting used to them. Even I will slip up some times. If I’m not using my own pronouns consistently, how can I really expect other people to do that?

In discussing how people often did not use correct pronouns, Sam said



It's just a word – it doesn't really bother me. Yes, people should respect how people identify, and if it really makes someone upset and it's triggering to them, then they need to respect that, but I hate people always correcting people and stuff like that. It just doesn't bother me. I don't even tell people what pronoun I wanna use. They can use what comes out of their mouth naturally, and that's just how it is. It doesn't bother me.

Similar to descriptions related to the theme I refuse to be bound by gender binaries, students had thoughts and suggestions about how to be more sensitive and inclusive about pronoun use, which will be presented and discussed in chapter 5.

*Transgender advocacy.* In descriptions of experiences with pronoun use, students pointed out examples of campus climate not being necessarily welcoming for transgender students. Non-transgender students, in particular, displayed empathy for transgender students by advocating for more enlightened policies and procedures surrounding pronoun use. For many of the students in the study, this was also tied to other aspects of the theme I refuse to be bound by gender binaries. Their concerns will figure prominently in the discussion in chapter 5.

Gender-neutral restrooms were described by several students in the study. Sam (who identifies as transgender) said

I wish there were more gender-neutral bathrooms. The buildings that I often have classes in, there's just like normal bathrooms. I feel like, a little bit awkward in the bathrooms. People look at me or like, they walk out for a second and they walk back in cuz they think they're in the wrong bathroom if I use the women's

bathroom. Ok, this is my problem – I switch what bathrooms, so maybe I’m confusing people. It depends on what I’m wearing. If my chest is showing, I’m not gonna go in the men’s room, but if it’s not, I’m probably gonna go to the men’s room, cuz men, they don’t look up – they just go the bathroom and get out. I just wish there were more gender-neutral bathrooms.

Alex A. (who identifies as gender fluid and a trans person) said “having multiple options for restrooms would be really useful, even it is the single stall, anybody can use this bathroom kind of thing.” In referencing the fact that a few non-gender-specific restrooms did exist, Alex A. said “I know of at least one that is a family/handicapped restroom. I’ve used it. It’s a little bit weird because I feel like I’m using a special restroom that anybody who happened to observe me might not think I needed, but it’s there, which is nice. I’d like to see more of those.”

Jenna said “Right now a big thing is trans issues. If a transgender student has to go to the bathroom in the middle of a class in [Mid-Atlantic] Hall, they have to walk to another building. There’s still things like that that are hard.” John said “I’m hoping to see less bathrooms that say men and women, and more [that are] gender-inclusive.”

Jenna also discussed medical/insurance issues for transgender students:

There’s also the health coverage on our campus because there’s things like hormones to be considered and top surgery and different things like that. Where there’s still students at our Center that are going all the way to [Metropolitan City] to get these resources and they have to pay bus fare. It’s such a difficult situation to do that constantly and watch my friends go through that.

*Name change.* Three students – Jenna, Dan, and Amir - discussed the issue of name changes or preferred name options for students. Jenna said

Another issue is name changes, especially on rosters and on student ID cards. Because students are still going to the cafeteria on campus to get a piece of pizza and they use their ID card with their legal name that is not the name they use. Then the employees there will call out their name when their food is ready and that hurts them. A lot of the employees aren't really trained that well to know how to address that situation, so a lot of times they refuse to use the name that a student will ask. I have a lot of friends that aren't going to certain places on campus to eat just because of that.

In discussing preferred name options, Dan said

I think it's absolutely ridiculous that on a roster, when the professors are calling out your names, it's still gonna come up as whatever legal name you have on your birth certificate. If right off the bat, on the first day of class, you're calling a trans person by their wrong name, by the wrong pronouns, that sets a precedent that we [institution] don't care.

Dan also described campus climate for transgender individuals compared with other identities. According to Dan

Honestly, the lesbian and gay – as far as sexual orientation goes, we're fine on campus. I think that when it comes to trans individuals, that there's still policies that could be changed that would advance the climate, because the policy directly correlates to the climate. If there's rules and regulations stopping discrimination,

then the discrimination will be less than if – if people are allowed to discriminate or people are allowed to misgender and not understand pronouns and use the wrong names, than people are going to continue to do it.

William described the inclusion of transgender individuals within the LGBTQ communities. He said “a lot of people have brought up the issue of whether or not the trans community should be part of the LGB community. I think that it should because – I think anybody who isn’t necessarily cisgender or heterosexual, they tend to be othered [sic] and pushed away by society. I do think they belong together as part of a queer community.”

As described above, a majority of students in this study recounted experiences that led to the emergence of the theme “I refuse to be bound by gender binaries.”

Although all four of the trans-identified students recounted experiences related to this theme, 60% of the non-trans-identified students recounted experiences (of theirs and/or of others) related to this theme. This is particularly important as research has begun to focus on the experiences of transgender students on college campuses. Several studies in the past two decades have focused on the experiences of LGBTQ students, indicating that LGBTQ students have experienced hostility because of their actual and/or perceived LGBTQ identities (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003).

Additionally, studies have indicated that LGBTQ students feel marginalized and often excluded on campus (Brown et al., 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997). However, a handful of recent studies have focused on the experiences of transgender students at colleges and universities. In a small qualitative study with

transgender college students, Pryor (2015) identified themes including coming out, interaction with instructors, and peer (non) support in the classroom, with students all reporting incidents of marginalization by instructors and peers. Similarly, Garvey and Rankin (2015) researched the influence of campus experiences on the level of being out among trans-spectrum students, finding that trans-spectrum had high levels of negative perceptions of campus climate, classroom climate, and curriculum inclusivity.

There has been movement on some college campuses in recent years to examine experiences of, and address policies and procedures affecting, trans-identified students. In a study of 30 individuals (students, faculty, and staff) on one campus who identified as, or were perceived as transgender or gender non-conforming, Seelman (2014) elicited recommendations for improving college campuses for transgender individuals. In another recent article, Donatone and Rachlin (2013) provided an intake template for transgender college students seeking mental health services. It was enlightening to find students at Mid-Atlantic describing experiences and offering solutions in this arena as well.

**Can't I be LGBTQ *and* religious?** In addition to describing experiences of and desires for appreciation for non-gender binaries, students described other aspects of identities, often through a lens of intersectionality. As defined above, intersectionality concerns “the context within which an individual experiences multiple dimensions of identity” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). Several students in the study described experiences with aspects of religion or spirituality in their lives, including the student's

religion, the importance of religion in the student's family/peer group, and intersectionality, primarily with sexual identity (ies) and religious identity (ies).

I did not ask about religious/spiritual identity (ies) in the demographic section of the interview, so I found it quite noteworthy that so many students described experiences with religion "unprompted." While these experiences are described in more detail below, many of the students who mentioned religion did so in the contexts of coming out and family/cultural dynamics.

*Individual.* Some students discussed the importance and salience of religion to their identities. In discussing same sex/same gender marriage, Joseph said

I'm very different because I'm very religious. I was always troubled because the whole getting married is a sacrament. The thing to being Christian, at least – and I'm Orthodox – just like Orthodox Jews, we're, like, the really tough Christians. It's prayer, right action, and sacramental life. Not getting married or getting married to a man is not accepted in the church. I will never get married to someone who I want to get married to in my church. I want to get married in a church somewhere so it's... – but I'm not converting.

Morgan was part of a Christian group on campus, and initially had some conflicts with how others perceived her different identities. She explained:

I was in a relationship with a boy for half of the year. He was Christian and very, very straight and very traditional. My credibility as a Christian was- was denied by him in the beginning because of my sexuality. He always had a slight problem because my sexuality was not the same as his. Now he's starting to warm up to

the idea of LGBTQ rights and how it's okay and how it should not be looked down upon. What happened was I started going to small group Bible studies. I was doing a lot of different things that had to do with my religion, and then he saw from that that I was dedicated which shouldn't have been [laughter]- been a problem in the beginning. I didn't care at all really. Just because I knew that I didn't need his acceptance to be who I was.

Alex B. described

The religious aspect is very big; very, very big. I'm a Christian. I used to think, and I kinda still do, that I don't wanna disappoint God. That's the thing. Some people say God doesn't like you this way, but then some people say you were born like this, so it's kinda like a struggle. It all depends on how God sees it. I would not choose this, because I would never choose to be this. I'm not ashamed, but I would not choose it, and I would not change it at all because it is who I am. I'm happy. It took me a long time to be happy. I used to pray to God to change, and nothing happened, so I guess this is who I am. This is who I was meant to be. I'm gonna have to wait to the afterlife to see what comes... I'm a good person, I know that. I'll just have to see.

