QUEER CHIEF STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS: THE IMPACT OF LIVED EXPERIENCES AND DISCLOSURE ON PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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"Rights are won only by those who make their voices heard"

~ Harvey Milk
Abstract

This was an interpretative phenomenological analysis study which explored how eight chief student affairs officers at institutions of higher education, seven who self-identified as gay men and one who self-identified as a lesbian woman, perceived their sexuality impacted their career and professional identity. Throughout the study, the researcher utilizes the word queer to align with queer theory, as the participants explored not just their sexual orientation, but gender expression, gender expectations, and how heteronormativity and gender binary assumptions impacted their role. Within queer theory, queer is utilized to explore experiences of the non-heterosexual experience. This study helped address a gap in literature that tends to leave out the voice of staff, particularly student affairs professionals, in LGBTQ+ studies on college campuses. This study examined the early career experiences of participants and how those experiences impacted their leadership and personal values in their current role; participants also were reflective on the juxtaposition of time and place in their experience. As Swan (1995) explored the lavender ceiling—the concept that LGBTQ+ employees are constrained by explicit and implicit biases to achieving higher level leadership positions—participants detailed their own experiences that were either discriminatory or supportive in their ascension to their leadership role; using queer theory as the lens of analysis, the study analyzed how campuses contribute to workplace dynamics. The results of this study will provide leaders at institutions of higher education a better understanding of how to support queer employees and create organizational policies that demonstrate diversity as a top priority. The experiences may also assist queer emerging student affairs professionals with an understanding of the potential obstacles (such as explicit discrimination and tokenization) these participants faced in the workplace and how these individuals overcame them. The researcher recommended future
research incorporate current events into the sense making process of participants and explore whether their perceptions of physical and career safety had shifted.

*Keywords:* student affairs, chief student affairs officers, disclosure, vice presidents, lavender ceiling, LGBTQ+, queer, tokenization, discrimination, queer theory
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Chapter I: An Introduction

Problem Statement

The topic. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) individuals face unique challenges in the workplace, including heteronormative job search practices and discrimination (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Jung, 1995; Law & Hrabal, 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rocco & Gallagher, 2006). In this study, to align with queer theory, the researcher utilizes the umbrella term queer to define the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals (Jagose, 1996). Any expression of sexuality that is not perceived to be accepted or normalized by the masses may cause the need to hide or manage identity differently than the members of a privileged group. Queer employees often manage minority identity and continually choose whether to disclose (“come out”) in their workplace environments. Human Rights Commission (2014b) reports that nearly 53% of queer employees do not reveal their sexual or gender identities in their workplaces.

Over the past twenty years, public opinion of queer individuals has become more positive and has resulted in the reduction of systemic barriers within the workplace and has provided more opportunities and rights for openly gay and lesbian employees. Systemic barriers that may have prevented professionals from assuming employment or leadership positions, creating what is known as “lavender ceiling,” now have become less overt; these include resume screening discrimination, grooming of ‘best fit’ for gender expression, and being passed over for promotions (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Croteau & von Destinon, 2009; Luggs & Tooms, 2010, Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Tilcsik, 2011). Anticipating discrimination, candidates with marginalized sexualities have lower expectations of being hired, are willing to accept a less-than-ideal job, and have lower salary expectations (Ng et al., 2012).
Lesbian and gay individuals continue to face unequal workplace environments even as public acceptance and inclusive policies, private and public, have evolved for minority sexualities (Becker, 2014; Becker & Todd, 2015; Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007; Pizer, 2012; Swan, 1995). While institutions of higher education may appear to have a more liberal climate in regard to sexuality, non-heterosexual employees of higher education institutions still experience discrimination, though most research focuses on the experiences of students and faculty (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Croteau, 1996; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Gray, 2013; Marine, 2011; McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015; Messinger, 2011; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Renn, 2007; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Sears, 2002).

**The research problem.** Queer individuals make disclosure decisions in their job searches and choose how they incorporate their sexualities into their professional identities (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Some workplace environments are more accepting of non-heterosexual employees than others (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

Student affairs professionals, staff members at institutions of higher education typically assisting in the day-to-day co-curricular aspects of campus management (residence life, career services, counseling services, etc.), are often charged with creating an inclusive environment for student development and identity exploration (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Student affairs professionals are often creating advocacy opportunities for their LGBTQ students yet few conversations address the needs of the professional or the challenges they may face; a majority of studies of non-heterosexual higher education employees focus on faculty concerns and experiences (McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015; Renn, 2007; Renn, 2010; Russ, Simons, & Hunt, 2002; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Some higher education professionals who have broken the proverbial lavender ceiling have managed balancing their
sexuality disclosures with their leadership identities (Jaschik, 2010). A greater interest is what are now the perceptions (or insights) of how these decisions have impacted their leadership experiences, particularly for queer chief student affairs officers. In particular, this study focused on learning about the experiences of eight student affairs professionals in higher education, seven who identified as gay men and one who identified as a lesbian woman. This study also explored how these leaders perceive individual factors influenced their disclosure decisions.

Evidence justifying the research problem. Literature has established that vocational satisfaction and needs are based on different circumstances for queer individuals than their heterosexual counterparts (Barry Chung, 2003; Hook & Bowman, 2008). Student affairs professionals must assess their campus climates and find ally communities in which they feel safe disclosing their orientations (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Student affairs professionals manage their sexual identity disclosures since openness may impact their perceived professional credibility in the workplace; in addition, their level of disclosure influences their own work satisfaction; in academic environments such as colleges and universities, the credibility of faculty and staff are questioned based on perceived sexual orientations (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002). The lack of visible, out queer leaders in academia may be a sign of the lavender ceiling (Jaschik, 2010).

Deficiencies in evidence. While research exists confirming the importance of identity authenticity (the ability to disclose aspects of one’s identity that may indicate they are part of an underrepresented group) in order for employees to feel connected and satisfied in the workplace, research is scarce in how an organization can encourage authenticity from queer professionals and acceptance by their heterosexual counterparts, outside of enacting nondiscrimination policies
Few studies have evaluated the work environment satisfaction of lesbian, gay, or bisexual professionals, particularly in the field of student affairs (Croteau & Lark, 2009; Croteau & Von Destinon, 1995; Renn, 2007). A majority of work focuses on the student enactment of identity, and fails to identify the challenges or address the needs of aspiring professional leaders within student affairs—the same individuals tasked with assisting in the development of queer students (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

When LGBTQ student affairs professionals are surveyed about their experiences on-campus, it is often as members of larger communities of students, faculty, and staff (Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

**Purpose statement.** The purpose of this research was to gain insight into how queer chief student affairs officers perceive their sexualities impacted their career experiences and professional identities.

**The audience.** Examining how disclosure of sexual orientation may impact a queer chief student affairs officer’s leadership identity will enable new professionals, mid-level managers, and director-level staff to better prepare themselves for leadership positions, including managing their multiple identities. Findings from this study may also enable search committees, hiring managers, and higher education leaders to develop a stronger understanding of workplace heteronormative practices that may have a chilling effect and negative impact on employees’ abilities to be authentic. Finally, insights and suggestions from leaders who have been successful traversing the lavender ceiling may assist higher education institutions in fostering queer friendly campuses (Messinger, 2009; Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

**Significance of the Problem**

Student affairs professionals have been at the forefront of understanding and supporting lesbian and gay young adults through creation and implementation of developmental identity
models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

However, LGBTQ student affairs professionals continue to experience workplace discrimination and must determine through job searches and within their institutions whether the institution is a safe place of employment (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Croteau, 1996; Hook & Bowman, 2008; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Workplace environments where diversity in sexual orientation is not embraced leads LGBTQ employees to feel unable, or unsafe to, display personal artifacts of their families, perceptions of lack of openness and disconnection from the organization; and, in the instances that they do disclose orientation, heterosexist attitudes may insinuate the employee as flaunting homosexuality versus simply being as open as heterosexual individuals would be (Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2013; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008). The fear of workplace discrimination may discourage student affairs professionals from working at particular institutions in which coming out at work may diminish their leadership advancement opportunities (King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Renn, 2010). Researching the experiences of chief student affairs professionals who identified as gay or lesbian explored how this problem affects professionals on an individual level, as a field, and how the problem must be addressed with institutions of higher education nationally.

Queer student affairs professionals evaluate many factors to determine if a college or university is accepting of queer employees—sexual orientation-related policies, cultural behaviors of the institution, and whether orientation disclosure is encouraged (Hook & Bowman, 2008; Messinger, 2009; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Further research into their perceptions of factors of importance for queer student affairs professionals when identifying a ‘safe’ institution may help provide search suggestions for recruiting and retaining queer
candidates and help promote skills for managing multiple identities in order to live authentically (Poynter & Washington, 2005).

Lesbian and gay student affairs professionals have identified systematic workplace discrimination practices as hindrances to their success (Croteau & von Destinon, 1994; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Within higher education, students judge credibility with lesbian and gay faculty and, if that is the case, it is no small leap to assume students and staff might have similar credibility concerns with queer professionals (Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002). Enhancing insight into the leadership ascension of queer chief student affairs officers may expose potential credibility and leadership struggles for aspiring queer professionals to overcome within their field. By addressing this juxtaposition between service expectations and employee treatment, recommendations could emerge for field adaptation.

Finally, Jaschik (2010) points out that sexual orientation is still a major discriminating factor in the appointment of higher education’s highest position, the college or university president. If representation is an important factor for gender, sexuality, and racial diversity, one must ask: are queer professionals not rising to the leadership positions because they have too few role models or because “gatekeepers” perpetuate a continued stigma with any non-conforming sexual orientation, illuminating heteronormative practices at institutions of higher education (Coleman, 2012, p. 601; Eagly & Chin, 2010)?

Diversity in race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and other cultural components add to quality leadership (Coleman, 2012; Eagly & Chin, 2010). Having leaders from diverse backgrounds allows for more perspectives to be heard, for underrepresented voices to be better understood by leaders, and for subordinate individuals to see their values or cultures reflected in leaders (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Incorporating multiple identities, diverse leaders are able to see
potential opportunities that traditional, seemingly normative leaders do not grasp because they fail to incorporate the needs of diverse communities and individuals (Day & Greene, 2008). However, LGBTQ individuals often feel when they mentor younger LGBTQ individuals, they receive criticism for inappropriately affiliating with members of their ingroup (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Chin, 2010).

Research into the experiences of queer student affairs professionals may not land automatically into leadership positions, but the struggles and experiences may help higher education leaders understand the value of sexual orientation diversity within leadership contexts and, since authenticity and disclosure is related to higher work satisfaction and less anxiety about discrimination possibilities, adapt structural and cultural changes within higher education that facilitate disclosure of authentic identity (Eagly & Chin, 2010; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008).

**Positionality Statement**

Researchers must recognize their biases and positions of power to ensure they do not taint interpretation; researchers should identify biases upfront and acknowledge their positionality, which may include language, ethnicity, sexuality orientation, and ability (Briscoe, 2005, Machi & McEvoy, 2009). Without an understanding of complex positions, researchers are unable to cross-examine historical and sociological forces in cultures (Fennell & Arnot, 2008). As a researcher, my sexual orientation and my career are heavily related to this study.

I have worked in the residence life component of student affairs since 2002, starting as a paraprofessional. For graduate work, I studied social sciences with a concentration in student affairs and diversity at a larger research university, where my area of research was heteronormativity’s effect on dating. Each of these experiences outlined how majority culture
affects and presents underrepresented groups consciously and unconsciously, inevitably creating an “other” mentality and perpetuating power positions within society (Briscoe, 2005).

I have worked within institutions that espoused values of inclusivity. Human Rights Commission (2014b) points out, however, workplace conversations center on social lives at the expense of outing a non-conforming individual. At each institution, personal life was a clear topic of conversation as well as a strong foundation for relationship building amongst peers and supervisors; I was clearly the minority in my discussion of my partner, commitment ceremony, and sexuality.

As a gay student affairs professional, I have insider positionality in regard to the workplace, field, and sexual orientation; the topic explores how historical representation and judgment of minority orientations have affected current perceptions and working relationships (Jung, 1995; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008). As a gay male, I have experienced moments where I must decide whether to disclose my sexuality, even in casual conversations, or stay “in the closet,” particularly when evaluating an advancement opportunity (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Swan, 1995). I must recognize that my experience as a gay individual may be different from other gay individuals, as well as those who are lesbian, e.g. some may feel sexual orientation does not contribute to their career trajectory at all.

Experiencing the workplace as a gay male, as a member of an underrepresented group, is only one dimension; however, male gender and white ethnicity do contribute to privilege in the workplace (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007). The power of white, male privilege may override any effects of sexual orientation discrimination; diving deeply into diverse perspectives may expand insight into similarities and differences based on multicultural participant experience.
While researchers may hope for, as Jupp and Slattery (2006) noted, a “color blind” approach to research, positionality affects the way a scholar practitioner shapes research questions, interacts with constituencies, and interprets data. Specifically, recognizing and acknowledging how my identities have shaped my career and personal development will be important. By acknowledging positionality, the scholar practitioner has the edge of ensuring their work does not purposefully confirm their hypothesis just to reaffirm a position of power.

**Research Question**

The study is guided by the following research question:

- How do LGBTQ CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation, and disclosure have impacted their professional progression and identity?

**Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks serve to provide a foundation for a research study and, particularly in qualitative work, assist in the direction of interpretation (Rocco & Plakhotnick, 2009). This study utilizes queer theory to interrogate how sexuality may impact the professional identity of queer chief student affairs officers; queer theory aims to articulate the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals within a normed environment, recognizing that experiences may differ widely when sexual orientation and gender expression, and societal expectations, are utilized as the lens for evaluation. Queer theory examines power differentials based on sexual orientation and gender expression, while critiquing the systems that formed those gendered expectations (Butler, 1999; McIntosh, 1968; Sedgwick, 1990; Spargo, 1999).

**Queer theory.** In the 1960s and 1970s, research into non-heterosexual life was typically titled gay and lesbian studies (Halperin, 2003). During this time, research shifted from seeing homosexuality as a deformity to acknowledging sexuality as a socially constructed label that
provided privilege to some and allowed others to be treated as outcasts (Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 2003; Spargo, 1999). In her seminal work, McIntosh (1968) recognized the power of society to deem certain behaviors “permissible” and others “impermissible” and shifted the view of the homosexual from a condition to a role individuals have (p. 183).

**Figure 1:** An illustration of the focal points of Lesbian and Gay studies as described by Stein and Plummer (1994).

Applying poststructuralist research paradigms to sexual orientation, Michael Foucault (1978) argued that societal behavior must be witnessed as a performance and therefore deconstructed and re-read to analyze what is considered normal and why. This includes a re-reading of media (films, music, and images) and analyzing social and political power relations stemming from sexual orientation as a “constructed category” in everyday behaviors and observations (Spargo, 1999, p. 12). Lesbian and gay studies began to focus on the issues
important to that community, attempting to provide voice to, and celebrate the culture of, the marginalized individuals.

Queer theory shifted the focus less on the marginalized people and more of the social practices that created the marginalization through sexual hierarchy (Giffney, 2004; Halperin, 2003; Pinar, 2003; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Queer theory attempts to make explicit Marxist-like power struggles. Dilley (1999) and Halperin (2003) each articulate queer theory’s ability to identify power struggles similar to Marxist theories. As Marxist theorists evaluate class (bourgeois versus proletariat) and feminists analyze gender (masculine and feminine), it is the role of the queer theorist to expose and analyze the binary of heterosexual and non-heterosexual, and the associated performances of gender expression (Butler, 1990, Dilley, 1999; Warner, 1992; Young, 1992).

By seeing normality as subjective and hierarchical, queer theorists deconstruct what is “said” and “unsaid” and place sexual orientation and gender performance at the center of discussion to evaluate marginalization and oppression (Dilley, 1999; Halperin, 2003; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Queer theory also argues that labels, such as lesbian and gay, create unequal experiences and may prioritize heterosexuality as a social stable (Jagose, 1996; Young, 1992). For example, evaluating a college student’s experience from a queer perspective would focus on how their sexuality affected their day-to-day experiences and how the institution itself re-enforced heterosexuality as normative (Kasch & Abes, 2007). In addition, queer theory also focuses on society’s preoccupation with sexual orientation as an identifier: Eve Sedgwick, an activist and researcher in queer studies, recalls a time when, during an interview, the interviewer was preoccupied with her marital status and sexuality, even more so when she refused to give it because it had nothing to do with the conversation (Dilley, 1999).
In research, queer theory is argued to be a perfect lens for evaluating non-normative expressions of sexuality orientation and heterosexism, and how disparities between expression and expectations are treated (Butler, 1990; Halperin, 2003; Young, 1992). In general, the theorist may focus on the lives of non-heterosexual individuals as they reside in, as described by Foucault (1978), a normed world, and does so juxtaposing their experiences to their heterosexual counterparts. Finally, it critiques why LGBTQ experiences are even explored as “outside of the norm” (Dilley, 1999, p. 462). Rubin (1984) explores behaviors that are deemed as normal in her Charmed Circle diagram, where deviant behaviors are considered outsiders—the homosexual individual as one of them.

