DISCLOSING SEXUALITIES, ACCESSING COLLEGE, AND FINANCING HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF GAY AND BISEXUAL UNDERGRADUATE MEN

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Dedication

“There are all sorts of different families, Katie. Some families have one mommy, some families have one daddy, or two families. And some children live with their uncle or aunt. Some live with their grandparents, and some children live with foster parents. And some live in separate homes, in separate neighborhoods, in different areas of the country - and they may not see each other for days, or weeks, months... even years at a time. But if there's love, dear... those are the ties that bind, and you'll have a family in your heart, forever.” - Mrs. Doubtfire

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the caregivers in our lives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Nearly ten years ago, I wrote a paper for a public policy in higher education course at Vanderbilt University. The relatively short academic exercise in 2008 piqued my interest in this complex question: what happens to queer college-bound young people after coming out to their parents? That paper, combined with my personal experiences and recounts from friends, launched this decade-long exploration of financial aid and college access for LGBT teens. Yet like relying on the village to raise and nurture a child, this search was not conducted in isolation, and this visual culmination of 13 years of primary and secondary school and 10 years of collegiate coursework is not a “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” narrative. I did not become a doctor of education because I wanted it more than others. This thesis is built by the very foundations of my family tree, network of friends and teachers, research titans who came before me and started this road toward discovery, brave LGBT individuals who stepped forward and gave us freedom to love and learn, and “helpers” in educational spaces throughout our lives.

Writing this section seems more laborious than going through my entire graduate program and crafting the dissertation itself. My incredible friends, family, mentors, teachers, and colleagues have made this journey worthwhile, thought-provoking, meaningful, and dare I say fun – at times. This section cannot possibly capture all of the people over my last 32 years who have helped me get to this place. If I could thank each person individually, I would certainly do so. These short passages must suffice for now.
I would like to first thank my brilliant chair and advisor, Dr. Shaun Harper, and fantastic committee members, Drs. Laura Perna and Joni Finney. Shaun pushed me to think deeper about my methods, participants, analysis, and implications. He supported me from day one and never wavered in his belief in my work. Shaun provided encouraging words, opened his home and his heart to my cohort mates and me, and hosted his office as my private interview venue – a necessity for sensitive and important topics with the young men in this study. I will always be grateful that Shaun, a giant in the field of higher education research, agreed to serve as my dissertation chair. In my master’s degree program at Vanderbilt and later in my first job as an admissions officer there, I studied the important works of Laura Perna and Joni Finney. Their research informed my thinking and worldview of higher education and served as a foundation for my initial understanding of this field. Never in a million years did I believe that these influential academicians might one day support, encourage, and give guidance to me in pursuit of my own degree. A “thank you” does not adequately convey my immense gratitude to Shaun, Laura, and Joni for improving my work, pushing me to think beyond my own analysis, and standing in my corner at all times. This completed dissertation is a testament to their support.

A hearty thank you to the participants in this study. The 18 men featured herein, out of more than 500 contacted, stepped forward to share their stories, and their lived experiences tell us more than we ever knew about coming out and going to college. Without their honest accounts and sharing of memories, some of which represented painful and difficult moments as young teens, this dissertation would not be as rich and
detailed as it is. But beyond this exploratory exercise, their contributions may help other young men as they come out to loved ones and navigate the college and financial aid processes. Thank you for taking the time to respond on Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet to a grateful researcher.

My friends are my life. They have stood by me at every turn and corner – not just during my time at Penn, but since day one. Perhaps it can be difficult for straight people to understand that friends are family, sometimes more so than any blood relationship. A lioness of our community, RuPaul said, “You know we as gay people, we get to choose our family. We get to choose the people we’re around. I am your family. We are family here. I love you.” This quote means the world to me as it defines the very experience and the essential existence of being a member of the LGBT community. My closest friends – my chosen family – love me and support me, and I could not be more thankful to have them by my side. Thank you to Alia, Bonnie, Dave, Drew, Dustin, Jenna, Jenny, Lauren, Lori, Melissa C., Melissa W., Neal, Niki, Sara, and Dr. Wilkinson, and of course my love, Adam, for being a constant where I originally had none. A special thank you and a “we did it!” to my cohort mates and friends, Georgia and Marc, who know better than anyone else in my life what it is like to write a dissertation in less than a year. Countless texts, phone calls, and writing sessions got me through this part of graduate school, and you two were rocks throughout this time. Additionally, funding and support for my education provided by ASU’s Leadership Scholarship Program, my first graduate assistantship at the Vanderbilt International Office (and the wonderful staff there), employee tuition benefits from Vanderbilt and Swarthmore, and the incredible people at
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I would be remiss without individually expressing my thanks to my true thought partners, Dustin and Adam. They both took time out of their busy lives as I tried out new interview questions on them, bounced ideas about data collection and analysis off of them, and picked their brains about interpretations and implications. Having navigated their lives as gay men like me and being immersed in the field of higher education, I could not have had better critical friends on this road to a doctorate. Their thoughtprints can be found throughout these following chapters, and I am indebted to both of these men for their incredible contributions to this study.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank the family who stepped in during the absence of my own – Scott, Sue, and Austyn Chambers and Jenna Martin. I’m simply at a loss for words in describing what this family means to me. Like some of my participants, they represented the positive and affirming adults in my own life. They treated me like any normal 17-year-old kid, regardless of my sexual identity. This family took me in during the wake of my biological family’s departure, a critical moment that could have left me stranded as a high school senior. Scott and Sue provided their home and a bed in which to sleep, gave me security and comforts, and cared for me until my ASU family could take over. Without their support – or my incredible, life-long best
friendship with Jenna – I absolutely would not be where I am today. So thank you to the
Chambers – this one’s for you.
ABSTRACT

DISCLOSING SEXUALITIES, ACCESSING COLLEGE, AND FINANCING HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF GAY AND BISEXUAL UNDERGRADUATE MEN

Andrew S. Moe
Shaun R. Harper

Large bodies of literature reveal two salient experiences during adolescence and young adulthood for many men who identify as gay and bisexual: disclosing one’s sexual identity to parents and going to college. Research suggests the reaction of one’s parents to sexual identity disclosure serves as a powerful indicator of subsequent health-related and psychosocial outcomes, yet little is known regarding the relationship between parental reaction and accessing college and financial aid. This study explores the lived experiences of White gay and bisexual young men and how they navigated the college choice and financial aid processes. The study investigates three interconnected constructs with regard to one’s sexual identity disclosure to his parent: the nature of the college choice process; the navigation of financial aid and scholarships; and other experiences that work to facilitate or restrict the college choice and financial aid processes. This qualitative study employs a phenomenological lens to retrospectively gather data using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 gay and bisexual-identified men, ages 18 to 24 years old, from a large U.S. metropolitan area. Participants were selected using online
and phone-based social media dating applications, popular in gay and bisexual men’s communities. The findings of this study suggest that prior to disclosure, the young men expressed a perceived fear in coming out to their parents. After disclosure, most participants reported that families were supportive of their sexual identities as well as their college choice process, and all participants went to college with financial aid support from their parents. Due to the limited sample size and specific characteristics of men in this study, future research must be conducted to explore this relationship of sexual identity disclosure and college access further. This study concludes with a set of suggestions and recommendations for parents, counselors, and higher education leaders.
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CHAPTER 1
Background, Purpose, and Overview of the Study

Introduction

Lesbian and gay youth are more likely to be in a relationship-shattering conflict with adults in their world. Parents, educators, and health care providers often act out the bias of society against lesbians and gays. That bias, when combined with the uneven power of the relation of adults with minors, can result in brutalization of youth, as these adults enlist the force of the ‘law’ to punish or coerce minor youth to conform to their ideal of heterosexual behavior (Abinati, 1994, p. 149).

Much has changed in the social and legal landscape over the last 23 years for gay and bisexual1 (GB) people since Abby Abinati wrote those words in 1994. GB men can adopt and foster children in most states, serve openly in the U.S. military, and legally wed their same-sex partners. They enjoy housing and employment protections from many state and local governments, file federal tax returns jointly, and receive Social Security spousal benefits when one partner passes away. GB people have been recognized and celebrated in the media and on television, serve in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures, work as business and technology leaders, and are located throughout society, from one’s family physician to teachers and professors. In a nationally representative study, 92% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults agreed that compared to ten years ago, society is now more accepting of LGBT people (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Still, other results from the same national study in 2013 suggest that GB men are far from fully embraced by the American people. Nearly 40% of LGBT people have

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1 This study examines the lives of gay and bisexual (GB) cisgender men. When appropriate, I use the term lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) to include women’s experiences as well, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) to include both women and trans experiences.
been rejected from family and close friends due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; 30% have experienced physical abuse or threats. Such findings confirm earlier studies (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks, & Sinclair, 2010) and reveal that while increased acceptance and additional legal protections serve as a foundation for gay and bisexual equity, GB people continue to experience discrimination, prejudice, and rejection, simply based on their immutable non-heterosexual identity.

GB youth, in particular, may encounter exceptional challenges that their heterosexual peers do not face. Straight children and adolescents do not “come out,” or disclose their sexual orientation, to their parents. Heterosexual identity is simply assumed due to heteronormative standards in society. Nor do heterosexual young people grapple with the consequences of disclosing their sexual identity to family, friends, teachers, counselors, and other adults in their world. Instead, heterosexual youth worry about typical teenage dilemmas: grades, homework, money, appearance, where to go to college, and what career they may have in the future (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). In addition to the same concerns their straight peers hold, GB youth also express apprehension over non-accepting families, bullying at school, and fear of being open about their sexuality (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). GB young men must infer potential reactions from family and friends, potentially negotiate their level of openness with themselves and others, and trust adults and peers alike with a deeply personal part of their identity. Based on available research and the temporal nature of such processes, we
know this set of experiences usually occurs at the same time GB men are considering what college to attend and how to pay for it (D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2005; Nelson, 2006). Yet, we do not know to what extent GB young adults access college and financial aid and how their sexual identity disclosure, particularly to their own parents, may relate to their college choice process.

Statement of the Problem

Literature on gay and bisexual people reveals a number of psychological and social challenges. To be clear, many GB adolescents and adults experience acceptance from significant people in their lives and transition to adulthood with little to no issues related to their sexual identity (Ryan et al., 2010). For others, disclosure and subsequent reactions represent troubling roadblocks and obstacles to leading a healthy life with an affirmed identity. GB people often lack identity affirmation from their own families (Morrow & Messinger, 2006; Blum & Pfetzing, 1997), may experience social isolation (D'Augelli, 1993; D'Augelli, 1998), face higher risks of harassment than peers (D'Augelli, 1989; D'Augelli, 1993; Rankin, 2003; Evans & D'Augelli, 1996), encounter physical and verbal abuse or attacks from others, including their family members (Cochran et al., 2002; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 2010), and experience higher risk of health-related problems, especially when confronting rejecting behaviors and attitudes from others (Ryan et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Ueno, 2005; Needham & Austin, 2010). Based on what we know from the aforementioned studies in psychology, sociology, human development, and healthcare literature, we
might expect that GB students also struggle with, or at least have a different experience related to, college and financial aid access. However, we do not know if this assertion is empirically supported because the subject has never been studied.

**Federal financial aid.** Financial aid, specifically those resources available through the federal government (e.g., Pell Grant, subsidized loans, work-study subsidies), may be inaccessible to some students given the strict requirements for parental income and tax disclosure; GB students from a myriad of home and family backgrounds are no exception. Absent this parental information, federal financial aid policies rely on specific criteria, such as reaching the age of 24 years old or a formal emancipatory declaration from a court, for a student to become financially independent from one’s family of origin. Besides meeting official criteria, young people have the option to appeal their dependent status, called a “dependency override,” to complete the financial aid process independent of their parents. Financial aid administrators may approve dependency overrides for various extenuating and unusual circumstances, such as physical abuse by one’s parents. Yet proving verbal or physical abuse, emotional or financial rejection, eviction from one’s home, and other empirically-supported results from sexual identity disclosure can be difficult for GB-identified young people, and those behaviors may not meet the requirements for a dependency override. As a result, GB students who have been rejected from their families and homes due to their sexual orientation may not be able to complete the federal financial aid process, and therefore, they may not have the same access to federal financial aid as those students where sexual orientation is not a salient issue (i.e., heterosexual students) or those students with accepting parents. Without
access to federal financial aid, GB students with rejecting parents may not be able to enroll and persist in postsecondary education like their peers.

Federal financial aid policy is predicated on normative, government-defined family relationships and is based on expected financial contributions from parents for a young person’s undergraduate education (Smith, Baum, & McPherson, 2008). In order to access financial aid, prospective college students must submit income, investment earnings, and tax information, among other documents, from parents and student to complete the federal financial aid process. The government requires this information to ensure a “fair” allocation of finite resources, yet due to the increasing complexities of family structures and the U.S. population (e.g., grandparents or relatives caring for children), negative implications for such policies may exist for GB students. Based on U.S. law, the government views parents as an integral part of the funding formula for higher education, which from a public policy perspective, has far-reaching consequences for parent-child relationships defined by rejection, abuse, or abandonment. Abinati’s (1994) contention is reality for some GB young people; they may be in “relationship-shattering conflicts with adults in their world,” including their own parents (p. 149). When this conflict exists, parents may not be willing to contribute to their child’s higher education, as the federal financial aid formula assumes, leading to GB students with rejecting families of origin to possibly be left out of many colleges and universities. This phenomenon has not, however, been empirically confirmed, and this study intends to qualitatively explore the relationship between sexual orientation disclosure to one’s parents and a student’s subsequent access to college and financial aid.
Age of disclosure and why it is important to financial aid eligibility. Research shows that adolescents, on average, disclose non-heterosexual identity to parents and loved ones between the ages of 16 and 18 years old (D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2005; Nelson, 2006), with gay men coming out earlier than lesbian and bisexual women (Pew Research Center, 2013). The act of disclosing sexual identity to others occurs far earlier than previous generations (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Of course, not all adolescents experience strained family relationships after disclosing their identity, but a body of literature suggests many experience some type of rejection from others. The nature of the parent-adolescent relationship post-disclosure may be pivotal when the adolescent discloses sexual identity prior to legal maturation. In most circumstances a student must rely on a parent to provide valuable information and support in the college and financial aid process. Whereas the government recognizes legal maturation at the age of eighteen for most responsibilities, privileges, and obligations, students do not have the sole responsibility of paying for U.S. higher education. The burden of paying for college falls on both parents and students. Therefore, in circumstances where a child has been estranged from parents or rejected from the home, the student faces policy hurdles to accessing college and financial aid options.

To further understand Abinati’s (1994) argument that GB youth may be in “relationship-shattering conflict[s] with adults,” research shows that parental victimization and fear of future victimization are salient concerns (D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 2010; D'Augelli, 2006). In a longitudinal study
that examined disclosure of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth over a two-year period, D’Augelli et al. (2010) studied disclosed, recently disclosed, and non-disclosed adolescents and young adults. They found that youths who came out (recently disclosed) to their parents during the two-year period reported the least overall family support\(^2\) and experienced a decline in the quality of family relationships\(^3\) during the study, especially with mothers. Disclosed, or out, youths in the study experienced the highest level of victimization by parents in the past, yet had the lowest fear of rejection by parents or sexual identity harassment. Finally, non-disclosed youth maintained the highest level of fear of rejection or harassment due to their sexual orientation by their parents. With the age of D’Augelli et al.’s study participants in mind (between 15 years old and 19 years old at the beginning of the study), it is clear that young people may experience difficult home lives prior to and just past legal maturation, well under the federally-defined age of 24, or one of the federal financial aid barriers to financial independence (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

**What is the magnitude of this problem?** As noted by several researchers, LGB people are not easily identifiable, and the population is often considered “hidden” or socially invisible (Ryan et al., 2010; Sanlo, 2004; D'Augelli, 1991; D'Augelli, 1998). Therefore, research concluding the size and scope of the LGB population is imperfect,

\(^2\) “Family support” in this study was measured by items on the Multidimensional Measure of Perceived Social Support. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, “My family really tries to help me” (D'Augelli et al., 2010, p 184).

\(^3\) “Quality of family relationships” in this study was measured by asking several questions related to verbal harassment, fear of rejection, and self-reported quality of relationships with parents. This set of questions also included measures from the Child and Adolescent Psychological Abuse Measure. Variables included relationship with mother, relationship with father, sexual orientation victimization by parents, fear of parental harassment or rejection, and family support.
yet it is essential to understand the extent to which these issues affect a sub-set of the U.S. population. Some research suggests identifying oneself as LGB is only one way non-heterosexual orientations can be measured and counted. Laumann, Ganon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) classified three components of sexuality: sexual desire (or attraction), sexual behavior, and sexual identity. The researchers found approximately 10% of their sample fell into one or more categories, though very few (1.5% of women, 2.4% of men) reported having same-sex sexual desires, participated in same-sex behavior, and identified a non-heterosexual identity. More recent research indicates that approximately three to five percent of the United States population self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Gates, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013; Newport & Gates, 2015; Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014), with 8.2% of respondents on one survey indicating same-sex sexual behavior had occurred in the past and 11% reported some same-sex attraction (Gates). Still, with stigma attached to LGB identity, desire, or behavior, researchers find it difficult to determine the exact magnitude of the population. Regardless, LGB people represent an ample number of Americans, equivalent to a figure between the size of New Jersey’s population and that of Indiana and Iowa’s combined number of residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). Since this study only explores gay and bisexual men’s experiences, we examine approximately half of this population.

Because significant consequences occur for some GB people who disclose their sexual orientation to others (e.g., loss of employment, eviction from home), sensitivity and confidentiality must be recognized when asking about sexual identity in surveys or interviews. Fear of disclosure continues to prevent accurate data collection on a wide
scale. Only recently have large research universities started asking about sexual identity on standard institution-wide surveys (Angeli, 2009). The number of higher education institutions that are asking prospective or current students about sexual orientation or gender identity is nearly zero, preventing researchers from using this information to understand important practical implications for recruiting, enrolling, matriculating, and graduating LGB students (Stainburn, 2013). People are conditioned to giving demographic details on surveys and questionnaires, such as race and ethnicity, approximate income level of family, sex, and educational background; however, researchers rarely ask about sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, or romantic attractions. When they do, the manner in which questions are posed about sexual identity may affect the answer given, perhaps skewing results and underrepresenting the population (Laumann et al., 1994). Without such data, colleges and universities lack the ability to track and identify GB students and note any challenges they may encounter on campus, including access, or lack thereof, to federal financial aid.

While some research and quantitative estimates can uncover the approximate number of GB people in the United States, no population-based empirical study reveals the portion of GB young adults rejected by their families or pushed out of their homes. In a study of 87 homeless youth providers, more than 78% of providers indicated LGB and questioning youth using their services were forced from their home or ran away due to their sexual orientation, with more than half indicating eviction or departing the home was the primary reason for homelessness (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015). Other studies confirm that LGB youth are more likely to be homeless compared to their
heterosexual peers due to their sexual orientation (Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012; Walls, Potter, & Van Leeuwen, 2009). Despite these studies, the magnitude of the GB college-going population potentially left out of higher education (due to parental rejecting behaviors, delay in attending as a result of financial dependence policies, or a host of other factors that work to reduce college access) is undetermined.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of gay and bisexual men and their journey to college. The phenomenological approach will allow for a deep exploration of common experiences shared across young people’s lives as they retrospectively recount how they navigated sexual identity development and disclosure, received reactions from their parents and others, attempted to attend or successfully accessed college, and applied for and possibly received federal financial aid. The primary purpose is exploratory in nature, as we do not have any research in the higher education field or other fields that examines this intersection of experiences.

This study aims to primarily explore the lives of GB men to set a course for future research, but when appropriate, the study will also help inform practitioners and alert decision-makers to the specific needs of GB students as they relate to their college choice process. After this study concludes, we will discern how sexual identity disclosure to one’s parents relates to subsequent college and financial aid access. We will also better understand GB student support systems, behaviors among adults that work to facilitate or restrict college access, and how early messages about college and financial relate to
future college-going behaviors. The primary target audience for this study is higher
education leaders and financial aid administrators, as they retain power and influence
over who is eligible for and receives need-based financial assistance from colleges and
universities. Secondary audiences include those “helpers” in the college choice process,
such as parents, college and guidance counselors, community-based organization
advisors, independent counselors, mentors, extended-family members and family friends.

Additionally, policymakers, including federal lawmakers, U.S. Department of
Education employees, and the White House, should note any challenges or special
circumstances that GB students encounter and work to mitigate obstacles that
heterosexual peers may not experience. Lawmakers and bureaucrats formulate policy for
an entire population. As populations are segmented due to status, background, or specific
needs, complexity of lived realities can lead to unintended roadblocks and limit effective
policymaking. The government and educational institutions have an obligation to ensure
statutory and policy barriers do not prevent a particular class or population from
accessing government benefits and institutions. This research study seeks to recount
valuable lived experiences of GB students from various types of families and
backgrounds, perhaps calling for additional quantitative and qualitative research in
college and financial aid access for GB youth. I plan to offer a set of recommendations
based on research findings to all interested parties that serve students in the college
choice process.

Finally, this study will contribute valuable, empirically-based findings to the field
of higher education, and more specifically, admissions and financial aid. While many
studies have been conducted examining the lives of LGBT students on college campuses, and some other studies in psychology, sociology, and healthcare literature have shed light on GB adolescents and their coming out process, we know virtually nothing about federal financial aid access for non-heterosexual students. This study serves as a starting point for a longer and more extensive conversation on how higher education communities, community-based organizations, schools and most importantly families can best support their lesbian, gay, and bisexual students navigating the college choice process.

Definitions and Related Concepts

Part of this study examines the large bodies of research surrounding distinct areas intersecting identity, sexual orientation disclosure, college access, and the financial aid process. As such, several terms and concepts must be defined before continuing. I use the term GB, or gay and bisexual, throughout the paper to describe the population under review. I also use lesbian, gay, and bisexual, or LGB, since this is the population most often cited in the literature. The terms “gay” and “bisexual” refer to any combination of sexual desires (or attraction), sexual behaviors, and sexual identities (Laumann et al., 1994). The mere label of GB is complex and opaque. Often, researchers ask participants to self-identify a static identity or orientation at the time of the study. Other times, researchers ask participants about specific behavior in which the participant has engaged (e.g. same-sex, opposite-sex) or feelings and attractions. However, most studies do not explain how researchers define these terms. Because I am reviewing years of research, generally from the 1980s to present day, researchers and scholars have used various terms for study participants: homosexual, queer-identified, LGBT (inclusive of lesbian,
bisexual women, and transgender communities), gay, non-heterosexual, and sexual minorities. Unless otherwise noted, “gay and bisexual”, or GB, refers to one’s self-described identity. The working definition that I intend to use in my study is self-identified gay and bisexual men, regardless of behavior or attraction.

Higher education terms, such as financial aid and college access, can also be confusing to the non-higher education communities. Financial aid for the purpose of this review includes only federal need-based resources, such as loans, grants, federal work-study, and institutional “scholarships” that are, in fact, grants as determined by federally-based methodologies. My interest stems from one’s access to and eligibility for federal aid, rather than scholarships that often do not take financial need into consideration (e.g., merit scholarships) and do not necessitate the filing of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). I use the terms “federal financial aid” and “need-based aid” interchangeably to reference any need-based resources provided to students using the FAFSA, though states and institutions may provide need-based financial aid to students using other methodologies as well. I also use the term “college choice” interchangeably with “college search” and “college selection.” To be clear, college choice encompasses the entire process of accessing postsecondary education, from pre-dispositions and attitudes toward attending college to matriculation at a college or university (Perna, 2006; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). College search is the phase in which a prospective student is reviewing information, searching online, visiting campuses, and applying to college. College selection occurs after one has completed the college search phase, has been admitted to one or more institutions, and is now actively making a decision to attend
one college. The reason for using these terms interchangeably is due to the imprecise point in time in which an adolescent or young adult discloses sexual identity to the parent. The exact stage or phase of the college choice pipeline is not always clear in the literature when discussing disclosure, so I use all of these terms to describe the college choice process in general.