***Family and peers.*** Other students discussed religion as it related to family and peers. William said

When my grandmother passed away, my mother started going to church [with William] a lot more often. I guess being in a church that preached negatively against gay people, I turned away from religion. After taking War with Religions

last semester, I actually realized that I don't necessarily believe in the Christian doctrine. I identify more with Buddhism as far as religion. I think it just made me have more negative feelings towards religion, but it put me in a position where I was starting to question religious identity earlier than I probably would have if I didn't have a reason to.

Anne said "my mom wanted me to go to St. Mary's [local religiously-affiliated institution]. She went there and I got a scholarship there. I visited and stayed over and I was just like... I wasn't comfortable with the religious aspect it's based off of." Interestingly, Anne had considered herself out since middle school, but her mother still had a hard time believing she was a lesbian, which relates to the theme of *I choose to disclose my identity*.

Abby said "my family's very religious. Not my immediate family, but my mom's side of the family, my dad's side of the family. My cousin in the Dominican Republic [where Abby was born] thought she was gay; her family was freaking out, and they brought her to church. They got rid of the gay by taking her to church." Abby said that she didn't share her life with her family because of that. Similarly, Lio said "My whole family are Catholic. My grandma is very religious. I think that definitely plays a part in me not wanting to come out to my family." Amir – whose family is from the Dominican Republic – had recently come out to a younger brother. According to Amir, "He's religious too, he's Christian. He was like, I'm here for you, but you know that God could change you." Abby, Lio, and Amir all identify as people of color, and their stories



exemplified some of the complexities of intersecting identities related to sexual identities and religious identities.

*Campus.* Joseph and Morgan also discussed the conflicts that often came with navigating two parts of their identities on campus, sexual and religious identities. While Morgan had experiences with members of her Christian group not initially being accepting of her sexual identity, both Joseph and Morgan had experiences with members of the LGBTQ community not being as accepting of their religious identities. Joseph said

I'm not trying to point fingers at my own community, at the LGBTQ community; (but) sometimes I feel that they can get up in arms very easily about people not accepting them. I think it's important that we need to accept each other. If they don't accept you, then you need to just pinpoint where you wanna be. I want to still be at church.

Morgan said

I'm very involved with the LGBTQ Center. I'm also very involved with the faith and spirituality center. I know that's almost an impossible task. It's like putting two magnets together – they'll just repel. That's something that really needs to happen because there are people like me that do want to be part of both communities. It's odd because I'm only allowed to share half of myself with each community in the way that I have to hide my beliefs when I'm talking to someone of LGBTQ because I'm afraid that they'll think that I'm not – that I'm not as accepting as I am because it's just a stereotype that's smacked onto Christians.

The concept of intersectionality is really at the heart of the theme Can't I be LGBTQ and religious. Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model suggested four ways of identity resolution for individuals who were experiencing intersectionality:

1. Identifying with only one aspect of self in a passive manner (determined by others).
2. Identifying with only one aspect of self that is determined by the individual.
3. Identifying with multiple aspects of self, but choosing to do so in a segmented way, frequently only one at a time and determined more passively by the context rather than by the individual's own wishes.
4. The individual chooses to identify with the multiple aspects of self and has both consciously chosen them and integrated them into one's sense of self (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 406).

Similarly, Beagan and Hattie (2015) found that individuals' responses that conflict with sexual and religious identities included staying, leaving, or integrating their identities.

Several students in this study were brought up in families that were very religious, and some of the students considered themselves very religious at earlier points in their lives. Abby, William, and Lio had turned away from their religious identities because of conflicts with their sexual and/or gender identities and could be engaging in Beagan and Hattie's (2015) strategy of "leaving" a religious identity in favor of another aspect(s) of their identity. Morgan and Joseph actively claimed their religious identities, but could be

engaging in Reynolds and Pope's (1991) strategy of segmenting the ways in which they experienced potentially conflicting identities (conflicting in how they assumed others might perceive them).

The theme of "Can't I be LGBTQ and religious" has implications for potential best practices for enhancing the experiences of LGBTQ students who identify as religious and/or spiritual, and will be discussed further in chapter 5. Students' experiences that contributed to the emergence of this and the other previously discussed themes are heavily intertwined with the final theme to be discussed: the importance of a physical and a symbolic space.

**The importance of a physical and a symbolic space.** Almost all of the students interviewed discussed Mid-Atlantic's LGBTQ Center at some point during their interview, and some students discussed it at multiple points. Although students were primarily recruited through communication from the Director of the LGBTQ Center (and, therefore, had at least some knowledge of the Center), I nonetheless found it significant that so many students discussed the impact of the Center on them and on the campus.

**Recruitment.** One of the major aspects of the theme the importance of a physical and a symbolic space was the role a Center might play in recruitment of students to attend college. Students repeatedly mentioned the impact of the LGBTQ Center on their decision to attend Mid-Atlantic. Dan explained how the presence of the Center was one of the selling points for him when he paid his initial campus visit to Mid-Atlantic. Joseph said "one of the first things I looked up when I decided to transfer to Mid-Atlantic was the LGBTQ Department (Center), and then I looked up the director. I'm like 'Oh, okay.

I think I'll be safe here.' I felt okay, I'm gonna have a voice." Similarly, John said "when I said 'I'm thinking about Mid-Atlantic' to people, they'd be like 'That'd be a great school for you' or 'Yeah, a transgender person I know went there.'" Greg said "My junior year [high school] I came out to my parents because I'd started looking for colleges, and I needed to specifically look for colleges that were LGBT-friendly." Nick, a transfer student, said "the more I looked at Mid-Atlantic, the more I saw how great they were for the LGBTQ community."

*On-campus resources.* Students also discussed their experiences with the LGBTQ Center and the resources that were offered. This led to a finding of the Center as a campus resource. William said

Last semester I spent a lot of time at the LGBT Center – I went there because I wanted a social life. Like, I said I didn't have much of one in the community college or in high school. I didn't expect it [the Center] to be that big. I met a lot of trans people. There's a few people that hang out pretty frequently in the Center, and I wasn't expecting that many people there, so it was actually a pleasant surprise. The coordinators there seem to be really helpful and willing to help in any way they can. I'm pretty happy with that.

Sam said

Yeah, went to some of the stuff there [at the Center], went to like, some like, drag king, drag queen ball here. That was a lot of fun. That was pretty cool. There was a lot more people than I thought. I didn't know that the LGBT community here was actually so big. That was pretty cool.

Alex A. said

I love the LGBTQ Center on campus, and I love the pronouns. When you introduce yourself, you introduce yourself with your pronouns, and that is just fantastic because that opens the door to me being able to talk about this stuff and not just have anything really be assumed. I realize that I'm part of this community, so I want to be in the community.

Morgan said

I really love how – if I went to another college, I know I would recognize that the LGBTQ community is not as strong and that would bother me because I do like having that safe space, not just for me, but for everyone. Because it's [the Center] so big, it really has influenced all of campus. I feel like they've really spread that whole acceptance, being who you are type of thing, all over campus.

Anne said

I think definitely it would be the amount of stuff they [the Center] have going on, and the amount that's out there. It's not even in your face. It's available, it's easy to find, it's – I can't think of the word. It's open, it's not an exclusive group. It's not pushy to other people. It's just an open kind of like "Come here if you need it" kind of thing. Which I think is great compared to like – I've seen some groups that are very like, if you're not gay you really shouldn't be here kind of thing. It's community-based, not sexuality based. It's for everybody.

As mentioned previously, at the time of their interviews, five of the students were new first year students, and one student was a new transfer student. In their short time at

Mid-Atlantic, they had come to know and value the Center for its programs and resources. Nick said “I came here for an Open House and the LGBTQ Center had such a presence. It was really cool to talk to people who were educated in the same issues that I was” (this fit the aspect of recruitment as well). Greg said “here the LGBTQ Center is a huge thing. The stuff they put on is very accepting.”