![Figure 2: Rubin’s (1984) Charmed Circle](image)

Queer theory challenges the institutions that prioritize heterosexuality and make deviant all non-conforming practices. Through this interrogation of all normative behavior, queer theory
Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression of homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual power regimes...the constitution of self and society.” (Seidman, 1995, p. 128).

Queer theory sees sexuality as social construction (Stein & Plummer, 1994).

Queer theory focuses on the construction of heterosexual identity as much as non-conforming identities. It is critical of all institutions, even those not typically associated with sexuality, to assess how it may contribute to dominant ideologies.

Figure 3: Based on Rubin’s (1984) Charmed Circle, this figure illustrates the overall societal elements which Queer Theory attempts to deconstruct, as described by Dilley (1999) and Stein and Plummer (1994).

After being pioneered by Foucault (1978) and expanding upon LGBTQ issues, queer theory researchers such as Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) provide opportunities to reflect on societal behaviors that perpetuate heteronormativity and marginalize the experience of non-heterosexuals (Dilley, 1999; Giffney, 2004). Research has been applied to not only societal issues of oppression, but also the education system and literary works that contribute to the normalization of heterosexuality (Sumara & Davis, 1999). In higher education, queer theory has been utilized in identifying the struggles of lesbian and gay students within higher education.
and how these students perceive and advocate for support on their campuses (Abes, 2009; Kasch & Abes, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

As Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) note, the experiences of those within the “socially constructed margins,” “drawing attention to previously unexplored perspectives,” is one of the goals for queer theory (p. 584). Queer theory has often been the lens used to explore the perspective of higher education faculty, students, and staff, and how sexuality has impacted otherwise normal experiences. For example, self-identified gay, black students may experience the job search differently than non-gay black students so a queer perspective focuses on how sexuality changes the experience (Harris, 2014). Researchers in higher education have used queer theory particularly to uncover the experiences of queer students (Abes, 2009; Kasch & Abes, 2007)

As a queer theory perspective on student development may account for college students' interactions with and resistance of heteronormative structures, using queer theory to examine the experiences LGBTQ chief student affairs officers may allow for a retelling with a focus on how disclosure impacted the leadership experience (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

Definitions of Key Terminology

- LGBTQ: This acronym, standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer is an acronym widely accepted within student affairs when talking about marginalized sexual orientations (Renn, 2007).

- Disclosure: The “act of revealing personal information about oneself to another” (Collins & Miller, 1994).

- Gatekeepers: Individuals, typically in positions of formal or informal power, who perpetuate stigma with any non-conforming or minority individual (Coleman, 2012, p.
601). In this study, with the lens of queer theory, this would be an individual enforcing heteronormativity and/or heterosexism by rejecting an individual of non-conforming sexuality.

- **Heteronormativity:** Aligns with the gender binary of male and female and makes the assumption of opposite sex attraction. It is an assumption of heterosexual romantic relationships (Jung, 1995; Warner, 1993).

- **Sexuality:** Similar to the use of the word queer, sexuality incorporates an inclusive view of sexual orientation (a desire of specific genders) and also includes how individuals express their gender, identify their gender, and who they are physically and emotionally attracted to. Sexuality is inclusive and holistic (Brickell, 2006; Foucault, 1978).

- **Sexual Minority:** Any individual whose sexual orientation is not part of normative, accepted culture. Traditionally referred to as non-heterosexual individuals (Gender Equity Resource Center, 2013).

- **Student Affairs Professionals:** Professionals in higher education dedicated to developing students as “whole” individuals, and to complement the academic mission of the institution usually through career guidance, counseling, and overall management of the on-campus, often residential, experience (Nuss, 2003).

- **Queer:** Lugg and Tooms (2010) argue that queer is an inclusive term in its view of sexuality and gender as a spectrum, a term that relates to any sexuality expression which is nonheterosexual (Doty, 1993). To refer to participants in this study, and to align with a discussion that is not just focused on sexual orientation but also inclusive of gender expression and gender expectations, the researcher utilizes queer, “an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginalized sexual self-identifications” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1).
Many researchers recognize the word was once verbally abusive but has been reclaimed as an identifier.
Chapter II: The Literature Review

Higher education is fertile ground for minority student development, and student affairs professionals are charged with creating inclusive learning environments for their students, but few studies have focused on the work experience of LGBTQ+ student affairs professionals (Croteau, 1996; Croteau & Lark, 1995; Rankin, 2005). The experiences of faculty and students have been explored, which include how these constituents assess their campus climates, decide to disclose their minority status as non-heterosexuals, and how these issues affect their workplaces (Renn, 2007; Vaccaro, 2012, Sears, 2002).

As more than 50% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) employees nationally do not reveal their sexual or gender identities in the workplace, and lesbian and gay professionals continually choose whether to “come out” in their work environments among their heterosexual counterparts often, in doing so, facing or fearing workplace discrimination, gaining insight into the perceived workplace climate of queer student affairs professionals will assist in developing practical ways to encourage inclusive workplace cultures (Croteau & Lark, 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2014b; Jung, 1995; Morrow, Gore, & Campbell, 1996).

The literature is organized into the following sections: managing identity within the workplace, the development of student affairs, and the persistence of heteronormativity and workplace discrimination for lesbian and gay higher education professionals and students.

Managing Multiple Identities within the Organization

The “Lavender” ceiling. Workplace discrimination has persisted even as public acceptance and inclusive policies, private and public, have evolved (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007). These systemic barriers within the workplace for openly gay and lesbian
employees have been called the lavender ceiling (Swan, 1995). Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, and Sürgevil (2011) call discrimination due to sexual orientation one of the last socially acceptable prejudices within the workforce. Because queer professionals are charged with creating an inclusive environment for student development and creating advocacy opportunities for their queer students, conversations must explore their own experiences and unveil the challenges they face in revealing their orientations due to potential workplace discrimination.

Because of myriad of ways sexual orientation may impact workplace socialization and effective performance, queer student affairs professionals also face the possibility of discrimination within promotion to higher leadership opportunities. As a boundary to advancement, the lavender ceiling defines the explicit policies and implicit beliefs that may impede career mobility (Swan, 1995). Lavender ceiling practices impact application review (Croteau, 1996; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), tenure for faculty (Messinger, 2011), salary and compensation (Wright & Smith, 2013), job loss (Wright & Smith, 2013), and overall workplace comfort (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009).

Renn (2007) notes that LGBTQ young adults develop into advocates on college campuses, prompting increased outness of younger students; because of their advocacy tendency, individuals may, however, be consistently asked to speak on behalf of their marginalized community and feel tokenized (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Russell & Bohan, 2016). Within the workplace, lavender ceiling policies serve as a boundary to this pattern, as the lack of queer leaders becomes a lack of role models for emerging queer professionals. Lavender ceiling practices may impact career choices if that career choice does not fit into gender normative assumptions, such as a male, gay teacher (Morrow et al., 1996; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rocco & Gallagher, 2006; Swan, 1995).
Professional identity construction. An individuals’ sexual orientation, race, gender, religion, and social class, among other contextual factors, become influential to an individual’s core identity, and may be amplified or suppressed based on the context an individual is operating within (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Abes et al. argue that a meaning-making filter is applied by individuals based on their environments. As individuals make sense of their organizations’ values, they enact professional identities that allow them to be successful within the constraints of their organizational cultures.

Since group affiliation is important to success, an individual constructs a professional identity that likely prioritizes factors that the organization and its members will accept as normative and suppresses factors that may ostracize. The construction of identity recognizes that individuals have multiple dimensions of identity and must manage what dimensions are seen and what remains unseen (Abes et al., 2007; Roberts, 2005). Roberts recognizes a “bottom up tactic” enacted by organization members as they decide how to “leverage” positive aspects to their individual diversity components while minimizing diversity components that may generate a conflict from the organizational culture (p. 687).

For individuals who feel their sexual orientations are not accepted as a valued diversity component, disclosure of sexual orientation may cause conflict and lack of group connectedness. Anticipation of conflict or discrimination is a factor in disclosure of sexual orientation when managing professional identity (Croteau, 1996). If queer employees feel disclosing their personal identities is not acceptable while at work, they will choose to remove this part of their identities from their professional identity constructions (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). This may be demonstrated through professional attire that reinforces heteronormative culture (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). At times, individuals may feel they need to have multiple identities from which
they pick and choose for the context in which they are operating (“closeted, completely out, or selectively out”) (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009, p. 93; Kwon, 2013).

**The Development of Student Affairs**

As a relatively new field in comparison to higher education in general, student affairs has the task of engaging students on a co-curricular level (Hughes, 1989). Prior to the advent of student affairs, faculty members filled the role of “dean” or other moral developers of students on university campuses in loco parentis (Fenske, 1980; NASPA, 1989). Where faculty often ran classes and managed extracurricular life, the separation of these duties occurred at the same time institutions of higher education no longer simply focused on intellectual preparation, but also preparing students holistically for adulthood (Fenske, 1980; Nuss, 2003).

As the separation became more prevalent, the roles also became more defined for the professionals stepping into these positions. Through a difficult transition from faculty deans to student affairs personnel, education requirements, focus on student development theory, and an understanding of complex issues such as discipline and enrollment became more defined (Bloland, 1979; Dewey, 1972). Now, student affairs professionals have contemporized, focusing on student development, inclusivity, co-curricular learning, and fostering a campus climate conducive to learning (Nuss, 2003).

Student affairs professionals are also charged by their campuses to be supportive ambassadors to building inclusive communities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Because they focus on out of the classroom experiences, student affairs professionals often cultivate first-year students into student leaders and activists and address issues of racism, gender bias, and sexual orientation discrimination among students. Promoting identity
development seems to be a major component of the profession (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Chief student affairs officers, as senior leaders in student affairs at each institution (and, likely on the president’s cabinet), cultivate student development among the professionals reporting to them, and advocate for fiscal resources for co-curricular and holistic learning (Lovell & Kosten, 2000). While in the early stages faculty deans may have had a long-standing history at one particular institution, the needs of the position now call for a diversified career preparation, with many CSAOs changing institutions six times and having nearly 20 years of professional experience (Biddix, 2011).

Non-Heterosexual Perspectives in Higher Education

The higher education campus is usually seen as one of the liberal environments, fertile ground for identity development and acceptance of diverse identities (Poynter & Washington, 2005). Particularly the work of student affairs professionals, focusing on co-curricular, out of the classroom personal development, is expected to facilitate development of identity (Poynter & Washington, 2005; Rankin, 2005). The Human Rights Campaign identified 567 out of 4,391 colleges and universities that offer antidiscrimination policies based on sexual orientation, while 309 offered same-sex partner health-care benefits. Only 387 protected against gender identity (as cited in Messinger, 2011).

Although queer-related advocacy may be a priority for many institutions of higher education, many queer faculty and staff continue to feel a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality and forced invisibility (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2013). Particularly, “gayness” seems to be silenced and “heterosexuality…routinely assumed” (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009, p. 89). Since heteronormativity is often propagated by heterosexual
individuals, D’Augeilli (1989) promotes that any adjustment to decentralize heteronormativity must start heterosexual individuals see other sexualities also as normal and accepted.

**Assessing campus climate.** When assessing campus climate, multiple factors determine visibility, support, and safety. Rankin and Reason (2008) perceived climate to include beliefs, standards, attitudes, and behaviors of the members of the campus community, influenced by policies, relationships, curriculum, and other institutional priorities. Campus climate, for queer individuals, is viewed through experiences of homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia (Rankin, 2003).

Tooms (2007) compared deconstruction and analysis of these cues as a dance, with partners communicating cues, each deciphering messages from the other. By interacting with other organizational members, individuals observe behavioral patterns on multiple levels and perceive organizational priorities. Through this judgment process, an individual will evaluate whether their values and beliefs align with those of the organization’s members and, in turn, the organization as a system; the member will decide whether he or she feels a part or separated from the group, and may lead to determination of commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). For queer individuals, the cues they observe can help them feel welcome and a member of the organization’s culture or can affect job advancement and organizational inclusion (Human Rights Campaign, 2014b).

Rankin (2003; 2005) explored fourteen campuses with 1,669 self-identified respondents. The study explored frequency of verbal and nonverbal harassment, fear of attack, as well as friendliness toward non-heterosexual individuals, who supported individuals, and how diversity was discussed in the curriculum (Barry Chung, 2003; Rankin, 2003; 2005; Vaccaro, 2012). Little and Marx (2002) found similar climate assessments of college campuses.
In addition to quantitative surveys to provide a generalized idea of the experiences of queer individuals, thicker descriptions help gain insight into particular experiences and contexts. Assessments also must take into account the various contexts in which higher education professionals work. Climates vary depending on academic factors such as faculty discipline, collective group membership such as fraternities, or location factors, such as community residence halls (Rankin, Hesp, & Weber, 2013). Faculty perceived campus climate based on interpersonal interactions with peers, the level of support, and organization policies that legitimatized relationships (Messinger, 2011).

An important aspect to campus climate is entering students’ attitudes. Wright and Smith (2013) argued that homophobia was present within public K-12 education, which affected students’ attitudes. Fifield (2004) chronicled the harassment by students of their student teacher, including hostile and derogatory remarks. Russ, Simonds, and Hunt (2002) noted that classroom “outness” affected teacher ratings based on student perception of sexual orientation. With prominent queer individuals not being recognized in curriculum, visibility for students of queer young adults is limited (Wright & Smith, 2013).

Campus climate is often seen as a “singular organizational-level” experience (Vaccaro, 2012). Research into subgroups, subcultures, and intersecting identities, however, can shed light into the lived experiences of the subculture and highlight differences in those experiences (Schein, 2010). When looking into subgroups on the higher education campus, students (Poynter & Washington, 2005; Renn, 2007; Vaccaro, 2005), faculty (Messinger, 2011), and administrators (Croteau & Lark, 2009) are the primary subgroups utilized in the research.

**Student-centered research.** Although research assessing the lived experiences of graduate students exists (Vaccaro, 2012), a majority of research on queer identity development
within higher education focuses on undergraduate student development (Abes et al., 2007; Bullard, 2013; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Renn, 2007; 2010). One particular area of focus is managing the multiple identities students may have and encouraging them to manage identities in a way that does not amplify one to the detriment of another (Abes et al., 2007; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Renn, 2007). Positive management of multiple identities is the primary role of the student affairs professional (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Rankin, 2005; Renn, 2007; 2010) as well as creating safe spaces for all campus community members (Vaccaro, 2012).

Research for student-related issues or discrimination is prevalent in the literature (Liddle & Stowe, 2002; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). Particularly, research into LGBTQ student needs has become a national trend since the harassment of queer college students nationally by their peers (Woodford et al., 2014). One determining factor in campus satisfaction by queer students included the interpersonal relationships and interactions with fellow students (Vaccaro, 2012).

The literature also focuses on intervention programs to assist with heteronormative language and attitudes (Liddle & Stowe, 2002; Woodford et al., 2014). Intervention programs help gain insight into the discrimination and oppression experiences of queer people, mostly to assist the developmental needs of students, such as making classrooms more queer inclusive (Woodford et al. 2014). Students found disparity between the way faculty provided instruction to queer students in comparison to their heterosexual peers and also felt an invisibility (or need to be invisible) on campus (Tetreault et al., 2013). Students also reported negative campus climate being influenced by faculty use of “antigay rhetoric” (Vaccaro, 2012, p. 434).

Much of this work becomes the role of faculty who serve as advocates or of student affairs professionals (Liddle & Stowe, 2002). Although student development is an important
aspect of the work of student affairs professionals, very few studies focus on managing multiple identities from the perspectives of the employees (Renn, 2010; Vaccaro, 2012).

**Faculty.** Sears (2002), researching institutional climate, found nearly 50% of faculty at public institutions rated their institutions as gay neutral, intolerant, or hostile; only 12% rated their institutions as affirmative, with the vast majority (41%) finding their institutions “tolerant” (p. 18). While private institutions were more likely to have affirmative (44%) or tolerant environments (44%), tolerant alludes to a mentality of don’t ask, don’t tell. Faculty perception of discrimination includes factors such as hearing homophobic remarks and the ability to share personal experiences (Sears, 2002); their factors for perception of discrimination are similar to those that impact the larger workforce (benefit denial, fear of termination, lack of ability to be open at company events) (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

Faculty performance appraisal is largely based on students’ evaluations of the instructor’s performance. Similar to larger workforce employees indicating higher rates of job satisfaction when openly out of the closet (Tsui et al., 1991), faculty also reported feeling a sense of “freedom” and authenticity when they were out in their classrooms (Orlov & Allen, 2013, p. 1033). However, because of potential negative student feedback and widespread reported homophobia within academia many faculty chose not to disclose their sexualities as to not jeopardize their tenure track positions (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Messinger, 2011; Renn, 2010; Sears, 2002).