Disclosure, or coming out as non-heterosexual to another person, is also a term that needs clarification. The colloquial phrase, “coming out of the closet”, is avoided in this literature review, though it is certainly present in interview reports and qualitative studies. Rather, I use the term disclosed or disclosure to describe the active, passive, or reactive process of telling another person of one’s sexual identity, as there is a wide body of literature on sexual orientation disclosure. I attempt to describe the nature of disclosure, whether the process is self-initiated (active), written or disclosed in other non-confrontational ways (passive), or other-initiated by a friend or family member to one’s parents (reactive). Although these three categories are not always distinct, I use the general terms disclosed or disclosure to describe the overarching process of coming out as gay or bisexual to other people.

Organization of the Dissertation

A review of the literature follows this section in Chapter Two. Specifically, I use Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice to guide and frame the college choice process for GB adolescents and young adults. Perna’s model serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Two will also discuss GB identity development and disclosure to others, acceptance and rejection behaviors post-disclosure,
federal financial aid policies for financially independent students, gatekeepers and supportive adults in the college choice process, and access to college and financial aid for independent students, including homeless students, emancipated and foster care youth, and those students with intersecting identities along racial, socioeconomic, and immigrant identities. Chapter Three covers the phenomenological paradigm and methods, including participant selection, data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter Four introduces the reader to participants selected for this study, specifically how they navigated coming out to parents and going to college. Chapter Five presents findings from the study, organized into themes and sub-themes based on the data analysis. Chapter Six discusses connections between and across findings, how these empirical discoveries relate to previous literature, and offers implications for practice and research. A list of references and appendices follows Chapter Six.
CHAPTER 2

A Review of the Literature

A review of the literature on gay and bisexual (GB) students’ access to need-based financial aid and the relationship between access and disclosure to one’s heterosexual parents yielded no results. Most GB young adult research focuses on youth shelter inhabitants, support group participants, and college students, likely due to the availability and access to these populations. No single study that explores the intersection of sexual orientation disclosure effects and access to education exists to date, yet several research studies examine GB identity development; disclosure of sexual orientation to others, including parents; positive and negative implications for such parental disclosure and the spectrum of acceptance and rejection; financial aid policies for financially independent and dependent students; and access to college for students with intersecting identities. I intend to draw comparisons and similarities between other college-aged student populations, such as homeless students and those with non-traditional family structures, and how they might navigate the college search process. First, I reference Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice to frame the varied contexts students encounter when attempting to access college and financial aid, followed by a full and exhaustive review of the literature. Future research must extend what we already know about the effects of coming out to a parent to try to understand how the experience interacts with the college and financial aid processes.
Guiding Theoretical Framework

To better understand the lived experiences of GB students, their experiences after disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents, and how they navigate their college choice and financial aid processes, I consider these issues using Perna’s Conceptual Model of Student College Choice. The model allows for deep exploration at pivotal intersections in the college choice process and helps frame a student’s multiple contexts and lenses for understanding the person’s immediate and greater environment. Though the model does not explicitly take sexual orientation or disclosure reactions into account, I intend to use the model’s components to interpret the multiple contexts a student encounters when choosing to attend college.

Perna (2006) developed a conceptual framework for understanding college choice amongst students from various backgrounds. In short, the model is composed of four layers of context, including the individual’s habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and the social, economic, and policy context. Perna drew from both economic (e.g., human capital theory) and sociological (e.g., status attainment, social and cultural capital) theories to develop the model, recognizing that economic and sociological lenses alone do not adequately explain decision-making in the college choice process. The model assumes that there is not one linear path to college enrollment to which all students adhere; rather, the model recognizes an individual’s “situated context” by examining one’s habitus in relation to structural and societal contexts.
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

Source: Figure 3.1 Proposed Conceptual Model of Student College Choice, Perna, 2006.

With permission of Springer.
For the purposes of this study, I am keenly interested in the first two layers: habitus and school and community context. An individual’s habitus, or layer one, is nested in the larger stratum of context at play in an individual’s college choice. Habitus is composed of a collection of ideas, garnered from membership in a given group or class of people, that creates an individual’s attitudes, expectations, and aspirations (McDonough, 1997). These ideas and concepts are situated within one’s immediate environment and help inform and frame one’s college choice (Perna, 2006). Closely related, social and cultural capital inform and facilitate one’s college choice process. Social capital refers to the access to networks of people, as well as the information and knowledge acquired through those networks (Perna, 2006). Cultural capital involves the transmission of knowledge and skills, such as language ability, cultural understanding and personal traits, from parents to children; those with more valued forms of cultural capital (by the majority, or dominant class) are able to maintain their status and position in society (Perna, 2006). In the college choice context, social and cultural capital benefits students and assists them with making informed decisions about their college choice, whereas the lack of highly valued forms of capital can inhibit college access and choice. Finally, one’s characteristics, such as race and gender, play a role in informing the college choice process, and for the purposes of this study, one’s sexual identity and reaction to disclosure is part of an individual’s immediate environment.

The second layer, school and community context, encompasses structural and organizational resources, supports, and barriers (Perna, 2006). Schools, classrooms, college counseling offices, community-based organizations, counselors, teachers, and
advisors primarily make up one’s school and community context. For example, those students living in larger cities or close to colleges and universities may benefit from nonprofits that offer college advising services to low-income and first-generation college students or from federal programs housed at higher education institutions, such as GEAR UP or Upward Bound. Likewise, those students living in rural areas or those who attend large public schools with few counselors may encounter additional barriers to college access. A counselor at a religiously-affiliated school who disagrees with homosexuality on religious grounds may constrain a GB-identified student’s access to financial aid by withholding information or refusing to mediate between parents and the student. Since this subject has not yet been empirically studied, school and community actors could exhibit a range of responses that encourage or constrict college-going behaviors among GB students.

The third layer, higher education context, refers to the position colleges and universities hold in a student’s college choice process, and the fourth layer, the social, economic, and policy context, pertains to societal and cultural forces, the economy, and public policy (Perna, 2006). While I am certainly interested in how one might receive messages from higher education institutions, interact with institutional actors (e.g. financial aid administrators), and be affected by federal financial aid policy changes, the central goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of young gay and bisexual men and the interplay of their immediate environment.
Disclosure as Part of Being Gay or Bisexual

Disclosing sexual orientation to others, especially to one’s family of origin, is a key developmental milestone for GB people (D’Augelli, 1994). Although disclosure of sexual orientation to parents has been well-documented in the past few decades (Ben-Ari, 1995; Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2012; D'Augelli, et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 2010; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Needham & Austin, 2010; Ryan, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998), little is known about the relationship between disclosure and students’ access to college and financial aid. Research suggests non-heterosexual students may encounter negative reactions in the home, such as verbal and physical abuse, due to one’s sexual identity that heterosexual students do not otherwise face (D'Augelli et al., 1998), though the extent to which these family-based challenges modify or mediate the college choice process has not been empirically studied.

In addition to disclosure to one’s parents, GB youth encounter distinct, non-linear milestones in their identity development, including self-awareness, self-disclosure, and disclosure to others (e.g., friends, siblings), among other developmental processes (D'Augelli, 1994). Several research studies found that the age of self-awareness of one’s feelings toward someone of the same sex is 10 years old, whereas self-disclosure or labeling of one’s own sexuality occurs between the ages of 14 years old and 17 years old (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2013). In opposite-sex
parent units, some research confirms that adolescents and young adults are more likely to disclose to mothers than fathers (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Nelson, 2006). Regardless of the parental recipient, the timeline of awareness and disclosure is critically important; disclosure to parents, either intended or unintended, often occurs prior to legal maturation, or the age of 18 (D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2005; Nelson, 2006). Yet legal maturation for college purposes, or the age of independent status for federal financial aid, is at least 24 years old, requiring young people to rely on their parents for support that may or may not exist for GB students.

Disclosing sexual identity to a parent can lead to far-reaching implications for adolescents and young adults depending on a parent’s reaction. To be sure, some families and parents react positively to a child’s “coming out” or disclosure of sexual identity (Ryan, 2009a; Ryan et al., 2010; D'Augelli et al., 2005). Researchers have found that parental acceptance and family connectedness serve as protective factors against unhealthy outcomes (Ryan et al., 2010; Saewyc, Homma, Skay, Bearinger, Resnick, & Reis, 2009; Bregman et al., 2012). Ryan et al. (2010) conducted a retrospective study on acceptance behaviors amongst parents of LGB young adults (as reported by the LGB young adults) to understand the relationship between acceptance behaviors and health and mental health outcomes. They found that young adults who claimed higher levels of acceptance from families experienced healthier outcomes, such as higher self-esteem, more social support, and better general health than those who reported lower levels of family acceptance. Likewise, those who reported lower levels of family acceptance had
higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and behavior. While we cannot determine directional causality, this study was one of the first to examine family acceptance and LGB young people. In another study, Saewyc et al. (2009) found in a population-based study that bisexual young people reported lower levels of protective factors, such as family connectedness and attachment to school, than heterosexual peers. This suggests that young people who are not as connected to their family, perhaps due to sexual orientation, may face obstacles and risk-factors that heterosexual students may not encounter to the same degree or for the same reasons.

Indeed, most research on parental disclosure among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people examines the negative outcomes of such disclosure. Disclosed young people often experience stress (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Savin-Williams, 2001), verbal and physical abuse or violence (Cochran et al., 2002; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Nelson, 2006), low self-esteem (D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Evans & D'Augelli, 1996), loss of various forms of support from friends and family (D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Ueno, 2005; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Saewyc et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006), internalized homophobia (D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Bregman et al., 2012; Shilo & Savaya, 2012), threats of disclosure to others (Nelson, 2006), and poor health outcomes (Ryan et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Ueno, 2005; Needham & Austin, 2010). Poor health outcomes may include heavy drinking, drug use, depression, suicidal thoughts, and risky sexual behavior, among others. Additionally, some research suggests that higher levels
of religiosity are associated with lower levels of acceptance among friends and family and lower levels of disclosure (Shilo & Savaya, 2012), suggesting that the more religious one identifies, the less likely they are to receive acceptance and affirmation from their family of origin. Interestingly, religious faith has been linked to positive mental health among the general population (Weaver, Samford, Morgan, Lookdown, Larson, & Garbarino, 2000), though perhaps due to some religions and religious texts rejecting homosexuality, these findings do not necessarily hold true for LGB people (Shilo & Savaya, 2012).

Some research submits that the affirmation of one’s sexual identity can produce positive consequences. Bregman et al. (2012) found that LGB young people with affirmed identities had little identity uncertainty and internalized homo-negativity, fewer acceptance concerns from heterosexual people, and fewer challenges around sexual identity development. Based on the number of participants categorized as having affirmed identities, as opposed to identity struggles, the results suggest that many young people receive acceptance from others and have self-affirmed sexual identities. A recent, non-randomized large-scale research study by the Human Rights Campaign (2012) of more than 10,000 13 to 17-year-olds adds value to Bregman and colleagues’ conclusion: More than 60% of LGBT adolescents report that their family is accepting of LGBT people. Still, youth report the most important problem they face is their non-accepting families (26%), compared to the most important problem that heterosexual students report, which is classes, exams, and grades (25%).
Particular attention is paid by researchers to physical and verbal abuse from parents and family members. D’Augelli et al. (1998) examined this area in multiple studies; limitations exist, however, due to convenience sampling and most studies occurring in large metropolitan areas where youth have access to social support networks and support centers. Still, the findings suggest real and perceived consequences endure for GB adolescents considering disclosure. In a relatively small sample, D’Augelli et al. (1998) compared disclosed youth to their parents to non-disclosed youth. They found that disclosed youth experienced more verbal and physical attacks from family members due to their sexual orientation; non-disclosed youth reported almost no attacks, though they reported more fear of future abuse than disclosed youth. Several other studies conclude abuse from others can sometimes occur post-disclosure (Cochran et al., 2002; D’Augelli, 2006; D’Augelli et al., 2005; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995) while others claim this response is relatively rare (Savin-Williams, 2001). “Evidently,” D’Augelli et al. noted, “disclosure of sexual orientation within the family during one’s adolescence – while one is still residing at home and attending high school – has its dangers” (1998, p. 367). We cannot conclude, based on available research, to what extent these dangers exist, but present they are.

Understanding the prevalence of physical and verbal abuse is important, though victimization of GB men can take many forms. No research exists to understand the impact or extent of financial victimization (the degree to which financial resources are withheld by parents upon disclosure) on college access among those GB youths rejected from their homes due to their sexual orientation. Additionally, we do not know to what
extent GB adolescents depart from their homes and permanently sever ties with their families of origin. Savin-Williams (2001) cited research that concluded “relatively few parents display fits of rage and anger, physically or sexually abuse their child, reject their daughter or son, or eject the youth from the home after disclosure” (p. 40). Moreover, Savin-Williams wrote that five percent of adolescents experienced physical violence from parents or were ejected from their homes, according to several other studies; these studies were not cited in the book, so we do not know the validity of such research and the accuracy of Savin-Williams’ conclusion. We do know several other studies have found verbal and physical abuse and violence as a result of disclosure (Cochran et al., 2002; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Nelson, 2006). Additionally, we know that LGB youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population (Rosario et al., 2012; Walls et al., 2009; Corliss et al., 2011) and that sexual orientation and conflict over such identity are reasons why young people run away from home or are rejected from their home by their parents (Cochran et al., 2002; Kipke, Weiss, & Wong, 2007; Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer, & Smith, 2005).

**Spectrum of acceptance and rejection.** The reaction to sexual orientation disclosure can range from complete acceptance to outright and permanent rejection. However, this binary view at opposite ends of the reaction spectrum neglects the full reality for GB people. GB men can disclose their identity actively through conversation with friends and family, tell others via social media, text messages, or written documents, or have others come out on their behalf. Others have their identity exposed without their
permission, also known as “outing” another person. Of course, many GB people reactively respond to the proverbial, “Are you gay?” question and choose to disclose (or not disclose) to others asking about their sexual orientation. Regardless of the way in which GB young men tell others about their identity, sexual orientation disclosure receives a continuum of responses that may change over time. Some studies examining rejecting families suggest that after disclosure, improvement of one’s relationship with parents occurs over time, though researchers generally do not indicate how much time has elapsed before that transpires (Saltzburg, 2004; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Coolhart, 2006). Because the timeline for high school graduates applying to college and for financial aid is generally both sequential and linear, lasting roughly one year between initial application to an institution and starting classes, the lapse of time between disclosure and relative acceptance represents an essential piece of information to understand college access of GB youth.

Some researchers have attempted to categorize the nature of relationships with parents. In a study of homeless LGB and transgender youth living in New York City, Maitra (2002) found that in general, youth had “tense” parental relationships. He typologized relationships in four ways: functional, deceptive, strained, and separated. *Functional relationships* described the most accepting form of interaction between parent and child. Maitra explained that these types of relationships involved a disclosed youth and their parent or parents, who in turn accepted or were comfortable with their child’s sexuality. *Strained relationships* represented interactions typified by conflict. Often, youths reported discrimination and physical, sexual and/or verbal abuse; sometimes,
parents allowed their child to live in the home, though they “make them feel unwelcome.” *Deceptive relationships* are driven by fear among youths. These relationships included non-disclosed youth worried about eviction from their homes, parental withdrawal of support, or abuse (Maitra), confirming an earlier study of non-disclosed youth (D'Augelli, 1998). Finally, *separated relationships* constituted an absence of relationship between parent and child. Maitra revealed two reasons for this occurrence: either eviction and rejection from one’s home, or departing the home due to “intolerable conditions”.

More recent research identified more than 100 behaviors from families and caregivers in response to a LGBT adolescent or young adult disclosing their sexual orientation, from accepting to conflicted to outright rejection (Ryan, 2009b). Researchers from the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) conducted a participatory research study with 53 Latino and White LGB adolescents, as well as 49 families, where they held in-depth individual interviews (Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010). FAP generated 55 positive family experiences and 51 negative family experiences and developed close-ended questions based on these reported experiences (Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010). FAP then surveyed more than 200 Latino and White LGBT-identified participants, aged 21 to 25, from the San Francisco area who had disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent or caregiver (Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010). Such questions included, “Between ages 13-19, how often did your parents/caregivers blame you for any anti-gay mistreatment that you experienced?” (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 347) or, “How often did any of your parents/caregivers talk openly about your sexual orientation?” (Ryan et al., 2010, p.
Finally, they looked at health outcomes and assessed self-esteem, social support, general health, current depression, suicide ideation and attempts, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior (Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010). Ryan et al. (2009, 2010) found that “family acceptance promotes well-being and helps protect LGBT young people against risk. And family rejection has a serious impact on a gay or transgender young person’s risk for health and mental health problems” (Ryan, 2009b, p. 4). FAP researchers categorized family acceptance into four levels: extremely, very, a little, and not at all accepting, whereas they categorized family rejection into three levels: low, moderate, and high rejection (Ryan, 2009b). LGBT people who have extremely accepting parents and caregivers (as retrospectively reported by youths in the study) are more likely to believe they can be a happy LGBT adult and more likely to have a desire to become a parent, whereas LGBT people who have a high level of family rejection are more than three times more likely to use illegal drugs, more than three times more likely to be at high risk of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, almost six times more likely to report high levels of depression, and more than eight times more likely to have attempted suicide (Ryan, 2009b). Clearly, the level of acceptance and rejection from parents and families can have a profound impact on the well-being of a young person and varies across a broad range of reactions. What Ryan’s study did not examine, and what we do not know from a review of the literature, is the extent to which GB adolescents and young adults experience financial consequences from their families of origin as they attempt to access college and federal financial aid.
Financial Aid Policies for Financially Independent and Dependent Students

Colleges and universities rely on the federal financial aid system as a primary source of revenue to fund their annual budgets and meet operating expenses, in addition to endowment returns, alumni annual giving, parent and family contributions via tuition payments, and for most public institutions, state and/or local appropriations. Without the federal aid system, many students, mostly low-to-middle income students, may not be able to attend college, save for low-cost community colleges and institutions that offer vast merit aid and/or tuition discounts. The federal government provides grants, loans, work-study and tax incentives for students and their families to help make college more affordable (Baum, 2007). However, Baum contends that “the student aid system falls far short of assuring access to affordable, high quality, higher education for all who could benefit from it” (p. 709).

Student aid in all forms includes both need-based and merit-based monies. Need-based aid includes subsidized and unsubsidized loans, work subsidies (for federal work-study jobs, usually on campus), and grants (such as the Pell Grant) (Baum, 2007). Conversely, institutions, state governments, and external funding agencies provide merit aid and scholarships based on academic ability, test scores, athletic or musical talent, or other criteria. While merit-based scholarships given to low-income students inevitably help provide access to attend college, most merit aid programs do not account for financial need, and we know that need-based aid, and in particular, grants, has a larger effect on college enrollment than merit-based aid (Perna & Kurban, 2013; Baum, 2007). This dissertation explores the relationship between federal need-based aid accessibility
and one’s post-disclosure experiences between parent and child, so although merit
scholarships can ultimately mitigate negative financial repercussions (i.e., parents
withholding college funds), I am primarily interested in understanding how students
access need-based aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Eligibility for federal need-based financial aid, as well as some state and
institutional funding when contingent upon the federal eligibility guidelines, is based on
answers to the questions posed on the FAFSA. In a study examining barriers to filling
out the FAFSA and completing the financial aid process among Pell Grant-eligible
students, Cochrane, LaManque, and Szabo-Kubitz (2010) assert that the “[FAFSA] is the
gateway to all federal grants, loans, and work study, as well as most aid from states and
college. The FAFSA is a critically important step…” (p. 4). FAFSA asks for both
student and parent demographic and financial information when the student is financially
dependent on parents and cannot claim financial independent status. The government
asks parents about marital status; social security numbers; dates of birth; legal state of
residence; federal benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Supplemental
Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Free or Reduced Lunch, among others;
income tax return form used; adjusted gross income; income tax; exemptions; earnings
(wages, salaries, tips, etc.); cash, savings and checking account balances; net worth of
investments; net worth of businesses; and untaxed income, among many other specific
questions pertaining to earnings and taxes (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In
most circumstances, parents are required to sign the form for submission to the federal
government to determine the parents’ Estimated Family Contribution (EFC), or the figure
that colleges and universities often use to determine financial aid awards. In sum, federal authorities require extensive answers about a student’s and parents’ income, assets, and taxes paid.

Access to need-based financial aid most often relies on the federal definition of eligibility, though exceptions exist for state-level programs and some institutional aid. To understand the differences in financial independence for federal aid and to primarily argue that aid eligibility should not be predicated on the expectation that parents contribute to their legally mature offspring, Smith et al. (2008) proposed two types of financial independence: actual financial independence and exception-based financial independence. Actual financial independence classifies students who have the financial resources (income, assets) to support themselves financially. Regardless of the support their parents are willing to provide, these students can independently finance their education. Exception-based financial independence, however, is the “normative condition of being considered financially separate from one’s parents for any reason other than having independent sources of income or independent assets” (p. 135). The federal government has outlined limited cases for a student to be considered for exception-based financial independence, such as being a ward of the state or being homeless. Smith et al. further maintained that, regardless of any arbitrary age, “financial aid should never be conditioned on the extension of an abusive relationship” (p. 149). Likewise, in a qualitative study of independent college students, Gordon (2013) argued that “avenues to independence should not be limited to homelessness or divorcing [being emancipated from] one’s parents due to abusive situations” (p. 276). However, for LGB students,
federal financial aid may be conditioned on the extension of an abusive or rejecting relationship with a parent with little recourse. The purpose of this study is to explore student experiences with exception-based financial independence.

The federal government created policies in the last decade to allow more latitude for students (e.g., homeless youth) to declare independent status based on exception-based concerns; however, we do not yet know how these new policies may affect, promote, or prevent access for GB students. Until 2008-09, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) required parental information on the FAFSA in all circumstances except for those who met one of the following criteria: birthdate prior to January 1, 1985; matriculation into a master’s or doctorate program at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year; legally married, as recognized by the federal government; children who receive more than half of a student’s support; dependents (other than children or spouse) who live with the student who receive more than half of the student’s support; deceased parents or a ward/dependent of the court; or, active duty in the military or a veteran. The federal government further defines parents to exclude grandparents, foster parents, and legal guardians unless they have legally adopted the student.

In 2008, Congress passed the Higher Education Opportunity Act, and in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education (2009) amended the FAFSA to include the following categories: foster care since the age of 13; emancipated minor as determined by a court in the state of legal residence; legal guardianship as determined by a court in the state of legal residence; determination by the high school or school district homeless liaison that the student was an unaccompanied youth who was homeless since July 1, 2008;
determination by the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that the student was an unaccompanied youth who was homeless since July 1, 2008; or determination by a runaway or homeless youth center or transitional living program that the student was an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or was self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. The Higher Education Opportunity Act made homeless youth automatically eligible for federal TRiO programs, providing a range of support services and college advising for this population (NAEHCY & NASFAA, 2014).