***Programming.*** Several of the students discussed specific programs that the LGBTQ Center offered, including Safe Space training, group meetings, and a mentoring program. Jenna, Joseph, and Alex A. all participated in Safe Space training, with Alex A. stating “before I applied for it [a Center job], I did the Safe Space training program and that had a huge impact on me, and was actually part of what really helped me realize that I should be the person coming in to take advantage of their services.” William participated in a group for trans men. Alex B. and Carly participated in the mentoring program, with Alex B. saying “I have a mentor who helps me out. I can talk to him about anything. Matter of fact, I talked to him about coming out, because I’m still in the closet, and he said that when you’re ready, you’ll know. Just be yourself.”

***Off-campus impact.*** Dan and Jenna were so taken with their experience at Mid-Atlantic due to the LGBTQ Center that they decided to pursue graduate degrees at Mid-Atlantic with a goal of working with college students. Jenna said

I was looking all over the country for different grad schools. I went and I was doing the same process that I did back then, but with this new added aspect of my identity, and that was almost the number one thing for me – whether or not they had an LGBTQ Center and how LGBTQ-friendly their campus was. I was almost

looking for that and the ability to work at a Center before I was looking for anything else.

Dan said

(Because of the Center) my experiences have been absolutely amazing. So amazing that I want to stay in college for the rest of my life. That's why I'm going into higher education. Because I had such a positive experience on this campus, that I realize that not everyone has those experiences, and I wanna make them for other people, especially for queer people. I really wanna create change in that way.

The emergence of the theme the importance of a physical and a symbolic space is hugely significant to this study. With 17 of the 19 students describing experiences, often quite passionately, relating to a need and an appreciation for a "safe space," this seems to have become the heart of the entire study. As described above, students recounted many aspects of a safe space on campus, including reassuring them that this could be a space campus on which to matriculate, a place where educational and social programming could occur, and a place to help them assess where they wanted to be post-Mid-Atlantic.

The presence of a physical and/or symbolic space like an LGBTQ Center has become increasingly important as several recent articles and studies have presented evidence that LGBTQ high school students are making college choices based on perceptions of how welcoming campuses are of LGBTQ students (Burlison, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012). As stated earlier, Burlison (2010) said campuses send signals to prospective LGBTQ students concerning

the levels of support they can expect to find, including the presence or absence of an LGBTQ resource center. The importance of a physical and a symbolic space will be discussed in further detail in relation to best practices for campus climate in chapter 5.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to hear students describe their experiences with campus climate at Mid-Atlantic. The 19 students interviewed described their reasons for attending Mid-Atlantic, any experiences with bullying, their coming out experiences (if out), and their experiences at Mid-Atlantic. In examining the students' descriptions of their experiences through listening to the audiotapes of their interviews and coding of the transcripts of the interviews, four themes emerged: *I choose to disclose my identity (ies)*; *I refuse to be bound by gender binaries*; *Can't I be LGBTQ and religious?*; and *The importance of a physical and a symbolic space*. The themes and the implications for counselors and higher education institutions to maximize campus climate will be discussed in chapter 5.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Introduction

Studies of campus climate have become increasingly more crucial in assisting colleges and universities in assessing student satisfaction (CIRP, 2015; NSSE, 2015). A growing number of institutions have begun administering their own campus climate assessments in order to obtain data on the experiences of their students. While these surveys have tended to yield useful quantitative data, deep qualitative studies, particularly focusing on how students experience college, have not been as prevalent. In addition, studies of college student experiences have not often been inclusive of all students' experiences.

In order to assess satisfaction, campus climate surveys have begun to examine the climate for diverse populations (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). Early surveys of campus climate of diverse populations focused on addressing issues of race and ethnicity, and more recent surveys have focused on the climate for other marginalized populations including LGBTQ students (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Fine, 2011; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Hurtado et al., 2008; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Pryor, 2015; Rankin, 2005; Tetreault et al., 2013; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Despite these studies, there has been a dearth of research, particularly qualitative research, on LGBTQ individuals, including college students. There has also been a lack of research on the lived experiences of LGBTQ college students (Fine, 2011; Longerbeam et al., 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to hear and understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ-identified students at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic university. A demographically diverse group of students were interviewed to gain their reflections on the guiding research question: What do LGBTQ college students report about their experiences with college life and campus climate at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic institution? Students were asked questions related to their overall assessment and experiences of campus climate, as well as their reasons for attending the institution. Additionally, students were asked to describe their coming out experiences, and any experiences they may have had with bullying and/or harassment.

### **Reiteration of Findings**

As described above, interview transcripts were coded, resulting in the construction of categories and then themes. Four main themes emerged from participants' reports: "*I choose to disclose my identity (ies);*" "*I refuse to be bound by gender binaries;*" "*Can't I be LGBTQ and religious?;*" and, "*The importance of a physical and a symbolic space.*" In addition to the major themes, other findings centered on students' coming out experiences and experiences with bullying. The themes and findings mirrored much of what was discussed in the review of literature, and lend themselves to implications for improved campus climate, discussed later in this chapter.

As discussed previously, this study was undertaken by utilizing, in part, a theoretical lens of Cass' and D'Augelli's identity development models. Their models of LGBTQ identity development (again, "homosexual" for Cass and "LGB" for D'Augelli)

were essentially models focusing on coming out processes. Thus, coming out proved to be a valuable construct for this study as well.

Coming out, as theorized by Cass and D'Augelli (and briefly described through other models), provided a fascinating lens through which to view themes that emerged from the study. The theme “*I choose to disclose my identity (ies)*” essentially was about coming out. Students who described experiences that helped construct this theme wanted the freedom to make decisions about when, how, and where to come out and to whom. The loci of choice and control were paramount with this theme.

“I refuse to be bound by gender binaries” was intertwined with coming out as well. This theme could be viewed as students wanting – and really, demanding – the freedom to come out as they wanted to – to not be bound by societal or cultural restrictions on gender identities (and, other identities). As discussed earlier, this actually ties into critiques of Cass and D'Augelli and earlier identity models as perhaps being too rigid and hierarchical.

The theme “Can't I be LGBTQ *and* religious?” was very much tied to the concept of coming out. As discussed at length above, and also briefly below, intersectionality is a way of examining aspects of students' religious/sexual/gender identities. Students in this study described experiences of coming out about their various identities, and also described instances where they chose not to come out. As another critique of Cass and D'Augelli, I offer the experiences of two students, Joseph and Morgan. They were two of the students who seemed most affected by the intersectionality of their religious and sexual identities – often describing having to navigate these seemingly different worlds.

Utilizing the lens of Cass and D'Augelli for Joseph's and Morgan's overall experiences (as described by them), I felt Joseph "scored" as Cass Stage IV of Identity Acceptance and D'Augelli phase of Entering an LGB Community, and Morgan "scored" as Cass Stage VI Identity Synthesis and D'Augelli's phase of Developing an LGB Intimacy Status. While I found coming out to be a useful way to view this theme, it is perhaps not as helpful to pigeonhole students into stages/phases of current models of identity development.

Finally, coming out seemed to be a very useful way to look at the theme "the importance of a physical and a symbolic space." While most students (14 of 19) had come out prior to attending Mid-Atlantic, the LGBTQ Center and its staff and programs often facilitated coming out experiences for students in this study. Students who had not been out, referenced experiences with "the Center" as assisting them in coming out, while others described the Center as helping them help others come out.

### ***I Choose to Disclose My Identity (ies)***

With this theme, students discussed others having pre-conceived notions/beliefs about them. Wood (2005) described this as "an environment that assumes a universal heterosexuality" (p. 431). Utamsingh, Richman, Martin, Lattanner, and Chaikind (2016) described the dangers of heteronormativity as "the presumption of heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation" (p. 566). Participants in this study described assumptions that occurred in class, as well as those assumptions that occurred outside of class. As discussed in the previous chapter, Alex A. and Dan described incidents of assumptions that occurred in class: Alex A. recounting assumptions that classmates made about them

(Alex A.'s pronoun), and Dan recounting assumptions that faculty had made about him. Several students discussed assumptions made about them on campus, with Lio, Alexandra, and Jenna recounting some peers refusing to believe their sexual orientations/identities. Similarly, Anne described a member of the Counseling Center staff making incorrect assumptions about her identity.

As discussed in chapter 2, there have been a number of quantitative studies of campus climate for LGBTQ students, and a handful of qualitative studies of the experiences of LGBTQ college students. In recent years, the experiences of transgender students have begun to be heard and examined. Additionally, there has been a fair amount of research conducted on the coming out experiences of LGBTQ students. However, students' descriptions of their experiences at Mid-Atlantic lend a depth and richness to the impact of assumptions as part of "*I choose to disclose my identity (ies).*" At the end of this chapter, I provide recommendations for future research that address this theme.