Faculty reported discrimination ranging from homophobic slurs (Vaccaro, 2012) to poor evaluations (Bilimoria and Stewart, 2009; Vaccaro, 2012). A majority of faculty noted that discrimination was more verbal and implicit, compared to the physical dangers of earlier decades (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Herek, 1990; Nardi & Bolton, 1991). Much of the qualitative
feedback provided was based off behaviors associated with being a non-heterosexual teacher, listing items such as a raised voice or flamboyant mannerisms as distractions (Bilimoria and Stewart, 2009; Russ et al., 2002). Because faculty members often have shared governance in organizational curriculum and policy development, they frequently become advocates for underrepresented groups (Messinger, 2011). Messinger (2011) reported faculty waited to advocate for LGBTQ issues until they received tenure, and faculty also discouraged colleagues from advocacy until they received tenure. Even in faculty selection, potential candidates may be told to tone down their appearances during an interview or not discuss their partners out of fear that sexual orientation may become a selective factor (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). This coincides with national research on LGBTQ potential employees being passed over for selection due to their sexual orientations (King & Cortina, 2010; Tilcsik, 2011)

**Student affairs administrators.** Although studies of faculty experience are present (Messinger, 2011; Sears, 2002; Russ et al., 2002), fewer studies have focused on the experience of student affairs professionals (Renn, 2010; Vaccaro, 2012). Though research is limited, student affairs professionals continually experience sexual orientation discrimination in various aspects of their career selection and development (Croteau & Lark, 2009; Croteau and von Destinon, 1994).

Student affairs professionals do report a higher level of openness within their field than the national average (Croteau & Lark, 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2014b). However, the more open the professional, the more likely they are to have perceived instances of discrimination (Croteau & Lark, 2009). Student affairs professionals who do not disclose their sexuality also report that they are overwhelmingly (96%) dissatisfied with being closeted, connecting to prior research correlating level of openness with job satisfaction (Bowring &
Brewis, 2009; Croteau, 1996; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Many student affairs professionals choose not to disclose their sexualities to avoid negative student perceptions, to avoid making others feel uncomfortable, and to avoid slander (Croteau, 1994; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2014b).

Particularly in job searches, student affairs professionals noted that openly gay or lesbian candidates were a topic of conversation within search committees and often were not hired (Croteau, 1994). Even if hired, many student affairs entry-level positions reinforce heteronormative and heterosexist attitudes. For example, in positions requiring on-campus living, residence policies may require partners be legally married; particularly in states where marriage between two same sex partners was, until recently, illegal, this practice would alienate queer individuals (Croteau & Lark, 2009); even though it may be now legal across the United States, the attitudes and perceptions that it should not be legal can play a factor in campus climate for queer professionals. Student affairs professionals reported less hostile environments, but noted that attitudes were still negative in general (for example, homophobic statements and words being used on a general, not individual, level) (Croteau & Lark, 2009).

**Chief student affairs officers (CSAO).** Studies focus primarily on entry-level or mid-level managers within student affairs, faculty, or students. Vaccaro (2012) acknowledges that staff roles vary with “different levels of autonomy and institutional power” (p. 439). A missing representative in the literature is the chief student affairs officer (CSAO).

**The college president.** The college and university president is seemingly the highest level of achievement within higher education. Yet, there are fewer than 40 college and university presidents that are openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Domi, 2010; Jaschik, 2010; LGBTQ Presidents, 2014). Role models are increasingly important in breaking through the
lavender ceiling (Orlov & Allen, 2013, Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rocco & Gallagher, 2006; Swan, 1995); often, however, role modeling is discouraged as LGBTQ individuals are accused of privileging members of their ingroup (Ayman & Korabik, 2010).

The college presidents, however, by being open, are creating a public forum to discuss diversity in a time when queer-related issues are making national attention. Specifically, having out senior leaders sends a message to emerging lesbian and gay professionals about being able to openly discuss their sexualities as an integral and accepted part of their identities, and aspire to achieve leadership positions previously reserved for heterosexual professionals (Domi, 2010; Jaschik, 2010).

**Changing landscape of LGBTQ issue awareness**

Over the past few years, awareness of queer-related bullying has increased (Woodward et al., 2013). Federal legislation for workplace protections has been introduced (Human Rights Campaign, 2014a) and marriage equality is spreading across the United States (Chuck, 2014). Recent empirical research on attitudes and climate is difficult to find. A cultural shift toward stigmatizing queer-related discrimination appears apparent, as the White House has consistently condemned queer-related discrimination (The White House, 2010) and encouraged marriage equality (Office of Public Affairs, 2011). There also appears to be an increasing push on the larger landscape of morality with conservative views of heterosexism being challenged on multiple forums, such as with the Boy Scouts of America’s discrimination policy against gay male participation (Apuzzo, 2014).

Within higher education specifically, increased policies for colleges and universities have been evolving to provide same-sex partners with similar benefits as married, different sex partners. Advocacy work has also been more accepted than in previous years (Messinger 2011).
Particularly, heterosexual individuals are also combating normative assumptions and have become partners in queer advocacy (Messinger, 2011).

**Summation**

**Thesis statement.** As of recent, more than 50% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employees do not reveal their sexual or gender identities in the workplace based on fear of discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2014b). The lavender ceiling is a barrier for queer employees even as public acceptance of queer identity appears to be evolving (Embrick et al., 2007; Swan, 1995). If the lavender ceiling affects career decisions and career outcomes (hiring, promotion, tenure, and termination) for queer individuals nationally, it is important to gain insight into how these factors hinder job progression for student affairs professionals.

**Thesis analysis.** Although faculty experience has been greatly discussed in the literature, student affairs professionals have faced similar workplace discrimination but their experiences are not as highlighted except for a few seminal works (Croteau & Lark, 1995; 2009). While student affairs professionals are charged with creating an inclusive environment for student development and creating advocacy opportunities for their queer students, the scarce literature lacks the ability to help gain insight into their own workplace experience and shed light onto any challenges they face in managing their workplace identities with their LGBTQ orientations.

**Implications on practice, policy, or theory.** Many organizations are evolving and becoming inclusive environments for diversity. This inclusivity is beginning to address workplace discrimination for queer individuals. Queer friendly policies assist in the development of the inclusive environment (Bilimoria & Steward, 2009; Ng et al., 2012). However, while anti-discrimination policies may encourage inclusivity, it is the interpersonal relationships and attitudes that are the strongest predictors of positive climate perception (Vaccaro, 2012).
Workplace managers, including administration within higher education, can assist in combating discrimination by enacting organizational policies that strengthen the equality of queer employees. Enactment of organizational policies can be further beneficial by adding intervention programs that address heteronormative belief structures in the workplace in order to moderate interpersonal relationships.
Chapter III: Research Design

Queer chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) face unique challenges in ascending to leadership positions. As sexuality impacts the perception of professional credibility, queer professionals carefully construct their workplace identities, keeping in mind any social and political consequences of their non-heterosexual identities (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002). With most queer CSAOs having more than 20 years of higher education experience, many have been witness to a cultural, political, and social evolution of acceptance of non-heterosexual orientations but still may have experienced heteronormative job search practices and workplace discrimination (Becker, 2014; Becker & Todd, 2015; Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Law & Hrabal, 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rocco & Gallagher, 2006).

Through their careers, queer CSAOs have broken the proverbial lavender ceiling (Swan, 1995). This study gained insight into their lived experiences, sexuality disclosure decisions, and their perceptions of how sexuality impacts their leadership identities. This study also dove into the factors that led to their disclosure decisions.

The study was guided by the following research question:

- How do LGBTQ CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation and disclosure have impacted their professional progression and identity?

Although the study aimed to explore the individual differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer perspectives, participants in the study self-identified as seven gay men and one lesbian woman; since, in addition to sexual orientation, the ideas of gendered performance and gender expectations were explored, and aligning to queer
theory, the study refers to participants using the umbrella term, queer, unless talking about a specific participant’s experience (Dilley, 1999; Jagose, 1996)

**Qualitative Research Approach**

The qualitative research approach honors the lived experiences of participants. It also allows participants to share multiple perspectives and allows the researcher to conduct multiple interviews and observations (Creswell, 2013).

As a constructivist-interpretivist study, participants all experience their worlds differently and, in addition, each organization that a chief student affairs officer works within will be different, as are the experiences preceding the leadership role. All of these factors impact how the participant makes sense of their professional environment in relation to their positionalities. Similarly, potential inequities that cause a queer individual to remain closeted in the workplace would be uncovered and suggested for change (Burrell & Morgan, 2005). The researcher utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore in-depth experiences of CSAOs, particularly how sexuality has impacted the leadership and employment experiences.

IPA focuses on understanding the framework participants use when viewing the world. Moustakas, in his book *Heuristic Research*, focused on the ideology of hermeneutics—the act of interpreting (mostly) literature and recognizing that those interpreting the source material are bringing their own historical and contextual perspectives to their interpretations. In essence, Moustakas (1990) noted that every person understanding their own world or the world of another does so through their “internal frame of reference” (p. 26). Similarly, Husserl recognized the need for researchers to examine each experience as individualistic as each experience is impacted by individual factors; in addition, a phenomenological attitude refers to not studying an object but rather one’s perception of that object (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
IPA has found its guiding principles through more recent authors (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA focuses on “how people make sense of events, relationships, and processes in the context of their particular lifeworlds” (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 330). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) provided the foundations to IPA but also a practical guide to incorporating an IPA process to research.

As IPA focuses on thick description and on the lived experience, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to pose questions using a theoretical framework, and also allows for flexibility for additional themes not previously identified by the researcher to emerge. The semi-structured interview is the most frequent IPA data collection method (Clarke, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews encourage an interactive approach to in-depth interviewing, where the interviewer has a plan of action, or schedule (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin).

IPA utilizes homogeneous groups since all participants should have experienced the same phenomenon (Clarke, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). In order to stay closely tied to individual experiences and relay thick description from the participants, a small number of participants are incorporated in the study (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Having too few or too many participants may distract from providing rich, thick description (Finlay, 2009b). A suggested sample is eight to ten participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is well versed for studies that focus on extrapolating unique voices and is particularly useful for studies focusing on personal and cultural identity, as well as sexuality identity (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). A similar study regarding sexual orientation disclosure within higher education utilized a phenomenological approach (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014). Within the LGBTQ community, IPA began by focusing on health issues and has since found traction not
only exploring the lived experiences of participants (such as identity formation or disclosure), but also juxtaposing their queer identities within larger societal experiences such as education, parenting, and healthcare. It also allows for exploration of perceived barriers such as homophobia and heteronormativity, as these experiences are subjective and each individual makes sense of them differently (Reygan & Moane, 2014; Robinson, 2010; Skinta et al., 2014; Tasker, Barrett, & De Simone, 2010).

Participants

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and gender non-conforming participants were invited to participate in this study. Participants for this study identified as gay or lesbian. In addition, participants held a senior leadership position with student affairs functions within a college or university; typically, this was demonstrated by individuals with a vice president of student affairs, dean of students, or other chief student affairs officer title. In order to obtain participants, the researcher initially utilized a snowball sampling using direct contacts, as well as purposeful sampling to attempt gender equity, to recruit eight participants. The researcher utilized LGBTQ networks in the two dominant student affairs associations to advertise for potential participants: the National Association for Student Personnel Administrations (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (Nuss, 2003). NASPA and ACPA encourage dialogue among administrators and provide opportunities for distribution of best practices and news—each has affinity groups for LGBTQ members. Potential participants self-identified interest in the study by e-mailing the researcher (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013).

In addition, networking took place with the LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education consortium, which markets to professionals emerging into key leadership positions. Participants
were made aware of the research questions and the study’s intent. Research participants’ contact information was collected via individualized contact cards rather than a sign-up sheet to ensure privacy. Particularly around sexuality, where unintended disclosure can have social and political consequences, maintaining privacy and anonymity is vital (Parker & Gagnon, 2013). This was achieved by masking names through pseudonyms and ensuring descriptions are not identifying (Creswell, 2013). During a brief 5-10 minute intake telephone conversation with potential participants, the researcher determined if the respondent should be a participant.

**Procedures**

The researcher, using IPA, designed 3-5 interview questions which gathered thick description of the participants’ lived experiences through a semi-structured interview; the semi-structured interview allows for flexibility for additional themes not previously identified by the researcher to emerge (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Depending on location and/or preference of the CSAO, interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone and recorded (Hanna, 2012). Skype interviews allow interviewers to still assess body language and expressions when not in-person (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Hanna, 2012). These non-verbal cues are important aspects of detailing authenticity in an interview and, because the interview was played back at a later time for transcription, were more readily available to the interviewer (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). Lastly, Skype also may increase the participants’ self-reflection, as the participants could see their own video responses during the live interviews (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010).

Primary interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed by a transcribing service, and then transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the researcher and participant. Follow-up interviews for clarification were done remotely. Transcripts were renamed to protect the participant. The
records were kept on a local, password protected hard drive (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Data Analysis**

As an interpretative phenomenological analysis, this research utilized semi-structured interviews in order to allow participants to share their life experiences. Once data was collected, the researcher utilized a transcription service and downloaded each transcript. Transcripts were kept on a secure, password protected server.

Transcripts were analyzed individually so that themes could emerge. While Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend that researchers utilize their first emergent themes to inform their readings of the next transcript, this research allowed themes to emerge independently from each transcript and then compared for similarities and differences among the participants.

Transcripts were loaded into MAXQDA and the researcher utilized initial and in-vivo coding to analyze interview content. Upon a full list of codes, the researcher consolidated codes using focused and axial coding (Saldana, 2013). In-vivo coding is particularly useful in phenomenological studies to preserve thick, rich description in the participants’ own voices (Saldana, 2013); similar studies on sexuality disclosure, identity management, and intersectionality of roles and identities utilized in-vivo coding to stay as close to the participants’ language as possible (Fox & Warber, 2014; Palkki, 2015; Tillapaugh, 2013). Focused and axial coding allowed for in-vivo and initial quotes to be consolidated based on frequent themes to then create a core phenomenon. Axial coding described superordinate themes which had a variety of ranges, such as “How Gay Are You?” or “Second Class Citizen” which described lower level implicit bias compared to risk of physical harm. Tillapaugh (2013) similarly used axial coding to review initial codes and place them into clustered categories.
Ethical Considerations

In order for participants to be comfortable sharing their experiences, protections need to be in place that foster an open environment and protect the interviewees' experience (Creswell, 2013). Particularly, participants should have an understanding of the role of the research and how their participation will contribute to the direction. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect identifying information and transcripts were scrubbed of identifying locations and information; in my particular research, it was important that institution names and cities were transferred to pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Since interviews were also conducted mostly online, and the subject is sexual orientation disclosure, I was careful to disclose the data security of the video file and transcript (Sullivan, 2013). Quotes that were included in research needed to be carefully evaluated for identifying experiences where leaders may be able to be identified by their peers. This occurred through analysis of data in order to paint a picture of overall, composite experiences rather than individual experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness and validity within the study, the following steps were taken. Identifying positionality and bracketing experiences was important to ensure the author clarifies research bias. As a scholar practitioner, including my positionality as a gay male, I am familiar with student affairs as a profession and have experienced heteronormative organizational cultures. Because of that, even though the process was qualitative, I may have had a hypothesis of the experiences some participants identified. Bracketing my positionality allowed me to look at the participants’ experiences as unique. This took place through consistent reflection on assumptions.
It was important to recognize that the participant has the best understanding of his or her own experience and including participants throughout the study (member checking), such as allowing them to review and confirm their transcripts, was helpful to assure I was not making assumptions about implied meaning.

Finally, peer reviewing allowed another researcher the ability to review data, codes, and interpretations for general accuracy. Peer review also allowed opportunities to compare initial analyses.

**Potential Research Bias**

Researchers should identify biases upfront and acknowledge demographic positionality that may include language, ethnicity, sexuality orientation, and ability, and recognize their biases and positions of power to ensure they do not taint interpretation (Briscoe, 2005; Machi & McEnvoy, 2009). While researchers may hope for, as Jupp and Slattery (2006) noted, a “color blind” approach to research, positionality affects the way a scholar practitioner shapes research questions, interacts with constituencies, and interprets data. In addition, particularly when researchers share a similar affinity with participants, researchers must take more intentional care to present multiple perspectives and all data (not just data the researcher agrees with—the “Pollyanna” effect) (Creswell, 2013, p. 60).

As a gay student affairs administrator, I felt relatively connected to my participants’ experiences and had to “bracket” my experiences as actively as possible (Merriam, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Because IPA is a double hermeneutic, as the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense of an experience, researchers must actively engage their positionalities to identify why they are making sense of the data in the way they are.
Lastly, to ensure data is collected and analyzed with as little bias as possible, member checking is suggested. Here, to ensure “participants’ realities have been represented in the final account,” the researcher provided participants their transcripts as well as preliminary analyses (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). Having a close collaboration with participants through data collection and analysis helped to ensure credible data was utilized and presented.

**Limitations**

There were a few limitations on this study which need to be addressed. As CSAOs have multiple demands on their time and workloads, it was difficult scheduling interviews that aligned for their schedules.