While the federal government created avenues for homeless youth, youth at-risk of being homeless, and youth in foster care since the age of 13 or in legal guardianship as determined by the state, significant challenges may persist for GB youth. First, adolescents and young adults may be hesitant to contact authorities, notify school personnel or tell friends after turmoil occurs in the home due to the sensitive disclosure of one’s sexual orientation. Research shows that, even when people are given the chance to disclose their sexual identity, attractions, or behaviors on a survey “even under conditions of extreme privacy and anonymity” (Coffman, Coffman, & Marzilli Ericson, 2013, p. 4) substantial social desirability bias exists that prevents accurate reporting. Presumably, if GB people are reluctant to report sexual orientation on an anonymous survey in their own home, they may also be reluctant to disclose their orientation to adult authorities. Further research must be conducted to confirm this hypothesis.

Furthermore, because we know that some parents eventually accept, to some degree, their GB-identified child (Saltzburg, 2004; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Coolhart, 2006)
and family reunification can be the goal after parental rejection and sexual identity disclosure, GB young people may not initiate or follow through with formal legal proceedings to change guardianship, enter foster care, or register with a school or community homeless liaison in the event of eviction from one’s home. Absent of these formal steps and without parental support, GB adolescents and men must contend with complex bureaucracy and daunting institutional dependency override policies to access federal financial aid and college matriculation. No current research exists to understand the impact of these policies on GB youth from rejecting homes or how vulnerable populations navigate policies to access financial aid, though we do know that youths may receive some support and guidance from their school and community context along the way (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011).

**Gatekeepers and Supportive Adults**

Students receive information about college and financial aid from a number of sources, including the Internet, television, newspapers and periodicals, college brochures, guidance and college counseling offices, teachers, parents and guardians, older siblings and extended family, friends, and community-based organizations, among other avenues. Research confirms that parental involvement, support, and encouragement is related to a student’s decision to enroll in college (Perna & Titus, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999). Stage and Hossler (1989) found that parental encouragement and support represents the largest predictor of whether the student aspires to attend college. However, given the research around post-disclosure reactions from others, GB youth do not always have sexual orientation support or acceptance from parents and caregivers (Ryan et al., 2009). This
suggests that, in the absence of general support from parents, specific support for the college search process may be withheld from parents as well, though the literature remains silent on confirming this point. Regardless of the existence of parental support, high school counselors, or gatekeepers to college access, play a pivotal role for young people’s access to college information (Bryan et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, Rafiullah Miller, & Scott Krei, 1996). In a longitudinal study of high school seniors, Bryan et al. (2011) found that contact between the student and the counselor positively predicted application to college, with a more pronounced effect for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as compared to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet given that many high schools have high student to counselor ratios, with the national average of 266 students for every one counselor (including both public and private schools), students do not always have access to their high school counselor (Clinedinst, 2015). In a study of 15 high schools in five states, Perna et al. found that high student to counselor ratios led to students and parents initiating assistance to gather college-related information (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Loring Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008). Similarly, Bryan, et al. argued that “from the perspective of college access, relationships between parents and school personnel are an important factor. Counselors’ discussions with parents play a decisive role” in providing college information and educating students on the college choice process (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009, p. 288). The findings of Perna et al. (2008) and Bryan et al. (2009) may have powerful implications for the GB student lacking parental support at home.
Counselors and advisors must have the knowledge of college application processes and financial aid to counsel their students, yet this social capital does not represent the only form of knowledge necessary to counsel populations of students who lack parental support. In a survey of public school personnel, financial aid officers, college access advisors, and homeless youth service providers, NAEHCY and NASFAA⁴ (2014) found that respondents had different levels of familiarity with policies for homeless youth access to financial aid. Most respondents had heard of policies for unaccompanied homeless youth and their access to federal financial aid, though the degree to which they were familiar varied. More than 22% of college access advisors, from federal programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO, had heard of such policies, yet they lacked details or knowledge of how these policies worked. Another 10% of college access advisors indicated that the survey question represented the first bit of knowledge they had on the subject, and nearly 74% of all college access advisors had attempted or knew of an attempt by colleagues to assist unaccompanied homeless youth with their financial aid process. In the same survey, although a plurality of respondents indicated no barriers existed for unaccompanied homeless youth in accessing financial aid, some participants reported several other barriers. Burdensome documentation required by financial aid, lack of awareness of policies for unaccompanied homeless youth, and insensitivity and intimidation toward students and/or providers among financial aid office personnel represented the most common financial aid barriers for students.

⁴ National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
Beyond knowledge of financial aid policies for homeless youth, an identity to which GB students may or may not ascribe, college counselor competencies and familiarity with LGB-related issues prove important for these students as well. Welles Day (2008) found in a study of 226 counselors that participants had little to no LGB-related graduate courses, spent little time examining these issues in other graduate courses, and had attended few LGB-related workshops in graduate school. More notably, Welles Day found that the importance of religion to a counselor negatively predicted the counselor’s LGB attitudes, suggesting that LGB students with religious counselors may not have the same level of social, personal, and/or college-related support as compared to their heterosexual peers. Another study confirmed the lack of LGB-related topics in counseling certificate programs; topics were often embedded in courses examining minority populations or college access without particular attention paid to LGB students (Tremblay, 2014). It is evident that students who identify as GB may not have the necessary help from guidance and college counselors for issues and challenges they encounter due to their sexual identity and consequences of disclosing that identity, yet available research prevents a comprehensive overview of such concerns. Instead, we must turn to other types of independent students who lack support at home to glean empirical evidence that may shed light on GB students as a similar, and sometimes intersecting, population.

Access to College and Financial Aid for Populations of Independent Students

Higher education research has explored and continues to explore predictors of and barriers to college access and success for many different populations and subpopulations.
Researchers have learned much about college access for African American students (Davis, Green-Derry, & Jones, 2013; Auerbach, 2007; Van Horn, 2010), Latino/a students (Collatos, Morrell, Nuno, & Lara, 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999; Urquidez, 2010), Native American students (Fann, 2006; Urquidez, 2010), undocumented students (Burman, 2013; Woodruff, 2013), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Urquidez, 2010), and students from first-generation college backgrounds (Saunders & Serna, 2004; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), among many other communities. One main reason why academic researchers have not examined ways in which GB students access college is due to the social invisibility of the population in high schools, on college campuses, and in society in general (Sanlo, 2004; Ryan et al., 2010; D'Augelli, 1998; D'Augelli, 1991). It proves difficult to study a sample of a particular population when very few institutions regularly ask about sexual identity in mainstream surveys, questionnaires, and even college applications (Stainburn, 2013).

While many studies examine how federal, state, and institutional financial aid policies increase or inhibit access to college for a myriad of student populations, no research exists to measure the impact of these policies on GB students. The only research found looked at transgender and gender-variant people and accessibility to financial aid and scholarships. In a national survey of over 6,000 participants, researchers found that 11% of transgender and gender nonconforming people experienced a loss of scholarship funds, or could not access financial aid or scholarships at all, due to gender identity (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011). The study indicated that those with multiple marginalized identities experienced the greatest risk of not accessing
financial aid and scholarships. Unfortunately, Grant et al. did not explore reasons for such loss or lack of access. Therefore, we must examine similar and overlapping populations of students, such as homeless youth, emancipated youth, and those who lack family support and how they might navigate and traverse the college access landscape.

**Homeless students.** Approximately 1.3 million homeless children attend public K-12 schools in the United States, with an additional 415,000 children in foster care (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2015), though the National Runaway Switchboard estimates that as many as 2.8 million young people run away from their homes each year (National Runaway Safeline, n.d.). Of the homeless youth population, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates that between 20% and 40% identify as LGBT (Ray, 2006). Although homeless young adults and GB people represent distinct populations with their own needs and characteristics, considerable overlap occurs across these identities. First, I explore homeless youth in general and their access to resources, including financial aid, and second, I examine homeless GB youth more specifically to reveal reasons for leaving their families of origin.

Homeless adolescents and young adults apply to and attend college throughout the United States, though they confront important roadblocks along the way. Though more than 56,000 college-bound students self-identify as homeless on the FAFSA (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015), this number is likely underreported due to social stigma associated with being homeless or simply not believing they can enroll in college (NAEHCY & NASFAA, 2014; Crutchfield, 2012). Like GB people, homeless
individuals are often characterized as socially invisible (Crutchedfield, 2012). Educational institutions rarely ask about or account for homeless status, resembling the issues associated with researching and reporting on the number of GB students in the college pipeline. Various barriers exist for homeless youth attempting to navigate the college search and selection process, including application and testing fees; challenges associated with completing the FAFSA, especially without parental support and information; insufficient financial aid from colleges and universities; enrollment and housing deposits; and an overall lack of information about scholarships, legal safeguards built into federal financial aid policies and in-state financial aid opportunities (Salazar, 2011).

A debate exists over what constitutes “homeless,” so for the purpose of this review, I use the definition provided in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, which defines homeless people as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (Sec. 725). These individuals include children and youths living in cars, motels, camping grounds, parks, and other public spaces, as well as those living in emergency and transitional shelters or living in multi-family residences, also known as “doubled up” (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). Whereas homeless youth have legal protections and safeguards in place until their eighteenth birthday, few resources and policies exist for homeless college-bound high school graduates attempting to access higher education, and even then, a complicated web of federally-designated officials, federal and institutional policies, financial aid waivers, and professional judgment may stand in the way of a young person qualifying for federal financial aid (Hallett, 2010).
The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and more specifically, Subtitle VII-B of the Act (Education for Homeless Children and Youths program), serves as the primary collection of federal policies for homeless children and their educational attainment. While mostly focused on primary and secondary education, the Act provides some resources for homeless youth attempting to access higher education. Similarly, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) of 2007 uses the same definition of “homeless” that McKinney-Vento employs, and further defines “youth” as a student 21 years old and younger and a student who is still enrolled in high school as of the date the student signs the FAFSA. For students meeting these definitions, some protections for college access exist. For example, students who are both unaccompanied and homeless (UHY, or unaccompanied homeless youth) may apply for financial aid independently of their parents. Technically, a student should not need to submit any additional information to the financial aid office; in practice, however, financial aid administrators often request additional written information or verification from a federally-designated official to confirm their UHY status (Dukes, Lee, & Bowman, 2013). In a survey of financial aid officers, 53% of officers indicated that UHY could not provide additional documentation to verify their status, the highest reported barrier to financial aid access (NAECHCY & NASFAA, 2014). Absent this verification, students must rely on the professional judgment of college personnel. The Federal Student Aid Application and Verification Guide notes that, “in these instances, there is no prescribed method for financial aid administrators to document homeless status; they may make a determination on the basis of a documented interview” (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in
In this case, a financial aid administrator may issue a “dependency override” for “unusual circumstances,” assuming a student seeks out the appropriate persons at the college and can meet the criteria (NAEHCY & NLCHP, 2009, p. 35).

In addition to an overrepresentation of LGB youth in foster care and juvenile detention centers, homelessness is a particular problem among LGB youth (Ryan et al., 2009; Rosario et al., 2012). Compared to heterosexual peers, LGBT youth experience homelessness at a higher rate (Cochran et al., 2002; Saewyc, Skay, Pettingell, Reis, Bearinger, Resnick, Murphy, & Combs, 2006; Ray, 2007; Rosario et al., 2012). In a small study by Cochran et al. (2002), family conflict represented the main reason for homelessness among youths. Fourteen percent of LGBT youths in the study reported conflict over their sexual orientation. They also found that LGBT youth were more likely to depart from the home as a result of physical violence than their heterosexual peers. Ray (2006) also cited family conflict as the primary reason for homelessness among youth. In a study that used a nonprobability sample, Rew et al. (2005) found that 73% of gay and lesbian youth and nearly 26% of bisexual youth left home and became homeless due to conflict with their parents over their sexual orientation. Rew et al. also found that while gay and lesbian participants were more likely than bisexual youth to leave the home and become homeless due to family conflict, bisexual participants were more likely to depart the family home due to violence than heterosexual or gay and lesbian participants. Still, literature reveals the primary reason for homelessness among GB youth is family disapproval of sexual orientation.
**Emancipated and foster care youth.** The family unit is built upon the notion that parents care for and support their children, legally until the age of 18 years old, yet not all parents meet this obligation, expectation, or norm (Abinati, 1994). Abinati noted that “the well-being of youth is predicated on them being in a protective parental relationship with an adult or adults, preferably with their family of origin” (p. 150).

When a parent-child relationship fails to function normatively, whereby adolescents seek refuge outside of the family home due to abuse, neglect or rejection, emancipation from one’s parents may serve as a necessary remedy. Legal emancipation represents an avenue for students without legitimate dependency on parents or legal guardians. The process of emancipation is determined differently by each state, yet many states have laws that regulate the process of emancipation of minors. According to the Legal Information Institute (n.d.), emancipation, or more specifically for the purpose of this review, *implied emancipation* “arises from minor and/or parental conduct inconsistent with the right and duty of parents to exercise control over and provide care and support for their child during its minority. Desertion, abandonment, nonsupport and other censurable conduct on the part of the parent constitute reasonable circumstances for implied emancipation of the minor child.” In short, a minor seeking emancipation for any of these reasons would need to petition the court and provide evidence to persuade the court that sufficient proof exists. A student who successfully achieves emancipation can then apply for financial aid as an independent status student. In reviewing research for this subpopulation of youth, one qualitative study by Gordon (2013) points to a participant who emancipated himself, a self-described “divorce” from his parents. The
study does not clarify whether this was a court-approved emancipation, or an emancipation for financial aid purposes as determined by a financial aid administrator. The study suggests the latter, discussing the participant’s “dependency appeal,” or dependency override, which required “a thirty-page document that included a description of his parent’s psychological abuse, a letter from a counselor affirming that claim, and financial documentation showing that he was not receiving any support” (p. 153). Federal financial aid policy gives responsibility to financial aid administrators for determining whether a dependency override, which would lead to a classification as an independent status student, is appropriate given the circumstances (NAEHCY & NLCHP, 2009). I found no other studies that discussed the lived experiences of emancipated students outside of the foster care system.

Policymakers have built legal safeguards for foster care and former foster care youth to access financial aid. To be sure, emancipated⁵ students in foster care or formerly in foster care struggle to complete high school and access college (Wolanin, 2005; Foster Care to Success, 2014). Foster Care to Success, a national non-profit organization dedicated to college-bound foster care youth, found that half of students in foster care complete high school by the age of 18, and 20% who graduate go on to college, despite the fact that more than one in eight foster youth want to attend college. Notwithstanding these challenges, clear dependency exemptions exist in federal financial aid policy for adolescents in foster care since the age of 13 (U.S. Department of

⁵ Although similar to emancipation of youth outside of the foster care system, emancipated foster care youth means youth have “aged out” of the system, or achieved age of majority (18 years old) and no longer receive most benefits under McKinney-Vento (Getz, 2012).
Education, 2009), allowing youth to apply as independent status students. No such broad financial aid policies apply to GB students with parents who express and exhibit rejecting behaviors toward their children.

**Lack of family support.** Beyond distinct populations of homeless youth, foster care youth, and legally emancipated youth, another subset of independent students remains, yet they lack specific protections in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 that otherwise apply to the aforementioned populations (Duffield, 2008). Students lacking familial support (i.e., financial, emotional, social) in the college search process through either active resistance, meaning a refusal to provide necessary paperwork, or passive resistance, meaning a general absence from one’s life, represent an unknown number of prospective college students. Gordon (2013) interviewed independent undergraduate college students who reported that their parents refused to assist with college expenses or the financial aid process. He categorized these students as “functionally” independent, providing for their own needs with minimal or no financial assistance from their families of origin but classified as dependent students for federal financial aid eligibility. These students generally had close relationships with their families, but financial backing did not accompany other types of support. Gordon interviewed additional students who lacked other forms of family support or who came from abusive homes. A few of the study participants self-identified as LGB, yet Gordon acknowledged the relationship among one’s sexual orientation, financial aid access, and relationship with parents was outside the scope of the study and should be explored further in the future. Another qualitative study on community college students’ access to
financial aid highlighted, in part, students’ difficulty in obtaining dependency overrides for legitimate reasons. One participant, James, described the process as a result of being GB:

[Some people] know their mother or their father is not going to give them their information because they’re either gay or they have come out as a homosexual, or they left the home, ran away...you know, so it’s really a hassle and the system doesn’t make it any better. You got to, some people are wards of the court, but you got to go to court, and that takes a three to four-month process for them to even give you a piece of that paper that states you’re a ward of the court (White, 2013, pg. 122)

Whereas the “people” James describes as having left home or run away may have financial aid safety nets as a result of being homeless within the year of signing their FAFSA (NAEHCY & NLCHP, 2009), students who either have been homeless before their senior year or students who remain in their family home despite being rejected by their parents due to their LGB identity must rely on a dependency override process based on “unusual circumstances” and their financial aid administrators (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Andrade, 2003). The Department of Education gives guidance to financial aid administrators as to what does not constitute an unusual circumstance, including: “Parents refusing to contribute to the student’s education; parents unwilling to provide information on the application for verification; parents not claiming the student as a dependent for income tax purposes; and students demonstrating total self-sufficiency” (Andrade). Based on this guidance, students cannot receive a dependency override if they remain in the family home with parents who refuse to pay for college or provide financial aid information. An unusual circumstance could include “an abusive family environment or abandonment by parents,” according to the Dear Colleague letter
issu​ed by the Department of Education (Andrade). Recognizing not all “unusual circumstances” involve physical abuse, Baum (2012) proposed a four-pronged approach to modify this guidance, requiring:

1. “Parental refusal to pay for the education of a child on the basis of a protected category in the university non-discrimination statement;

2. Parental refusal to pay for basic, daily expenses of the child (including food and housing) on the basis of a protected category in the university non-discrimination statement;

3. Parental behavior that rises to the level of physical or emotional abuse;

4. Third party documentation of such refusal, discrimination and abuse” (p. 26).

Baum argued that this set of requirements could also apply to non-LGBT-identified students, such as religious identity that conflicted with parental beliefs, and would be based on the institution’s non-discrimination statement. While Baum’s proposed framework does not completely remove every obstacle for disclosed GB youth, it broadens the definition of “unusual circumstances” to include typical experiences of rejected GB students. Additionally, if students achieve a dependency override, such appeals are only valid for one year, requiring students to complete appeals each year until they reach 24 years of age (NAEHCY, 2016). In short, students with a lack of family support do not have the same protections as other well-defined student populations, such as homeless or foster care youth, though these categories of students are not mutually exclusive. Intersections of homeless status, GB identity, race and ethnicity,
socioeconomic background, and immigration status surely generate additional layers of complexity to one’s college choice process.

**College Access and Intersecting Identities**

College access includes four categories integral to a student’s enrollment and choice in the college search process: financial resources from family, institutions, external bodies and the government; academic preparation and achievement; encouragement and support from others, such as parents, counselors, and friends; and information about college, the college application process, and financial aid (Perna & Kurban, 2013). Each of these factors can promote or inhibit one’s access to college. For example, grant-based assistance is positively associated with college matriculation (Avery & Hoxby, 2004), whereas loans have little effect on enrollment patterns (Heller, 2008). Further, academic preparation and achievement and access to college-related information varies based on the type of school one attends (McDonough, 1997). When examining college access for GB students, one must consider the college choice process for students with intersecting identities, as students do not simply bring their sexual orientation to the table in isolation of other identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, socioeconomic level, immigration status).

From the study examining transgender identity and access to financial aid and scholarships, researchers found that people with multiple marginalized identities experienced the greatest risk in not accessing resources for college (Grant et al., 2011). After reviewing the research related to race, ethnicity, and immigration status, one could assume that GB students who identify as Black, Latino, or undocumented may face
additional obstacles as a person with intersecting identities. Despite gains made over the past two decades, research shows that underrepresented minorities, namely Black and Hispanic students, do not access higher education at the same rate as White and Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a). Interestingly, though, Black students for the first time in 2014 enrolled in college at a higher rate than White students, though NCES uses three-year moving averages to account for these types of changes. Besides access to college in general, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students are also overrepresented in two-year institutions compared to their White and Asian peers (Clinedinst, 2015). With regard to academic preparation, Black, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, other Hispanic, and American Indian students score lower than White and Asian students, on average, on Advanced Placement examinations (College Board, 2015), possibly due to the varying degrees of preparation students receive in high school. As for support from others, Ceja (2006) found in a qualitative study that Chicana students received limited assistance from their parents, often turning to siblings to help with the college choice process. Many young women in Ceja’s study came from immigrant families with limited familiarity with the U.S. higher education system (Ceja). Finally, there is some research to suggest that financial aid response may differ by race. Perna (2000) revealed that the offer of loans decreased the probability that African Americans would enroll in college, possibly suggesting that Black students are unwilling to borrow for college or do not have enough information about borrowing.

Evidently, GB men who also identify as Black, Latino, or Native American may face
some additional challenges beyond navigating the reaction from others to their sexual identity in the college choice process.

Students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, where parental education attainment and family income levels are lower than middle and upper class people, have varied experiences accessing college. They lack the same college choice opportunities compared to middle-income and high-income students, and based on what we know about the federal need-based financial aid process (i.e., FAFSA) and the complex system of requesting a dependency override, GB students with unsupportive parents from low-income homes may be at a particular disadvantage in gaining access to college and federal financial aid. Low-income\(^6\) students continue to trail middle- and high-income students in enrolling in college, with 37 percentage points separating low-income and high-income students (82% for top quartile family income versus 45% for bottom quartile family income) (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Other research studies found similar conclusions on enrollment (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008; Mortenson, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b). Students from low-income backgrounds are much less likely to attend college than students from higher-income families (Isaacs et al., 2008). When low-income students enroll in college, they tend to matriculate at two-year institutions, attend college less than full-time, and do not graduate at the same rate as higher income peers (Heller, 2013). In fact, despite gains in enrollment from all family income levels since 1970, graduation rates for low-income students have been virtually

\(^6\) Low-income refers to the bottom quartile of all family incomes (less than $34,160), high-income refers to the top quartile of all family incomes (more than $108,650), and middle-income refers to the second and third quartiles (between $34,160 and $108,650) (Cahalan & Perna, 2015).
stagnant for more than 40 years. Using U.S. Census data, Cahalan and Perna (2015) found that in 1970, 40% of high-income dependent students received a bachelor’s degree by the age of 24, whereas merely 6% of low-income peers did the same. In 2013, 77% of high-income dependent students received a bachelor’s degree using the same timeframe; the number of low-income students gained three percentage points in 43 years to reach 9% of students with bachelor’s degrees by the age of 24 years old. Without question, the overwhelming majority of students from the lowest family incomes in the United States do not graduate from college.

Counselor support tends to be vastly different for low-income students as well. McDonough (1997) found that students from lower SES levels attended high schools with large counselor caseloads, had little to no individual time with their counselor, and often failed to qualify for four-year colleges due to unclear instructions on academic preparation requirements. To be certain, many college counselors care greatly about their students and attempt to help with the college choice process, but given deep budget cuts in public schools and massive caseloads compared to private school peers (Clinedinst, 2015), low-income students are often left with very little direction and do not understand their own responsibilities with regard to college and financial aid. McDonough (1997) found that students from lower SES levels reported that they thought *they* bore the responsibility for college finances, whereas their parents and extended family would “help out” (p. 143). For higher SES level students, many students in the same study talked of their own privilege about not having to worry about paying for college. Based on previous research indicating the importance of guidance counselors in the college
choice process (Bryan et al., 2011), low SES students, particularly those who identify as GB and must navigate a complicated federal financial aid system with little support at home or at school, may be at considerable risk of not attending or not graduating from college.