### **I Refuse to be Bound by Gender Binaries**

The first theme was often tied to the theme of gender binaries, and particularly to the sub-theme of pronoun usage. A majority of students in the study talked at length about assumptions being made about gender identities, theirs and others. Other aspects of gender binaries that were described included the need for gender-inclusive restrooms, name change procedures, and health care.

Students' passion for rejecting gender binaries affirms what has become an important topic in the past few years on college campuses. Singh, Meng, and Hansen

(2013) conducted a study on the resiliency of trans youth in college and reported four themes that help to provide a welcoming campus environment: campus-wide trans-affirming language; campus training on trans student concerns; trans-affirming campus health care access; and developing a community of trans allies. Messinger (2011) discussed the importance of developing trans allies among faculty members. These two studies are welcoming signs of important research starting to be conducted in this area. The experiences of students at Mid-Atlantic lend credence to the need for much more research on students' experiences with "gender non-binaries." Recommendations based on the results of the present study will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **Can't I be LGBTQ *and* Religious?**

Religious and LGBTQ identities was another theme that emerged from the study: the religiosity of the students, of their families/peers/culture, and the intersectionality of religious and LGBTQ identities. Several students described the importance of religion in their lives. Students also described the intersectionality of their identities, with Joseph and Morgan recounting instances where members of their campus religious and LGBTQ peer groups questioned their authenticity in attempting to be members of both groups.

In examining the concept of intersectionality, particularly as it relates to sexual/gender identities and religious identities, it is helpful to be reminded of Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model which suggested four ways of identity resolution for individuals who were experiencing intersectionality, and Beagan and Hattie's (2015) work which discussed individuals' responses to conflict with sexual and religious identities.

While some of the research on intersectionality, including Reynolds and Pope (1991), can offer insights into religious/sexual/gender identities, there has not been as much research specifically focusing on experiences of these specific intersections (as with Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of students at Mid-Atlantic can be useful in illuminating these intersections, and provide questions for further research.

### **The Importance of a Physical and a Symbolic Space**

The final theme was the role or importance of an LGBTQ Center on a college campus. Almost every student in the study discussed the campus LGBTQ Center and the role it played on campus. Students recounted Center influence along a continuum of students' connections with Mid-Atlantic, from recruitment visits, through orientation, through club fairs, through campus programming, training, and activities, and life beyond Mid-Atlantic, with students discussing graduate school and career choices connected to Center influence.

As students were recruited for this study through e-mail listservs from Mid-Atlantic's LGBTQ Center (a limitation described below), it is not surprising that so many study participants referenced the Center in their interviews, often at great length. It was, however, enlightening to see how the LGBTQ Center could impact all aspects of students' connections to the campus, from recruitment, orientation, time as an undergraduate student, time as a graduate student, and post-college plans.

The Center's role in programming and training seemed to always include invitations for participants to identify their preferred pronouns. Pronoun use was a large part of the theme of rejecting gender binaries. There were four transgender-identified

students in the study, and, as might be expected, they all advocated for addressing concerns of transgender individuals, including pronoun usage and gender-inclusive restrooms. However, I found it particularly relevant that eight other students (non-transgender) discussed the importance of advocating for transgender individuals, describing at length concerns about pronoun usage and gender-inclusive restrooms, but also discussing the need for name change options and health care coverage for transgender individuals. Thus, the concept of being an ally to other members of the LGBTQ community seemed to be very important.

The use or non-use of preferred pronouns ties into the theme of identity disclosure and assumptions. As was described numerous times by students in the study, assumptions made by faculty, staff, and peers were of great concern. Many of the students recommended training, some said it should be mandatory, for faculty and staff on LGBTQ-related issues. Some students referenced existing Safe Space training, stating this should be expanded to the whole campus (including students); again, some students said Safe Space training should be mandatory.

As has been referenced several times in this study, more and more K-12 students are making college choices based on items tied to the theme “the importance of a physical and a symbolic space.” It has been important to hear the experiences of students at Mid-Atlantic related to this, which also provides impetus for further research.

### **Coming Out Experiences**

While not a separate theme, all of the students described their coming out experiences. Most of the students did this unprompted, before we got to the coming out



question in the interview guide. Students often described coming out within the context of my first open-ended question – “tell me about your experiences in K-12.” In fact, had I not had a specific question about coming out as part of the interview guide, I perhaps would have viewed coming out experiences as some kind of separate theme. As such, this lent credence to utilizing coming out experiences as a framing device for this study.

Most of the students had come out prior to attending college, with seven students coming out in high school, six students coming out in middle school, and one student coming out even earlier. Three students had come out in college (including one who was just coming out at the time of our interview). Two students did not consider themselves out or fully out at the time of the interview. Thus, 14 of the 19 study participants had come out prior to attending Mid-Atlantic. The timing of students’ coming out experiences could be helpful to know for best practices for campus climate for LGBTQ college students. For example, if we know or can surmise the percentages of students who come out prior to college, we can potentially tailor programs, policies, and procedures differently. We can also train ourselves (college staff and faculty) to not assume that students will not be out before they arrive on campus.

### **Bullying Experiences**

Experiences with bullying were also discussed in the interviews. Eight of the students discussed having experiences with bullying in their K-12 settings. Again, while not a theme, it was one of the questions from the interview guide, and students’ experiences could have implications for best practice. As almost half of the students in this study experienced K-12 bullying, and as significant percentages of LGBTQ youth

experience bullying (Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Hanlon, 2009; Poteat, 2008; Russell et al., 2011; Swearer, Turner, Givens, Pollack, 2008), providing spaces free of bullying and harassment should be a goal for campus climates.

In thinking about the four themes that emerged from this study, along with the concept of coming out and students' experiences with bullying, it is important to note the role that my critical friend played in helping to me to view students' descriptions of their experiences. As discussed in chapter 3, my experiences in college had the potential to resonate with me even more as I was hearing the experiences of current students. Some of the themes and experiences really had the potential to "hit close to home" with me, so I engaged in particularly in-depth discussions with my critical friend at these points in the study. These discussions helped to provide clarity to the questions I was asking participants and how I was able to connect them to themes without allowing my experiences to determine their direction.

### **Implications**

The intent of campus climate surveys is to gather information on the experiences that students are having. It is incumbent upon institutions to take the additional steps to address concerns that arise from the data. Therefore, in this section I make recommendations to address the themes and findings that emerged from the study. In most cases, recommendations came from study participants themselves. Many of the areas described below were referenced by students in this study, and this can help inform recommendations for campus best practices. For example, the overwhelming majority of

students in the study described incidents and issues related to transgender advocacy (theme of I refuse to be bound by gender binaries) that are tied to aspects of policy inclusion, support and institutional commitment, academic life, and housing. Students also described incidents related to counseling and health (with Anne's Counseling Center intake session figuring prominently here). Finally, many students described the importance of recruitment and retention efforts for LGBTQ students. The experiences of the students in this study inform the items discussed in the following sections.

### **Training and Programming**

As a Student Affairs practitioner, I know the logistical difficulties of mandated trainings for staff and faculty, particularly trainings that are interactive and in-person, and often more effective than on-line assessments and trainings. However, I understand the frustrations of the students who are typically on the "front lines" of microaggressions (subtle manifestations of heterosexism; Woodford et al., 2015) that occur, especially in classrooms. I also find particularly potentially damaging the kinds of encounters described by Anne, where a Counseling Center staff member made erroneous assumptions about her identity. As such, one of the strongest recommendations from this study is for campuses to find ways to train their staff and faculty on best practices in working with LGBTQ individuals, particularly students.

**Pronoun use.** As described and recommended by several students in the study, I recommend that specific emphasis be placed on training the campus community on being cognizant of inclusive pronoun usage. This is an effort that has begun to be undertaken by institutions in the past few years (Howard, 2015; Ray, 2014), particularly as research

has been conducted on the experiences of transgender college students (Chang & Chung, 2015; Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Howard (2015) references institutions including Harvard, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ohio University, and the University of Vermont as having progressive pronoun-inclusive policies. She quotes Shane Windemeyer, Executive Director of Campus Pride as saying “It’s one thing to say, ‘We want to use inclusive language for our trans students.’ Colleges need to look at their processes, making sure they think about how they collect data on each student as a unique person” (Howard, 2015, p. 1).