In addition, higher education administrators who identify as LGBTQ may not have wished to identify their sexual orientations as playing a factor in their leadership style; in addition, they may not have perceived their orientations as being a factor, either positive or negative, in their professional identities, as Bullard (2015) found in his study of LGBTQ presidents. However, to encourage authentic conversation, the researcher explained the importance of the study, listened intently to the participants’ answers, and dove deeply into the participants’ stories by encouraging continuation of a story and asking for clarification. Finally, having interviews over Skype may have posed a barrier to seamless conversation due to technology constraints.

The purpose of an IPA study itself is to draw general conclusions while also honoring and staying close to the individual experience. While the researcher utilizes queer as an umbrella term to discuss the participants’ experiences, the researcher must acknowledge that all but one participant were openly gay men, so limitations in gender experience are present.
Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) who identify as gay or lesbian. This chapter is organized in the following sections: a review of the purpose, research questions, and methods; participant profiles; overview of themes; and a description of each theme and subtheme as it relates to the participants’ perceptions.

Purpose, Research Questions, and Methods Review

Through their careers, queer CSAOs have broken the lavender ceiling. This study gains insight into their lived experiences, sexuality disclosure decisions, and their perception of how sexuality impacts their leadership identity and career. This study also dives into the factors that led to their disclosure decisions.

The study was guided by the following research question:

- How do LGBTQ CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation, and disclosure have impacted their professional progression and identity?

Interviews were conducted via Skype, with all but one participant participating from their offices. Seven of the participants identified as male and one participant identified as female. Six of the participants were the designated chief student affairs officers at their institutions, one had served as a chief student affairs officer before ascending to a presidency, and one had been selected as a chief student affairs officer and would be starting his new position in a few weeks.

Participant Profiles

Each chief student affairs officer had varying years of experience in the field, including a diversity of institution type. To provide context to their experiences, participant profiles will follow. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and institutional names have been omitted.
Each biography includes generalized information about the participant’s institution, career experience, and perception of his or her disclosure in the workplace.

**David.** David identifies as a cisgender, gay male, and currently serves as the CSAO at a mid-sized community college in Pennsylvania. He has been in the field of student affairs for 26 years, getting first involved as an undergraduate while attending a small, private liberal arts college. Much of his undergraduate experience included advocacy work, including as a member and then president of the gay/straight/bisexual alliance. His path to his Vice Presidency includes what he terms the “traditional” path, starting in Residence Life and obtaining positions in undergraduate advising as a class dean and director of first year advising. His career spans work at small institutions, as well as midsized and large, public universities—this includes work at a Hispanic-serving, transition bi-lingual community college in New York. David achieved one of his master’s degrees while abroad in Spain.

David describes himself as being “fully out in all aspects of [his] life.” He describes his undergraduate years as being full of gay pride (“I was out and gay and not compromising”), where he was a strong advocate for gay rights. He noted that he has always felt safe being out.

**Craig.** Craig identifies as a masculine, gay male. Craig recently assumed the role of CSAO at a small, private, liberal arts institution in Pennsylvania. He has been in the field for approximately 20 years and began his interest in student affairs via residence hall leadership as an undergraduate student. Identifying as introverted and guarded, he contributes his leadership experiences as an undergraduate with expanding his leadership abilities. For the past 15-plus years, Craig had served in various residence life capacities at the same institution in the Midwest. His first position was at a faith-based institution, which he left at the end of his second year.
When asked for his orientation, Craig noted that he is “gold star gay” and this was present in his disclosure as well. He slowly disclosed his identity early in his career (and only came out to his family at age 25). Only in his first position was he not fully out, as he felt the need to be discreet and that being out would have significant ramifications in the workplace.

**Tyler.** Tyler identifies as a cisgendered, gay male. Tyler has served in the role of CSAO at a private college in Ohio for 15 years, where he has built his division from the ground up. Tyler notes that he was raised as a conservative, fundamentalist Christian which impacted his identity and educational plans. He attended a religious institution in Alabama, attended a seminary, and began working in his first professional position at a large, private, Christian institution. Prior to his role as CSAO, he worked in residence life, new student programs, and leadership programs.

Tyler is out. He recalls earlier in his career not being “ready to own” his orientation publicly in the workplace: “I was not ready to be the poster child.” Now, he identifies his sexuality as just a part of his identity and is open about his personal experiences.

**Carl.** Carl identifies a gay, cisgendered male. Carl has served at his current institution, a private, liberal arts college in Connecticut, for nearly 20 years. At his current institution, he began as a dean of students and ascended after about 10 years to his CSAO role. Carl grew up in upstate New York and attended an Ivy League institution for his undergraduate career—crediting his undergraduate experience with his first exposure to students from diverse backgrounds. Carl began his career as a residence assistant and progressed through residence life. He has worked at public and private institutions in New England.
Carl is out in his work and professional life and notes that it is important to live openly and authentically. Carl remembers coming out in his first position at a staff meeting and while most were supportive, he was described as being “too optimistic in terms of the receptivity.”

Patrick. Patrick identifies a gay man. For the past six years, Patrick has served as a CSAO at a multi-campus community college in Pennsylvania. He grew up in Florida and identified as being “deeply religious.” He began his career as an undergraduate student at a community college in “the deep south” and secured positions at his alma mater in enrollment and orientation. He then accepted another position at a community college in another conservative state before taking on his current role.

Patrick notes that he disclosed his sexuality personally at 21, slowly disclosing his orientation to himself, friends, and family until 25 when he no longer proactively hid his sexuality. Earlier in his career, while out, he kept the details of his private life to himself, but now feels that he is able to be open about sharing parts of his life—particularly to be “a good example for others who may be struggling.”

Patricia. Patricia identifies as a lesbian woman. Although she currently serves as a president of a mid-sized, public institution, she served as a CSAO for 10-plus years at a public university in the Midwest. She entered student affairs via undergraduate work in residence life and student activities. She notes that her first job “was very glamorous,” working the 3am to 6am shift as a security desk attendant in the residence halls. Her career spans 35 years in higher education.

Patricia has disclosed her sexuality in all aspects of her professional work. She notes that her level of disclosure is much more comfortable now than in the past, when disclosure may
have led to acts of violence and safety concerns: “In the 70’s and 80’s…when you’re out, you are putting yourself in harm’s way.”

**Marc.** Marc identifies as a gay male. Marc has served as the CSAO for a private institution in the Midwest since 2011, with his career spanning 25-plus years. His academic and professional careers span multiple institution types, including large public, small art, mid-sized religious, and small, private. He has worked in academic advising, orientation, and generalist student affairs.

Marc quickly identified as someone who has private and professional lives which he keeps very separate. While he is considered out in his personal and professional lives, he keeps the details of his personal life private and noted that there are “some of my friends who don’t know what I do for a living.”

**Manuel.** Manuel identifies as a cisgender, gay male. Manuel was born and raised in Portugal and notes that, based on his upbringing, he was expected to fill the “immigrant blue collar” lifestyle—attending college was not an expectation and his family did not have a basic understanding of higher education. He began to live on-campus as a resident assistant and began his student affairs career as a graduate hall director while obtaining his master’s. He continued his trajectory in residence life and student activities at mid-sized public and private institutions.

He describes himself as an advocate for LGBT students. Manuel has disclosed his sexuality to his friends and professional colleagues, but notes that his family and hometown are not aware of his sexual orientation: “Oh my gosh, these folks would rather believe that I can’t find a wife than I’m gay.”
Overview of Themes

In reviewing the transcripts of each participant, overarching, emergent themes arose which each participant experienced to varying levels. To stay close to the participants’ voices, major themes were reflected by a substantial quote given by one or more participant. The emergent themes were: being the “Big Gay On-Campus,” feeling like a “Second Class Citizen,” that experiences are tied to “the specific individual, the specific place,” and the question “how gay are you?” Each superordinate theme included subthemes; a count of those counts by theme and participant is indicated within table 1.

Table 1
Sum of codes within superordinate and subordinate theme by theme and participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Patrick</th>
<th>Marc</th>
<th>Manuel</th>
<th>Patricia</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Tyler</th>
<th>Carl</th>
<th>Craig</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Big Gay on Campus&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>NO</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td><strong>63</strong></td>
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Theme: “The Big Gay on Campus.” All of the participants stated they felt as though their sexuality became an integral component of how others perceived them and that, at times, they were tapped on the shoulder to be the voice of the queer experience. This was particularly salient around queer-related policies and procedures which impacted students, faculty, and staff.

As Marc pointed out, “I’ve definitely been tapped on the shoulder or been asked to speak on behalf of the community to inform policies, decisions, processes and I’m okay with that.” While some felt the role was placed upon them, others were self-appointed based on their interest and competency in intercultural and social justice programming and advocacy. Craig described his role as self-appointed: “I describe myself as the big gay on campus.”

Serving the role of Big Gay typically revolved around social-justice related policies and procedures. Another subtheme is how the participant appointed themselves in the role or how they simply accepted that role. Finally, participants explored how being the Big Gay is a tokenizing experience.


“I think of student affairs and um, higher ed, I think that we have, we’re more aware of a host of issues around identity” – Craig

All participants agreed that student affairs staff tend to have a social-justice inclination and orientation. As Manuel pointed out, student affairs seems to be the place where “the two most defining things as an individual and a professional,” his sexuality and passion for social justice, “intersect.” Specifically, Patrick surmised that “inclusion and acceptance” are “the center of…the culture of student affairs.” While Patrick hypothesized that the field itself was compassionate towards marginalized groups, Patricia later noted that she experienced, from individuals in the field, situations which were discriminatory and noted that not all practitioners share the passion for diversity. So much so, that Patricia was forced to advocate without
identifying herself; “I was extremely articulate and clear on positions of principle and values and ethics, in the third person.” And, because others might question his rationale or positions, Tyler did not often acknowledge his sexuality in his advocacy when of working with students on an queer policy change:

   It was already something that we were working on but she wanted to advocate for it. And I ... I didn't say I'm one of you. I care because I'm one of you. I just care. And I'm with you on this. And she walked away and I don't ... She walked away and I don't even know if she knew I was gay.

   Tyler noted that because of his sexuality, he was inclined to support social-justice related endeavors:

   I mean I am very committed to social justice, first of all, and because I have also lived on the margins in my own life that I, um, in terms of my social identity that I can empathize with others who live at margins.

   Similarly, participants are often envisioned as the go-to person for education and change.

   As Craig points out, he was identified early as a change agent for queer initiatives:

   I really have been identified as a change agent, I think, in terms of moving forward the conversation around LGBTQ inclusion, especially around the TQ plus sorts of identities on our campus

   Carl similarly noted that his passion for social justice was not limited to LGBTQ+ issues, but many instances of diversity and inclusion:

   I was doing a lot of diversity consulting, a lot of training, not just around GLB and then GLBT issues but really around race and ethnicity…There was really kind of a resonance
for me in understanding kind of an inter-sexuality and understanding some of the challenges faced by, uh, people of color, different social classes, different genders, etc.

As David and Craig point out, sometimes an queer staff member may receive heightened scrutiny for their commitment to queer causes and why they are advocating for this cause over another. David was continually questioned when he wanted to hold LGBTQ+ awareness weeks, with students, staff, and administrators questioning “why are you putting this in our parents' faces?” David continued:

> You know, we put lesbian, gay, bisexual awareness days at during that week, because that was something that was national, happening for that reason. Right? Um, uh ... As we did with other weeks.

This scrutiny continues for budget decisions that others may perceive blend personal life with social justice advocacy, as Craig points out:

> I do send some budget dollars to LGBTQ stuff that could go in a lot of different places.

> Um, but I send it there because I think that's important. I send money to uh, you know, to ... to services that support students of color, too

**Subtheme: Self-Appointed/Accepted Role.** Because of their sexuality, some participants described either appointing themselves to be the Big Gay on Campus, or how they came to terms with accepting the role. In some instances, the role was emergent when a need on-campus existed and intersected with the identity of the participant, such as Manuel:

> My early career in most other places that I worked at, um, it had either no LGBT student group or a struggling LGBT student group. Uh, and because I was out I was, and because I was in student affairs and, an early part of my career because I lived on campus I was tapped to either, uh, advise or co-advise the, the student organization
Patrick described being asked to speak at LGBTQ+ related functions and noted that “I don't think if, if it was a straight person in my seat that they would be asked.” Carl noted that he automatically thinks about his sexuality and positionality when he is being sought out as the Big Gay on Campus:

It…comes to mind when I think I'm being sought out as a resource person for GLBT folks and/or when some um, queer or trans or GLB folks are talking with me about some sort of policy or proposal that they have.

Patricia similarly noted also being asked to speak at LGBTQ+ functions:

Ah, probably where it's most poignant is where I would be asked to speak as a, cause as vice chancellor, you know, often, you know, you're asked around, within campus or in town, to be a speaker.

Craig was the only participant who described a personal responsibility to serve in the role, being the first participant to describe himself as “the big gay on campus.” While some other participants talked about a reluctance to serving as the representative for all things queer, Craig noted he felt “not a pressure, but a personal responsibility.” This personal responsibility corresponded with his active engagement in his sexuality, where he noted he was “very gay” and then “gold star gay.”

**Subtheme: “The Tokenism Is Real.”** A more prevalent subtheme across all participants was the notion that participants felt tokenized by their sexuality at many stages of their career. As Tyler points out:

The tokenism is real. And it does happen. You know, I ... I don't ... I try not to let myself get put in that position. I was not ready to be the poster child, if you will, for, you know, look at this gay person on our staff.
Tyler discussed an experience earlier in his career when he saw a visible queer individual being placed on a public forum, speaking for all LGBTQ+ individuals:

You know, where she was the spokesperson for the LGBT experience and, um, I did not want to be that. That ... I ... You know I'm unlikely to come out at this campus because I didn't want to be forced on this pedestal... And oh my god, they paraded her out at every turn about diversity.

While Tyler did not want to be the “poster child,” he finds in his role as a CSAO on a different campus, he still becomes the “litmus test” for approval:

So often I will be at a cabinet meeting, for example, and something will come up about sexual identity or gender identity. And, you know, heads turn. They look at me. And I'm sure this is what women face or anyone else with a visible identity that they become either the litmus test or how people will react about it.

Tyler describes an incident in a cabinet meeting where his institution was discussing offering partner benefits:

And people looked at me, right? Because I'm the only non-heterosexual person on the senior cabinet...And I've always been really careful about it because I didn't want to be, you know, the guy who is always carrying the pride banner around campus. Because it's one of my identities. And it's an important one. But it's not how I want everyone to know me.

In another incident, Tyler remembered when the cabinet, unbeknownst to him, removed sexuality from the discrimination statement:

And they started to move on, uh, to another topic and I said stop. I said, uh, you hired me as the Dean of Students to advocate students and to advise you …what does it say that we
no longer have this in our statement … You know, I can tell you students are looking at it. Particularly, LGBTQ students and when we don't have it in ours, that's going to say something to them. And I took this manual ... I was so mad I took it and I threw it on the table and it like slid across the table. And I thought, oh shit that was pretty dramatic.

Manuel similarly noted he serves as the sole answerer to questions regarding queer issues. Manuel said, “When questions come up around this topic, uh ... That highlights the fact that I'm the only person there.”

Marc similarly noted that his supervisor would often stumble on diversity-related questions or programs, particularly those around queer issues. Marc described himself as “the highest ranking gay professional” and his supervisor as “really uncomfortable with LGBT issues”:

We developed a real strong connection so anytime an LGBT issue came about, and eventually the Student Affairs Division became responsible for the creation of an LGBT Student Services Area, when they went to identify where that would fit, they moved it under the Dean of Students because I was the most visible, or out, or identifiable gay man in Student Affairs

There was a demonstrated apprehension to being in this role. David noted that he doesn’t want to “be seen as the gay VP.” Instead, he wanted his work and ability to be a change agent to inform others’ opinion of him first, and then, “and yeah, yeah, we know he's gay, that's cool.” Similarly, Marc noted a displeasure in discussing or disclosing his personal life: “I am not somebody that likes to have any attention on me so I tend to avoid situations where I would be in the position to have to disclose or reveal my private life.”
Similar to the social justice subtheme, Carl said, because of his sexuality, “people having expectations that because of my identity I'll come down on a certain issue in a certain way” is an issue. Craig also noted that because of his sexuality, when a faculty member openly questioned LGBTQ+ related spending in a meeting when Craig was not present, people began contacting Craig for his opinion:

So, this ... this question is asked and uh, and immediately, you know, there's this sort of like, assumption of homophobia on the part of the faculty member, and sort of that he is bringing this ax to grind, because he's anti-LGBTQ+. And, uh, and ... and so, you know, my phone is blowing up...because it's LGBTQ stuff and I wasn't there.

Participants noted that queer leaders are often faced with a dilemma when an queer student or policy concern comes up: do they chance disclosing their identity and being questioned about their integrity, or standing up for the issue? As Tyler pointed out when recalling sexuality being removed from the discrimination statement:

My face went red. I hear my heart in my ear like dun dun dun. And like I'm thinking, what do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

David specifically noted that LGBTQ+ leaders often must remind individuals that sexuality is part of one’s identity but “it's not ... it's not the leading piece.”