Immigration status represents an additional layer of complexity to the college choice process, and in particular, access to federal financial aid. Approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year (National Association for College Admission Counseling, n.d.). The U.S. government, under federal law, must ensure that all children, regardless of immigration status, are able to access elementary and secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), yet the same is not true for higher education. In a Dear Colleague letter from U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to institutions, Duncan clarified that while undocumented students are not eligible for federal student aid (e.g., grants, loans, work study), colleges and universities are not prevented from enrolling and giving institutional, state or private aid to undocumented students (Duncan, 2015). Because the higher education landscape changes so quickly, we do not know to what extent institutions give aid to undocumented students, but we can assume given the absence of federal financial aid, financing a college education remains a chief concern among undocumented students.

Undocumented students, on average, come from poorly educated families, lower income backgrounds, have health insurance at lower rates than U.S. born children, and tend to be Hispanic, though 11% of undocumented people living in the U.S. immigrated from Asia (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Among undocumented college-aged high school graduates (ages
18 to 24), 49% are attending or have attended college, whereas 71% of U.S.-born residents attend or attended college (Passel & Cohn). Furthermore, the Williams Institute at UCLA estimates more than 267,000 undocumented LGBT adults live in the United States, calling this “living in dual shadows” and characterizing this group of people “among society’s most vulnerable individuals” (Burns, Garcia, & Wolgin, 2013, p. 1). Given the challenges for undocumented people in general, and students navigating the college search process in particular, undocumented GB students with unsupportive parents may engage with a more difficult process accessing college, though perhaps to a smaller degree (relative to U.S.-born students) given they are not allowed to access federal need-based financial aid regardless of the reaction to their sexual identity disclosure. This is another area of research left unexplored.

Conclusion

College acceptance and completion represents an important set of achievements for many young people in the United States. Studies have shown that people, especially those from low-income families, can attain a certain level of economic mobility through education (Isaacs et al., 2008). Obtaining a college degree has been proven to lead to greater income over a lifetime; the median family income gap between having just a high school credential and having a four-year college degree was $29,000 in 2005. Despite rising costs of college and falling wages across the country, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York estimated that the long-term benefits of having a college degree outweigh any costs associated with such an investment (Abel & Deitz, 2014). More than one million dollars separates high school graduates from college graduates over the course of an
average working lifetime (Abel & Deitz). Aside from direct economic benefits, college graduates also receive non-pecuniary benefits as well. They tend to be more satisfied with their job, they are more likely to have health insurance, and less likely to require public assistance (Perna, 2005). And yet, some youth populations continue to lag behind their peers in enrollment and degree attainment, including homeless young adults, foster care youth, racial minorities, low-income students, and undocumented immigrants. What is not clear from the literature and empirical evidence, however, is the extent to which these gaps extend to gay and bisexual youth, especially those coming from family contexts where they have been rejected or have experienced rejecting behaviors from parents due to their sexual identity. This study explores the relationships and interactions among the sexual identities of young people, disclosure of such identity to one’s parents, how parents respond to non-heterosexual orientations and how those responses might relate to subsequent or simultaneous college-related processes. The study also examines how some intersecting identities, namely socioeconomic status, geography, and family’s religious identities, may play a role in college choice and how others in young people’s lives may work to support or suppress college access.
CHAPTER 3

Research Methods

Qualitative Methodological Approach

The goal of this study was to explore the complex relationship of disclosing one’s sexual orientation to parents and one’s access to federal financial aid for a college education. The study examined this phenomenon as it relates to White gay and bisexual men. To better understand this phenomenon and explore common experiences held by participants, a qualitative methodological approach was preferable to a quantitative approach. Qualitative inquiry seeks to describe, explain, and understand “multiple realities” of participants and make sense of the “subjective evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Methodologists characterize qualitative research as inductive, compiling and analyzing data to develop a theory or essence of a phenomenon. In order to appropriately answer the research questions posed below, I employed qualitative methods using a phenomenological approach.

The study used a phenomenological approach to understand the experience of accessing college and financial aid opportunities. Phenomenology uses empirical data to explore the “lived experiences” of individuals experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). The phenomenological approach was most appropriate because I attempted to understand “common experiences” of participants (p. 81) prior to developing recommendations for future research. The paradigm also leads to the researcher defining the “essence” of some shared experience among individuals (p. 76). More specifically, White gay and bisexual men generally share the experience of
disclosing their sexual identity to others. While I did not presuppose White gay and bisexual men access college and federal financial aid in the same way as one another or share a common set of events leading to college access, the study explored this dimension as well. Examining this set of experiences, the study intended to understand the central phenomenon of sexual identity disclosure to a parent and its relationship with a student’s access to college and federal financial aid.

Researchers and philosophers devote an immense amount of time to the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994); I briefly discuss the tenets of the paradigm here. First, researchers place themselves outside of the experiences of the participants, called bracketing or epoche. Researchers acknowledge their own personal experiences as they relate to the phenomenon studied and disclose those experiences, but the focus of the study is the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). This inevitably increases trustworthiness and validity of the study by refraining from inserting oneself into the study. Second, data collection consists primarily of interviews in phenomenological studies, and a researcher analyzes data collected according to a set of methodical procedures. In short, the researcher codes the data to find small units of analysis, such as short statements or passages, and later creates broader categories to make meaning of a set of explanations and identifies patterns and themes. Finally, the researcher will reveal the essence of the experiences by including both textural descriptions, or what the participants have experienced, and structural descriptions, or how they have experienced it. This analysis leads to defining the essence of common experiences held by individuals.
Research Questions

Using a qualitative methodological approach based in a phenomenological paradigm, the study sought to answer three research questions related to the \textit{nature of the college choice experience} for White gay and bisexual men who have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent, the \textit{navigation of financial aid processes} among these men, and \textit{other experiences that served to facilitate or restrict access} to financial aid resources. More specifically, the research questions are the following:

1. What is the nature of the college choice experience for White gay and bisexual men who have disclosed their sexual identity to a parent?

2. How do White gay and bisexual men who have disclosed their sexual identity to a parent navigate financial aid processes?

3. What other experiences facilitate or restrict White gay and bisexual men’s access to financial aid?

Participant Selection

The group studied included White gay and bisexual cisgender men who have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent. Participants included young adults who experienced accepting and rejecting behaviors from parents as identified by the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan et al., 2010). Further, the target population traversed through the college choice process and the financial aid process, as I sought to understand the relationship between disclosing one’s non-heterosexual orientation to a parent and these processes. It was essential that participants were intentionally chosen because they had experienced the phenomenon of disclosing their sexual identity to their parent or
parents and had attempted to navigate the college choice process so that I could produce a common understanding of what was happening and how it had occurred. However, as a researcher using qualitative methods, I did not purport to choose a representative sample of participants to extrapolate wider and more generalized meaning to a larger population. I intended to identify common experiences and the essence of the phenomenon based on the lived experiences of the participants. Due to the complexity and particular needs and challenges of the transgender community, this study does not seek to explore the influence of disclosing a non-cisgender identity to a parent on one’s access to federal financial aid for a college education. Similarly, I aimed to focus as much as I could on the phenomenon at play: coming out to a parent and going to college. Therefore, I chose to include only White men, as issues of race and gender play important roles in one’s development as a person. Future research should focus on college and financial aid access for women and lesbians, as well as Black and Latino/a LGBT young people. For this study, 18- to 24-year-olds who identified other than White men were excluded from the sample.

The participants were identified through online cell phone-based dating and social networking applications. The applications chosen include Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet. Online dating has experienced rapid growth in the last few years, becoming the second-most common way of meeting a significant other (Rosenfeld, 2010, as cited in Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). In an article published in MUSED Magazine, Garco (2013) argued that gay men primarily meet in clubs and on the Internet. Whereas gay bars do not lend themselves well to conversations and
engagement, the Internet and social networks can connect people who are not easily identified and help increase connections outside of large cities (Garco, 2013). A recent nationally representative, population-based survey found that LGBT adults are more likely to use social networking websites than the general population and that approximately half of all lesbian and bisexual adults have met new LGBT friends online or via social networking sites, with 69% of gay men indicating the same (Pew Research Center, 2013).

For these reasons, I sampled gay and bisexual young men using a number of popular dating applications. Grindr claims to be “the world’s largest gay social network” (Grindr LLC, 2016a), serving more than two million users every day (Grindr LLC, 2016b). The platform uses location-based technology to connect users in close proximity of one another, from mere feet to several miles. Tinder, a phone-based application that serves both heterosexual and LGB people, utilizes Facebook to alert users to common connections, such as books, movies, or musical interests (Tinder, 2016). The application allows a user to “swipe right” or “swipe left” to choose to connect or not connect with a person, respectively. Once both people confirm they would like to connect with one another, a message window opens allowing the users to converse. Tinder claims 10 billion matches total and 1.4 billion matches per day have been made on the social networking application among LGB and heterosexual people. Hornet boasts seven million profiles of “gay, bi, and curious” men and now offers users the option to meet other men on an Internet-based tool (as opposed to a phone-exclusive application). Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet, among other applications, reach millions of GB-identified
people and serve as effective platforms to initially screen potential participants. These applications allowed me to efficiently draw from a particular area of Philadelphia (Brewerytown) to approach potential difficult-to-identify study participants. Some recent research examining sexual practices among gay and bisexual men used Grindr to sample and collect data (Winetrobe, Rice, Bauermeister, Petering, & Holloway, 2014). Other research utilized advertising on social networking applications to sample participants (Rendina, Jimenez, Grov, Ventuneac, & Parsons, 2014; Burrell et al., 2012), though using this method for a research study in the field of higher education may represent a groundbreaking new approach to reach gay and bisexual-identified young men. No other studies in the field of higher education were found using GB dating applications.

In this study, I interviewed 18 White gay- and bisexual-identified cisgender men from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. All 18 participants lived in Philadelphia at the time of the interview, though not all participants grew up or attended college in the city or suburbs. I chose the city of Philadelphia and surrounding suburbs as the site for the study for several reasons. Philadelphia represents the sixth largest metropolitan statistics area in the United States (Babay, 2014) and is as diverse or more diverse than many other cities of similar size. Two-thirds of residents in the city and county of Philadelphia identify as people of color, and the median household income, $38,253 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015c), is significantly lower than the U.S. median income, $56,515 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015b). More than 100 colleges call the city and surrounding suburbs home (CollegeSimply, 2017), providing an ample number of potential gay and bisexual college-aged students who
might participate in this study. Finally, since the sampling technique relies on geo-location technology, it is also important to consider where the researcher lived at the time of study (Brewerytown in Philadelphia), close to several colleges and universities.

To prepare for the technology-based sampling process, I created a new Facebook account with minimal information to start a Tinder profile. I have a personal Facebook account, and I used Tinder at one time as well, so I wanted to ensure that all information on both profiles included little personal information related to myself. I also created new Grindr and Hornet profiles. All profiles included minimal information, such as my first name, standard portrait photo, location, gender identity, and my age (31 years old). The Tinder profile was set to only match with men (Grindr and Hornet are men-only dating applications).

I pre-screened all potential participants on the social networking applications prior to conducting in-depth interviews. To be clear, I did not conduct interviews over web- or cell phone-based applications. The pre-screening and selection process was two-fold. I reached out to all persons who appeared to fit the parameters of the study by using the ages on users’ profiles. On Grindr and Hornet, I filtered profiles based on self-reported age and race. I utilized a semi-structured recruit script (see Appendix A and Appendix B) that immediately introduced the aims of the study to the participants, described the terms of participating, and requested that the potential participant answer a few follow-up questions. The script included several questions for the potential participant, including whether the person attended college, if he lived in Philadelphia, and whether he was “out” to at least one parent. Based on the answers to these initial questions, I ascertained
whether or not the potential participant fit the parameters of my study. When the participant did not fit the parameters, I let the person know that based on the information provided, the person did not meet the criteria to participate. If the potential participant answered affirmatively to all questions, I repeated the terms of the study and asked if they would complete a Profile Form using Google Forms.

Since the social networking applications are interactive and bi-directional, I also responded to users who sent messages to me, either by engaging in conversation and asking appropriate questions (to the target age demographic) or responded to those who do not fit the target age demographic, per their social networking profile, that I was conducting a study with 18- to 24-year-olds. I clearly delineated the purpose of my time spent on the social network platform so it was apparent to users that I was not seeking to use the platform to find a partner or for any other purpose.

Secondly, I developed a short online questionnaire, called the Profile Form (see Appendix D), that asked about demographic information to ensure each participant indeed fit the parameters of the study. The Profile Form asked for the potential participant’s name, email address, gender identity, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, birthdate, town or city where he currently resides, state where he currently resides, if he attended college, and if he disclosed his sexual orientation or identity to at least one parent or legal guardian. In the event that he answered “no” to the question asking if he attended college, he was taken to a second page asking, “At any point, did you want to go to college?” and “Did your parent or parents influence your decision not to pursue or attend college?” Matriculation at a college or university was not necessary
for the sample since I was attempting to explore access, or lack thereof, to college and federal financial aid. However, I wanted to understand if the potential participant did not attend college, did it have anything to do with his parent? If not, the potential participant was not eligible to participate. This study did not seek to learn about the experiences of gay and bisexual young men who chose not to attend college for other reasons, though that may be an area for future study.

Though not included in the set of questions posed, I hoped participants would represent a variety of educational backgrounds (i.e., secondary school type), religious identities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Because research shows that implications resulting from disclosure to one’s parents may differ based on race (Ryan et al., 2009), sex (Needham & Austin, 2010; Saewyc, et al., 2009; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Russell at al., 2001), religiosity and religious affiliation (Shilo & Savaya, 2012), and parental occupational status (Ryan et al., 2010), I attempted to limit some of the identities to better focus on the phenomenon at play. In the end, I limited the sample to 18- to 24-year-old, Philadelphia-based White gay and bisexual-identified cisgender men who had disclosed their sexual identities to at least one parent and who went to college or attempted to go to college.

After reviewing the responses to the Profile Forms submitted online, I categorized participants as eligible or ineligible for the study. Eligible participants fit all criteria, including age, gender identity, disclosure status, and college attendance/desire to attend college. Ineligible participants had one or more characteristics that did not fit the
parameters of the study; for example, one ineligible participant identified as Latino on his Profile Form.

Once the categorization of participants was complete, I contacted eligible participants to set up either in-person interviews at a public location with a private room at the University of Pennsylvania to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences or allowed participants to choose to complete an online Skype-based audio interview (see Appendix E). I wanted to be sensitive to participants’ time and resources. Since Philadelphia represents a large metropolitan area with unpredictable traffic and uneven parking policies and fees, an online audio session represented the best option for a few participants.

Participants were nominally compensated for their time. All participants received TD Bank gift cards that could be used anywhere in the amount of $25 USD. Initially, I also intended to offer participants who did not attend college one-on-one coaching from me for a period of time up to one year. Coaching included advising on institutional type and program fit, the application process, essay and personal statement writing, framing of extra-curricular and work experiences, and the financial aid process. However, all participants in this study attended college, are attending college, or in one participant’s case, will attend college in the fall. All participants were accepted to college. I did offer financial aid services to one participant as he indicated that he was struggling with paying for college. While he agreed to work with me, I have not heard back from him after my initial email that included advice and directions.
Over the course of several weeks, I reached out to 505 men on the three dating applications. Eighty-five of the men responded “yes” to the initial question asking if they could answer a few questions on the application platform (initial response rate of 17%). Seventy-four men answered all questions posed to them from the recruitment script, and 57 of those men became eligible to complete the Profile Form. In the end, 32 men submitted Profile Forms, and 28 of those men became eligible for an interview. Eighteen gay and bisexual men agreed to and met for an interview, representing 3.6% of all solicitations. See Table 1 for data related to all three application platforms:

**Table 1. Solicitation to Interview Pipeline by Social Networking Application**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Tinder</th>
<th>Grindr</th>
<th>Hornet</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Men Solicited</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men with Initial Affirmative Responses</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicitation Conversion to Affirmative Response Rate</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men who Answered All Questions</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men Eligible to Complete Profile Form</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men who Submitted Profile Forms</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men Eligible for Interview</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Men who Completed Interviews</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicitation Conversion to Interview Rate</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 1 should interest methodologists who specialize in finding LGBT people for research studies. Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet are different social networking applications serving different functions, though Grindr and Hornet are relatively similar in how the applications work and whom they likely serve. Anecdotally, Grindr is known in the GB community as a “hook up” application where men go to meet other men for sexual encounters. Without a doubt, the applications are utilized for other
purposes, such as dating or meeting other GB people for friends. Still, this well-known primary function of Grindr may have played a role in the relatively low percentage of men interviewed for this study. Put differently, gay and bisexual may not have been using the application to initiate or engage in conversations. The conversion rate of solicitations to affirmative initial responses confirms that those men on Grindr and Hornet were less likely to agree to answer questions than those men using Tinder. The Tinder application forces electronic connections to exist (i.e., both people must say “yes” to the connection before they can write to one another), which may explain why I had to reach out to fewer men to yield interviews. Alternatively, perhaps more men on Tinder are open to having conversations, and by extension, more likely to engage in this research study than those on Grindr and Hornet.

Importantly, I should note who is not represented in the sample before discussing who agreed to participate. A total of 466 men either declined to participate in the study by not responding to my initial question or dropped out of the study between the initial question and the request for an interview. In limited circumstances, some men (21) were deemed ineligible as a result of responding to a question that disqualified them from the study. I learned a few men did not live in Philadelphia and one person fell out of the age group. Of the 85 men who initially indicated that they would like to answer my questions, 12 men said they had not disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent. Only three men reported they did not go to college, two of whom said their parents played no role or influence in their decision not to attend. One man said he did not attend college and that decision pertained to his parents rejecting his sexual identity, yet he
declined to participate in the study. Since we know a majority of young people in the United States enroll in college after high school, the small number of men I talked with who chose not to enroll in college represented a surprising result of this study.

It is notable that 420 men on three different social networking platforms refused to respond or declined to answer my initial questions. Undoubtedly, a certain level of self-selection played a part in the sampling for this study. Men chose to participate in this study for some personal reason or set of reasons and were willing to share their narratives about disclosing their sexual identities and going to college with a stranger. For those who declined to participate, we do not know why they declined to respond, and future studies that replicate the methods in this dissertation should explore how to include perspectives of those who actively declined to participate or provided no response when asked.

Of those who chose to participate in this study, the 18 men represented a wide array of backgrounds, including religious identity, socioeconomic status, public and private colleges, public and private secondary schools, and place of origin. Some participants grew up in Philadelphia or the suburbs, others grew up further away, including Kentucky and Texas. Two participants identified as bisexual, and 16 participants identified as gay or homosexual.

**Positionality and Role of Researcher**

The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is important to understand and disclose since he or she also acts as the instrument during interviews and interactions with the participants (Creswell, 2013). Maxwell contends that acknowledging one’s
“personal ties” to the study can provide useful understanding of one’s study (2013, p. 27). Furthermore, the bracketing of researcher experiences is essential in phenomenological studies. I identify as a gay, White cisgender man who grew up in a small city in the upper Midwest with very limited access to information about college or financial aid. I am also a first-generation college and low-income student rejected from my home, in part due to the disclosure of my sexual orientation to my parent. Although I always had a bed in which to sleep, my high school experience was defined by transience, moving from home to home during junior and senior years. By today’s federal financial aid eligibility guidelines, I would have been classified as homeless for more than one year, though at the time of my own college matriculation, such policies were not in place.

Although I secured a full-tuition merit scholarship for four years, I was unable to apply for need-based financial aid using the FAFSA after my first year in college because my university refused to classify me as “financially independent” for federal financial aid purposes. I applied for a dependency override, but I was subsequently denied. Therefore, I sought out assistance from college personnel and an external scholarship organization for emotional and financial support. I also have an immense amount of privilege having attended college and earned two bachelor’s degrees, a master’s degree, and now a doctorate from highly-regarded higher education institutions. While I attempted to conduct this study using rigorous data collection techniques and theoretical framework, I am biased as a member of this community and as a person who has experienced a parental relationship defined partially by rejection due to my sexual
identity. While I could not completely eliminate any researcher bias or discard my own set of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and experiences, to the extent possible, I bracketed my own set of experiences and allowed the study to move forward examining only the experiences of the participants. I used memos, charts, critical friends, and inquiry groups to help engage in thinking about these biases throughout each stage of the research, from instrument development through data collection and analysis. This allowed me to keep my own experiences bracketed out of the study and focus on the participants’ shared experiences.

As in most qualitative studies, reactivity, or reflexivity, also played a role since the researcher is the main instrument to collect data. However, Maxwell (2013) concluded that “reactivity is generally not as serious a validity threat as some people believe” (p. 125). Maxwell recommended employing some strategies to decrease the likelihood of reactivity, such as abstaining from asking leading questions, though one cannot control for such bias like one can in quantitative studies. Follow-up and clarifying questions, for example, while grounded in theory and research are part of the lived experiences of the researcher and what he or she knows to be true. I did all that I could to acknowledge my own biases and bracket out my experience from the study, though reactivity should be an acknowledged limitation of any qualitative research, including this study.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary method of data collection was one-on-one, semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with participants, either in person or via audio conferencing
technology. One-on-one interviews afforded me the necessary time to understand the central phenomenon in a sensitive and confidential manner (Creswell, 2013). Although structured around my research questions, I used the flexibility to ask follow-up questions to dive deeper into themes that emerged as they related to the research questions. Before the interview, I explained the full scope and purpose of the study to ensure participants understood the type of questions that I was going to ask and the intent of studying this phenomenon. I ensured participants knew what I intend to do with the data (Maxwell, 2013). The interviews sought to understand, explore, and explain the process of sexual orientation disclosure to a parent, the nature of one’s relationship with a parent pre- and post-disclosure, the college search and choice processes, the financial aid process, the relationship of disclosure and access to college and federal financial aid, and others in the lives of participants who assisted or supported them.

The interviews lasted an hour, on average. They were recorded to preserve the original words of participants. I used two reliable recording devices in one-on-one, in-person interviews, and I used audio recording devices during the Skype-based interviews. I asked questions pertaining to one’s experience with disclosure and access to college, as well as context and events surrounding such experiences (see Appendix F). Questions included, “Where did you grow up? What was your neighborhood or town like?” “When you first came out to people in your life, what were their reactions? How did you come out initially?” “How did your parents react after they learned of your sexual identity?” and “Did you receive help or assistance in applying to college?” The questions and follow-up questions were guided and developed by current research on
sexual orientation development and disclosure (e.g., attraction, self-identification, disclosure to peers, disclosure to parents) and financial aid access (e.g., mechanics of completing the FAFSA, financial aid literacy and definitions, adults or peers that helped to support or constrain financial aid access), but the themes emerged organically as opposed to imposing a theoretical framework on the study. Most importantly, all interviews were conducted with complete confidentiality for participants. Due to the nature of questions and the sensitive content of this study, I ensured that participants fully understood the scope of the study and how their identities would be protected.

To ensure confidentiality and shared understanding of this protection, I used language in the Profile Form, Consent Form, and passage read prior to all interviews fully explaining how I would treat the data. In short, I used pseudonyms for all participants, de-identified the data (e.g., excluded real names of parents, siblings, counselors, and high schools, masked hometowns and colleges), I stored all original transcripts, audio recordings, and the pseudonym key on a secure, password-protected cloud-based drive (PennBox), and I completed a member check with each participant to ensure all information included in the final dissertation was de-identified appropriately. I explained to participants that data would be used in the dissertation and would be published when completed.