For students, I believe a place to start is with what I consider some best practices that have been described by students in this study: admissions tour guides identifying themselves with their pronouns; orientation leaders identifying themselves and asking student group members to identify themselves with their pronouns; and Residence Life staff (particularly student Resident Assistants) modeling this at floor/building meetings and in other interactions with students. It is recommended that LGBTQ Center staff (where a Center exists) or local LGBTQ community resource staff conduct trainings with paraprofessional staff (Admissions, Orientation, Residence Life, and other offices with peer programs) on inclusive pronoun usage. These paraprofessional student staff are often the first people with whom students (and prospective students) interact. However, one of the most important groups with whom to conduct this training is faculty. As described by students in this study, some of the more egregious/insensitive examples of non-inclusive language occur in the classroom. Therefore, it is important that faculty receive training in this area. One of the best recommendations for training is to hear

students describe interactions they would like to have in the classroom, and then to tailor training resources (in-person sessions, written hand-outs, or both) based upon student feedback. As an example of this, Ramapo College has a workshop for faculty that is based on recommendations from students of color on how to foster inclusive classroom environments. This may be mirrored for the LGBTQ student population as well.

**Intersectionality.** I was particularly struck by the students in this study who described seeming to be between two worlds in navigating their religious/spiritual identities and their sexual orientation/gender identities. As Morgan said

I'm very involved with the LGBTQ Center. I'm also very involved with the faith and spirituality center. I know that's almost an impossible task. It's like putting two magnets together – they'll just repel. That's something that really needs to happen because there are people like me that do want to be part of both communities. It's odd because I'm only allowed to share half of myself with each community.

In the same vein as training, staff that work with student clubs and organizations can consider programming that addresses concepts of inclusion and intersectionality. Powerful messages could be sent if staff worked to encourage collaboration between LGBTQ student groups and faith-based student groups, including exploring creating LGBTQ faith-based student groups. Many college campuses, through a Student Life office and/or the student government association, require or strongly encourage student groups to co-sponsor programs and events with groups that are different from them, often culturally different. LGBTQ and faith-based/religious student organizations, as well as

campuses, could certainly benefit from such collaboration. The descriptions of the experiences of Morgan and other students in this study around intersectionality of religious and other identities, and their hopes for more positive experiences, lend credence to the need for these types of collaboration.

**Bullying and harassment.** As has been discussed, almost half of the students in this study had experienced bullying and/or harassment related to their actual or perceived sexual/gender orientation/identity. Studies referenced in chapter 1 indicate extremely high percentages of LGBTQ students being bullied in K-12 settings. There have often been tragic results of bullying, including suicides of college and college-age students. A number of studies discuss the continuation of bullying into college (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Chapell et al, 2004; Hughes, 2001; McDougall, 1999).

As has also been discussed, none of the students in this study reported experiences of bullying or harassment at Mid-Atlantic. So, perhaps it could be posited that Mid-Atlantic is doing very well in addressing and/or forestalling incidents of LGBTQ bullying. Further research could help to uncover what best practices might be occurring in this area. However, the fact that eight study participants had K-12 bullying experiences, and the fact that so many study participants referenced the importance of creating safe spaces for all LGBTQ community members (e.g. transgender advocacy), suggests the importance of continued efforts in training and programming on LGBTQ bullying and harassment.

College campuses have begun to explore programming in this area, most notably “It’s On Us” campaigns that are often spearheaded by student leaders, clubs, and

organizations. According to *USA Today*, more than 2,050 colleges and universities have begun these campaigns (USA Today, 2015). “It’s on Us” campaigns can be helpful in letting members of historically marginalized/oppressed groups and/or vulnerable individuals know that there is broad support for them among their peers and their campus communities. One of the best ways to implement such a campaign is to have student popular opinion leaders, often athletes, members of fraternities and sororities, student government leaders, resident assistants, as well as faculty, staff, and administrators, participate in highly visible support campaigns. These may include videos, posters, and web and other social media outlets. This directly ties to concerns with the prevalence of suicidal ideation among LGBTQ youth and college students, and may empower LGBTQ students on campuses to collaboratively prevent bullying efforts based on the experiences of participants in this study.

### **Policies and Procedures**

There is growing evidence that LGBTQ high school students are making college choices based on perceptions of how welcoming campuses are of LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012). Burleson (2010) stated that campuses signal support levels including the presence or absence of LGBTQ student organizations, LGBTQ resource centers, LGBTQ staff and faculty, and special-interest housing options. Therefore, it is incumbent upon college administrations to ensure that inclusive policies and procedures are in effect, and are continually being researched and updated. This study exemplifies the importance of this.

Most of the students had come out prior to college, and at least five of the students were specifically researching LGBTQ-friendly colleges to attend.

**Gender-inclusive housing.** Many college campuses have begun to implement gender-inclusive housing options, particularly in the aftermath of highly publicized LGBTQ-related tragedies. Several students in this study referenced Mid-Atlantic's gender-inclusive housing as a best practice for helping create an inclusive campus community. A few of the students had lived in this community, and had extremely positive experiences as a result. A recommendation is that campuses research possibilities for gender-inclusive housing options for their institution.

**Gender-inclusive restrooms.** According to a Huffington Post article, more than 150 colleges and universities have begun providing gender-inclusive (or, gender-neutral) restrooms, including Illinois State University, Northwestern, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (Huffington Post, 2014). Several students in this study discussed the importance of this. Although students were generally aware of Mid-Atlantic's gender-inclusive restrooms, they felt that there were not nearly enough of them.

**Pronoun use.** One of the most frequently described topics in this study was pronoun use, often tied to the issue of name change policies. A fifth of the students in the study identified as transgender individuals, and most of the other students advocated on behalf of transgender individuals. In particular, Nick thought it was important to have "a used name policy, not a preferred name, because I don't like the term 'preferred.'" Because I don't prefer my name, I demand my name. I demand my pronouns."



Campuses might investigate and implement student-friendly name change policies. In this way, students would be able to indicate the name that they choose to use, as opposed to prefer to use. This policy change would typically be housed within a Registrar's office, and it would need to be institutionalized so that it pervaded all levels of campus, particularly in the classroom. As recounted by students in this study, faculty were often unaware of how to be sensitive to and inclusive of correct pronouns, so training for correct names would also be important.

**Counseling Centers.** Anne's encounter with a Counseling Center staff member who made erroneous assumptions about her identity continues to stand out in this study. Anne's interaction with the Counseling Center exemplifies the great care that must be taken in ensuring that campus Counseling Centers are inclusive, and perhaps more importantly, are perceived as inclusive by LGBTQ students. In an analysis of 203 college counseling center websites, Wright and McKinley (2011) found that less than one third of the websites listed individual counseling for LGBTQ students, fewer than 11% listed group counseling, and fewer than 6% offered listed information about LGBTQ issues and resources. This is particularly significant as LGBTQ students are at greater risk for substance use and abuse (Kerr, Ding, & Chaya, 2014), depression (Effrig et al, 2014), and suicidal ideation (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2012). There are also gaps in research on intimate partner violence for LGBTQ college students (Jacobson, Daire, & Abel, 2015) suggesting that Counseling Center staff need to make great efforts to be inclusive.

Another recommendation is for areas and offices that offer counseling and advising, such as the Counseling Center, Career Center, Academic Advising, and Health

Center, to examine the messages they send to students, both formally (e.g., inclusive websites and publications) and informally. Career Centers in particular should be cognizant of the intersections between career development and sexual orientations/identities. Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) researched the relationships among lesbian identity development, perceptions of campus climate, and career/vocational development, and made recommendations that included career counselors being familiar with sexual identity development models.

### **The Role of an LGBTQ Center: A Physical and a Symbolic Space**

A final recommendation is tied to what has been a central theme of this study: the importance of a physical and a symbolic space. One of the most enduring aspects of the interviews with the students is the impact that the LGBTQ Center has had on them and on Mid-Atlantic University. Based on the reports from participants in this study, I recommend that campuses explore how they can provide some type of center or resource/gathering area for LGBTQ students.