**Theme: “Second Class Citizen.”** The next theme, “Second Class Citizen,” relates to the discriminatory experiences participants recalled and reflected upon during their interviews. The theme emerges from Patrick, who stated, “I really felt okay being openly gay, [but] there was still this, kind of um, second class citizen feeling I got at times.”
While some Second Class Citizen moments were outward, others were more informal and interpreted by the participant to create a sense of cautiousness. For example, Craig describes a faculty member who apparently is trying to find commonalty in conversation:

So, I have this faculty member, and he's an older, straight, white guy, and… his research area is on the King James Bible… so, all I know about King James is from him because every time we interact on campus, he gives me more information about King James. But apparently, King James had sex with a lot of boys. I'm not talking about like, young men, I'm talking about boys. He was a pedophile. And ... and so, every time, you know, that's the frame of reference that this faculty member brings [to same sex interactions and relationships]. I'm like pushing back and being like, well historical associations of you know, of men and boys is not characteristic of our understanding of gay and lesbian identity today or gay identity today. And, you know…but he's trying, right? He's trying to sort of connect with me…And ... And it's ... it's creepy, and it's uncomfortable...

**Subtheme: “Always Cautious.”**

“It was small things like that that kind of told me I had to be a little cautious, um, and that uh, I, I was going to be held, maybe, to a standard that that others were not when it came to things like that.” – Patrick

As mentioned earlier around the cautiousness of sexuality being seen as the leading piece to one’s passion or support for queer efforts, participants continued to describe a sense of being cautious around supporting queer initiatives or even interacting with LGBTQ+ students. Manuel remarks, in recalling an queer colleague hiring a gay student worker:

And usually their mind goes to, uh, place of unprofessional behavior, boundaries, that kind of stuff… But what tends to happen is straight colleagues tend to question why?
Which of course is ridiculous because no one ever accuses a straight person of hiring too many straight people.

Manuel went on to say queer professionals often are accused of being “too friendly with students.” Patrick alluded to similar fears: “They are not going to believe that you're an ethical and upright person because of their perceptions of just a stereotype of what the LGBT Community is.” Patrick disclosed being cautious about talking about his personal life: “I'm always cautious about, um, how, uh, you know, I would talk about, you know, guys, that sort of things.” Manuel had similar feelings. When asked if he believed employees gossip about LGBT individuals more than heterosexual individuals, he replied, “Without a doubt, absolutely.”

Similarly, Marc continually gauges his involvement, and how others might perceive his involvement in the queer on-campus community, “that people would think I was favoring or pushing too hard on a particular agenda [asking himself]…Marc, do you need to ratchet this back? Is this too much? Are you pushing too hard on this?” Similarly, Tyler discussed always wondering if he should press an issue. He notes, “I was very careful to not be the guy who always brought up the issue…even though I wanted to.”

Marc describes that, just because of societal expectations, “being gay was thought of as the thing that makes you flawed so I feel like for the most of my life I have tried to compensate and overachieve so as to offset what may be viewed as a flaw.” Because of this perceived flaw and always cautious state of mind, participants understood the need to climate check their environment, and their supervisors’ likelihood of acceptance. Patricia noted:

I would never of come out to that person because I, it was fairly clear to me that that would've been a, a catastrophic experience for me professionally.
Similarly, Craig noted how his supervisor, the President of an institution, discussed Craig’s sexuality in terms of campus acceptance, when a social media post about him went viral:

And my president was very, um, supportive, you know? ‘We chose for the reasons we chose you. We know you'll be a strong student advocate, um, but be aware.’ ‘You speak with a ... A megaphone, and, uh ... And so it's important to be measured and thoughtful and considerate about how and what you say.’ I ... So I've been doing some thinking about that, right?

In disclosure decisions, participants become concerned how they are acting and how they might be perceived by others out of fear that the response from the heterosexual individual may impact their work. David notes:

I think, an attempt to be kind to someone who's probably, um, overall well-meaning but not comfortable, but it's also self-serving in that, you know, would I want this board member on my side when an issues comes up about budget for my division. I'm gonna do this and I'm going to do it complete nonchalantly, but I'm ... I'll perform nonchalance as opposed to being truly nonchalant, right?

Similar to Patricia’s concern about acceptance from her supervisor, Craig explored how students perceive him and the vigilance he takes to ensure his sexuality does not impede his approachability. Craig noted he needed to “come to terms with the fact that a student might see me as inaccessible” due to sexuality. Craig fears his sexuality may impede students with more conservative values from approaching him:

I think some people perceive that maybe um, as an advocate for LGBTQs that I sort of give preferential treatment to LGBTQs, right? We have students who come to us from um relatively hetero-normative, or strongly heteronormative communities, rural
...or faith traditions that are particularly um, unwelcoming, maybe. (laughs)

And so, there are moments when I’ve had RAs um, who for being out as I am, or my vocal advocacy for LGBTQ students has become a barrier…It's sort of something that others have disclosed to me, or my own observations about those students and sort of their comfortability, their willingness to approach me… It was really hard to hear that.

Subtheme: “Slap You Right in the Face.” While the cautious persona is one participants took on in their everyday approach to their work and life, it was often the result of incidents which were outwardly discriminatory. Some situations were described as more discriminatory than others, ones where discriminatory practices would, as Patrick noted, “slapped me right in the face.” And, as Patrick noted, a negative experience at an institution does not just have an immediate effect, but one that is long-lasting: “If I had a bad experience at the beginning of my career, when it came to being out and open, I think that the rest of my career, that could have perpetuated.”

Patrick specifically remembered not being considered for a promotion at his institution. While it was an unknown consequence (he was not told it was because of his sexuality), there were implied grievances with him that can only be attributed to his sexuality. For example, Patrick recalls:

And they would purposely, and of course you can always go, ‘Well, I-I-if maybe they just didn't like me, or maybe it was because I was gay.’ My feeling was me being gay, had a big part to do with it with, kind of these conservative folks in this particular department, uh that they would really, um, purposely exclude me from things, from conversations, and make decisions without me, and at times they would even, kind of, purposely make it seem like I had done something wrong.
Similarly, Craig recalled an incident early in his career, prior to when he disclosed his sexuality, where potential employees who were “perceived as LGBTQ+ or openly LGBTQ+ really received no further consideration” and that he noticed:

Overt and covert messages of um, about dis-inclusion, exclusion, I guess, um, around other folks…it really reaffirmed you know, keep quiet, uh, stay out of the way, um, or move on, which ultimately, I did.

David, when he was an entry-level student affairs professional, recalled how students were adverse to a queer professional working on-campus. David remembered a survey which asked how the campus could improve residence halls to which one student responded “Non-homosexual RD (the position David had).”

Patricia similarly observed her supervisor while working at a southern institution being an “extraordinarily articulate homophobe” and, “she was my direct supervisor.” Patricia chose not to disclose her identity: “I'm not coming out to somebody like that.”

Participants also recalled specific discrimination regarding their personal lives, specifically incidents involving their partners. Manuel was told specifically not to bring his partner to campus events, such as the employee holiday party. Tyler recalled a job interview where he made reference to having a partner, and how he quickly understood the climate of the potential campus around sexuality when the interviewer made sure Tyler knew the institution did not offer partner benefits. Carl noted in his interview that he had a partner, and since the position required him to live in campus housing the director needing to get “special permission from the institution, because they had not had that situation before.” Patrick recalled a family emergency:
I let him know that I was going to need to go to support my partner, and his family, and his reaction was, ‘Well who's going to do your work here?’ And, you know, I reacted as well as I could but I thought, you know, if it was my wife…

Patricia similarly recalled an incident, when she was getting married, of a wedding announcement being posted in the local newspaper and receiving hate mail:

I've received hate mail, hate emails, um, you know, I've, uh, had only a couple of people directly say things that were clearly homophobic and hateful…Anonymous letters, or emails, or anonymous Facebook postings, um, that are, uh, often negative, have been nasty.

Disclosing sexual orientation in an interview or in a new workplace environment can create fear-inducing scenarios to which queer employees must respond. Craig received similar anonymous negative messages when he interviewed for his current CSAO position:

Students were talking on YikYak, um, about me and some of the views I've expressed in my interview and even some of the, you know, statuses, historical statuses on my Facebook. Um, and, you know, to the extent that I'd be approachable or an advocate for all students.

And, upon arriving at his position, David received an e-mail on his social media account:

I got a random email on my Myspace saying, ‘Hey, really excited you're coming but I wanted to give you some advice.’ (laughs) And the advice was, ‘You shouldn't be openly gay on social media, and you know, people are probably going to have a problem with that.’ Um, so that was a really impactful situation.

Theme: “The Specific Individual, The Specific Place.” Throughout all interviews, participants recalled a trend from their early career experiences—disclosure was not just related
to career safety but also personal safety. Patrick assumed how unique participant experiences would be particularly when discussing time, region, and institutions:

It depends so much on the specific individual, the specific place, even the specific college, and the people in that college, on what all of our experiences have been.

Some participants recalled disclosure not just affecting their employment security, but their physical and emotional state of being—Patricia noted where she was an entry-level administrator, someone could get “beat up” for being gay. The subthemes in this section explore how context affected the participant: specifically, how their current position as a CSAO, how the location in which they worked, and the span of time they’ve been in the field (juxtaposed against the national events) may have changed the way they perceive sexuality affected their daily work.

**Subtheme: “The Culture of the Area.”** All participants explored how the location of their institution impacted their work life as an queer individual. In some instances, positions were chosen specifically because of their liberal nature or being close to a geographic area the participant believed would be more welcoming. As Manuel recalls, he chose his current job because “the job description, the last sentence, said metro access to Chicago.” Manuel noted that moving to a metropolitan area provided not just professional safety, but opportunities for a more open social life “for a single person.” Manuel even rejected a job offer due to the area in which he would need to work. A former supervisor asked him to join him at a new university: “Oooo. That's like an hour and a half from Indianapolis and 3 hours from Chicago, I can't do that.” Similarly, David noted that not only does he look for area, but also always “picked places that have had non-discrimination clauses.”

Some participants were more outward with how geographic location affected their job search, or even future job searches. Nearly all participants laughed or joked around regions, as
though there was a basic understanding of which regions were accepting and which would not be—many participants began their discussion of regions vaguely, such as Patrick: “Particularly in certain areas of the country.” David noted that after moving to a more accepting region, he was “recovering from the damage that the homophobic heterosexual society does to you.” Patrick noted his sexuality is front and center in his current job search:

Me being gay has been um, a greater struggle with that search just choosing the right area and region, simply because you become so much more, kind of, political, and I don't want to go anywhere where I'll, I'll have issues.

Patrick has resided in more conservative areas which he calls “the deep south,” and those less tolerating regional cultures greatly impacted his ability to be successful, causing him to relocate. Not only did it affect his job search, but also his previous position:

They didn't want me to leave but in the end, um, it was both that direct experience (of discrimination), at the institution, and… it was Alabama.

In addition to the location of the institution, institutional context also provided barriers and opportunities for participants. Some participants, just like they screened regions, also made choices about what institution they’d be willing to partner with. As Marc described, he made “very conscious choices about not applying to places” that would not be accepting of his sexuality: “I didn't want to go to a school that wasn't going to be a safe and comfortable place for me.” He recalled the additional effort of his job search: “Part of my screening process begins before I even would send out an application.” Manuel also noted a tendency to prescreen institutions so that he could hopefully guarantee his sexuality will not be a barrier. Patricia similarly noted she “expected” safety and comfort from institutions in which she was giving her “time, talent, my expertise and my energy.” Tyler also noted that, when interviewing, he spun the
tables to interview the institution to ensure they are aware of his sexuality, his partner, and his values:

I've been at a place where, uh, you just wouldn't talk about these things. And I never want to be back at a place like that. So I actually when I'm interviewing, I come out, you know and so ... So that they know, like if you don't want to hire me, you need to know this.

Craig found a similar issue in his job search, where “hetero-normative, or strongly heteronormative communities, rural communities sometimes or faith traditions” were “particularly unwelcoming.” Patricia recalled receiving hate mail at her wedding, and correlated it to working in “a very remote, rural, conservative community.”

For example, Craig, who has worked at faith-based institutions, states there were “significant concerns about being out in the workplace.” Craig specifically noted the need to be “discreet” when working at a faith-based institution. He described the environment as “unhealthy…un-supportive.”

Manuel had a similar experience working at a faith-based institution, where he felt he needed to “retrench” his sexuality. Marc had to outwardly dissect how his faith-based institution would come to terms with his sexuality—by specifically asking. When he asked “what it would mean as a gay man, to be working in this environment,” he recalled their response:

It was more kind of me interviewing them. I never ... I didn't ever get a negative response to it. It was more of, ‘Of course you'd be welcome here…while we do have a mission and a church rhetoric that speaks very directly to being an inclusive community, there's also a lot of church rhetoric that says you don't have any place here, but we want to be sure that you know that here, we view ourselves to embrace Catholic from the perspective of inclusivity and welcoming.”
Subtheme: “It Was A Different Time.”

I mean, if you think about it, in the time in which I’ve been in higher education, from, you know, starting out as an undergrad in 1978 all the way to 2016, this is not the same country. – Patricia

All participants reminisced about the differences from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, when many participants had been in college or were in their first professional position, and today when they serve as a leader at their institution. Some participants, such as Patrick, referred to previous decades as “back then,” which indicated a paradigm shift in social perception of sexuality “then” and “now.” Manuel, when discussing currently taking on the role of the token gay male on-campus, noted that “earlier, it was the only gay.”

The difference in time was outstanding when participants recalled differences. The physical harm one could experience was highly evident in Patricia’s recollection of Houston in 1970s and her description of police raiding gay and lesbian bars:

You have to understand, I’m old enough…In the 70's we had, you know, the queer boys getting beat up. In the 80's we saw police harassing people at the bars, so, and that's not to mention the bigot, or the homophobe, or the crazy person who sees 2 people, and just shoots them. So those, that's been my narrative as well… the general sense of safety and security…being out in Houston, Texas in the 70's and into the 80's there was risk of violence personally. There were periodic acts of violence in Houston…there was a sense, when you're out, are you putting yourself in harm's way?

The events occurring during these decades had major impacts on participants. Carl specifically planned to do AIDS research and Marc recalls how the HIV and AIDS epidemic affected him separating his work and personal life, out of fear his work would be judged by his sexuality:
It was also just at the start of HIV and AIDS being such a devastating impact on the community and I wanted to be sure that whatever my sexual orientation, that the quality of work that I did and the way that I chose to behave professionally, was separated from my orientation.

Continuing, Marc recalls that the level of unsafe times and environments is a major contributor to his feeling of uneasiness in discussing or disclosing his personal life:

I think there's a very strong part of me that believes I needed to keep it separate so that...

I think I grew up and came out at a time where being gay was still something that wasn't hugely, socially acceptable.

Patricia connected with this segmentation of personal and work life, particularly because of the context of the decade. Because of fear of retribution, Patricia notes, “It is amazing how you can describe a full weekend, and not use a pronoun.” She continues, “We got very gifted at not, not fully describing.” Because of the lack of social tolerance, there was the tendency also for Patricia, if she did use a name or pronoun, “to indicate that we weren't a couple, or we weren't dating… I got really good at segmenting.” Segmenting was the preferred way to manage one’s sexuality, particularly in the workplace. As Tyler pointed out, “Back then, when I started my career in the 90s, there weren't a lot of ‘out’ people. So there was fear that you would…that you wouldn't find a career opportunity in the field if you were out and public about it.” Managing one’s public identity did not mean they disowned their sexuality. Tyler continues, “I was gay…and I sort of owned that in some ways…Quietly I owned that then…Not publicly.”

For some participants, the era in which they grew up was empowering since the queer movement, often stemming from the HIV/AIDS crisis, encouraged them to speak up. David recalled his early activist years and described himself as “exhausting to be around.” David
refused to hide his sexuality and ensured that if someone had a problem with his sexuality, it was their problem (and not his).

**Subtheme: “Positional Power.”**

As I sort of gain power and authority and comfort, I mean, certainly I disclose more comfortably, more frequently, you know, more from a position of um ... Yeah, I don't feel at risk. ...But, as I moved up kind of the food chain, I think I've become more open, more self-aware, more willing to self-disclose, less concerned that maybe my identity disclosure would make me inaccessible to students from all backgrounds or experiences. – Craig

It was evident from interviews that participants recalled more instances of sexuality affecting their daily work that occurred earlier in their career. Tyler noted that today, there appears to be more of an accepting culture around diversity, where diversity is seen as an active contributor to a college campus:

It's interesting to think about how the field has changed where being sort of a minority in your sexual orientation was a risk. And in some cases ... Some environments it's still that way today. But in many environments, it's sort of moved. I mean our cultural understanding and appreciation for sexual orientation differences has changed so much that now in some ways it's a sought after identity because it's important for us to see people like themselves in leadership.