**Data Analysis**

Phenomenology was used as a research design framework to understand the central phenomenon of disclosing non-heterosexual identity to a parent and the influence of disclosure on access to college and federal financial aid. Following each interview, I
transcribed the interview on my own. I saved each audio recording and transcription to a secure web- and cloud-based platform (PennBox). After each interview, I reviewed the interview protocol and made slight changes to it based on the previous set of interviews. Prior to starting data analysis, I attempted to bracket out my own experiences, reviewed my positionality of the researcher section again, and allowed the themes to emerge throughout each interview without imposing preconceived notions or experiences on the data. To counter any kind of bias that I, as the researcher, might introduce in the study, I engaged with two critical friends who were familiar with the study. Next, I read through six interviews without taking notes, and I reviewed them a second time and took detailed notes. The notes included significant statements and passages related to the phenomenon and broad themes I started to notice as I read through interviews. I used the notes from the first six interviews to develop 75 codes pertaining to the lived experiences of the participants and relating to early messages, disclosure, the college choices process, and the financial aid process, among other categories. After reading through all of the data once more, I developed 3 additional codes represented in multiple interviews.

Next, I read through all 18 interview reports, representing more than 14 hours of interviews and over 200 single-spaced pages of text. In reading the interview reports, line by line, I used open coding and applied the 78 codes to sentences and passages using a qualitative software package called Dedoose. Then, I grouped all codes together to examine passages related to every code and meaning statement. I reviewed the data once again, going line by line through every coded statement, and from that, I created a list of significant statements. I used a structured analytic approach to develop broad themes, or
“meaning units” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193), that emerged from the data by using open coding (Maxwell, p. 107) across interviews to find similarities and differences. More specifically, I paid careful attention to significant statements in the transcriptions, and these statements became “clusters of meaning,” or themes that emerged across all interviews (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). The themes found in this study are as follows: 1) Growing up gay or bisexual, 2) Coming out, 3) Growing up college-bound, 4) Going to college, 5) Paying the bills, 6) Intersection of sexuality and college, and 7) Outcomes. From the data analysis and additional clusters of meaning within each broader theme, I developed sub-themes, described in Chapter Five.

Analysis and coding used in phenomenology, such as organizing textural descriptions (i.e., the “what” descriptions, or what happened as it relates to this phenomenon) and structural descriptions (i.e., the “how” descriptions, or how this set of experiences occurred), should yield an informed set of experiences shared across the participant group (p. 193). I developed the textural and structural descriptions and included Chapter Four where one can find participant profiles. The profiles highlight what they experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon of coming out and going to college. Finally, the analysis of data yielded a composite description of the phenomenon that can be used in future research and to inform practice. This is also called the “essence” of the experience shared among the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Due to the phenomenological approach of bracketing one’s own experience with the phenomenon, I wrote memos during the analysis phase and convened an inquiry group which examined short statements, emerging themes, and the final essence of the
phenomenon. These strategies allowed me to exclude any personal experiences or influences I may have had on the data analysis, though one cannot completely bracket out personal experiences and background (Creswell, 2013). Memos allowed me to collect thoughts and reflections and organize them into larger themes, such as one’s experience coming out to a parent and the events surrounding that disclosure (Maxwell, 2013). Memos helped serve as the basis for written passages in my final chapter of the dissertation. Finally, and most importantly for my study, inquiry groups and critical friends, composed of adults who experienced the phenomenon, served as important sounding boards and provided feedback to me as the researcher. While I did not include the experiences of critical friends in the study, I wanted to ensure that my own biases did not invade the space of this study and that particular statements and broader themes that emerged were confirmed as significant, relevant, and interpreted in a similar manner by an inquiry group. I asked the inquiry group to code (e.g., find significant statements) a sub-sample of the data as well to ensure we were finding similar statements critical and significant based on the research questions. The results of the sub-sample confirmed that the use of established codes was appropriate and that particular passages were coded in a similar manner by inquiry group members.

**Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility**

I used several strategies and procedures to ensure results were trustworthy and credible. I intentionally do not use the words “validity” or “validate” in this study as the construct of validity is primarily used in quantitative studies and represents the existence of an “objective truth” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122). In qualitative settings, the question is
not whether the responses and analysis are valid; rather, we ask whether the results are credible and trustworthy based on several strategies to ensure threats to trustworthiness are minimized (Maxwell). In phenomenological research, I wanted to confirm that results were “well grounded and well supported” (Creswell, 2013, p. 259).

Credibility, or the construct that ensures that the participant is accurately identified and described (Creswell, 2012), was established and met by recording and transcribing the interview, taking detailed notes during the interview, analyzing and coding the data based on established principles and practices of phenomenological research design, and categorizing themes to answer the research questions. Based on these actions, it was important to develop a paradigm that future researchers can use to understand the experiences of GB youth’s college choice and financial aid processes as those experiences related to the relationship with a parent. Further, I asked participants to first review the transcripts to ensure accuracy and ask for clarification where necessary. After coding and analysis, I again asked participants to perform a member check to ensure that they could determine the accuracy and credibility of findings based on their own lived experiences. I also engaged an inquiry group to help code a sub-sample of the data for significant statements, and I asked the group to review the meaning units, or themes that emerge. In addition, I disclosed my own biases and experiences as a researcher and gay man in the interviews and in the final dissertation. Although limitations apply due to my background and relationship with the study, I grounded my questions in the literature and theoretical framework.
Whenever possible, I provided deeply rich and substantive descriptions of participants, events, and recollections (Maxwell, 2013). Although transferability is not a goal of this study or of qualitative studies in general, being able to provide an immense amount of information related to participants to understand the circumstances and background of those individuals will allow readers and consumers of research to draw connections to others with similar backgrounds and characteristics (Maxwell, 2013). After identifying the essence of the phenomenon studied, practitioners and researchers will be able to better understand this shared set of experiences around disclosure and federal financial aid access.

Dependability, or the notion that given the same conditions, sample, questions, and parameters of this study will yield the same results in a future study, was not a goal of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2012). The nature of this study seeks to give voice to a socially invisible, sometimes unheard population, and each set of experiences was different even within a relatively homogenous sample. While not transferable, the results provide rich data and storied experiences to help others better understand the experiences of gay and bisexual young adults and the population’s access to college and financial aid. The essence of the phenomenon that emerged from the data instructs future research and fills a gap in knowledge that currently exists at the intersection of disclosure and federal financial aid access.

Piloting ensured that interview questions, based on the study’s research questions, were tested and emerging themes were clarified and confirmed through additional data points. I engaged in two pilots for this study. The first, unofficial pilot occurred a year
prior to data collection to better understand the experiences of LGBT students who were similar in background of the participants in this study. Next, I used a sample of critical friends, who were also similar in background to those who were selected to participate, and I tested questions, equipment, and timing before officially beginning the study. After the second pilot, I discussed the experiences with the critical friends group and solicited feedback. I then slightly modified the semi-structured interview questions based on original pilot members’ and peer researchers’ feedback to ensure that the research questions were being addressed sufficiently. I believe that I paid particular attention to follow-up questions as well.

Because this study relies on memory and recollections of participants, recall bias threatens the trustworthiness of the results. Recall bias is the intentional or unintentional provision of information from a participant that differs from actual events that occurred in the past (Hassan, 2005). Since memories are imperfect (Koriat, 1993) and the act of recalling accurate memories depends on time elapsed (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987), I had to employ strategies that reduced recall bias in a retrospective study. First, participant selection served as a key decision to ensure credibility of memories. The decision to select 18- to 24-year-olds pertains not only to the federal definition of financial dependence on a parent for aid purposes, but the age range also reduces recall bias. We know from research that after one year, approximately 20% of important details of an event may not be recovered by the participant. After five years, a person may not be able to recall approximately 50% of those details after the event. I selected participants as close to their date of parental disclosure as possible to reduce recall bias,
though one of the limitations of this study is that some points of parental disclosure occurred more than five years prior to the interview. Second, I asked about the precise events and moments in time rather than only asking about vague or generic thoughts around a process or activity (Maxwell, 2013). Although I intended to understand feelings and reactions of a participant as a result of certain moments in time, asking about particular events relating to time and space allowed me to retrieve more accurate memories, termed “episodic memories” (p. 103).

Limitations

Both the qualitative research design and the purposeful selection technique employed mean that the results cannot be generalized or transferred to a larger population, nor is generalization expected in an exploratory qualitative study. The study represents 18 gay and bisexual men’s experiences, and I attempted to draw conclusions, make connections, and inform stakeholders based on my findings.

Another limitation relates to the narrative of disclosing non-heterosexual orientation to one’s parents. The study relied on GB-identified students’ own stories and recollections to describe this process, which could have resulted in recall bias (Hassan, 2005). The study did not seek the attitudes, feelings, and emotions from the students’ parents directly. Future research may want to include parents as participants in such a study, though this can also be problematic in a number of ways and access to parents exhibiting rejecting behaviors in the past or present against their sons may be challenging.
Related to the narrative nature of the study, the participant may have given the perspective they believed I wanted to hear as a researcher. I fully disclosed the nature of the study and for what purpose the study serves, and in the call for participants as well as at the beginning of the interview, I emphasized the importance of understanding their personal experiences from their perspective, which should alleviate some concerns of trustworthiness of answers. Interview design, however, may have an element of “filtered” responses (Creswell, 2012), but I believe the benefits of semi-structured, open-ended interviews and the richness of the data collected outweighed the potential limitations of the interview structure.

Finally, the study was limited in that I drew participants from urban and suburban areas in a particular area of Philadelphia. I chose only to focus on the experiences of men, primarily due to sampling technique and truthful access to populations as a gay man myself. I also chose White-identified cisgender men, yet I acknowledge the importance of studying Black, Latino/a, Native populations, women, and trans people, as research indicates particular challenges for non-White adolescents and young adults and differing experiences based on gender identity. I interviewed students who grew up in both urban and rural areas, and it was clear to me that experiences of rural and small town participants differed from those who grew up in urban and suburban centers.

Based on my sampling choices and results, future research should focus on a number of experiences not necessarily represented or the focus of this particular study. Though a few of the participants in this study attended community college, they transferred to four-year colleges. Perhaps a study focused on community college students
would yield different results as the institutions are generally lower cost, open access campuses. Without question, future research should include the experiences of those students who were not able to access college as a result of parental disclosure and choices; I attempted to do so, but of the more than 500 gay and bisexual men reached, I found only four men who did not attend college. The racial and gendered make up of this study’s sample also represented a limitation, and future scholars should include racially diverse populations, women, trans communities, as well as students in rural and isolated towns in their samples. This study represents the first step in understanding how disclosure of sexual identity to one’s parents relates to college and financial aid access, and I am grateful to the participants in this study for telling their stories.
CHAPTER 4

Participants

The 18 White, self-identified gay and bisexual cisgender men in this study all lived in or near Philadelphia at the time of the interview. They all either responded to a message on Grindr, Tinder, or Hornet, social media platforms used by gay and bisexual men, or they initiated contact with me on the dating applications. All of the participants were college-aged, between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. Except one participant, all men were either in college at the time of the interview or graduated from college. The other participant, Kyle, completed his college search process and intended to enroll in the fall of 2017. Nine participants graduated college recently, and eight men were still enrolled in college when interviewed. This point is significant, as I intended to interview some men who had enrolled in college and some others who were not able to enroll in college; however, I could only find college-going men in the extensive search for participants. The men in this study enrolled in a range of colleges and universities, from public to private institutions, as well as campuses in Philadelphia and outside the city. Some participants recently moved to Philadelphia after attending college outside of Pennsylvania. All participants attended four-year colleges, though a few started their higher education careers at two-year colleges. All men applying for financial aid received assistance or information from their parents to complete the federal financial aid process, and the remaining men who declined to apply for financial aid received assistance from their parents to pay for the costs of attendance.
All participants disclosed their sexual identities to at least one parent, and most men disclosed their identities to both parents. All but two men identified as gay or homosexual; two others claimed bisexual identity. Upon disclosure, a range of reactions from parents occurred. Three men experienced primarily rejecting behaviors and received negative messages from their parents. The other 15 participants received positive, partially positive, eventually positive (though initially somewhat negative responses), and neutral reactions from one parent or both parents. About half of the men disclosed their sexual identities to their parents while enrolled in college, and the other half disclosed in high school or earlier. Regardless of the reaction by their parents, all men attended college with the support and financial or financial aid assistance of their parents.

**Participant Profiles**

Anthony. From a big southern city, Anthony recalled hearing comforting messages from his parents throughout his childhood. “It's just this thing that I knew that they'd be okay with it because my mom has told me that for years as a child,” he explained, referring to his sexual identity. “Like, ‘I will love you no matter what.’ She's reiterated that to me as a child.” His parents were “very outspokenly liberal,” he recalled. He did not know anyone who identified as gay when he was a child and teen. Despite positive messages from his parents, he still tried to like girls. Around age 21, he came out to his mom. He remembered, “The whole event has always been nonchalant. My mom’s never made it a big fiasco, and I’m thankful for that.” All of his friends, who he

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7 All names and identifying information has been changed to maintain confidentiality for participants.
described as open-minded, had positive reactions to his disclosure. Anthony grew up playing sports and athletics-related video games, and he recalled knowing about obscure college sports teams. He said he knew he was going to college. His counselors and teachers talked about college search and the application process, and his classmates applied to many colleges. His parents completed the financial aid process for him. He admitted that he was “not really sure” how he paid for the costs of attending college, but he said he knows he received tuition remission because his dad works for his alma mater, a large university in Kentucky. Now, he works in college athletics and talks with his parents often.

Brandon. From the suburbs of New York City, Brandon grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. He described his parents as “very liberal,” and he and his sister were the first persons in their family to attend college. He first came out to his sister at 17 years old, shortly before coming out to both of his parents. “I felt ready,” he said when asked why he chose to disclose his sexual identity to his parents. He received positive responses from all people in his life, including his mom and dad. At the same time, he was touring colleges with his mom, receiving college assistance from teachers and his counselor, and searching for an accepting, safe, and comfortable college campus. He recalled his parents not being very open about how much they could afford for college, though with his parents’ assistance and support, he attended college in Philadelphia. He received a scholarship to attend, with the remaining balance paid by his parents. He had a part-time job to help pay for personal expenses. Brandon’s parents also provided emotional support and checked in on him often during his college years. His relationship
with his parents has remained unchanged since before he came out, he said, though his relationship with his dad has improved over the years. Though he has parents who expressed words and behaviors of acceptance towards him in relation to his sexual identity, Brandon recalled peers with very different outcomes.

Christian. A recent graduate of a Chicago-based college, Christian spent much of his childhood in a mid-size city in western Michigan. He described his parents as fairly liberal with gay friends, though he said he did not really know any gay people when he was younger. He remembered having homo-negative thoughts as he got older, calling non-heterosexual orientation a “stigma”. After his mom discovered some gay-related websites on his computer, he came out to her as “confused” when he was 15 years old. He later came out to her as gay when he entered college. Both of his parents expressed their acceptance. His dad preempted the conversation by saying, “We’re accepting of you.” Christian said, “The fact that he initiated it, like, looking back on that makes me really thankful that he was able to, I think that was like a brave thing for him to do. I think that's really cool he was able to do that.” Most notably, Christian was more self-sufficient in the college search and application process than other participants. His mom provided advice on majors and took him on tours, but otherwise, Christian handled most of the application process on his own. He remembered, though, the FAFSA being a joint effort, calling it frustrating and tedious. He attended a college in Chicago and paid for school with loans, scholarships, parental assistance, and part-time jobs. Had he not had assistance from his parents to secure loans and complete the federal aid process, “that would have definitely impacted my ability to stay in college, probably.”
David. After attending a Catholic high school, David recalled being influenced by his morality class when thinking back to self-identifying as a gay man. “I didn’t like it,” he confirmed. Though he was quick to point out that he supported gay rights, he just felt those feelings were different and uncomfortable for him personally. Also fearing some family rejection and loss of friends (as a result of watching YouTube videos about people getting kicked out of their homes), he chose to come out to a “safe person” before his parents. He disclosed to a female friend involved in his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, who he said reacted positively, saying, “We were friends before, and we’re still friends now.” David came out to his conservative and spiritual mom when he saw an opening in conversation; they were discussing another family member’s sexuality. “I think she was startled at first, because it kind of came out of nowhere. But she wasn't, I mean, she took it very well, I think,” he remembered. David was first generation to college, and he had an older, college-educated sister who helped guide him through the college search and financial aid processes. He is currently attending college in Philadelphia using a patchwork of federal and state grants, loans, and institutional aid. Though he said his high school assisted a bit with the identification of scholarships (“They would say, ‘This is the scholarship, and if you want more information, we have a board [where] you can read about it.'”), he mostly applied to college on his own.

Evan. Raised in a small, rural town in Pennsylvania by his two parents, Evan recalled a defining moment at 10 years old when his father called a television star a derogatory name used for a gay man. In questioning his dad in that moment, he quickly realized, based on his parents’ response, it might be problematic in the future to identify
as non-heterosexual. “Okay,” he said to himself, “you got to keep this very low profile.”

When he did come out his freshman year in college to his parents via group text message, he recalled being terrified. “I was shaking so violently with fear. It was like make it or break it, whatever happens for the rest of my life. Either it's nothing at all and we move past it, or it's a huge thing and I don't talk to my family ever again.” After receiving positive responses from both of his parents, he felt relief and said he could finally be himself. Evan is also first generation to college, though since his father attended a two-year program, his dad had some prior knowledge of financial aid – namely, private loans. Evan chose to attend college in Philadelphia, several hours away from his hometown, though financing his college education has been immensely challenging. His father takes out loans each semester from a private bank, paying each off before he is able to apply for another. Evan said that he is often confused and lost about the entire financial aid process, completely reliant on his family to retrieve loans, pay for his rent and tuition, and send him money, despite their own lower-income, working-class background. That was why, he said, he was fearful in coming out to them. “If they did cut me off, I’d definitely be screwed for finishing college.” He also related the potential reaction of his parental disclosure to his current economic standing:

If it did go south, my parents could easily be like, ‘You know what? You're not in our home now. And now you're stuck in Philly.’ I was afraid that if it did go so far south that I would be stuck in my apartment at school with them not talking to me ever again. Because I'm 18, so they could legally just cut me off. They didn't have to pay my rent. They didn't have to give me money for groceries. They didn't have to do anything. I knew that in that moment [of coming out], not that it would happen, but at a worst-case scenario, they could disown me, then and there, with whatever money I had in my bank account for me to be on my own. It very much scared me from a financial stance, too, because I was just afraid if I did
come out and it did go sour, that I would be done. That I would have no one to
lean on for money.

He is currently struggling with the decision to stay in college and finish his degree or do
something else, primarily due to the cost of college and strain it has placed on his family.

**Gregory.** One of two bisexual men in the study, Gregory identified his mid-size
university town in Pennsylvania as liberal, as were his parents. They attended an
accepting church, and both were highly educated. When asked how he expected his
parents to respond, Gregory conceded, “I was a little bit worried. I expected them – I
wanted them to be supportive. I wasn’t sure if I expected that.” A week after moving in
to college, he came out to his mom and sister. “Oh,” he recalled her saying. “That’s
going to make your life so much harder.” Overall, he found support from friends and
family. Early on, Gregory remembered his parents linking college with job prospects,
telling him he needs to go to college unless he wants to make minimum wage. He
actively searched for campuses with a high level of LGBT acceptance and student groups
on campus, settling on a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania. He heard
some vague messages about scholarships at school, such as, “You’re so smart. You’re
going to get so many scholarships.” He did not recall his counselors or teachers playing
any additional role in financial aid and scholarships. He and his family paid for his
college with institutional scholarships and loans. While he enjoyed considerable support
in college, he said his friend had to pretend she did not live at the LGBT-friendly
residence hall in fear that her parents would stop funding her education.
Hunter. Experiencing awareness of his same-sex attractions at an early age, Hunter recalled telling his mother he liked boys. She responded saying it was fine. He grew up with his parents in suburban Philadelphia. His father, he said, observed strict gender roles, believing a father should earn money and a mother should stay at home. His parents are conservative. Hunter came out to his mother at age 23, and he has only disclosed his sexual identity to his mother. In response, she said, “I don’t care. I still love you.” However, she advised Hunter not to tell his father. He believes his father might throw him out of the house, as he still lives with his parents. “I don’t know how he’s going to react,” Hunter said, “but from my mother tells me, she’s like, ‘Hunter, he really does not like gay people.’” He had an early conceptualization that college serves as a precursor to other adult responsibilities, asking himself at age five how he was going to pay off a mortgage. By going to a college preparatory school, he felt that the school instilled an assumption that he would be going to college. His parents paid for his college education. He also lived with them during college, and they provided emotional support. When asked how he would have navigated paying for college without his parents, Hunter responded simply, “Basically without them, I would have been fucked.”

James. Raised in a small, rural town in central Pennsylvania, James was first in his family to attend college. Unlike other participants in the study, James’ parents do not recognize or acknowledge his sexual orientation today. When he was about 15 years old, James was dropped off at home by an older man. He said his parents somehow knew that his friend was gay. They immediately started questioning him, breaking down, and crying. “How could you do this to us?” he recalled them asking. “What did we do
wrong? What are we going to do about this? What are people going to say?” The following day, his parents told his psychiatrist what had happened, and James said his doctor sided with his parents, telling James he was too young to make that decision. He recalled, “They had said if I weren’t that young or something to that extent, that they would have kicked me out, pretty much. Like, they wouldn’t have a gay person living under their roof.” James also sought treatment for mental health issues related to bullying. In spite of his parent’s reaction, he found accepting friends and their parents who provided refuge. At home, James refrained from talking about his sexuality to his parents again. With regard to college, James wanted to attend and remembered hearing encouragement from everyone. His parents were open with him about their role, offering to co-sign loans for him, but not being able to pay for his education. He eventually settled on a college in Philadelphia, paying for the cost of attendance with federal loans, grants, and scholarships. He had to complete his FAFSA paperwork on his own, though his parents provided their tax information. James’ relationship with his parents has improved, though they continue to ask if he is dating any girls.

Kyle. At 18 years old, Kyle has not yet enrolled in college. He recently completed his college application process. He has been accepted to his second choice school in New York City, and he is currently waiting for a decision from his top college. Kyle grew up in the Philadelphia suburbs. His parents are educated, liberal Democrats, and he said they never had anything negative to say about being gay. He has two gay uncles who recently got married. “I’ve always been comfortable with being gay,” he said. He came out to his parents at 12 years old, the youngest age of all participants.
They reacted unsurprised but positive. His mom found him a gay youth group so he could interact with other kids like him. His older sister, however, reacted negatively, called him “fag” and wished he was straight like her brother’s athletic friend. As a result, he no longer speaks to his sister. His interests in fashion and desire to be around other gay people have taken him to New York City for college visits with his mom. He did not apply for financial aid, as his parents assumed he would not get any assistance. He expects his parents to pay for the first two years of college. He will also take out loans and find a part-time job to fund the remaining years of his studies.

Logan. The other bisexual man interviewed in this study, Logan grew up in Philadelphia in a moderate to conservative, Catholic home. He experienced bullying from classmates since elementary school, where they called him “girly” and gay. He did not expect his parents to care about his sexuality since they reacted positively to his older brother’s coming out process. He said he felt awkward coming out to his mom at a family gathering during his freshman year in college, though she was fine with his sexual identity. His peers and siblings reacted positively or indifferent to his coming out. Logan knew, based on messages at home, that he would need scholarships to attend college. He had experience securing scholarships for his private school tuition, following in the footsteps of his older siblings. He also saw them go off to college and find financial aid opportunities. His counselor helped him secure fee waivers (he identified as low-income), sign up for the SAT, and find scholarships. Logan pushed himself academically to secure a scholarship to a Philadelphia college. “I basically knew that getting financial aid would be the only way I’d go to a college that I wanted to,” he
asserted. His parents, who never attended college, only played a minor role in his college and financial aid search, giving him advice on where to go and providing FAFSA information when required. He offered practical advice to parents of college-bound gay and bisexual men: “You probably shouldn't care if your son is gay or bisexual. Just hope that they get into a school with financial aid.”