As previously stated, there is growing evidence that LGBTQ high school students are making college choices based on perceptions of how welcoming campuses are of LGBTQ students (Burlison, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012). Burlison (2010) stated that campuses send signals to prospective LGBTQ students concerning the levels of support they can expect to find. Signals include the presence or absence of LGBTQ student organizations, LGBTQ resource centers, LGBTQ staff and faculty and special-interest housing options. A supportive campus environment for LGBTQ students is often predicated on the existence of an LGBTQ student

organization (Kane, 2013). Lipka (2011) discussed the importance of colleges and universities improving resources for LGBTQ students, including campus centers and special interest housing. Burleson (2010) also suggested that college administrators need to consider how the needs of LGBTQ students are being addressed in the college admissions process, what LGBTQ-affirmative programming is being offered, and how faculty, staff, and current students can reach out to prospective LGBTQ students.

The presence of an LGBTQ Center on campus can be central to addressing many of the aspects above. LGBTQ Centers often partner with other student groups and offices on campus, including advising LGBTQ and ally student groups, working with Residence Life on gender-inclusive housing options, working with Admissions and Orientation on inclusive messages for incoming students and potential students, working with Student Life on programming and training, and working with Academic Affairs on training for faculty (including Safe Space training).

### **Framework for Best Practices**

As a framework for developing best practices for creating and maintaining LGBTQ-inclusive college campuses, Campus Pride has created an index for assisting campuses in creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ students, and many institutions have begun to benchmark themselves against this. Currently there are over 200 college campuses that are listed in Campus Pride's "LGBTQ-friendly" section (including Mid-Atlantic). Campus Pride lists five primary goals:

1. Set forth a national standard of LGBTQ-inclusive benchmarks when it comes to policies, programs, and practices.

2. Offer an ongoing, effective measurement tool to improve the quality of life for LGBTQ and ally people on campus.
3. Provide an accessible online tool for prospective students and families to search LGBTQ-friendly campuses.
4. Support campuses in recruitment and retention efforts for LGBTQ prospective students, faculty and staff.
5. Advocate nationally for further LGBTQ and ally progress by highlighting positive efforts. (Campus Pride, 2016).

In order to assess progress towards these goals, Campus Pride measures eight “LGBTQ-friendly” factors:

1. LGBTQ Policy Inclusion;
2. LGBTQ Support & Institutional Commitment;
3. LGBTQ Academic Life;
4. LGBTQ Student Life;
5. LGBTQ Housing;
6. LGBTQ Campus Safety;
7. LGBTQ Counseling & Health;
8. LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention Efforts;

It is helpful to reference Campus Pride’s factors in light of the recommendations and suggestions that students made for Mid-Atlantic. Many of the recommendations tie with factors including support and institutional commitment, housing, campus life, counseling and health, and counseling and health.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there are limitations that must be addressed in the interpretation of the results. One of the main limitations of this study is that it was undertaken solely with 19 students from one campus in one specific region of the U.S. Although efforts were made to ensure a demographically diverse group of students, the group was not geographically diverse: almost all of the students were from within an hour or so of the campus. Although the students were diverse in many other ways, there is the possibility that some of the results were “region-specific.”

Another limitation is the way in which students were recruited to participate in the study. All of the students were recruited through an invitation e-mail by the director of the campus LGBTQ Center. There were several hundred students on the Center e-mail list, and while no assumptions were made that there wasn't significant diversity among the students, the fact remains that, in order to be a part of the e-mail listserv, students had to identify themselves (or at least their e-mail addresses) to Center staff (typically by signing up at an Orientation or Campus Fair event). Therefore, students who were not affiliated with the Center's listserv did not have an opportunity to participate in the study.

Another limitation common to many qualitative research studies is that participants self-selected to be in the study. This did not necessarily detract from the goal of hearing many different voices; however, students volunteered to be a part of the study, leading to possibly conclude that different perspectives may have been missed in this study. Additionally, as with all qualitative studies, the results are not intended to be generalizable.

Additionally, although attempts were made to recruit a socioculturally diverse group through three rounds of recruitment, the final group was not as diverse as I would have liked. I would have liked to have more students of color as participants. Four students identified as trans – female to male (FTM). I assumed I would have few to no students from this demographic, so was happy with this result. I was surprised that I had no MTF (male to female) participants. I think their voices would have contributed much to this study.

Finally, while coming out - as seen through the identity models of Cass and D'Augelli - was a framing device for this study, this can also be seen as a limitation. Eleven of the nineteen students “scored” in Cass’ Stage 4 – Identity Acceptance - which could imply they weren’t as self-actualized (i.e. they had not “achieved” the end – Stage 6). However, the fact that these students all responded and participated in the study, and the fact that they shared extensively about their experiences, and many seemed to be quite comfortable describing experiences, all seem to underscore the limitations of identity models, particularly stage models, and thus the limitations of my theoretical lens.

### **Directions for Future Research**

For future campus climate studies of LGBTQ students, it is recommended to have several different recruitment avenues. These include working with Student Affairs staff in areas such as LGBTQ Center, Women’s Center, Student Life, and Leadership Programs; faculty who oversee specific programs including LGBTQ Studies and Women and Gender Studies; and student groups who may have influence, such as campus LGBTQ groups and the Student Government Association. I would also recommend

utilizing general publicity on campus (e.g., fliers, e-mails) to attempt to recruit students not affiliated with any of the aforementioned groups. If possible, a screening survey could be utilized in order to help recruit a diverse group of study participants.

Campus climate studies are often single-campus studies. It would be interesting and informative to attempt a multi-campus study. These have been undertaken in quantitative studies, but very infrequently in qualitative studies. A multi-campus qualitative study of campus climate for LGBTQ individuals would be fairly unique. If such studies were undertaken with campuses from different regions of the country, and with different types of institutions (4-year, 2-year, public private, religiously-affiliated, and so forth), it might be possible to ascertain regional and/or institutional differences in campus climate. Based on the results of the present study, sampling students at different types of institutions may better reflect student experiences and their reasons for selecting and remaining at their respective schools.

It would also be interesting to attempt a longitudinal campus climate study. This study included students from first year students, some of whom had only been on campus for three weeks, through graduate students. The results might be meaningful to review based on class year and length of time at an institution. Hearing how students' experiences of campus climate might change during a longitudinal study could be beneficial to campus administrators.

Not surprisingly, the majority of students in the study had come out prior to college. As more students are coming out prior to attending college (Burlison, 2010; Cegler, 2012; Lipka, 2011; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Young, 2012), it is helpful if colleges

and universities can offer student applicants the opportunity to disclose their identity (ies) during the admissions/recruitment processes. Knowing how many students identify as LGBTQ can inform programs, policies, and procedures. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct more research on coming out and the impacts of self-identifying during college admissions.

In considering directions for future research, there are questions that have arisen from this study that lend themselves to further study. As previous sections have described how many students are coming out prior to considering and/or entering college, it would be interesting and informative to research the college admissions process for LGBTQ-identified students. There are logistical concerns with a study such as this, particularly given that many students might be under 18. A way to navigate this might be to research students *after* they have matriculated; however, much richness could be added if students were studied prior to matriculation.

Questions related to each of the themes lend themselves to fascinating directions for future research. I would suggest the following areas tied to themes:

- *I choose to disclose my identity (ies):* How do students navigate coming out in institutions/societies that make assumptions about identity (ies)?
- *I refuse to be bound by gender binaries:* How do students experience the spectrum of LGBTQ identities in a post “strictly LG world?”
- *Can’t I be LGBTQ and religious:* How do student navigate intersectionality surrounding sexual/gender and religious/spiritual identities?



- The importance of a physical and a symbolic space: I don't have a definitive question here, but I suggest some sort of ethnographic study that immerses researchers into the lives of students as they interact with a campus LGBTQ Center over a period of time.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to hear and understand the experiences of LGBTQ students at a mid-sized Mid-Atlantic university. In order for college and university administrators, staff, and faculty to provide optimal campus environments for their students, it is incumbent upon the administration to attempt to really know and understand their students' experiences. The 19 students who participated in this study shared their experiences from a variety of perspectives, from their K-12 tenures, through the college recruitment and admissions processes, through time as matriculated students, and, for some, their matriculation into graduate school at the institution. The experiences of the study participants and the themes that emerged from the study could yield invaluable data as Mid-Atlantic seeks to better understand the experiences of its students, and to continually improve campus climate for all its students.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter

Dear Student:

I am a doctoral candidate in Montclair State University's PhD in Counselor Education program, and am currently beginning to conduct research for my dissertation – "Campus Climate for LGBTQ College Students." The dissertation will end up being a report on the state of campus climate (the campus environment, how comfortable or uncomfortable students feel) for Mid-Atlantic students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer.