Earlier in their career, participants reported hesitation for disclosure was more present. The hesitation for disclosure stemmed not only from personal experiences, but also in being a witness to discrimination of another party. As Patrick pointed out, when his mentor was getting married and inviting colleagues to the ceremony (prior to it being legal), the president “basically
told her she couldn't do that…so and she just kind of accepted it and moved on.” In seeing these incidents, Patrick recalled how his disclosure changed early in his career:

   Over the course of the beginning of my career I think I hesitated to, to feel, uh, like I could be open in those conversations, so just kind of kept my private life to myself.

   The hesitation Patrick described seems to dissipate over time, which can be connected to time in the field and positional authority. As Tyler points out, he identified as being more authentic in his current position than in his previous positions, but he questioned whether it was a result of personal evolution and comfortability or one that was a result of his position of power:

   “I am more authentic now. Is it because of my position? No. Maybe?”

   Similarly, Carl identified that as staff “move up the organizational ladder,” there is an opportunity to be freer to outwardly display values and personal narratives. David identified a present privilege of his current position. Should he disclose his sexuality to a subordinate, there was no fear of retribution:

   And apparently, you know, there's the privilege of positional power in this. Right? I mean, my Director of Student Life wasn't going to get to fire me if he didn't like it.

   Patricia put this idea of positional power into perspective. She juxtaposed her earlier career experience, where she refused to disclose her identity, with her position of authority as a CSAO. She coined the term “professional safety” in her interview:

   Now professional safety…when you're young in your career… you have no power, and you're applying for positions, and trying to work with a power differential. I think there's … a great sensitivity on the people who have power who, who decide do you get jobs, or do you get support, and what are their dispositions and attitudes.
Patricia also pointed out that, as she moved into the CSAO role (and higher), she had to come to terms that segmenting her personal and work lives would likely not be a possibility: “I needed to only work at an institution that would hire me in being completely out.”

As Tyler points out, in his CSAO role, his social justice advocacy can happen more forcefully. He recalled a gender inclusivity policy that, because of his role, he was able to push along more intently without fielding opposition. Tyler began the meeting by stating, “The meeting today is not about should it happen, the meeting today is about how are we going to make this happen.” Without being in his CSAO role, he felt there would have been more pushback present.

Tyler brought up the idea that his ability to pass as heterosexual may have further contributed to the positional privilege he experiences:

I think that that has allowed me to have some credibility in ways that is not off-putting to... You know, I don't stroke those sort of heteronormative fears in people… I've probably had an easier go at it than someone who may have more feminine traits.

Theme: “How Gay Are You?” The final theme that emerged from participants was that the level of “gayness” of each participant had an effect on how participants perceived they were judged or how their work was judged by others. Patricia described that queer individuals consistently have to place into context their environment and with whom they’re interacting to decide how “demonstrably queer” to be. Tyler alluded to his masculinity, stating his life has been “easier” because he can “pass pretty easily as a straight person,” providing him “credibility in ways” that others might not have.

Subtheme: “Come Out All The Time.” Every interaction in which the queer CSAOs bring their personal life into the situational context, and often when they are trying not to, the
queer CSAOs are concerned about their presentation and whether disclosing their identities will disrupt their job performances. Patrick anticipated the “themes of worrying about how to present one’s self, and how to ‘come out’ at work, is shared experience for all of us.”

Often, participants out themselves in organic ways or allow assumed behavioral clues to speak for themselves. Patrick described coming out when “it's in context to the conversation that's happening” and asserted coming out is rarely a “grand announcement or gesture.” Similarly, Marc noted that he “can't remember the last time I ever just told somebody I was gay. It's not something that I necessarily disclose…I guess I allow people to assume.” Manuel is very specific to come out. He assumes that people “know before I tell them,” so he often chooses to come out publicly, “reaffirming it in a way that gives them permission to talk.”

Marc, however, was also unique compared to the rest of the participants. As mentioned earlier, Marc segmented his life very purposely, and often does not speak about his personal life or whether he is in a relationship. Marc noted that people may ask:

How was your weekend?’

‘It was fine.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Not much.’

I shut down those conversations pretty quickly.

Participants also discussed how social media has evolved during their time as professionals. In addition to discussions earlier about how social media has resulted in outward discrimination, Patrick noted, “You know, everything's set to private… I think that's for the best” in order to make sure his personal life remains personal.
In those everyday conversations, Patricia recalled consciously crafting her responses to remove pronouns or specific names as to not out herself earlier in her career. As David points out, “You're always aware and it's always ... it's this vague buzz on your mind.” Even if sexuality is not being discussed, the participants continually reflected on how their sexuality changes their perception, or how others perceive them. Carl, for example, recalled a time a parent asked him if he had a wife—which, suddenly propelled his sexuality into the conversation:

I will get asked sometimes when I'm dealing with parents, ‘Well, are you married? Do you have kids? Do you have a wife?’

Sometimes, disclosing identity is not just about sexuality, but educating others. David described a time, even though colleagues knew that he was gay, it was suggested he vacation with his partner at a location that is notably anti-gay. David took the opportunity to educate his colleague on the way queer individuals have different experiences than heterosexual counterparts:

But I'm like, gay people don't go there. It's a very unsafe place. And not ... Nothing other than making them aware that we move differently through the world and have to think about a different set of dangers and risks, um, than others.

Tyler summarized the idea of daily disclosure by describing that queer individuals are constantly “reminded” about their different in their daily affirmations of their sexuality. Tyler concludes, “You come out all the time…it's like big coming out and little coming out.”

However, there are larger occasions where the participants made conscious decisions to publicly out themselves, such as the job search process. Participants discussed the decision to allow their resume to “glow pink,” a term David coined about his resume outing him prior to an on-campus interview: “Anyone who's paying attention is going to have their radar tripped just by
reading my resume.” Craig noted his resume had specific experiences that disclosed his interest in queer related causes, something a hiring manager would use to prejudge sexuality. As Carl points out, experiences heading up or supporting queer causes become indicators that “before you had met me I guess it was likely that you knew that I was gay.” Manuel noted that the resumes for queer employees, because of the nature of the work they are passionate about, “to some degree, tend to like pave the way…because of presentations you do, and research topics.” Patrick noted that at CSAO-level positions, he made sure his sexuality was highlighted through work-related experiences on his resume: “It was something that I was going to make sure they knew before…if they had an issue with it, I don't want to be there, let alone if they have a right to, or not.”

Similarly, participants made conscious decisions during their interview processes. Carl recalled the President of an institution stating, at first, the university would be accepting of an queer vice president, but then, the President replied:

‘But how gay are you?’ I was like ... I don't remember what my response was but I do remember that I came home and called the head hunter and said, ‘Take me out of the running because I'm not really interested.’

Patrick described the internal debate many participants had in deciding whether to disclose their sexuality: “I had a very strong debate with myself, and with others, about whether to come out in the interview process, which is always a real struggle, or a real question.”

Participants described how they outed themselves in job interviews, as for many, being out about sexuality was a priority. As Marc pointed out, “I've been very clear about identifying as a gay male (throughout every position).” Tyler used the word “signaling,” which adequately described how most participants came out in a job interview. Instead of outwardly stating their
sexuality, most used pronouns to describe their partner, used the word partner instead of husband/wife, or asked about the climate for sexuality or sexuality as a protected class on the campus. Tyler described a general way of signaling:

I use the term partner. I try to make sure I drop the male pronoun there, somewhere along the way. He also works in higher ed. You know, my partner works at another similar institution or does this work, um, at another institution. And you know, he's done that for such and such. As a way of signaling, you know rather than making them ask.

Sometimes, this happened in nonchalant conversations, as described by David: “It's not really quite an interview anymore, right? I mean, you start sort of talking, and I realized oh, this is when I'm either going to say the word husband.” David described himself as being too “old and stubborn to play the pronoun game.”

Tyler described a similar experience, when outing his sexuality by stating he had a male partner:

I again came out in my, uh, interview with another senior leader who was interviewing me at the time. And his immediate response to my reference to my partner, um, was you know we don't provide partner benefits? I mean that was his response. And I said ... It floored me. I just came out to you…

Coming out prior to or during an interview had tangible benefits. Participants described it as a necessity to understand the campus climate and whether they would feel safe and secure on-campus. As Tyler pointed out, “I never want to be at an institution that would not let me, um, be open about who I am.”

*Subtheme: “Defined by partner.”* A subordinate theme of level of “gayness” was, at-times, contingent upon whether the participant was partnered. In addition, sometimes the marital
status of the participant also gave permission for the participant to be out and authentic. Manuel interpreted his relationship as giving him permission to be more connected with queer students without feeling others would “suspect” inappropriate behavior from him.

Many participants used their relationship status to signal sexuality. As Manuel noted, “If you're in a relationship, you have a reason to share in an interview, uh, that you're gay.” Patricia agreed that, in any situation, job interview or other social contexts, “one of the fastest ways I disclose is say, well my partner, or my spouse.” David and Patrick similarly agreed that using the term “husband” or “partner” was their signal to others about their sexuality.

Nearly all participants, except Marc, noted no concern about bringing partners to events. Tyler noted, “A lot of current students have met [my partner] and he comes to the campus events.” Patricia also noted, in her more visible position, her partner attends events with her and doesn’t ever think of her sexuality as the deciding factor for attending an event, but rather whether the event will be fun and entertaining. Marc, who segmented his personal and work lives more regularly than other participants, noted that while he’s been partnered a “variety of times” in his career, “nobody necessarily knew it.”

Carl discussed a scenario in which he become un-partnered and how he interpreted others suddenly becoming less comfortable with him and his sexuality:

My professional persona at work was always ‘Carl and his partner’ …we went to university functions together and so-forth. Then, suddenly, he wasn't there anymore. It was a really interesting experience actually, you know, working with people. I think for some people they're maybe a little more comfortable with somebody who is openly gay who is partnered, like it fits into the checklist of the ‘shoulds’ that people have in their
head in some way… When I broke up with my former partner, when we broke up it was like a coming out process again.

Participants described a much less transparent personality when they were single. As Marc pointed out, dating was a concern for him in that it might hinder his professional credibility and he separated his work and personal lives. Craig was the only participant who discussed bringing dates or boyfriends (versus the term partner, which many participants used to describe longer-term relationships) to campus events and the response he believed students had: “I have brought more than a handful of boyfriends to different things in the last couple years, there are students who talk about that.”

Tyler discussed being averse to being in a relationship earlier in his career, as he was not disclosing his identity. Any formal relationship, Tyler interpreted, would lead others to identify him as gay and “risk efforts” to “keep this private.” Patrick discussed trying to date and being outwardly told that he shouldn’t have an online dating profile by his President:

Someone had emailed the president a screenshot of me on like Match.com or something showing that I was gay, looking for dates…I was basically directly told that I should not have that up and honestly that was the end of it for me. I was done at that point. I was not going to be told to live my life in a way that's in-congruent with who I am and there was nothing ethically wrong with what I was doing.

Manuel also discussed being single as a main reason he chose metropolitan areas, so that students would not “see” him as a single person. Manuel notes in rural areas where he worked:

I couldn't go out and not risk seeing students, so for me going to a metropolitan area felt like, uh, not only do I have more options as a single person, uh, but I didn't have to worry as much about boundary issues.
Manuel also explored how, because of his sexuality, other employees would quickly try to set him up with the other employees they knew were also gay. He recalled an assistant dean introducing him to the arts center director. Manuel jokingly states, “Uh, you can guess why.”

**Subtheme: “Authenticity.”** While participants shared experiences that they had that might have been negative or hindered their career, nearly all participants always reverted to needing to stay true to their personality, values, and ethics regardless of how “gay” others perceived them, or whether others perceived “gay” as being a problem. Carl noted that choosing to downplay or hide his sexuality takes too much energy. Carl believes he makes decisions to be authentic or hide every day on an on-going basis. Carl was willing to disclose his identity regardless of others perceptions: “I continue to think it's important for us to speak up and be our authentic selves.”

Craig recalls that, earlier in his career, he was willing to compromise his authenticity in a way he is not willing to now; he felt because he was guarded in his younger years, he now has funneled that energy to help students who are “always on guard.”

Marc felt he was living authentically, but noted that his segmentation was likely extreme compared to his perception of others’. The way in which he interpreted living authentically was to compartmentalize his life:

I have friends at work, but I don't see them outside of work and then I have my own private friends that may or may not know what I do or where I work. So my whole career, back to when I was a graduate student, I really, in many ways, have two different lives that run parallel to each other and I don't necessarily blur the lines of them.

Marc felt blurring the lines would devalue his work and perhaps exclude him from professional circles:
I wanted to be sure that whatever my sexual orientation, that the quality of work that I did and the way that I chose to behave professionally, was separated from my orientation in a way that allowed me to be perhaps accepted but more I think, valued and included because of the quality of the work and not excluded because of my orientation.

Marc noted he would be “curious to read about what comes out of your dissertation because I have a feeling I am perhaps an anomaly in the sense of how distinctly separate I’ve kept my life.”

**Research Question Preliminary Findings**

The aim of this study was to explore how queer chief student affairs officers interpreted their sexualities and how sexual orientation affected their career experiences. The specific research question was:

- How do LGBTQ CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation, and disclosure have impacted their professional progression and identity?

The researcher found that queer CSAOs often engaged in diversity work on their campuses, from their early career to their current roles. However, because of their sexuality, they were often volunteered by supervisors to serve as advisors or in advisory capacities for queer-related policies, organizations, and events. Often, this led to tokenization on their campuses. The study also answered how sexuality negatively impacted professional progression, as participants noted issues with disclosure within job searches, interviews, and within their workplace. In order to manage their sexual orientations, some participants separated their personal and work life to avoid scrutiny while others fully embraced their role as an advisor to the institution on all things queer.
Key Findings

After analyzing the interview data, four superordinate themes emerged: “Big Gay On Campus,” “Second Class Citizen,” “The Specific Individual, The Specific Place,” and “How Gay Are You?” These themes allow the individual experiences of the participants to be grouped in a way that represents commonalities amongst their unique experiences.

The first theme explored how CSAOs often felt tokenized in their experiences and obligated to stand up for LGBTQ+ issues on their campuses; while they were passionate and aligned to these causes naturally, they felt they were looked to as the queer voice. Participants discussed the evolution of their careers and how the tokenization has changed over time.

All participants explored ways in which they felt marginalized, which emerged into the next theme, “Second Class Citizens.” The marginalization stemmed from specific, discriminatory incidents. The incidents, particularly if they were earlier in a participant’s life or career, could lead to a cautious approach to their work, as demonstrated by Marc who fully compartmentalizes his personal and work lives; this often led to credibility concerns. The third emergent theme piggybacks off these experiences, exploring how the participant context, the area and institutions in which they’ve worked, and the spans of years in which they’ve been alive, impacted their perception of sexuality.

The final theme, “How Gay Are You?” explored how participants manage their sexuality and how participants perceive others react to their sexuality. Participants discussed how masculinity and societal expectations (for example, being in a relationship) often made them appear to be less threatening than the stereotypical flamboyant queer community member; behaviors which were perceived to be “less than” and socially unacceptable. Participants managed their sexuality in ways they perceive heterosexual individuals didn’t need to; however,
even with this additional layer of complexity, all participants explored how living authentically was preferred versus hiding their true selves.

**Conclusion**

Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allowed for common themes to emerge from the participant data. All participants explored discriminatory practices and experiences as well as instances of being tokenized on their campus. Many of the participants, though, had varying experiences with disclosure: some shared widely their sexuality and personal life while others kept tight lock on their personal details. In Chapter 5, the researcher will explore more deeply the differences in experiences and ground the participants’ experiences to literature.
Chapter V: Interpretations, Conclusions, & Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how queer chief student affairs officers perceive sexuality, sexual orientation and disclosure have impacted their professional progressions and identities. The researcher utilized qualitative, semi-structured interviews using interpretative phenomenological analysis. These methods were chosen because of their ability to highlight individual voices and the individualized sensemaking experience.

This chapter will explore the results and analysis as it relates to each superordinate theme and discuss how the findings reflect the current literature. The results of the study in relation to the research question is also discussed. In the conclusion, the researcher will explore how current events impacted the study’s findings and provide an overall summary and recommendations for practice and future research.

Study Conclusions

This study explored the research question: How do queer CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation, and disclosure have impacted their professional progressions and identities? When analyzing the transcripts and codes into superordinate themes, the researcher found that queer CSAOs were likely to engage in social justice endeavors on their campuses, either by choice or being asked to take on those responsibilities. While the participants all had affiliations towards inclusivity work based on their personalities and passions, at times, participants reported feeling as though their sexualities required them to be the spokespeople for their communities.

However, because of the implicit and explicit discrimination they faced themselves or witnessed of others, the idea of being a tokenized representative for all issues of inclusivity appeared concerning or frustrating. CSAOs often perceived their motivations as questioned by their colleagues simply because of their sexualities. When thinking of sexuality as gendered
performance, participants recognized that their marital status, their personality indicators, and how vocal they were about their private lives all impacted how others judged the participants’ job performances.