Matthew. Growing up in a very religious and conservative home in Texas, Matthew did not know any gay people, even in college. He came out to his parents at age 20 while in college, unaware of how they would react but prepared to move out of his home, if necessary. He feared being evicted from his house and his parents withdrawing financial support for college. For Matthew, that did not occur, though his parents were upset and emotional upon learning their son’s sexual identity. He pointed to his parents’ religious and conservative views as the reason for their reaction. Because his mom obtained a master’s degree when Matthew was young, he expected to go to college, saying, “It wasn’t even a thought.” His parents helped pay for college and provided advice on where to go, though he worked full-time throughout his college years to defray the cost of attending college. Today, he is close with his parents, though they still do not talk about relationships or dating.

Nicholas. Though Nicholas does not identify his mother as being particularly religious, his caregiving grandparents were “highly religious,” he said. He grew up in a suburban, small town outside of Philadelphia. He described his first coming out experience to his female best friend as emotional. “I was in tears,” he remembered. His friend expressed support. At 16 years old, Nicholas found himself in a situation where he
had to come out to his mom. He recalled an event where he met up with a date, claimed he was at a friend’s house, and his mom discovered that he was not at his friend’s house like he told her. When he finally returned home and came out as gay, his mom left their home, probably more upset, he said, at the situation of lying to her than about being gay. First generation in his family to attend college, Nicholas applied to a West Coast college with his mom’s financial help. After being waitlisted, he applied to and enrolled in community college because, he said, “I had to do something with my life.” When he was thinking about transferring, he looked at colleges in larger cities in the North. He wanted the best colleges for gay people, he said. He transferred to a Philadelphia college, and he now studies business. His mom is paying his entire cost of attendance. Today, Nicholas’ mom is “extremely supportive,” even joking about his dating life. He has not come out to his religious grandparents, though, as he recalled growing up hearing homophobic slurs from them.

Paul. A Philadelphia native, Paul grew up in a family who owns a well-known restaurant in a popular city neighborhood. Though his parents were religiously-affiliated, he did not identify religion as a salient identity growing up. He heard rejecting messages from his mother and aunt throughout childhood as well as at school. At libraries, he read about teens getting kicked out of their home. His mother told him about violence against transgender people. As a result, Paul expressed anxiety over coming out to other people, including his parents. When he disclosed that he was gay to his father, Paul was surprised. His father, an Italian immigrant from an older generation, expressed love and acceptance to Paul. He called his dad “overtly accepting.” His mother was “faux-
supportive” and tried to make it a big deal, later expressing more rejecting behaviors.

Paul pointed to his mother’s mental illness as playing a major role in these interactions. His father never pressured Paul to go to college, though his father made it clear to Paul that he was saving money for his son in the event that he wished to go to college. Because of his father’s success, Paul did not have to worry about money growing up, and he knew his father would pay for his college expenses. After receiving poor grades and being overwhelmed with his future, Paul tried to commit suicide in high school (unrelated to his sexual identity). “I really thought there was no future for me. I didn't see it, like, I couldn't understand what I would be doing the next day. I thought I wasn't going to be able to go to college.” Paul recovered, sought help, and enrolled in community college. Later, he found an academic program that interested him and worked with an independent college consultant to apply to transfer. His father played a financial role in both the private counselor’s services as well as applying for the FAFSA. Paul’s aunt assisted him with the FAFSA, and they relied on his father’s accountant for tax information. Along with a scholarship, Paul’s father is paying the remaining cost of attendance at a Philadelphia college. Though he does not currently have a relationship with his mother, Paul has a better relationship with his father. “Because [now], it’s a relationship,” he said.

Ryan. Growing up in the military, Ryan’s family moved around quite a bit. They eventually settled in a small, southern town in northern Alabama. Unlike most other participants, Ryan knew some gay adults in community theater. Despite this network of people, he still thought home eviction, as a result of telling his father, was a real
possibility. “Growing up, just reading, like, I would go to chat boards and read different things about how people had come out to military families and they had just kicked them out. They had disowned them,” he recalled. When he disclosed his sexuality to his father at age 18, his dad responded, “And?” Ryan’s relief at his dad’s nonchalant reaction quickly dissipated after telling his mom. She grew up with a Lutheran minister as a father, and even though Ryan knew that fact, it was not something he considered when thinking about his mother’s reaction to disclosure. In selecting a college, Ryan sought an open and accepting environment in addition to his academic interests, choosing a small liberal arts college in the South. His parents both attended college, and his mother worked in higher education, so Ryan grew up going to college basketball games and hanging around in his mother’s office. To finance his education, he actively pursued scholarship opportunities since he knew his parents discouraged loans. His father helped him with his FAFSA, and he paid for college through scholarships and family funds.

Samuel. With college-educated parents and a high school filled with high-performing, driven teens aspiring to attend Ivy League universities, Samuel connected college to economic opportunity. His parents instilled in him an expectation that he would go to college. At school, he recalled some bullying around his sexuality, though he identified many supportive teachers and counselors. In thinking about coming out to his parents, he assumed his mother would receive the news well and his father might not accept it due to a religious upbringing. The opposite occurred. Because of his mom’s job as a nurse who received her formative experiences during the 1980s AIDS crisis, she was upset and scared, Samuel said. “Eventually, we got over that, and it was not so
contentious,” he recalled. Since then, he described his family as “unequivocally supportive” of his sexual orientation. Samuel recently graduated from a large college in Philadelphia where he received tuition remission due to his father’s employment. His parents’ assistance and proceeds from a part-time paid for the remaining balance.

**Tyler.** With self-identified progressive, educated parents from St. Louis, Tyler had some anxiety about disclosing his sexual identity to other people, though not because he expected family rejection. At 16 years old, he told both of his parents. Unlike most other participants, he said, “I didn’t have much fear,” yet he felt it was an awkward experience nonetheless. His parents responded positively and sought advice from their church to support their son. His father even considered joining PFLAG, formerly known as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Tyler’s parents were active in their son’s college search process, taking him on tours and encouraging him to apply to selective schools. Though he did not recall any particular messages about college from his parents, an assumption existed, he felt, that he should go to college. His parents were also active in his search for financial aid. They educated Tyler on their family’s financial standing and handled the financial aid process. Today, he talks with his parents about being queer, though the subject of dating is still not brought up. Tyler said he has good relations with his parents – about the same type of relationship as before he came out to them.

**Vincent.** Southern New Jersey native Vincent described his neighborhood and town as suburban and upper-middle class. His parents are Jewish, very liberal and highly educated with law degrees. His mom attended an Ivy League university, as did Vincent.
Despite their background, Vincent’s family struggled financially. His parents both had health problems, and Vincent had to grow up quickly. He remembered not being accepted by peers and hearing jokes from his father about his gay uncle. Yet he also recalled his father driving him and his peers from his Gay-Straight Alliance, of which he served as president in high school, to the LGBT center in Philadelphia. “My parents never had gay friends or lesbian or trans friends. I always kind of wondered if that meant that they were not accepting or if they were just from a generation where they didn't see or know many LGBT people.” He thought his mom might get upset, so he told her after a cancer treatment. Both parents expressed their support for Vincent after he disclosed his identity. As for college, Vincent went to university reunions with his parents when he was a child and was surrounded by college-educated people. He did not think about an alternative to college. Vincent had been told from a very young age that his grandmother would pay for his college, so he looked at some expensive colleges, including his mother’s alma mater. However, his grandmother ended up paying a very small portion of his first-year tuition. He said he was not sure if it had to do with his sexual identity; she paid a larger portion of his same-age cousins’ tuition bills. While he received assistance from his affluent school’s counseling office and teachers, the school did not offer enough conversation about financial aid. “There definitely were students who did [need financial aid information], but the focus was getting into the best university, and [they said], ‘Oh, you'll figure out how to pay for it somehow,’” he recalled. He paid for his undergraduate studies with his grandmother’s funding, loans, institutional grants, a local scholarship, part-time work, and a small amount of money from his parents.
William. Growing up in a Mormon family in Utah, William defined his surroundings as deeply religious and conservative, including his home life. Early on, William’s parents suspected that their son was gay, so they sent him to a private school to shelter and “contain” him, he said. His Mormon faith played a strong role in his early feelings toward his own sexuality, recalling anti-gay sermons that compared homosexuality to murder. When he came out to his family immediately before college, he also told them that he was quitting the church. He was rejected by both family and friends, though it was difficult for William to separate reactions about his departure from the Mormon church from his sexuality disclosure. In the back of his mind, William wondered if his parents would decline to support him financially in college. He was the youngest of four children, and all of his parents and siblings went to college. They expected him to go to college as well, and they told him growing up that they would pay for his undergraduate degree. He strategically accepted the offer of enrollment at his Utah college, he said, and came out two days prior to high school graduation. He thought during the entirety of his freshman year of college that they might pull his college funding. “They didn't,” he confirmed. “I think they realized that that was pretty fucked up if they did, so they didn't and just continued to pay for my college.” Today, he is much closer with his family. His mother even inquires about his dating life, and both parents visit him often as he pursues graduate school in Philadelphia.
CHAPTER 5

Findings

Growing Up Gay (or Bi)

Sexual identity development represents a foundational experience in any gay or bisexual man’s life. To understand the nature of future disclosure to his parents and loved ones, one must examine his thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward same-sex attractions and internalized identification as a non-heterosexual person. The first theme of growing up as a gay or bisexual person relates to participants’ feelings toward that identity as influenced and shaped by their parents, siblings, extended family members, and friends, as well as situational contexts at school and in their communities. Words of others and messages at church, in the media, and society at large related to study participants’ internalized homo-negativity and lack of homo-positive feelings. Moreover, participants found an insufficient number of LGBT role models, mentors, and peers in their lives, leaving them feeling isolated and alone in many ways, yet they managed to identify approving and accepting adults, often external to their family systems. Participants discussed few instances of positive messages about being gay or bisexual growing up, which ultimately framed future feelings toward disclosing their sexual identity to others.

Internalized Feelings Toward Sexual Attraction and Identity. Prior to disclosure to other people, participants identified a range of feelings and emotions around being gay or bisexual; almost none of the responses were positive. Study participants said they experienced fear, anxiety, and nervousness when thinking about the reaction of
others to their sexual identity, had an absence of homonormative and homo-positive messages from those around them growing up, received a range of negative messages from family members and peers, and did not indicate internal homo-positive feelings as their sexual orientation developed. They identified a level of internal rejection when they first encountered feelings of same-sex attraction. On average, participants said they were about 10 years old when they recognized these feelings starting to occur and develop. In describing those feelings, Tyler said: “I really sort of didn’t want it. Like, I just sort of tried to like think my way out of it, or, you know, really try to be into girls or something like that.” Similar responses were repeated often among the young men. Many participants commented that they attempted to become heterosexual or be attracted to women. Participants also said they “didn’t like it” and the feelings were “weird,” “not normal,” “different,” “uncomfortable,” and not “necessarily positive.” Some men said they did not understand what was occurring at the time, feeling confused and disoriented. Logan said he does not remember how he processed that attraction. Others, like Evan, had an internal battle with feelings around attraction and self-identifying as a gay person. After noticing his male peers changing in the locker room, he started to feel the same way as they did when they looked at young women. He explained his internal thinking: “I was like, ‘Oh, no, you’re not like that kid. Come on.’ Because I knew at the time [that] it was such a bad stereotype of people who were homosexuals.” This image of being gay, he said, related partially to his surroundings. He called his hometown “low-key, homophobic, and racist.” He later added that he often stayed up at night trying to figure out how to change his sexual orientation. He added: “And it almost felt like if I didn’t try
to switch it, switch my sexuality, that I’d be weak as a bean because I couldn’t overcome it.” Participants pushed feelings aside because of perceived negative reactions from others, repressed the feelings because they made them uncomfortable, and did not perceive being gay as something positive. Nicholas tried to push those feelings aside and recalled saying to himself, “Your parents won’t like you. Your grandparents will never talk to you again.” One participant said he was confused and thought he might be transgender; he did not know that men could like other men, so he perceived his feelings as gender-related. He said he later realized that he could be a gay man who liked other men.

Participants later recalled their thoughts and feelings around self-identifying as a gay or bisexual person, characterized as mostly indifferent or more positive than their feelings around the awareness of same-sex attraction. On average, the participants started to internally self-identify as a non-heterosexual person around age 16. Some young men reported that they were more self-confident about being gay, accepted their identity, and needed to explore. Gregory, one of the bisexual participants, recalled being confused and adopting several identity labels before settling on “bisexual.” Kyle, who expressed the earliest awareness, identification, and disclosure out of all participants, said he felt comfortable, but lonely, as a result of not knowing other gay peers. Tyler said he was “sort of okay with [self-identifying as gay]”, and similarly, Logan remembered thinking, “Okay, whatever.” He added, “I honestly had no big feelings over it.” Many participants recalled having more neutral feelings toward their self-identification of being gay or bisexual.
About half of the participants remembered hearing messages that influenced their feelings toward being gay or bisexual. Vincent recalled messages in the media affecting his thoughts and feelings toward his self-identity. He remembers a “witch hunt” in popular culture for gay and closeted celebrities. He said, “It wasn’t like, ‘Oh, you can be gay and a really awesome person, [a] really successful, you know, comedian or actor.’” His experience was particularly noteworthy since he grew up in New Jersey, where in 2004, the state’s governor, Jim McGreevey, came out. Vincent recalled his father calling the governor a “liar” and being upset, which made Vincent believe his father may be homophobic or have homo-negative attitudes. Nine participants discussed the heteronormative nature of messages in their families, among their peers, and in the media. These messages, they recalled, negatively affected their feelings around their identities.

**Shortage of LGBT Adults and Peers.** Study participants cited an absence of LGBT adults and peers in their lives growing up. Most could not recall knowing other gay or bisexual people, either at all or not until their high school or college years, and many participants pointed to difficulty not knowing anyone as their sexual attractions and identities developed. Brandon felt isolated. “I didn’t know if there was anyone else who felt the same way, if it was particularly normal.” Others had marginal gay actors in their lives. Anthony said his father employed gay people in his restaurant, and Christian recalled his parents having gay friends. Another participant said he knew some gay adults in community theater. However, none of the participants pointed to a LGBT adult
who served as a role model or had an important influence on his development growing up.

Though six participants claimed that they had gay uncles in their families, most of these family members did not have visible, active roles in their nephews’ lives. All but one participant, however, said that they recently discovered they had a gay uncle, their uncle was not out to the family, or he had passed away before the participant was born. Kyle had gay uncles and knew early on about his sexuality. “I’ve been around them since birth. So it was never, like, a foreign thing to me. Like, I always knew what being gay was.” Not necessarily because he had visible gay uncles, Kyle also came out to his parents at the earliest age (12) among participants and said he always identified as a gay person. The other five participants knew of a gay uncle or had the experience of their uncle coming out later in life. Brandon found out he had a gay uncle at age 17. Vincent’s uncle came out to his family when Vincent turned 22 years old; he recalled finding out that his uncle secretly married a man. Besides Kyle, participants said their gay uncles were not visible growing up and did not serve as positive LGBT role models during their formative years. Participants made only short references to these family members over the course of interviews.

The importance of having visible, positive LGBT role models in one’s life cannot be overstated. Participants discussed loneliness and isolation because they did not know other gay and bisexual people, they confirmed. When asked if knowing other gay people would have helped, Matthew explained it would have prepared him for his move to a larger city. He grew up in a smaller town in Texas and said he did not know any gay
people, even on campus, which lacked any LGBT support or services. Matthew said, “Yes, that would definitely have helped a lot, especially after graduating because then I moved to Philadelphia for a job opportunity that I got here. It’s completely different in that there is a huge gay scene, which I think is huge because I never had one before.” Evan said he was scared because he did not have anyone to talk to about his sexual attractions or feelings. Only later in college, Samuel discussed his assimilation and socialization into the gay community in Philadelphia. “What I needed, and what I found, was older gay men in my social life to help me through growing up as a gay man in early adulthood, which was something my parents and no one in my family is going to be able to give me the kind of advice and guidance and wisdom that I got from these various gay men in their late 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s,” Samuel reflected. Unlike visible forms of shared identity, such as race or gender, gay and bisexual men often do not share this identity with members of their immediate family. With a few exceptions of gay brothers and lesbian sisters close in age, this attribute of unique sexual identity held true for the study participants.

**Positive and Affirming Adults.** Despite not having LGBT adults as role models, participants pointed to other adults outside of their families who served as caregivers, teachers, and mentors. Guidance counselors and teachers were most cited by participants as being positive figures. Some participants explicitly said that there were older people who supported them and their sexual identity, such as a neighbor, therapist, or family friend. Others identified positive and affirming adults who, while not having the participant actively come out to them, implied their support. Evan said:
I had this one teacher in my junior year [of high school] who signed my yearbook. She was like, ‘Please,’ she’s like, ‘do what you have to do to get comfortable.’ Like, she knew that I was gay. I was very comfortable talking to her. I didn’t come out to her, but she just had this sense of knowing. And she just signed it so personal. It really struck me that she saw through it, and it wasn’t in a negative light. And I was afraid that if someone did find out because of this backroad town that I’m in that it would be horrible. So the fact that she noticed it and highlighted it in a good light, I was like, ‘Well, dang.’

While other participants did not overtly discuss their teachers’ support for their sexual identity like Evan, several other men talked about the positive relationships that they developed with caring and supportive teachers and counselors. Christian, for example, talked about the “comfort” he felt talking to his slam poetry coach who helped him bring his creative side into the open. Another participant said he came out to his guidance counselor and found support, especially helpful since he suffered from peer bullying.

Another finding pertained to parents and family members of friends who served as accepting adults. Four participants told stories of friends’ parents as being “protectors,” positive, and affirming. Nicholas disclosed his sexuality to his friend’s mom and said he was able to talk with her about what he was experiencing. Evan became close with a friend and her parents, and when they discovered his sexual orientation, they said he could live with them if his parents rejected him. Other parents of friends offered the same hospitality to Evan. James became friends with twin sisters and said his friends’ parents “kind of served as protectors, almost in that I knew they had my back when I needed it.” His friends’ grandmother also served as a positive adult in his life, becoming a surrogate grandmother to him, he said. Since William was surrounded by religious, conservative people in predominately Mormon Utah, he did not have many
people he could turn to and find support. He said he lacked safety and felt vulnerable in disclosing to other people in his life. “I didn’t talk to too many adults because I didn’t feel safe. Maybe it was safe. My perception was that it wasn’t safe. So I didn’t really reach out to people.” However, his best friend’s mother expressed supportive behaviors toward him.

**Hearing Messages.** The source of internal homo-negative thoughts and feelings ranged from messages directly from parents to other family members, peers, church members, and the media. Seven participants recalled incidents and messages involving a parent. His mother, Paul said, told him that being gay fell outside of normative behavior, causing him confusion. “When I first started getting called ‘gay’ at school and stuff, and I didn’t understand what it meant. She kind of described it in a way that wasn’t outrightly homophobic as much as it was, ‘These are people who live this certain way and don’t understand that this is what the norm is,’” Paul said, speaking of his mother. Often, the young men talked about an incident involving another LGBT person where their parent made a derogatory comment. Vincent’s father made anti-gay jokes after finding an Internet search history of pornography on a family member’s computer. Others remembered hearing gay jokes, insults, and a general misunderstanding of LGBT people by parents. Evan recalled a particularly noteworthy incident at 10 years old. He remembered watching a television show with his family, and an out gay singer auditioned for a reality show. After exhibiting behaviors that Evan’s father thought to be associated with being gay, his dad made what Evan perceived as an offensive statement. Evan explained:
[My dad] said, ‘Man, for someone who sucks cock, he sure can sing.’ And that didn’t sit well with me…. I looked him dead in the eyes and I was like, ‘What the hell does that mean?’ At that moment in time, I realized that there’s no correlation between sexual orientation and what you can and can’t do as a human being…. Then my mom said, ‘Well, why are you so offended?’ And then that mortified me. Following that, she said, ‘You’re starting to scare me.’ And then I cried, because at that moment in time, I was like, ‘Why does that scare her? What in this conversation scares her?’ I was like, ‘If I’m gay, my mother is scared of me? Like, what the hell?’ And that is what strung it all together to me, being like, ‘Okay, you got to keep this very low profile when I did start to question.’

Other young men also shared vivid memories of interactions with their parents. Paul recalled his mother shaming him for wanting to do what she perceived as “feminine things” and after hearing his mother say that “people don’t like [trans] people,” he said to himself, “Well, I can’t talk about this. I can’t.” Both Evan and Paul, based on their parents’ words, felt silenced, unable to share their same-sex attractions or feelings. David reflected on an argument with his father about “high-pitched voices” of gay men. Hunter’s mother, after he came out, told him how his father would react to his sexual identity disclosure. “She’s like, ‘Hunter, he really does not like gay people.’” Mentioned more than other sources, parents’ negative statements while participants grew up surfaced in many interviews.

Religion also played a role in some participants’ lives, generally in negative ways where the young men identified religious parents or peers’ religiosity as affecting their views on being gay or bisexual. William said his church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), gave anti-gay sermons on homosexuality. He explained: “The way the hierarchy in the LDS faith works with the sins is like murder is the top, denying God is the top, and then sex sins are, like, right there. So those are the big three, so being
gay is like compared to murder. Doesn’t make any sense. And so that’s what we were
told, so I was like, ‘Fuck. I’m up there with murders.’ So I felt damaged about that.”
Other participants assumed religion played a role in how their parents developed their
views and feelings toward LGBT issues. Samuel’s father grew up as Irish-Catholic and
going to church, and because of this background, Samuel thought his father may not be
accepting of him as a gay person. Nicholas also related his dad’s derogatory remarks to
his father’s religious identity. Not universally stated, six participants said their parent or
parent’s religion perhaps played a role in their views on LGBT people; only one
participant said this religious orientation positively influenced his parents’ views, as he
identified as a member of the United Church of Christ. Other participants who identified
their parents as religious or with an ascribed faith did not connect religion with parents’
views on being gay or bisexual.

Beyond parents, young men in this study remarked that they heard negative
messages from grandparents, siblings, and peers. Nicholas said because of his
grandparents’ religious beliefs, they would make gay slur jokes in his presence. They
would use the word “faggot,” he said, and Nicholas heard his grandparents say, “Oh, we
hate gay people.” James recalled knowing his brother used derogatory words for people
who were different from him based on race and sexual orientation, which made him
question how his sibling would react to his own sexual identity. Ryan, who grew up in a
small, conservative and religious southern town, said he heard many Biblically-based
messages from peers. They said a relationship should be “between one man and one
woman.” Most participants remember some bullying or comments made by peers at
school. They were called gay in a derogatory form, “girly,” “faggot,” and “tomgirl.” The young men expressed that they did not feel supported or accepted by some of their peers. William remembered some physical harassment where peers tried to put mascara on his face. One participant’s incidents of bullying were so profound that he became suicidal as a result and had to enter treatment.