The research portion of my study will involve my interviewing approximately 12 to 15 LGBTQ Mid-Atlantic college students. Each initial interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes, with the possibility of a second follow-up interview, lasting no more than 60 minutes. After all of the interviews, there will also be the possibility of a focus group with a group of students who have been interviewed (the focus group is basically a group interview where participants will have a chance to hear and respond to the comments of other participants).

Interviews will likely be held in a conference or interview room in the Counseling Department in Mid-Atlantic Hall, and will be at a mutually agreed upon and convenient time for interview participants and myself.

While the interviews will be audiotaped (recorded), the identity of participants will be kept confidential, with identifying information known only to me, the researcher. Pseudonyms (different names) will be assigned to each participant, and will be used when reporting results, and for discussion purposes.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to the research in the field of campus climate, particularly the experiences of LGBTQ students. It is also hoped that Mid-Atlantic administrators and administrators at other college campuses will gain greater understanding of their LGBTQ students, and will consider these experiences and voices when making/changing campus policies and procedures.

I am hoping that you will consider participating in this research study, and that you will consider sharing this information with friends and colleagues who are also current Mid-Atlantic students. If interested, please contact me at phone # or e-mail address. I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely, Rick Brown, Doctoral Candidate, Montclair State University

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic Information

Name	Gender Identity	Ethnic Identity
Sexual Orientation/Identity	Age	Class Year
Major/Minor	GPA	Resident/Commuter

1. What were your experiences in high school?
2. What extra/co-curricular activities were you involved in in high school, if any?
3. How did you select this university?
4. What did you know/perceive about [this university] in terms of “LGBTQ-friendliness before coming here?”
5. What have your experiences been like at this university?
6. Describe how “LGBTQ-friendly” you have found this university.
7. What has this university “done well” in regards to having an LGBTQ-friendly campus?
8. Have you received/perceived any bias/oppression at Mid-Atlantic based on your actual/perceived sexual orientation/identity? If so, please describe.
9. Could the university do anything differently regarding campus climate/atmosphere for LGBTQ individuals/community? If so, what and how?
10. If “out,” when did you “come out?”
11. Do you think how and when you came out has affected your experiences in college? If so, how? If not, why not?
12. In what ways, if at all, have your experience begun to differ since the repeal of DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) and DADT (Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell), and the legalization of same-sex/same-gender marriage in New Jersey?

13. Is there anything we've talked about that you'd like to say more about?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience as being a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer person at Mid-Atlantic that I haven't asked you about?

## Appendix C

### Sample Transcript Page

*Interviewer:* Okay, good. I don't know if this was even on your radar, with Southern or with Mid-Atlantic. Did you think about how LGBTQ-friendly the school might be? Was that on your radar at all for either one of the schools?

*Interviewee:* Well, in Southern, no, because I was still questioning. I didn't really know anything about myself back then. Here, I never wondered if it was friendly or not because I know that we're in a time where it's accept—for the most part, acceptable. When I saw—I remember seeing the balloons and the rainbow, the arches. I remember thinking I don't do anything at this school. I might as well go sign up for it and see what they do. I just went and I signed up.

I was really happy that that was out there. It wasn't pushed to the side, or you had to go online to find the club. The big rainbow arches were right there, and I was really happy that they were really putting it out there, and that anybody can join. It was nice to see there are people like me here. That's why I—that's why I signed up. I never wondered if there was one. I knew that there must have been, but I was just happy that it was actually out in the open.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What did you sign up for? Was it a club or was it a group or a program?

*Interviewee:* Just to join the LGBTQ -

*Interviewer:* The center, or the -

*Interviewee:* Yeah, the center. I hadn't done anything. That's why I wanted to do this interview cuz I was like it's time that I—it's time that I do something, be a part of it. Yeah, I just signed up for the mailing list that tells you everything that's going on, and when the meetings are, and how—

*Interviewer:* That's when you got the—I guess Steve sent out the email about the interview?

*Interviewee:* Mm-hmm.

*Interviewer:* Okay. You've been at—you were at Southern for about a year or so?

*Interviewee:* A year.

*Interviewer:* Then you took a year off, so you -

*Interviewee:* Yeah, and then I've been here for about a year-and-a-half now. I think next semester will be my fourth semester here.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What have your experiences been like at Mid-Atlantic? Again, it doesn't have to be related to identity, but anything.

*Interviewee:* I don't know. Since I'm from New York, a lot of people from New Jersey are very different. I find a lot more people who are open about their sexuality in New York. The people that I work with, the people that I meet out and about, very open, very animated, completely true to themselves. Around here, I can walk around and I'll think oh, maybe that person doesn't know that they're gay yet. I've seen that with a lot of people.

I don't find groups of people where I'm like okay, that's the crowd that I'd probably fall into. I mainly go to my classes and go home. I don't really find people who I can hang out with, which is - I want to be a part of the community, but I don't find people who I think I would fit in with, in that kind of - cuz I don't go to the LGBTQ meetings, and I don't wanna have to force that kind of relationship just because it's the center. I find that, in New York, people are very open, and I can tell right away if they're a lesbian or if they're gay or any kinda thing. It's a little more difficult here, I find.

## Appendix D

### Participants' Coming Out Experiences

**Joseph:** Came out in high school, but he never really directly told many people about his sexual orientation/identity. He said “I never have to tell anyone that I’m gay because everyone knows. It’s just one of those deals. I only had to really tell my parents ‘Hey, can I bring a guy home one day? Would you be ok?’ They were like ‘Yeah’.” Joseph also participated in a lot of training and workshops at the campus LGBTQ Center at Mid Atlantic University, and was hoping to tie his Center training to his off-campus job as an after-care teacher at a local YMCA. Additionally, he also served as the LGBTQ correspondent [liaison] at the YMCA.

**Morgan:** Came out as a sophomore in high school, though she had had same-sex feelings earlier. She said “the first time I ever thought I was not straight was seventh grade. I had a crush on a girl. I told my mom ‘I think I’m bisexual.’ My coming out story in high school happened in my sophomore year, in my first relationship with a girl.” At the time of the interview, Morgan identified as pansexual. While not knowing that term or identity existed when she was in high school, she said “I can be physically attracted or emotionally attracted to men, women, trans men, trans women, androgynous, intersex – basically, anything within the spectrum.” Morgan also identified as religious, and provided some good insights into the intersectionality of her sexual orientation/identity and her religious identity.

**Jenna:** Came out during her junior year in college (which was a year-and-a-half prior to our interview). While she realized that she might have had same-sex attractions much

earlier, she said “being in a heteronormative school environment, I didn’t know any different because I was taught that we’re all supposed to be heterosexual. On that principle, I didn’t realize it myself for a long time. I felt like I was an ally.” Jenna had worked in Residence Life for several years, as a Desk Attendant and then as a Resident Assistant, and had done much work with the LGBTQ Center including serving as a discussion group facilitator. She had just matriculated into Mid-Atlantic’s Masters in Counseling program. Jenna seemed to have integrated her sexual orientation/identity with all aspects of her life.

**Alex A.:** Identified as gender-fluid, trans person, and pansexual. She said “my sense of gender changes, and I like to identify as a trans person. The way I see it is you have a circle that’s people and then men and women are inside of that; I’m floating somewhere in the open space between them.” She considered herself “not being fully out”, and, in discussing her sexual orientation/identity, she said “I’m still uncomfortable with that because I feel like it’s hard for me to determine if someone might be interested in me romantically, and I don’t want to have that awkwardness of finding out that they are actually not attracted to the gender they perceive me as.”

**Sam:** Identified as non-binary and as queer. Later in the interview, he said “Okay, here’s the thing. When I say I’m binary, I don’t mean fluid. My gender’s not changed depending how I’m feeling. See, my gender’s kind of weird. That’s why I really don’t like to explain it. Obviously, I’m female biologically. At 14, I came out as transgender, wanted to change my sex, do all that. I have no doubt in my mind that I was supposed to be born a boy, even like little toddler, two-years old, I’d tell my mom ‘I think I’m a boy.’”