The following subsections will discuss the findings, situated within the study’s superordinate themes, and how the findings relate to current literature.

**Big gay on campus.** This study found that all participants viewed themselves as social justice advocates. These student affairs professionals all had early affiliations with social justice-related initiatives. While most were related to sexuality, some participants were on the forefront of other diversity-related advocacy. Participants were change agents for diversity and, because of the intersection of personal motivation (due to their marginalized status as members of the queer communities) and their passion for inclusivity, participants often found that they were both competent to lead diversity-related initiatives and, at the same time, the only ones in the room advocating for causes. Acting as the Big Gay on Campus allowed participants to capitalize on their social justice passion and move more quickly towards action. This confirmed previous research that student affairs professionals not only have an orientation towards inclusivity, but that they are the bearers of diversity-related initiatives on their campuses (Balsam et. al, 2011; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Liddle & Stowe, 2002; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

This finding correlated to the role of faculty also as advocates for social change on-campus, particularly if they were tenured, in positions of power, and had personal motivations to advocate (i.e. being queer themselves) (Messinger, 2011). Although in previous research student and younger staff advocates were much more explicit at stating their personal connection to
queer advocacy, this study found a more tempered advocacy for initiatives, unless the participant felt specifically threatened (Renn, 2007).

In addition to their roles as purposeful advocates, participants also were in ceremonious roles due to their sexualities or found themselves educating the campus community on behalf, and often in defense of, their sexual orientations. Because they had disclosed their sexualities in the workplace, participants often were asked to attend queer-related events (and serve as a speaker), advise gay-straight alliances, or even write queer-related policies that had nothing to do with their functional responsibilities. The study found participants accepted these tokenized roles: some chose to see these tasks as personal responsibilities while most automatically questioned if a heterosexual peer would have been asked to lead these initiatives. The study also found the CSAO serving as a “litmus test” for the institution: other senior leaders floating queer-related initiatives past the CSAO, asking for the CSAO’s opinion or the CSAO finding fault on an institutional policy.

This finding correlates to literature on tokenization based on race, gender, and sexual orientation (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Russell & Bohan, 2016). The idea of being the token voice for all lesbian and gay voices puts an undue burden on the marginalized group, consistently requiring them to advocate for themselves and others—without the larger heterosexual population making the needed changes to become more inclusive themselves (D’Augelli, 1989).

Even with progress with being a CSAO and pushing along policy changes that created more inclusive environments, perhaps because they were advocating for their own marginalized group, participants felt their motivations were often questioned. The study also found that participants want their work to speak for itself and that they did not want to be known as the
“gay VP.” Instead, participants wanted their responsibilities and decisions to be seen as authentic outcomes without any ulterior motivations (such as pushing funding towards queer organizations out of allegiance). This correlated with research on ingroup versus outgroup perceptions of leaders: leaders who emerge from typically underrepresented groups struggle with being perceived as being fair and consistent, and often are questioned about being members of the marginalized ingroup (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Chin, 2010). In addition, the study found participants felt that their decisions were unduly questioned, supporting research that educators who identified as gay were more harshly rated by their students and their credibility questioned (Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002).

**Second class citizen.** Participants in the study also reported incidents in which they felt uneasy about their disclosures, questioned whether they should disclose their sexualities, and felt others’ reactions to the participants’ sexualities may have impacted their work—this occurred explicitly earlier in the participants’ careers and, in their CSAO roles, often on a more political level around policies. Participants explored how faculty and staff members seemed to “go after” their integrity based on funding, policy decisions, and even hiring decisions. Participants expressed frustration when decisions were second-guessed because it was perceived their sexualities created a bias; participants often needed to question their own motivations, asking if they were pushing too hard on advocating for a change or student because of their own sexualities. This directly supported literature on a perceived bias as being members of the LGBTQ ingroup (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Chin, 2010).

The study also found that participants heard concerns that queer employees were too friendly with queer students, as if perverse behaviors were occurring simply because both individuals identified similarly. There was an overall perception that queer employees were
talked about by their colleagues more than their heterosexual counterparts. As one participant mentioned, he felt like he was “held to a different standard.”

One participant’s supervisor reminded the participant that all his actions and words were now spoken with a “megaphone,” making the participant wonder if his sexuality is now being amplified to the community; the participant similarly noted that his sexuality may make him inaccessible to conservative students. The study highlighted that participants, at certain points in their careers, had colleagues and supervisors that were not welcoming to the queer community and thus the participants were forced to retreat from disclosing their orientations. In some instances, this caused participants to vacate positions, lie to their supervisors, or perform in a way that did not indicate anything other than heterosexuality. This study supports the concept of professionals crafting an identity that evaluates organizational structure and choosing to disclose sexuality dependent on the employee’s context (with whom they are speaking, the purpose of disclosure, etc.) (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Croteau, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Roberts, 2005; Tooms, 2007).

Fears of retribution contribute to the creation of the lavender ceiling, where staff members fear their sexualities may make future employment opportunities less achievable (Swan, 1995). The study found there were, at times, severe repercussions for participants earlier in their careers for disclosing their orientations. Participants’ perceptions of their early experiences then tainted the rest of their interactions at that institution and, at times, perpetuated decisions throughout their careers. The study found that participants experienced verbal harassment, unfriendliness, political sabotaging, and, at-times, felt afraid that others might perceive their personal and professional relationships as inappropriate. These findings confirm extensive research on formal and informal discriminatory practices and fear of disclosure (Barry
Chung, 2003; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2002; Little & Marx, 2002; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rankin, 2003; 2005; Sears, 2002; Vaccaro, 2012).

The study also confirmed employment discrimination discussed in literature. Participants felt they did not receive promotions or positions, or were being criticized during job searches for their sexualities. This supports previous research on application review, tenure decisions, compensation, and workplace discrimination (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Croteau, 1996; Ragins & Cornell, 2001; Tilcsik, 2011; Wright & Smith, 2013). Of particular note, however, is that rarely were participants told explicitly that these outcomes were because of their sexualities—these were inferences made by the participants; literature, however, confirms that search committees and hiring managers often utilized sexuality as a determining factor, legal or not (Croteau, 1996; Tilcsik, 2011).

As many employees are aware that outward discrimination is not acceptable, a majority of systemic barriers are covert to prohibit hiring of queer workers or limit their potential to come out authentically (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007). Participants felt purposefully excluded from social events and felt conservative colleagues often boasted about their beliefs and opinions—including, at times, remarks about sexuality. These colleagues were often in positions of power as well, so they crafted policies such as on-campus housing rules that did not allow same-sex partners or permit partner benefits. This theme uncovered how participants make great sense of their campuses and colleagues, their colleagues’ actions, including their supervisors’ behaviors, all in an attempt to assess, understand, and navigate the campus climate; this supports research indicating employees on college campuses often must make sense of their environment and search for cues of acceptance (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2014; Ragins & Cornell, 2001; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Vaccaro, 2012).
The specific individual, the specific place. As participants typically reported a 15 to 30 year career span, the study found an enormous difference in the perception of institutional and regional climate for queer individuals that was dependent on time (i.e. 1980s versus 2016). As the current study focused on the climate the CSAOs perceive they influence and experience in their current roles, the study found that as participants recalled earlier experiences, they recalled issues pertaining to their physical and health-related safety, a symptom of accepted heterosexism, which permeated the country during that time and promoted heterosexuality as the norm (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Herek, 1990; Nardi & Bolton, 1991).

Participants recalled fear for their physical safety, including fear of authorities. During the 1980s and 1990s, participants also recalled the emergence of HIV and AIDS and, at times, correlated this crisis with their queer identities. In addition, cultural and regional upbringings crafted the values and identities of participants. This supports literature on youth and young adult development, and that early experiences with disclosing sexuality have an impact on how individuals accept or reject their sexuality (Flowers & Buston, 2001; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Having lived these experiences directly impacted how participants perceived and managed their sexualities. The study found two typical responses for having experienced direct discrimination, physical fear of attacks, and the HIV/AIDS crisis: acceptance and advocacy or, out of fear of retribution, segmenting their personal and professional lives. It was noted that some moved from segmenting to acceptance and advocacy at a later time.

The study also found participants, based on previous experiences with discrimination, self-selected their regions and institutions, even through today, based on regional assumptions (liberal versus conservative) and institutional markers and cues (partner policies, diversity statements, etc.) available either through word of mouth (friend’s assessments of climate) or on
the institution’s website. Participants made conscious decisions to move to specific, welcoming regions or apply to institutions where they perceived it to be accepting, supporting previous literature on queer faculty and staff assessing campus cultures for cues of acceptance (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Renn 2007; 2010; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009; Vaccaro, 2012). Regional factors for participants included closeness to urban versus rural areas and liberal tendencies. The study found that while most participants tried to stay away from faith-based institutions, when they did apply and accept a position, participants were clear to ask probing questions about whether diverse sexual orientations would be welcomed at the institution.

**How gay are you?** The study also found that participants believed their sexualities were judged by others based on how “demonstrably queer” their behaviors were perceived to be. There was a universal agreement among participants that they have, at least one time, worried about how to present themselves in the workplace and how disclosing their orientations would impact their roles. The study found passing as heterosexual, or in other words, choosing behaviors less normatively associated with feminine characteristics, could have positive work outcomes for some participants; this supports literature on gender and sexuality as a performance, with dress and appearance an important aspect of presenting and passing as heterosexual and minimizing any inclination that an individual may be gay; at times, choosing not to disclose their sexuality (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Butler, 1990; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009; McInitosh, 1968; Tooms, 2007). It also supports that passing is a strategic method to achieve a result without the fear of retribution based on sexuality (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009).
Participants made purposeful decisions to disclose their identities and to whom, supporting the contextual aspect to disclosure discussed in research (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; King et al., 2014; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Sears, 2002). The study demonstrated that sexuality is omnipresent—sexuality is a daily presence with participants constantly wondering how to describe a personal partner or their weekends, how others would respond to their disclosures, and whether their orientations would impact their performances. This supports research on disclosure as cyclical—participants do not come out just once, but daily (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2014).

In addition to their in-person disclosure, participants also needed to be aware of their resumes and how they represented themselves in job searches. Most participants chose to reveal their sexualities by displaying the programs, initiatives, and presentations that they coordinated around queer issues on their resumes. This supports research discussing resumes as a sexuality indicator and potential employees fearing being discriminated against even prior to an interview (Croteau, 1996; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Tilcsik, 2011).

The study also found that level of “gayness” was correlated to marital status. Participants perceived that if they were partnered, they were considered less of a danger and more aligned to cultural norms—partnership meant, in other words, “Look, I’m just like you.” When not partnered, participants felt more cautious about dating, meeting potential partners, and ensuring their personal lives were more private. This supports literature exploring a gendered performance to diminish effects of heterosexism: suppressing behaviors or judging behaviors in comparison to heterosexual constructed norms (Bowring & Brewis, 2009; Butler, 1990; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009; Tooms, 2007). This unfortunately includes presenting self within
the socially constructed straight image: minimizing personal conversation, reducing explicit identity disclosure, and not being vocal about political advocacy (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009; Tooms, 2007). While this study found participants often disclosed their sexualities, particularly at this stage of their careers, apprehension was present in these disclosure decisions and, for some, they chose to minimize their sexualities through intentional or unintentional passing (Fuller, Change, & Rubin, 2009).

Finally, the study found a commitment towards living authentically. Each participant felt their identities were managed and disclosures (or lack of disclosures) intentional; however, most did not view it as deliberate decisions but rather acting in a way that was authentically them. Those who chose to minimize their sexual orientations noted that this was simply who they are. Participants would rather not think about disclosure or its effects, supporting research that queer employees are most comfortable in the workplace when they are able to openly disclose aspects of their life in a way that is not forced but natural without fear of retribution (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Orolv & Allen, 2014).

Alignment with Queer Theory

Instead of focusing on highlighting the queer participant’s experience in a way to legitimatize their experience (as lesbian and gay studies, queer theory’s predecessor would do), queer theory attempts to out the sexuality hierarchy and pinpoint ways institutions (either actual institutions like, in this case, employers or metaphorical institutions like marriage, different-gendered monogamy, and gender itself) prioritize heterosexuality while stigmatizing any non-conformity (Butler, 1990; Dilley, 1999; Giffney, 2004; Halperin, 2003; Pinar, 2003; Stein & Plummer, 1994).
Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression of homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual power regimes...the constitution of self and society.” (Seldman, 1995, p. 128).

Queer theory sees sexuality as social construction (Stein & Plummer, 1994).

Queer theory focuses on the construction of heterosexual identity as much as non-conforming identities. It is critical of all institutions, even those not typically associated with sexuality, to assess how it may contribute to dominant ideologies.

Figure 4: Based on Rubin’s (1984) Charmed Circle, Queer Theory overview as described by Dilley (1999) and Stein and Plummer (1994).

This study analyzed the structures, mostly personnel related such as supervisors, which call out the participants’ sexuality to the forefront. While many participants embraced their roles as “Big Gays On Campus” (or at least fulfilled those duties without much hesitation), Marc was the only participant who actively combated that role by not sharing too deeply much personal information—yet, even while actively resisting, he still was asked to represent diversity initiatives his heterosexual counterparts would not.

The study also explored the nature of being demonstrably queer and the potential consequences if someone were to perceive the participant as being “too gay.” Participants called
attention to “passing” as straight, and in effect being more successful, because the conformity eased the tensions of the majority. And, any participation in gay-like behavior for participants (such as dating or sharing queer-related views on social media) had swift reactions from the privileged sector with calls to lessen any behavior which might be viewed as inappropriate.

Queer theory specifically calls attention to those “said” and “unsaid” structures to evaluate not just marginalized lives but rather how the marginalization happens (Dilley, 1999; Halperin, 2003; Stein & Plummer, 1994). This study contributes to the expansive work on queer theory by calling out that policies (such as discrimination policies) are just artifacts of the personally created structures and dynamics individuals enforce based on their biases of what is labeled ‘normal’.

When applying this theory to future studies, researchers must embrace the anti-structure and anti-establishment nature of queer theory. The researcher felt, in a word, anti-queer when attempting to find or compose a chart or diagram to explain queer theory; although the diagram does, building on Rubin’s Charmed Circle of appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors (see figure 5), center the non-conforming individual (in this case, the participants) and how structural institutions as well as implicit biases based on binary gender expectations continually re-enforce their own arbitrary norms—at the detriment to any ‘performance’ that doesn’t fall within accepted norms.
Figure 5: Rubin’s (1984) Charmed Circle

Queer theory is more than post positivist; queer theory is inherently open, anti-labels or process, and resists defining what queer even is. As some scholars recommended, any chart or diagram for queer theory should simply read “Some Disassembly Required” over a picture of a pile of gendered toys (K. Renn, personal communication, November 21, 2016; P. Dilley, personal communication, November 21, 2016).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how queer chief student affairs officers perceived their sexualities impacted their professional identities as well as the trajectory of their careers. This study explored how participants made sense of their experiences, typically in the context of their institutional climates and regional and national climates around queer rights and acceptance. There was one research question which guided this study: How do LGBTQ CSAOs...
perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation, and disclosure have impacted their professional progressions and identities?

The study answered the research question, juxtaposed by queer theory and previous research, by finding four major themes: being identified as the “Big Gay on-Campus,” feeling like a “Second Class Citizen,” experiences dependent on participants’ “Specific Individual and Specific Place” contexts (regional and cultural changes through the decades), and sexuality as a performance in “How Gay Are You?” In essence, being tokenized, feeling as though there may be double standards compared to heterosexual counterparts, and perceiving or experiencing explicit or implicit bias around their sexualities from others all played a part in participants’ managing their sexual orientation identities and impacted their work.

The participants all had different upbringings and worked in different regions and at different institutions (in size, public or private, and secular status). The study found that these individualized experiences influenced the way participants chose to manage their sexual orientation identities within their roles leading up to, and including, Vice President/CSAO. As some were evaluating their next career steps, they continued to be aware of needing to manage how others perceived their sexualities might impact their work.

Croteau (1996), Croteau & Lark (2009), and Croteau & Von Destinon (1994) were the only researchers attempting to specifically look at queer student affairs professionals and understand their experiences—a majority of the research focused solely on hiring practices. A majority of other work focused on faculty, staff, and students as parts of the larger campus community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Messinger, 2011; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Rankin, 2005; Renn, 2007; 2010; Renn & Hodges, 2007).
The findings in this study attempt to fill a void in discussing queer student affairs professionals, specifically chief student affairs officers. The findings show CSAOs experience similar discriminatory hiring practices researched for faculty and non-higher education workers, and even though they may have traversed the lavender ceiling within student affairs, those thinking about the next step in their careers continue to see their sexual orientations as a potential challenge. CSAOs also needed to manage their disclosures and social justice advocacy based on their institutional responses.

This study’s findings highlight that CSAOs want to live authentically but are constricted by the real or perceived notion of a watchful eye when attempting to do so. Nearly all CSAOs reported wanting to simply be known for their work, not for their sexualities. This study’s findings deal with factors that influence identity management. Additional research could focus on some of these specific factors and identify which specific factors may lead to higher rates of intentional disclosure.