While instances of hearing negative or heteronormative messages saturated the interviews when discussing the time period before coming out, about half remembered hearing some type of positive message from others. A few participants said their parents did not have anything negative to say about gay people; other parents offered subliminal or coded messages to their sons. Anthony often heard his mom say, “I will always love you, no matter what.” Anthony believed she both meant it and “saw signs” of him being gay as a child. Christian also said his mom would “subliminally” bring things up. Whereas he felt uncomfortable when she first referenced these issues, “I feel thankful that that was, that she was able to address it and sort of make me know that she would be accepting of me,” he said. Evan’s dad refrained from making him do anything he did not want to do, he said, such as athletics. Evan perceived this act of his father not forcing sports on his son as positive. That said, participants could not recall events where their parents expressed open, direct affirmation for LGBT people. Only two participants recalled specific instances of support from their parent or parents. Gregory, when asked directly about LGBT messages growing up, said he remembered his parents were “always supportive” without providing specific examples. Vincent’s father drove his Gay-Straight Alliance group to Philadelphia for a LGBT-related field trip. Vincent
recalled, “He seemed really supportive, and not many parents would drive a bunch of high schoolers to Philadelphia to do that thing.” As previously discussed, participants also cited general support by teachers and school officials. No participant recalled any specific or direct statement from parents, teachers, counselors, siblings, family members or friends in support of LGBT people or issues prior to coming out.

**Coming Out**

The second theme of disclosing sexual identity to parents and other important figures in participants’ lives, sometimes at same junction as going to college, relates to and influences the parent-son relationship. Without question, participants felt scared, nervous, apprehensive, uneasy, uncomfortable, and fearful of coming out to others, especially to their parents. The young men featured in this study reported hearing stories and scenarios where parents kicked same-age peers out of their homes, severed financial ties or threatened to do so, and exhibited rejecting behaviors toward their children upon disclosure. Perhaps more impactful, though, were the early words and messages of parents themselves to their sons, driving participants’ concerns. While most participants rarely expected the worst possible outcome – total family rejection, they expressed anxiety and lacked confidence in their parents’ reactions, even those who had indicated their parents’ friendships with gay and lesbian people or support for LGBT issues. Participants’ fears proved principally unrealized. Nearly all young men in this study experienced family acceptance in either the immediate aftermath of parental disclosure or in a relatively short time that followed. Some men strategized in telling their parents, devising a plan to disclose at the optimal time and place, and others did not have a choice
due to confrontation or discovery. Despite somewhat mixed reactions, though largely positive, from parents, one finding proved near absolute: friends and peers offered support and issued unconcerned reactions with few exceptions.

**Fear and Apprehension.** Among all 78 codes applied to participant interviews, “the presence of perceived fear or anxiety regarding the reaction of others” to one’s sexual orientation was cited by participants more often than any other code. While some young men mentioned a fear of disapproval or rejection from friends and peers, most men expressed angst and apprehension in anticipation of telling their parents. Family rejection was a pervasive fear. Many participants said they felt vulnerable, uncomfortable, awkward, isolated, disconnected, stressed, and nervous in response to telling their families. Only Kyle said he felt positive about the outcome, calling the coming out process “easy.” Matthew believed up until the day he came out that his parents would tell him to move out. Hunter’s fear of eviction remained as he only told his mother and not his father. “I don’t need the possibility of being thrown out of the house or written out of the will. I don’t know how he’s going to react,” he explained. Since he still lives with his parents even after college, this possible reaction remains salient to him. Other participants knew of peers’ situations or saw in the media where parents removed their children from the family home. Paul watched a video online of a gay person getting beat up by his family. David explained his experience watching YouTube and his thought process that emerged:

> All these people who get kicked out of their homes and, you know, they lose all their family, and their friends kind of turn their backs on them and everything. I mean, obviously, they didn’t think that was going to happen. If they did, they
wouldn’t have told people about it. So it was kind of like, they didn’t think it was going to happen, and if it happens, maybe it could happen to me, too.

Evan also “heard stories” of LGBT people getting kicked out of their homes and killing themselves. Of all participants, Evan expressed the most fear in coming out to his parents. He said he lived in fear of losing his family and went to great lengths so family members would not discover his identity. He deleted phone applications before coming home, refrained from visiting certain websites or “liking” LGBT pages on social media, and would “tiptoe around things because I was afraid of how [my family would] react.”

While many other participants explained their general fears in coming out to their parents, Evan was the only participant to explain the detailed precautions he took to evade questions and suspicion.

Related to the eviction from home and family rejection in general, financial severance more broadly represented a concern among some participants. A few men paired this fear directly with college and financial aid outcomes, though more often participants discussed a general distress over finances. Evan moved away several hours from his parents to attend college in Philadelphia. In doing so, he relied heavily on his parents for college expenses and living expenses. He said: “It very much scared me from a financial stance, too, because I was just afraid if I did come out, and it did go sour, that I would be done. That I would have no one to lean on for money.” Evan did not have a part-time job at the time of interview. He only had access to resources provided by his parents.
A few participants explicitly connected an apprehension over family rejection with how that outcome might affect college and paying for college. James, William, and Evan all discussed their feelings toward coming out and possible scenarios related to college as a result. James explained: “I would have the big fear of, if this happened, and they did not agree with me, that they would not co-sign or help me to get loans, or help me transition from home to school. That sort of thing. So I definitely had that in the back of my mind, the whole time. Even a majority of the time through college.” Since William not only came out as gay, but also quit going to the LDS church, he said he thought his parents might stop paying for his college expenses. He was not sure what was going to happen if that occurred. “I had some fear my freshman year and before my freshman year, and certainly, I was thinking about financial aid because I’m like, ‘Fuck. If they’re not paying for college, then I’m definitely going to have to get a loan. And how the hell am I going to pay for loans?’” Evan’s case was concerning since he did not have independent resources from a paid job like James and William.

David, a low-income student, reported similar fears as Evan’s, though his scholarship paid for most of his expenses.
The source of fear and anxiety among participants, especially as it relates to parental disclosure, stemmed from several sources, including traditional and social media, experiences of peers, and most notably, the words and actions of important people in their lives. Besides parents’ own words, study participants cited traditional media, such as televisions and books, as well as social media most frequently as the source of their apprehension toward parental disclosure. Five participants reported hearing “horror stories” from the media and friends about family rejection and other negative effects of coming out. Others reported that their parents and family members’ own words, or lack of conversation about LGBT people, caused them to worry. They often related the statements made to them years prior, such as Paul’s mom talking about violence toward LGBT people or Evan’s incident involving the reality television show star, to their apprehension over disclosing their sexual identity to their parents. A few participants mentioned the experience of peers and friends as a source of fear or anxiety. William had friends who went through reparative or conversion therapy (James also feared his parents would send him to reparative therapy, though he did not mention a specific source of this fear). Some participants identified school peers and students in their communities who came out to parents and were subsequently rejected in some form. Others explained they did not have exposure to out gay friends before college, which made it difficult to come out because of the unknown reaction and absence of a peer community.

Participants discussed their thoughts and feelings toward disclosing to other family members in mixed terms. Three participants felt comfortable enough to tell their sisters before anyone else. A few others did not know how their close family members
would react. James said he was not sure what his older brother might say, but his fear of rejection was apparent. James explained, “As we got older, it could have been, ‘Whatever. Live your life.’ Or it could have been, ‘Stay away from my child. Don’t come near my family again.’” Nicholas said he chose not to disclose to his grandparents because he does not believe they would accept him, based on their religious views and previous statements. A few other participants said they have refrained from telling their grandparents and extended family members as well.

Disclosure to friends and peers also concerned some of the participants. About half of the sample grew up in relatively small, rural towns, and many mentioned a lack of support they perceived among their peer group. Other participants related it to their school environment. Logan attended an all-boys high school in Philadelphia, and because of earlier bullying, he did not want to be in a similar environment that mirrored his middle school experience. He worried about additional bullying and teasing, as did James. David feared the loss of friends as a result of coming out, so he decided to cut ties with friends before they could reject him.

**Expected Parental Reactions.** Most participants, regardless of family background, religious identity, geographic location or parents’ political leanings, did not know how their mom or dad would react to their sexual identity disclosure. They said they were not confident, did not know, or were not sure of their parents’ reactions. Some made assumptions based on parental views and affiliations, such as church, military status, or culture. For example, Ryan assumed his father would have difficulty with disclosure because of his military background. He said he was influenced in thinking
military fathers like his own might react negatively based on stories he heard about families in the armed forces dismissing their children after disclosure. Similarly, Paul thought his father’s background as an immigrant from Italy and older age would play a role in his reaction, though he did not say why he thought this way. Samuel believed because of his dad’s conservative and religious upbringing, he would be uncomfortable and not accepting. Several men, even those with parents who expressed some general supportive behaviors prior to disclosure, said they were not sure of their reaction.

Whereas participants suggested that negative outcomes were likely not going to occur from parents, participants were unable to associate disclosure with potential positive outcomes. Put another way, several young men said while they did not believe their parents would react negatively, they could not take the incremental step to say their parents would react positively. Participants expressed a general lack of confidence in anticipated parental reactions. For example, Christian said he “never thought [his parents] would, like, not be accepting,” later stating he was nervous and not confident about coming out to them. Paul also explained his situation in a similar way: “I didn’t think [my father] would be, like, aggressive at all. I didn’t expect to be kicked out. I did not expect to be shunned in any sort of way.” Logan, who had older gay family members, said he did not worry about being disowned. When asked how they felt their parents would react, participants reported that they were unsure of the reaction prior to disclosure, and nearly all study participants framed their reactions in a similar way as Christian, Paul, and Logan. Only Anthony said he “knew” his mother would be okay with his sexual orientation because of her earlier statements of acceptance, and despite
Logan’s phrasing about family rejection and other concerns he expressed, he also believed the reaction from his parents would be positive.

William stood out among participants, saying he hoped for a positive reaction from his parents. Other participants likely wished for their parents to react positively to disclosure as well based on contextual clues given during interviews, yet only William explicitly said he remembered having positive expectations. In spite of his conservative and religious upbringing, William said he had a “fantasy that they would somehow or another be …. radically accepting of it.” He explained this thought related to his expectations of what the idea of family is meant to be in a young person’s life. “The way we’re socially constructed is the family’s meant to be supportive. It’s meant to hold you. And so I think that’s where my hopefulness came out of. Whereas like, ‘Well, they’re my family. They’re my parents. They’re supposed to love me no matter what, unconditionally.’”

Active Disclosure and Outing. While most participants did not identify specific reasons why they chose to come out to their parents at that point in their lives, a few noted a “strategy” or a specific reason they chose to tell their parents in a particular situation. More than half of participants actively disclosed to a parent, or came out to them on their own terms and timeline. Vincent’s mom underwent a chemotherapy treatment, and because he knew she would be “out of it,” he assumed she could not get upset by the news. Evan lived several hours away from his parents during his freshman year in college, and he used the distance to his advantage, he said. Instead of coming out in person or over the phone, he came out to his parents via text message. He also decided
to tell friends before telling his parents. “If [my friends] didn’t like it,” he explained, “they could go. You can cut that out of your life, whereas family is family…. My family, I do have to rely on going forward into college and my career.” David was talking with his mother about another family member potentially identifying as LGBT, and since the subject was on the table, he “saw an opening and took it.” William explicitly connected the timing and nature of his disclosure to the college process. He said he was “strategic” and “purposeful” regarding when he applied to college and accepted his offer of enrollment so his parents could not withdraw their support at that time. He also noted that he was not sure if they would pay for his college as they previously indicated, so he did not come out before completing the college search and selection process.

Four participants said they did not have a choice in coming out to their parents. They were “outed,” or the act of exposing sexual identity without the person’s expressed consent, or they were confronted by their parents based on actions or assumptions. After James’ parents discovered his friendship with another gay person, they confronted him about his sexual identity at age 15. Similarly, Nicholas also spent time with another gay man and felt he needed to come out to his mom to explain the situation. Christian’s mom discovered LGBT-related websites in his Internet browser history and confronted him freshman year of high school. Matthew remembered his mom asking if he wanted to tell her something, which he assumed related to his sexuality. He tried to evade the questioning, but he decided to disclose to her. Though not a direct confrontation, Gregory recalled his mom being concerned because he was spending time in college in the theater department. He remembered her asking, “Aren’t you worried people are
going to think you’re, like, gay or something?” He decided to come out to her as bisexual in that moment. While Paul was not outed to his parents, his sister found out by reading a journal entry he had written. He felt his sister had violated his privacy in that moment. He recalled, “It stripped me of the ability to speak for myself. I didn’t have a voice in my own life at that point. And that was one of the scariest things ever for me.” Several participants told stories of feeling outed or not having control over their own parental disclosure process.

The Parental Reaction. Due to sampling technique, all participants actively engaged in disclosing their sexual identity to at least one parent. James, however, initially responded he was not out to his parents. When asked clarifying questions, he explained he had come out to his parents but later stopped talking about his sexual identity. Because of this unique situation, James was permitted to participate in the study. All other participants are out to their parents today, though they reported varying degrees of how open they are to their parents. Parental reactions differed widely among the study participants. While all participants received at least some support from important people in their lives, not all participants received support from a parent.

Of the 18 study participants, three young men received an openly hostile, rejecting, or otherwise negative reaction from their parents. The other participants recalled positive reactions, partially positive reactions, neutral or indifferent responses, or initially somewhat negative responses that shifted over time. On average, participants came out to their parents at age 17, with Kyle being the youngest at age 12, and Hunter the oldest at age 23. Nearly all disclosed to their parents prior to college ending, and half
came out to parents in high school or earlier. Most participants came out to their mothers before their fathers. Evan, Tyler, Brandon, Vincent, Hunter, and Christian recalled relatively positive reactions from their parent or parents as a result of disclosure. Evan chose to disclose via group text message to his parents. As previously noted, Evan expressed the most fear and anxiety of all participants in how his parents would react; however, his father told him that he is “very loved” at home. Because of his father’s expressed masculinity as well as Evan’s previous relationship with his father, Evan identified this experience of coming out as significantly positive for their relationship. Tyler, Brandon, and Hunter’s parents told the young men that they loved them in response to disclosure. Christian’s and Vincent’s parents expressed their acceptance for their sons, though Christian recalled his mother telling him later that she felt like she was “mourning” something. She related it to possibly not having grandchildren, which made him sad, he recalled. He reassured his mother that he is interested in having children someday.

Four participants reported partial acceptance, often from one parent over another. Samuel, who was nervous his dad may be uncomfortable with his sexuality due to his father’s religious upbringing, said he was surprised by his dad’s neutral reaction. He recalled his dad saying, “You’re your own person. Do what makes you happy.” His mom, however, who he expected to be fine with the disclosure “had a hard reaction that was painful.” He said she was scared and afraid that he was going to contract HIV. She worked as a nurse, and she experienced the AIDS crisis during the 1980s, which drove her fears, Samuel remembered. It took a few years for Samuel to understand his mother’s
initial reaction. In a similar situation, Ryan also expected his father to offer negative statements or have issues with his sexuality. He remembered his father’s nonchalant response, asking, “And?” after Ryan disclosed to him. He characterized that response as positive. “My mother, surprisingly in all of my fears, took it a little more difficult,” he recalled. Her response pertained to her religious beliefs and upbringing. He spoke of a difficult conversation about marriage with his mother after he came out. He had to defend his right to marry someone of the same-sex, he said, and she could not understand why he felt he needed to do so. Gregory’s father, he said, has “always been supportive,” but after he came out to his mom, she expressed her concern. “That’s going to make your life so much harder,” he recalled her saying. Paul said he received a surprisingly loving reaction from his father. He was “overtly accepting,” but Paul’s mom tried to make it a “big deal”, he said. He also recalled how she made odd comments to him, like shameful statements about sexual intercourse with men. Because Paul was closer with his father, he characterized his father’s support as immensely supportive for him.

Five other participants differed from their peer participants in that they had neither a positive nor negative reaction in coming out to their parents. Their parents all gave neutral or indifferent responses to their sons’ sexual identity disclosure. Nicholas had to come out to his mom because he had been lying to her about being at a friend’s house when he was really with another gay man. She left his home in that moment, though he related that to the deceit of sneaking around rather than his sexuality. In time, she expressed her support. Three participants described their parents as being nonchalant in reacting to their disclosure, though in their parents’ neutrality, all characterized the
reactions as positive experiences. Kyle, at age 12, said his parents responded by saying, “We already know.” They also found a gay youth group for him and expressed their support for him.

William, James, and Matthew described hostile and intense moments at the point of parental disclosure. They experienced rejecting behaviors, such as their parents crying as a result, and disapproving messages from their parents. Matthew related his parents’ reaction to their conservative and religious orientations. After his mother questioned him and he disclosed, his parents became upset and emotional. His dad told him he needed to pray more and that perhaps Matthew was dating the wrong girl and had not found the right one at that point. He expected that they might throw him out of the house, but that did not happen. Like Matthew, William also connected his parents’ reaction to their religious identity as Mormons. William came out to his parents three times, he said, the first when he was 12 years old. “[My parents] kind of approached me,” he explained, after they heard about his sexuality from other people. “It was terribly unhealthy and was awful. And we had to do a lot of reconstruction around that. So yeah, they approached me and really aggressively telling me that I couldn’t do this. This was terrible. My mom cried, and of course, they blamed that on me.” As a result, they removed him from public school and entered him into private school, and they sent him to a therapist to “fix” him. He said that he “fully came out” at 18 years old, simultaneously telling his parents he was no longer attending church. His father called him “lazy” and stated that “no one would love [him],” and his mother passively accepted his father’s views. For years afterward, William said, his sexual identity represented a contentious and divisive topic. James also
experienced an extremely negative reaction from his parents after they found out he was interacting with a gay man. After disclosing, they responded to him, “How could you do this to us? What did we do wrong? What are we going to do about this? What are people going to say?” They told his psychiatrist the next day about his sexuality, and he recalled his parents saying that had he not been so young (15 years old), they would have evicted him from their family home. Though Matthew, William, and James differed in age at the time of parental disclosure, none had yet finished college at the point of coming out.

**Divulging to Others.** Beyond parents, coming out to other people, including friends, siblings, extended family members, school personnel and community members, also represented a significant moment in gay and bisexual men’s lives. Ten participants told women initially, and most often, they told a female friend about their sexual identity before anyone else. Other participants reported telling their sister, and only three young men told a male friend as the initial person to whom they came out. Participants overwhelmingly received neutral or nonchalant responses from friends and peers. They mentioned their friends responded with, “Okay” or that they did not really care. Nicholas’ female friend responded, “Okay. What else?” Gregory’s male friend said, “Yeah, you’re not a stereotype. You’re just a person.” Most peers did not express their surprise by the disclosure. Evan and David said they came out to “safe” people first, who were both involved in their respective school’s Gay-Straight Alliances. While a few participants said they lost friends as a result of disclosure, all received at least some
support from peers. Participants characterized their friends’ reactions as non-reactions and mostly indifferent, but positive.

In addition to parents, adults in the participants’ lives, as well as siblings, seemed to have a stronger reaction to disclosure than friends and peers, both positive and negative. Vincent and James noted a few examples of rejecting adults in their lives. Vincent received an angry phone call from his grandmother, saying his father would not accept him being gay. James’ healthcare provider told him that he was too young, at 15 years old, to make the decision to be gay. Yet most other adults reacted positively, said participants. Parents of friends, in particular, expressed support for the young men. William, surrounded by Mormon people in his conservative area of Utah, found few supportive people, but he noted that one friend’s family was particularly affirming. His friend’s family, who had an older lesbian daughter and who later left the LDS church because of their views on LGBT people, represented a “really strong example” of family support. “[My friend] told her mom that I was gay, and her mom, like fucking hugged me the first time she met me, and she was like, ‘I’m so happy.’ Her mom was training to be a massage therapist, and so she’s like, ‘Let’s go get massages.’ It was awesome, and so I think that was one positive person that I could talk to,” William explained. James and Evan also identified friends’ parents as supportive. Evan said he was so close with his friends’ parents that they said he could live with him if he was rejected by his parents.

Siblings generally responded positively or were neutral about their brothers’ sexuality, though a few participants described particularly negative and positive reactions that stood out to them. William’s brother, on a two-year mission, verbally assaulted him
and would not accept him being gay. When he went home during a break early on in college, he said his family and in-laws declined to speak to him even though it was his birthday. Kyle’s sister called him a “fag” and said she wished he was heterosexual.

Vincent’s brother, several years older than him, also had a negative reaction. “I think that [my brother] kind of feels like being gay is kind of, like, being less than other people in society…. I think he perceives that gay people can’t have the same kind of enjoyment that heterosexual married couples have,” Vincent said. Despite some of the more negative reactions by some of the participants’ siblings, most siblings expressed support for their brothers. James, in particular, had a very positive response from his older brother. Prior to coming out, he did not know what to expect from his brother based on his previous racist and homo-negative comments, but upon coming out, his brother effusively supported him. James recalled, “He announced it [to his friends at a party] about how proud he was of me and how much he loved me and all that… and to this day, he will still give me the ‘I love you’ when we get off the phone, which we had never done before [I came out].” Since James experienced particularly negative reactions from his parents years earlier and refrained from discussing his sexuality at that point, his brother’s response meant a lot to him, he said.

Growing Up College-Bound

The third theme, growing up college-bound, pertains to the early socialization and predispositions toward higher education among young gay and bisexual men in this study. Participants reported hearing messages about college and financial aid and scholarships from important actors in their lives, namely family members, and to a lesser
extent, teachers and counselors. Most felt their families and others around them expected the men to attend college from an early age; others recalled an internal drive and motivation to pursue postsecondary education, with several participants pointing to both internal and external forces pushing them toward university campuses. Visual markers, such as older siblings going off to college or parents studying in graduate programs or attending college reunions with their sons, and verbal encouragement provided participants with key messages about the importance of pursuing a college degree.

Unexpectedly, school played only a minor role compared to home discussions in developing students’ interests toward higher education. Peer culture and behaviors perhaps played a slightly larger role in delivering messages to participants about college. All participants reported hearing about financial aid or paying for college, most often in their homes. The message about paying for college seemed clear to participants: parents would assist, either in time or money, and in many cases, scholarship receipt was vital in the pursuit for college. Participants reported that specific discussion about financial aid in schools was nearly non-existent.

**Expectations to Seek Higher Education.** Parents, family, friends, and school personnel all played significant roles in participants’ lives with regard to college-going expectations. Most participants heard messages growing up at home and at school, and many reported that others assumed they would go to college. Parents and school officials presented few alternatives or options; it was given that participants enrolled in college after high school graduation. “It wasn’t even a thought,” Matthew said as he reflected on thinking about college for the first time. He saw his mother get her master’s degree when
he was young and watched her study all the time, thinking he was going to do that someday. Many other participants reported similar instances of seeing family members go to college and earn a degree. All of William’s older siblings went to college, as did his parents. Several others had older siblings or parents go to college. “College was always just sort of a given in my family,” Gregory explained. Both of his parents had bachelor’s degrees, and his dad completed Ph.D. level coursework. Expectations to go to college were not only reported by participants with highly educated parents and family members. James, a first generation college student, said everyone in his life encouraged him to go to college. David heard about college explicitly from his parents. “Parents said that’s what you do. You go to high school. You go to college. You get a job. They hadn’t gone to college, but they wanted all of us to go to college.” Regardless of family background and type of school attended, most participants recalled expectations from those around them that they would pursue higher education.