**William:** Identified as trans guy and gay. According to him, he “came out as trans at 17. I started transitioning around 19. I had surgery, and then I started testosterone at 20.” In terms of coming out to family, he said “I really only formally came out to my mother, and I did it through a letter. She, I would say is tolerant. She doesn’t say anything hateful, but she’s not completely embracing of my male identity yet. She tries.” William was 21 years old at the time of the interview, and has just started dating, because he said he wanted to wait until after his surgery.

**Alex B.:** Identified as him/his in terms of gender, and identified as gay. He is also Black/Haitian and identified as a Christian and very religious. Because of his religious and Caribbean identities, he was not out to anyone in his family or any of his peers (though staff and students at the LGBTQ Center knew his sexual orientation/identity). We discussed the intersectionality of his different identities, and he said his religious identity was the most salient.

**Dan:** “I think seventh or eighth grade was when I realized ‘I’m different from these other people. I don’t really like girls.” He was out to his sister and a small group of friends in high school and was outed to his family by others during his senior year of high school. He was very active as a staff member and volunteer with the campus LGBTQ Center, and was matriculated into Mid-Atlantic’s Master in Educational Leadership Program, with a concentration in higher education. Dan had decided that he wanted to continue working professionally with college students.

**Carly:** Identified as lesbian, and was just coming out at the time of the interview. She said she initially started questioning her sexuality in seventh grade, but in high school she thought she just liked the community without necessarily identifying with it.

In the second semester of her sophomore year in college she had discovered the campus LGBTQ Center and things had begun to change for her. “Before that I was confused about my identity. I didn’t know who I was, and it was really hard. Even all through high school and middle school and stuff, it was hard. When I found the LGBTQ Center, it really made me realize that I don’t need to label myself, and there are people who are very accepting of you.” Carly had just come out to her mother prior to the interview.

**Anne:** Identified as lesbian, and had been out since middle school. She said “I definitely do (consider herself out). I’ve been open about that stuff since seventh, eighth grade. My high school had 2200 kids and I never had a problem with being who I was with any of them. Even if they had a problem, they never showed it to me.” Anne came out to her parents during her sophomore year in high school (her mother, in fact, drove her to the interview with me, as Anne really wanted to participate, and needed a ride).

**Lio:** Identified as bisexual and polyamorous. While she “didn’t officially come out until my junior year, she had inklings of her identities much earlier. She recounted how as early as pre-school her mother would tease her about liking a boy because she liked to hang around him. Lio said “I associated that kind of thing with that boy as liking someone. Then I realized I had the same thing for other girls, a completely innocent type of way, until I started realizing what crushes meant around 4<sup>th</sup> grade.”

**John:** A trans man, John said “actually in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I stopped wearing girls clothes and started wearing boys clothes. I was sometimes ‘mistaken’ for a boy, but I liked it, and I didn’t really know why.” He also said “then over time, the female identity just faded away, and I felt more male, then entirely male. Going into my junior year of high school, I officially changed it on Facebook and told my friends what was going on.”

**Greg:** Identified as gay and started coming out in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He said “most of the questioning was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, then by the end of freshman year, I was at terms with it. As high school progressed, I started coming out progressively to my friends. By junior year, I was totally out.” Greg had also started coming out to his parents during his junior year, which was difficult as part of his family was “very religious and conservative.”

**Nick:** Identified as queer and started coming out in seventh grade. As described in an earlier section on bullying, he said he and his peers were discovering his orientation/identity at around the same time. While having a fairly rough time in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, Nick began to feel comfortable in high school, and during his junior year helped found his school’s Gay/Straight Alliance.

**Abby:** Identified as bisexual and said “I started questioning my sexuality around 8<sup>th</sup> grade. By the time I got to [new school] in my sophomore year, I was pretty comfortable with telling my new friends ‘Hey, this is who I am.’ It was a pretty good experience.”

**Alexandra:** Identified as lesbian and said “I’ve always questioned my sexuality since, maybe 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but I shoved it aside. It wasn’t until maybe my junior year when I saw a girl that I liked, and I didn’t understand why.” Alexandra didn’t really acknowledge/realize her identity until her freshman year in her first college (she was a

transfer student), when she began dating another female student. She started coming out to family members during her junior year in college.

**Rose:** Identified as lesbian and had come out her senior year in high school (the year before our interview). Coming from a religious family, she said “throughout my whole life, I was like ‘No, I’m not a lesbian.’ Then my senior year, I was like, Yeah [laughter].’ It was really accepted at my school, surprisingly.” She had just started coming out to her family.

**Sophia:** Identified as bisexual, and said “I figured out my real sexual identity in high school – actually knowing what bisexual was. I never knew there was a word for liking boys and girls. I might like some in a sexual context, I might like some in an emotional context.”

**Amir:** Identified as gay and came out his senior year in high school. He said that he had known since middle school, and “in senior year, I told a friend and then – people kept talking about it. Finally, everybody knew.” He was extremely involved with LGBTQ activities on campus, and had just come out to his parents the month before our interview.

## Appendix E

### Experiences with Bullying and Harassment Prior to College

**Joseph:** Attended a performing arts high school and indicated most students were very open-minded, and it was easy to be himself. However,

At church I was kind of bullied by the other guys. I wasn't bullied physically, but more emotionally. It was always talking behind my back, but I was conveniently around. I have really good ears. Whenever bullying would occur, it would be like, 'Oh, he's so gay', or 'he likes boys', or he's gonna be gay when he grows up. Stuff like that.

**Morgan:** "I came out my sophomore year, and I did go through bullying. A lot of bullying. It was anonymous, so people were leaving threats in my backpack and in my locker. They had little notes written in very aggressive and foul language saying that I was going to hell for what I've been doing, for who I am, and that I should watch myself or else I – I'm gonna get killed or deserve to be raped." Morgan's school offered her counseling to deal with the effects of the bullying; she said she attended for two years and found it helpful.

**Alex A.:** Identifies as a gender-fluid, trans person. "When I was in grade school, before high school, the other kids made fun of me for various things. I was kinda weird. I had trouble fitting in with the girls. There were times when I was more interested in whatever the boys were doing during recess. In high school, I think that's where I really – I started having more difficulties dealing with being perceived as female. Freshman year my

‘friends’ kicked me out of their group. All of a sudden I’m just an outcast. I was just alone in this, surrounded by all these little cliques.”

**Sam:** “In the beginning, a lot of people already knew me. I was one of the first kids to come out as gay and as transgender in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Then, entering high school, a lot of harassment. Especially older boys, which was surprising, cuz when I was younger, mostly girls would bully me, but then it got to be older boys. Physical, and more verbal, but got pushed around, pushed down stairs, stuff written on my binders and my books. Normal name calling.”

Interestingly, towards the end of the interview, Sam circled back and said:

Bullying is horrible, but I’m gonna tell you, it made me a much stronger person. I don’t know who I would be if I didn’t get picked on so bad, because it really just made me have to like myself. You gotta really learn to love yourself, to be okay with yourself, and keep going back in the same doors to the same people every day that are giving you crap. Yeah, I think I was just able to take it the right way.

**John:** A trans man, John described three specific instances of bullying or harassment in high school, including one where a classmate insisted on using the wrong pronouns in referring to him; after John’s friends stood up for him, the classmate began discussing the Bible in referencing how wrong John was. Two other instances involved restrooms, where John was addressed numerous times with “whoa, wrong bathroom,” and made to feel uncomfortable for using the “wrong” restroom.

**Nick:** Bullying as early as middle school impacted his coming out. “About seventh grade was when things started getting really weird because I was kind of figuring out my sexual

orientation, but everyone else was kind of also figuring that out, based on my presentation, I guess. People were like ‘oh, you’re so gay, you’re so this, you’re a faggot,’ this and that. I was like, okay that sucks, cuz, not only are you making fun of me, but now you’re actually being truthful. I’m like, wow, I actually do feel this way. That kinda sucked. It got to a really bad place because I had a lot of guy friends, and it went downhill. They never wanted to talk to me – they stopped all communication with me.”

**William:** “In high school I didn’t really have much of a social life. I think part of it is because of middle school. I was bullied a lot in middle school, so I really didn’t get enough socialization as a child. I was pretty much a loner.”

**Alex B.:** “In high school they would assume I was gay even though I never said it. They were picking on me, but I just ignored them and swept it under the rug.”

**Dan:** “In high school, I never received any outward bullying. No one ever really mocked me. A lot of people just – if they didn’t like queer people, they just didn’t hang out with me.”

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