**Implication for practice.** The participants in this study had high interest in social justice endeavors and found that interest often made them be targeted for taking on queer advocacy and educating others (formally and informally) about queer issues. This includes ceremonious occasions, being asked to be advisors to queer organizations, and needing to advocate for policy changes at their institutions. While many of the participants accepted these roles, they felt the burden was on them to educate and inform the campus community on queer matters. While senior level queer administrators may have the positional authority to decline these invitations, lower level queer administrators might feel required. Senior administrators could increase educational initiatives for students, faculty, and staff that increase the queer competency of the entire campus community. Increasing competency, which includes an understanding of historical
marginalization, microaggressions, and the real extent individuals fear and experience discrimination (with a potential consequence, then, of choosing to hide their orientations).

This study also found that real, first-hand discrimination occurred to participants in job hiring practices, organizational policies meant to promote heterosexuality, instances of being excluded from groups, and decisions and motivations being questioned as allegiance based on orientation, among others. Senior administrators should not wait until an queer person raises a concern to evaluate their own campus climates for inclusion. Campuses should evaluate their policies, diversity statements, and equal employment statements, even if not legally required, to ensure queer individuals have equal protection for hiring and that the organization treats queer individuals fairly in compensation and partner policies. An implementation that could also reduce the culture-finding that CSAOs reported they do when assessing whether an institution is queer-friendly is a rating system (based on a rubric assessing policies, climate surveys, etc.) that is published on human resource websites.

Finally, participants acknowledged the longevity of their careers and how institutional and national culture around queer acceptance has changed over time, and is dependent on institutional type and location as well. Participants were eager to share their experiences and recognize the instances of tokenism and discrimination they faced throughout their careers. Participants also recognized their positional authority may have allowed them to more easily live authentically then earlier in their careers. This outcome suggests entry-level or mid-level queer student affairs professionals would benefit from explicit mentoring from queer CSAOs. This mentoring would consist of sharing of personal narratives around identity management and struggles, as well as coaching the more novice professionals on assessing campus climate and
job search concerns. Currently, there is a LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education group and student affairs’ organizations can follow this model.

**Reflections as a Scholar-Practitioner.** As a member of the queer community and mid-level student affairs professional, I was intrinsically motivated to understand the experiences of CSAOs. There was a literature gap I hoped to fill: the experiences of staff always seemed to be concatenated with the experiences of faculty and students. In addition, research tended to focus on employees of heterogeneous ages or statuses (i.e. tenured or not tenured). My research intended to evaluate whether the negative job search practices, interpersonal discrimination, and climate assessments of faculty and staff applied to the experiences of queer chief student affairs officers. The process was emic—I tried to stay as close to the individual experiences as possible, to the point that most of my major theme titles reflected actual quotes from participants.

The results were more diverse than I expected and I found them dependent on the participants’ disclosure decisions, which were equally different. Some participants felt they needed to separate personal and private lives and others were fully disclosed and fully verbal. All participants, however, explored some level of discrimination that occurred to them and explored how their early experiences affected their decisions and level of disclosure. I was surprised by the focus on AIDS, HIV, and physical violence in the 70s, 80s, and 90s as motivators for these participants to act as social change agents today. All participants noted that, earlier in their careers, the focus was on physical safety and, sometimes, being the “only gay” person on campus; today, it’s focused more on career safety.

Finally, the theme “Big Gay on Campus” really hit home for me as a practitioner. I had not realized, until the first mention of tokenization, how many times I have been asked to participate in a task outside of my general responsibilities likely because of my sexuality. This
finding was both exciting to have a new perspective, but disheartening to realize that either I am serving a token role or that I may be viewed as the flag bearer for LGBTQ advocacy and competency building.

**Recommendations for research.** This section discusses the limitations of the findings and potential opportunities for future research.

**Impact of Pulse and Election.** The interviews for this study were completed in April 2016. Two short months later, during the middle of Pride month, a shooting at the Pulse nightclub, a LGBT dance club, occurred, rattling the queer community and shaking our assumptions of physical safety; the Pulse nightclub shooting has been identified as the “deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman” in US history and against LGBT people, killing 49 people and injuring 53 others (Boyle, LaBrie, Costine, & Witkovic, 2016).

As a major finding indicated participants were more focused on career implications of their sexualities and less focused on physical safety than they were in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the Pulse nightclub shooting changed the perspective of this finding. It validated that safety is a perception, not a guarantee. Similarly, the results of the political election, where some indicated the political climate had the opportunity to be anti-queer, became realized.

The researcher contacted participants, both as a sign of support and to gather their reflections on the Pulse shooting and whether the shooting changed their attitudes originally shared in their interviews. Some of their reflections are below:

*Carl shared:*

I think we as LGBTQ people have always been brave (admittedly in differing degrees) to live our truths, to be out and open. There is some risk to doing so, but each generation pushes a bit further for future queer folks. And, of course, we stand on the backs of other
queer people who preceded us. I have a sense of purpose about this. My faith/spirituality reassure me. Living authentically and doing the best I can trumps fear of all the many bad things that could happen along the way.

Craig admitted that the shooting changed his perceptions of safety:

I’ve been kind of hyper aware since Orlando of safety and security issues in a way that hadn’t been personal for me in a long time. It triggered those points of fear that were stimulated earlier in my identity process when gay become synonymous with death and AIDS, or with the physical safety risks of being open/out and public in the context of bashing (a daily lived reality truly for the queer-identified, for trans people, or gender non-conforming people, but not for me in my recent memory).

Patrick reflected on the microaggressions that seem to lead to physical fear:

It certainly did make me feel like the LGBT community continues to be viewed as second-class citizens. The hardest part was the almost immediate negativity toward the LGBT community I sensed in the wake of the event and a lack of acknowledgement for how our societal norms subtly support this type of act. For many of my family and friends, they do not tie together how their resistance to equality in marriage, the workplace, and in general for the LGBT community makes it somehow okay for the shooter in Orlando to go on this rampage.

And, as for Marc, who already secluded his personal life from his work life, he stated “Orlando has reinforced that I need to think carefully about where I feel safe and where I don’t think I would feel safe.”

In analyzing these reflections, it’s clear future research needs to focus on ideologies that contribute to fear of physical harm. One participant mentioned in his Pulse reflection that he sees
states that permit guns to have a correlation to anti-queer agendas. In addition, future research can focus on how perceptions of queer individuals were altered by this mass shooting and the anticipated (and perhaps perceived) shift in diversity values from the administration as a result of the 2016 Presidential election; both which target the LGBTQ community.

**Recommendations for future research.**

Based on the four major themes of this study, additional research can focus on one of those specific themes: tokenization, discrimination in the workplace, or specific campus climates that support disclosure for student affairs professionals. Research in these categories would help explore specific examples and/or delineate when an experience is seen as tokenizing and when an experience is viewed as an accepted opportunity.

This study specifically could have benefitted from a more focused approach to the participants’ perspectives of the “now”—how they behave, act, make decisions within their role as a CSAO and how they feel their sexuality impacts those actions; in addition, the interviews did not explore, except minimally, how participants may disclose their sexuality in the next steps of their career, whatever that may be. The semi-structured approach to the interview allowed the participant to share narratives that were important to them, which brought to light how pivotal early career experiences and the culture of the 80s/90s impacted the participants’ perception of safety—which the researcher was not expecting. However, the different direction of the study focused on the earlier trajectory and minimalized discussion of their current positions.

In addition, the study included all male participants, except for one female. While the study focused on marginalization based on sexuality, nearly all of the participants had privilege as it related to their cisgender, male status. Since most of the themes stay in-vivo, the themes themselves represent male hierarchy (for example, the theme “how gay are you” versus “how
queer are you?”). The researcher chose to stay in-vivo to highlight the mostly male perspective. As the participants who all responded were male (again, but one), the study’s limitation is that it does not explore the marginalization of women and, in another sense, deeply explore the experiences of participants of color (although, two participants did identify as persons of color but only briefly explored the impact of those experiences).

Juxtaposed to previous higher education research which focused on faculty and students, this study aimed to explore the climate as perceived by student affairs administrators and how their sexualities impacted their career experiences. Future research can focus on the perceptions of all staff—not just student affairs professionals. As student affairs professionals tend to have an inclination towards social justice roles, uncovering the perceptions of queer academic support staff, admissions counselors, and other staff who may not work directly with students is a vital aspect of campus climate that is currently missing (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Liddle & Stowe, 2002; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). A similar, in-depth qualitative study could help uncover whether perceptions of institutional climate, hiring practices, and disclosure dilemmas are relevant across higher education for staff, replicating some of this study’s results.

Lastly, as mentioned previously, the impact of current events was largely missing in this study—since the primaries were occurring at the time of the interviews, an opportunity was lost to connect so much of the progress participants explored to the political party in office and how their perceptions might change should the administration drastically change. The political climate of 2016 as well as the Pulse nightclub shooting created a retrospective in analysis that showed how temporal and dependent perceptions of safety may be. Future researchers will analyze the past decade—one of much perceived progress for the queer population (or so, as participants described)—as one of the “different times” or paradigms in which a progressive
administration helped reduce physical fear and career safety—it’s only a guess how the next shift will be analyzed.

**Summary.** This study explored how queer chief student affairs officers perceived their sexual orientations, sexualities, and disclosures affected their career trajectories and professional identities. The study found participants had experiences where they were discriminated against and often felt like the token queer person on campus. However, as a result of these experiences, as well as the participants’ upbringings, the study found queer CSAOs acted as change agents on their campuses. While it is important for them to continue their advocacy, it is up to higher education to begin to cultivate inclusivity to all members of the community and not expect queer leaders to bear the burden.
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Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail

Recruitment E-mail

To: NASPA GLBT Network Listserv, Chief Student Affairs Officer Listserv
ACPA LGBT Affinity Group Listserv
Student Affairs Professionals Network E-mail
LGBT Presidents in Higher Education Consortium Contact
NASPA Central Office Staff, VPSA Liaison

Hello,

My name is Brandon Barile and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a research study, gaining insight into the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers, and how they feel disclosing their sexual orientation has impacted their professional trajectory, career experiences, and identity.

I am recruiting Chief Student Affairs Officers who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer to participate in this student. Participation involved taking part in an interview, expected to last approximately one hour. Interviews may be remote or in-person, depending on your preference. It is expected that most interviews occur over Skype (or similar) platform. Initial interviews will be conducted in the next 30 days, and I’m happy to be flexible to your scheduling needs.

As the researcher, only I will have your direct contact information and all other information will be kept completely confidential. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, or have any questions I may help answer, please contact me at barile.b@husky.neu.edu.

I look forward to your potential participation.

Best wishes,
Brandon Barile, MA
Doctoral Candidate
Northeastern University
Appendix B: IRB Approval from Northeastern University

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

Date: March 21, 2016  IRB #: CPS16-02-16

Principal Investigator(s): Bryan Patterson
                         Brandon Barile

Department: Doctor of Education
            College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University

Title of Project: LGBTQI Chief Student Affairs Officers: The Impact of Lived
                 Experiences and Disclosure on Professional Identity

Participating Sites: N/A

Informed Consent: One (1) unsigned consent

As per CFR 45.46.117(c)(2), signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more than
minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally
required.

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: MARCH 20, 2017

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants
   into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be
   reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the
   expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other
   university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix C: Semi Structured Interview Protocol

Background of the Study

**Purpose Statement:** The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the personal and career experiences of LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers and how they feel their sexual orientation has impacted their career experiences, professional trajectory, and identity.

**Goal:** Insight is expected to advance practical knowledge for emerging LGBTQ professionals, specifically how institutional leadership in higher education can make the climate more accepting towards non-heterosexual student affairs professionals and how emerging LGBTQ student affairs officers can traverse obstacles through mentorship of CSAOs.

**Research Question:** How do LGBTQ CSAOs perceive their sexuality, sexual orientation and/or disclosure have impacted their professional progression and identity?

Introduction and Informed Consent Process (10 minutes)

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I’m a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University and this interview is part of my dissertation study on the experiences of LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers. Your participation will help me develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of CSAOs and how sexual orientation, gender expression, and disclosure have impacted their career experiences and trajectory. Before we begin, I want to review a few things:

All the information I gather will be kept confidential and anonymous. No identifiable information about you or your college or university will be used in the study. To protect your anonymity, I will use a pseudonym for you and your institution. If you discuss any other leadership roles, I will also use a pseudonym.

I would like your permission to record the session: if in person, I would like your permission to record the audio of this interview and, if via Skype, I would like to record both video and audio. I will be taking some written notes, but audio recording will allow me to focus on our conversation; a video record will allow me to revisit the full interview as well. Besides me, the only other person who will review the files will be a professional transcriptionist. The audio file will be named by using a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality, meaning that the transcriptionist will never know your name. After the interview is transcribed, I will provide you a copy of the transcript to verify and edit if needed. When the study is completed, I will destroy the audio and video files.

If you agree, I would like to **start audio and/or video recording now.** The audio/video recording has begun.
Before we begin the interview, I need to review the Northeastern University requirements for protecting human subjects. Research participants must read and agree to the Consent Form that I emailed/provided to you. I would like to review this form with you now.

The Consent Form for this study, titled ‘LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers: The Perception of How Lived Experiences and Sexual Orientation Disclosure Influenced Professional Identity” states that all participants must be at least 18 years old. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have indicated that you are currently a Chief Student Affairs Officer and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. There are no foreseeable risks to you for taking part in this study, and there are also no direct benefits to you. Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you, your college, or any other participant as being part of this study. Finally, your participation is completely voluntary. If at any point during the interview you want to stop, you may do so.

Do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process or this form? Do you give your verbal consent? If you are ready, I'd like to start the interview.

Prefatory Statement: As I stated, my doctoral project is centered on gaining insight into the lived experiences of LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers as it relates to disclosure of their sexual orientation and how they perceive their sexual orientation or gender expression has impacted their career.

In addition, I’m trying to gain insight into how LGBTQ CSAOs infuse their sexual orientation identity into their leadership position.

For today’s interview, I’d like to hear about your career progression and for you to describe how you perceive your sexuality and sexual orientation has impacted your career identity.

I have five to seven questions for you; however, I’d like for you to steer the conversation as well, so I expect our interview to last about 45 to 60 minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Okay, then let’s begin.

Interview Questions (35-45 minutes)

1. Briefly describe your responsibilities as a Chief Student Affairs Officer.
   - What’s your favorite part of your position?
   - Why did you enter this field?
2. How would you describe your gender and sexual orientation?
   - What factors might change the way you answer this question?
3. In relation to your career, when do you think about your sexual orientation?
4. When you think about the first time you disclosed your sexual orientation in your current position or in your previous positions, what comes to mind?
   - How has your decision to disclose your sexual orientation changed throughout your career, if at all?

5. Do you feel your sexual orientation has impacted your current position or any other previous position? If so, how?
   - How do you think your sexual orientation has impacted job searches or your decision to join a campus?

6. How do you think others perceive your sexual orientation impacts your role?

7. What else is important for me to know?

Closing (5-10 minutes)

I am finished with my questions at this point. Is there anything that we did not discuss that you think would be important to add at this time? Do you have any other questions for me?

Next steps: I’ll be preparing your transcript within the next few weeks. I would like to send you the transcript to review, edit, and confirm for accuracy. Is this ok?

Thank you for your time. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have additional questions, concerns, or think of another experience that may be helpful for me to know.
Appendix D: Informed Consent

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Dr. Bryan Patterson and Brandon B. Barile
Title of Project: LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers: The Impact of Lived Experiences and Disclosure on Professional Identity

Request to Participate in Research

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being recruited because you have self-identified as a Chief Student Affairs Officers and have also disclosed to the researcher that you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the personal and career experiences of LGBTQ Chief Student Affairs Officers and how they feel their sexual orientation has impacted their career experiences, professional trajectory, and identity.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a one-hour in-person or Skype interview. If needed, a follow-up interview will be scheduled. After the interview, you will receive a transcript and have the ability to approve the transcript for accuracy.

Will there be any risk to me?

There are no foreseeable risks to you for participating in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the information gained from this study will benefit higher education campuses attempting to make their climate and policies more LGBTQ friendly.

Who will see the information about me?

[Signature]

[Date]

Northeastern University - Human Subject Research Protection
Rev. 4/21/2015
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. In all instances, pseudonyms will be utilized (including for names of institutions).

Your interview will be audio recorded but no names will be used. These audiotapes will be transcribed by a professional transcription service and will only be identified by using the number of the recording (i.e. recording 1). Demographic information about the participant in each recording will only be accessible to the researchers. Audio and video tapes from interviews will be destroyed after the researcher completes a successful defense of his dissertation.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review to see this information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have [as a student, employee, etc].

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Brandon Barile (barile.b@husky.neu.edu) the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Bryan Patterson (b.patterson@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

Please state if you wish to consent and continue.

You may keep this form for your records.
### Appendix E: Code Matrix Table

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<th>Marc</th>
<th>Manuel</th>
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