**Internal Motivations.** In addition to external expectations placed on participations about going to college, some participants also reported an intrinsic motivation to go. Even in the absence of parental encouragement, participants reported that they wanted to attend college. Many connected this motivation to previous academic success and future economic and pecuniary goals. Logan and James both did well academically in high school. “I always just expected to go to college. I don’t think I ever had anything where I was like, ‘I’m going to college.’ I just always remember planning to go to college,” Logan said. He saw two older siblings go off to college, receiving scholarships and forging their own path with little assistance from others. James received
strong grades and could do the work. As a first generation college student, he noted that because his parents did not go to college and he knew that his older brother had problems in school, James wanted to “kind of further [my] family or at least do something a little better [than them].” Christian connected college to his pursuit of theater as a career, so he thought about college perhaps earlier than his peers. Tyler and Hunter had very early awareness and conceptualizations about what college meant for their futures. Tyler connected college with getting a job. “That was how the world was supposed to work,” he said, having those feelings when he left elementary school. Hunter said he had a sophisticated understanding of effects and benefits of college. “The mindset that I would be going to college has been there as long as I can remember. Yeah, I was the kind of kid who was like, ‘How am I going to pay off my mortgage?’ And this is, like, at age five.”

Samuel remembered his parents earning middle-class wages, living in the suburbs, and having careers. He said he knew in high school that obtaining his master’s degree would likely provide that level of comfort, both physical and financial. All of the participants noted some type of external expectation or internal motivation to attend college after high school.

**College-Going Messages.** All study participants reported receiving messages about college, most often in the home, but also at school and in the community. Many heard verbal messages about college from their parents, and others experienced part of their siblings’ college search process by going on campus tours. Some young men noted that their parents worked for colleges, so they had been on campus and involved in the college culture from a young age. Vincent went to his parents’ college reunions,
recalling that his parents talked about college at home. Ryan attended basketball games at the college where his mom worked. He remembered visiting her, seeing the campus, and understanding from a young age what college was. Christian and Samuel’s parents also worked for colleges. Nicholas’ mom became a bank president without a bachelor’s degree. Despite her success as a two-year college graduate, she encouraged her son to get a four-year degree, he said, and she recommended business administration. Matthew also heard advice from his parents regarding where they wanted him to go to college. Several participants noted that their parents offered advice, ranging from location of a college to academic majors and programs. Nearly all participants heard general or specific messages about going to college in their homes.

School served as a secondary, but minor, place where participants received messages about college. Counselors and teachers encouraged or expected participants to go, and part of the reason, as perceived by participants, is because some young men attended college preparatory, private high schools. Tyler attended one of these schools, noting that in elementary school, he remembered a physical map that designated where eventual graduates go to college. Hunter, who also attended a prep school, said the message was clear: “You’re going here because you are going to college.” A few participants noted that the idea of college attendance was drilled or ingrained into them by their school administrators and teachers from an early age. Samuel, Anthony, and Vincent commented that the college-going culture at their high-performing high schools was pervasive. Some of Anthony’s friends applied to more than 15 colleges. Samuel went to school “with a bunch of Ivy Leaguers.” His high school, a well-known suburban
Philadelphia public school, emphasized not only college, but selective colleges. He explained:

So there was that definite social elitism that was very palpable in high school. And that was like, even in freshman year, because you saw, interacting with upperclassmen who were going through the college application process and going on college visits and doing SATs and everything. Even from the word ‘go’ in high school, there was, I think, a social hierarchy and a paradigm and a premium placed on going to a highly regarded college or university.

Paul had a very different experience attending a Philadelphia public school. He struggled, he said, and counselors and teachers did not check in on him. He attended an information session at his school with two college graduates from selective schools, encouraging him and his classmates to apply to college. After realizing he lacked the grades and extra-curricular activities as credentials for the college admissions process, he became emotional. Paul recalled, “My entire life crumbled around me. I was like, ‘My world is over. I am going to die. I am never going to go to college. I will never meet people [or] succeed in life.” Shortly thereafter, he attempted suicide, relating this event to the belief that he did not have a future ahead of him.

**Who Bears the Cost?** Many participants received clear expectations from their parents about financing a college education. Some young men knew or had been told that their parents would pay for their education. Others understood that scholarships and financial aid would play important roles in their college search process. Paul’s father clearly explained to his son that he would pay for college. “He was like, ‘I am saving up for you go to school if you want to. This is possible for you,’” Paul explained. He heard the same messages about his father paying from other people in his life, so he did not
worry about financing his college education. William understood from his parents that they would pay for his undergraduate studies as they did for his older siblings. Nicholas’ mother told him he would not receive financial aid because she was able to pay for his cost of attendance. Vincent stood out among the participants for receiving communication around paying for his education from a family member other than his parent. He remembered from an early age that his grandmother said that she was going to pay for his education. She paid for his brother’s and his cousins’ education, and starting in second grade, his parents told him that she would pay for his schooling as well.

Some participants knew that scholarships and financial aid served as critical components for paying their cost of college attendance. A few young men had previous experience receiving scholarships for their private high school tuition. Logan and David both attended high school on scholarship, and they understood that scholarships for college were necessary. David explained, “Scholarships were always a very big talking point [in] my family. My parents don’t have a lot. We’ve never had a lot financially growing up, but my siblings and I have always been like A+, Dean’s list students. They always told us the expectation…. Financial aid is like, ‘You have to work hard because you need the financial aid because you need to go to college.’” He added, “My parents have always kind of made it that, ‘Without financial aid, a good education isn’t going to happen for you.’” Those early messages served as an impetus for him and his siblings to perform well. Other young men in the study heard about loans from their parents. Evan, another self-identified low-income student, said his parents told him they did not save money for college. “They were like, ‘Just so you know, we weren’t too smart growing
up so we just assumed our kids wouldn’t be that bright. So we never saved for you to go
to college’, and I was like, ‘Great.’” Evan’s father received loans for his two-year degree
program, so he heard a bit at home about loans and knew his dad had some experience
with financial aid. James said his parents were willing to co-sign loans for him, but they
made it clear that they could not assist in paying for college. Ryan remarked that his
parents did not want him to take out loans, and Samuel did not need loans because of his
father’s tuition remission. He knew that if he chose his father’s place of employment as
his college destination, Samuel would not need to pay for tuition. Overall, participants
had a firm understanding of their parents’ financial situation and expectations regarding
paying for college and securing scholarships.

School personnel provided little information in the way of financial aid and
scholarship messages to students. A few participants recalled that their schools held
assemblies on financial aid and scholarships. Several noted that school officials informed
them about local scholarships. Only Paul mentioned a vague reference to completing
financial aid forms from his school. Vincent attended an affluent public school, and he
articulated the financial aid situation dominating his community:

Financial aid, there was not enough conversation about it because the median, I
looked in the newspaper last month. The median income in the town I grew up in
is $160,000, so my peers had parents who were just waiting to pay for a great
university and not worried about how do we fill out the FAFSA and the [College
Scholarship Service] Profile, and how do we get you financial aid. Yeah, I don’t
think there was enough conversation about financial aid.

When asked if he connected the affluence of his town to a lack of conversation about
financial aid, Vincent said, “Probably. There definitely were students who did [need the
financial aid information], but the focus was getting into the best university and, ‘Oh, you’ll figure out how to pay for it somehow.’” The lack of financial aid information and scholarship messages in general matched another finding that counselors and teachers did not serve as a source of assistance in the financial aid process for the study participants. Young men in this study could not rely on school employees for financial aid information or any substantive discussion regarding application for financial aid.

**Going to College**

The fourth theme, actual application to and enrollment in college, built upon previous messages and expectations participants received growing up from family, friends, and school employees. Going to college represented the culmination of 18 years of hard work, and the young men in this study traversed their way through the search and selection process quite differently from one another. To better understand college-going behaviors and moves, one must examine participants’ own search for postsecondary options; assistance provided by parents, family members, and school officials in the college selection process; support from parents while participants were enrolled in college; and help garnered from others, such as older siblings, teachers, and counselors. All participants employed their own process for selecting colleges, some rational and organized, others haphazard and uneven. Some decided, either in the absence of support from others or because they simply wished to do so, to go it alone, applying to and enrolling in college by their own devices. Four participants expressed that, beyond the general expectation to go to college, they felt they did not have a choice in the matter. Regardless of circumstances or backgrounds, they all were able and opted to go.
**Searching and Applying.** All study participants applied to college and were subsequently accepted. As previously explained, all participants received encouragement from others or demonstrated an internal drive to attend college. In applying to college, however, the process employed by each person ranged significantly from one participant to another. Some participants received help from parents, siblings, and school personnel in applying to college, and others described the process as self-driven and relatively straightforward.

Many participants engaged in their own college search process, reviewing academic program information online, conducting research from websites and social media, and mapping out the college search and selection process largely on their own. Christian said he completed all of the applications by himself. He claimed, “I even paid for [the application fees], actually, because I was working my senior year. I mean, [my parents] would have helped if I needed it, but I was pretty self-sufficient.” Others mirrored Christian’s experience by explaining, “I want to do things for myself. I’m a self-starter,” “I took care of it all myself,” and “So I basically had to do it myself.” Nicholas, an aspiring performing artist, researched audition repertoire after watching YouTube videos and booked a flight to a West Coast school. After initially attending a community college, he mostly completed his transfer process on his own as well. Several participants did online research regarding the level of the college’s LGBT acceptance and climate. Many conducted their search for scholarships on their own as part of the college search process. William attended an accessible state college in Utah with near-open enrollment policies, “so you just submit your application and you’re done,” he explained.
While he remembered a college recruiter coming in to his school where William filled out an application, he did not receive much assistance from others in applying to college. Many participants, though not all, pointed to themselves as the primary person who engaged in the college search and selection process.

**College as a Choice.** All participants went to college, are in college now, or in one participant’s case, has been accepted and will go to college in the fall. For two young men, they remembered hearing about or feeling that there was an explicit choice in going to college. Most, however, described the college-going culture at home and school as implying that they had no choice in the matter; they simply had to go to college after graduating high school.

Paul and David talked about this choice in going to college or not going to college. Paul’s father, who did not attend college, presented him with the option to attend college without forcing the idea on him. His father informed him that he was saving for Paul’s college. According to Paul, his father said, “I’m saving up for you to go to school. This is possible for you. This is something I am making a possibility for you.” Paul added, “Which made it passively like, ‘You have to take this opportunity.’ But I don’t think it was or I wouldn’t think it was [required].” David grew up assuming he would attend college and heard messages from his parents about going to college, but he said later on in high school, they also offered him the chance to look for alternatives. After realizing his career required a college education, he made up his mind. Paul and David were both presented with the option to attend or not to attend college, but several other participants talked about college as a requirement or without an explicit choice.
Four participants talked about not having an option to attend college. Ryan said his parents did not give him a choice. “[My sister and I] were kind of told that they want us to at least get an undergraduate [degree]. They didn’t care whether or not we continued on from there, but they wanted us to at least get an undergraduate education.” William explained the same expectation from his parents, though he noted that his parents provided the autonomy to choose his subject in school. Nicholas’ mom was adamant that he earn a degree, preferably in business since he came from a business-minded family. Evan felt he had no other option besides college. He was enrolled in Advanced Placement© and honors courses, and he said he did well in them. “It was just drilled into our heads,” he said, referring to the idea of college from school officials. “And I can’t emphasize how much, there was no option but college.” He later added his frustration: “I feel like I was just thrown here rather than guided to it because there was no freedom in letting me choose myself because it was so expected. I just don’t like [the fact that] no one gave me the whole freedom to choose otherwise…. It was just assumed I’m going to college. I never thought about the alternatives.” Evan’s statement was noteworthy because he questioned during the interview whether he should be attending college.

**Parental Assistance.** Most participants received some form of assistance from their parents in the college search and selection process. In some cases, parents played a significant role in their son’s college search and selection process. Parents purchased plane tickets for college tours and auditions, paid for SAT prep courses, hired independent college consultants, paid application fees, and went with their sons on tours.
of campuses. They also reviewed essays, provided advice on the college search process, discussed specific majors and academic programs with their children, and in general, encouraged their sons during the search process. Of all participants’ families, Ryan’s parents were perhaps the most involved in his college search and selection process. His mother is a college English instructor and provided advice on his majors. His parents took him on tours and offered extensive help in selecting colleges. After each tour, he said he and his parents sat down, made a pro and con list, and discussed academic and financial options. Ultimately, they allowed Ryan to choose his institution, but they were highly involved in his college process, more so than any other participant.

Other parents of these men demonstrated a hands-off approach during the college search process. David, a first generation college student, lacked college support from his parents. He explained, “I would just say, ‘These are the schools I applied to. This is what I got. This is where I’m going. And this is what I’m going to do.’ And they just said, ‘Okay.’” Evan, another first generation college student, said his parents were also less involved than other parents, but they were highly encouraging, Evan reported. In speaking about his dad, Evan said, “He’s like point blank said that he will do anything to make sure that I can get the degree.” In general, the first generation college participants reported less tactical and logistical support from parents compared to those with college-educated parents. Most participants identified the financial aid process and paying for college as the most significant process in which their parents were involved, leaving the college search and selection process mostly up to the participants themselves.
While enrolled in college, participants repeatedly mentioned various forms of support from parents. Most participants reported a high degree of support while in college. Besides financial contributions and assistance in renewing the FAFSA financial aid paperwork, participants cited emotional support and general check-ins as the most important forms of support received while in college. They mentioned phone calls, care packages, visits to campus, and housing support (a few participants lived with their parents while in college) most often. Nicholas characterized his mom’s emotional and general support as follows: “She’s always there to pick up a phone call from having like a midnight breakdown…. When I tell her that I am going to quit the business school and transfer to a new major, she’s always there to talk me off the ledge.” Samuel, whose dad lost his job while he was in college, also said his parents’ commitment did not waiver for him. He was grateful for their support during the difficult experience for his family, he said.

Not all parents provided adequate support to their sons, however. Vincent recalled having to force his parents’ support for him. He said, “If I didn’t call them, I would often not hear from them. I had the kind of relationship with my parents where if I wanted to get support from them, I had to kind of force it. Most other people, I think, they get automatic support from their parents.” David also said his parents are “not invested” in his life, though he was quick to clarify that he did not require any additional support. He said he wishes they would just listen to him and retain information that he tells them, though. William received financial assistance from his parents, but because of their difficulty with his sexual identity, he had no emotional support from them.
Help from Others. Most participants did not receive assistance in applying to college or the financial aid process from those outside of their immediate families and schools. Some participants said school personnel, namely counselors and teachers, assisted in the college admissions process, yet none of the participants extensively talked about assistance gained from school officials. Counselors and teachers provided general advice about college search, offered essay-writing assistance, wrote letters of recommendation, helped one participant register for the SAT, submitted high school transcripts, and provided assistance with the college application. Ryan received the most help from counselors among participants. He stated, “We had an amazing counseling department at my high school. The university that I ended up choosing, [the counselors] kind of helped steer me there from the very beginning. So I worked in their office in high school, so I had a very close relationship with all of my counselors. They did help play a large role in identifying some of the schools.” Ryan’s experience with counselor support, though, served as an anomaly in the data. Matthew, David, Christian, William, Hunter and Paul did not identify any support from a counselor or school-based teacher, though Matthew did receive support from a private music teacher in the college search process. Samuel, who received recommendation letters from his counselor and assistance with writing essays from teachers, summed up the experience for many participants: “I don’t think I really had any substantive, external help.” Participants identified mostly routine, logistical support from teachers and counselors.

For two participants, an older sibling provided assistance in the college search and financial aid processes. David’s sister helped him the most with college and financial
aid. He explained, “So it was kind of my sister who helped me through most of it. Because she was, I mean, her college, she went to so many different colleges, and she was the college search queen. She would find all the scholarships and all the grants and everything, so she was kind of the one who helped me out with that.” Logan received information from his older college-educated siblings about scholarships as well. They secured financial aid from Philadelphia colleges, so he learned from their experiences. Several participants had older siblings, but none of the other participants mentioned their older siblings playing any roles in their college search process.

Only Paul mentioned outside help in the college admissions process. Based on a recommendation from a friend, his father hired an independent college counselor to help him transfer from his community college to a Philadelphia university. “She helped me figure out six schools I wanted to apply to. [She] helped me take control of my narrative. It was a really amazing experience.” His private counselor worked with him extensively over several weeks to complete his transfer process. Besides this one experience, and a couple instances of encouragement from a neighbor or a college search list from a friend’s university-president-father, none of the participants talked about substantive assistance from other people outside of their homes or schools.

**Paying the Bills**

Without financial assistance of some kind, college remains out of reach. At least, that proves true for young men in this study. Participants relied on parents, government, colleges, foundations, private businesses, and some personal income to pay for college. No one indicated personal wealth, nor did a legal declaration of financial independence
exist. Therefore, they depended on others to pay for college, the fifth theme of this study. Some participants had wealthier families, and others received more assistance from colleges themselves. Many worked part-time throughout their four-year degrees, but all turned to parents for financial assistance of some kind, primarily because the U.S. system of higher education assumes parental responsibility in young adults’ financial aid process. A major finding in this study concerns the roles of school officials and oneself in financing an education. Participants overwhelmingly said no counselors or teachers, nor anyone else in the lives of young people, played a role in the federal financial aid process, and school officials assumed only a marginal role in scholarship receipt. Moreover, personal knowledge of the college financial aid system among participants proved insufficient. So in the absence of parental resources and assistance, and without external help or personal familiarity with the financial aid system itself, what are students supposed to do?

**Without Independent Resources.** All participants relied on funding for college from other people and institutions; no participant claimed wealth acquired or held independently of a parent or family member. Likewise, no participant reported that he had been declared financially independent to apply for federal student aid on his own, so all participants were legally dependent on their parents per U.S. government guidelines. College funding sources among participants included parents, family members, colleges and universities, federal and local government grants, employee benefits, federally-guaranteed loans, part-time and full-time jobs, local scholarship funds, and private bank
loans. Participants paid for their college costs in a number of ways and employed various strategies for obtaining additional funding sources.

Nearly all participants secured some merit or talent-based scholarship funding for their college education. Colleges gave scholarships for talent, such as music and athletics, as well as specific academic programs and majors. A few participants reported losing scholarships because of changes in major or not fulfilling the requirements of the scholarship. Participants from low- to moderate-income backgrounds also said they received need-based grants from colleges and the federal and state governments. Some men mentioned part-time jobs, and in Matthew’s case, a full-time job. Participants used part-time job proceeds to pay for personal expenses, rent, and food, rather than a significant portion allocated toward tuition. Matthew said his full-time job helped support his college tuition, an outlier in the participant experiences.

Some participants reported receipt of loans. Most of those pursuing loans said their loans came from the federal government in the form of Stafford loans or parent loans, though Evan remarked that his father took out private loans for his education. His financial aid situation, and more specifically, the act of taking out private loans, took a toll on his parents’ finances. He explained, “[My father] couldn’t apply for another loan until that was paid off. He still has like $300 left on it.” He further described the struggle of taking out private bank funds: “My dad was like, ‘Okay, well, I’ll pay off the next 300 [dollars], and then if I go to the bank, I can apply for this next one, and it should get approved.’ And it’s like scurrying for paying off one loan only to get the next, only to get the next.” His parents took out loans for tuition, rent, and living expenses, even
taking money out of his father’s 401k account for college expenses. Most other
participants who took out loans for college reported relatively low dollar amounts from
the federal government.

A few parents of participants worked for colleges and received tuition remission
benefits. Those benefits assisted greatly in paying the cost of attendance, said
participants. Samuel took advantage of his father’s employee benefit, and he did not
need to take out loans because of the generous policy. His parents saved for years prior
to that to help pay for other living expenses, including room and board, books, and food.
When Samuel’s father lost his job and his tuition remission, his parents stepped in so he
could finish college without loans. Anthony’s dad also used his employee benefit for
tuition, though Anthony also obtained academic scholarships.

Some participants reported receiving some local scholarships, aside from college-
allocated scholarships and grants. Vincent received a scholarship from his state’s Gay,
Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) chapter as a result of his work with
his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance. Evan earned six small scholarships in high school,
though local scholarships did not fund a significant portion of other participants’ college
expenses. Evan explained, “I used [that money] for groceries and utilities for the first
three months [of college].” James won a nominal scholarship for British ancestry. Local
scholarships made up a very small portion of the overall funding for participants’ college
expenses, though they represented the main source of funds mentioned by school
counselors.
Parents served as the primary source of college funding for many of the participants. Paul’s father paid for all of his college expenses, except for a merit scholarship he received from his university. “I honestly don’t even know how much they’re taking off [the bill],” he admitted after mentioning the scholarship. Nicholas’ mom, a bank president, also had the resources to pay for his education, as did the parents of William and Hunter. Brandon, Samuel, Ryan and Matthew’s parents paid for a significant portion of the difference after scholarships and job income. Vincent’s situation was rather unique among participants. He was the only participant to have college expenses paid partially by a family member other than parents. Having been told his grandmother would pay for his education, he recalled she only paid a small amount of an expensive private college’s costs. His grandmother’s contribution amounted to approximately $8,000, a small fraction of his cost of attendance; he made up the difference with large school-based grants, a significant number of part-time job hours throughout the year, and a small amount of money from his parents. Of all external funding received, parental contributions, by far, made up the largest portion of funding, and parents also assisted the most in the financial aid process.

**Parents Paying and Providing Information.** All study participants received some form of assistance from their parents in the financial aid process or in the act of paying for college. As previously mentioned, some parents assisted their sons’ education primarily through family funds, paying a portion of or full cost of attendance through savings and parent income. Regardless of their parents’ ability to pay, though, many participants said they applied for federal, and sometimes state, financial aid, even if they
did not need financial aid. “[FAFSA is] a requirement. I don’t know if you’ve heard that, but, like, it’s a thing,” Paul said of his university’s requirement for all students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Ryan also said his college required the FAFSA, though his family did not accept any of the loans offered.

Without question, the FAFSA represented an important factor in many of the participants’ financial aid search process.

For those participants completing the FAFSA, all men relied on their parents for tax and other pertinent information, and some depended on their parents’ guidance and knowledge of the process. Several young men described the process as a joint effort involving parents. Christian explained, “I think probably the fact that you have to answer so many questions about your parents and it really was a collaborative process to fill it out. I remember being fairly frustrated about how that, it kind of was very tedious.” Brandon agreed with the assessment that he and his parents had to work together. “It was a joint effort. I completed the things that said, ‘Student.’ My parents completed the things that said, ‘Parent.’” Vincent remembered his father helped him with both the FAFSA and the College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile, a longer financial aid form required at many private colleges. Vincent said, “I know for financial aid, it’s really hard to fill [the forms] out if you don’t have information from your parents. So I think that was kind of like a joint venture, was, ‘Hey, I got admitted to college. Can we please figure out how to do the CSS Profile and the FAFSA? This is really important.’” Like participants reported, in nearly all circumstances federal law stipulates that parent
information is required to complete the FAFSA. Participants across interviews discussed the necessity for parental information to complete the financial aid process.

A few participants completed the FAFSA largely on their own, though they relied on parental tax information to complete the process. Samuel explained the necessity of parental information:

I would enter all of my information, but it also required your parent or guardian entering their income and their commitments and their tax liability and that sort of thing. So it was always brief, and it was, there was maybe more of the application that I filled out, but then they would always have to input their financial information. For us, it was very quick, and it wasn’t very long or convoluted or confusing. It was just something we had to do, but there was some information that I just didn’t have that they had to contribute to it.

Logan, David, and James, all first generation college students, completed the FAFSA by themselves. They mostly relied on their parents for tax information. James also explained that his parents co-signed loans for him and helped him understand the “jargon” of the financial aid process. David said because his parents did not go to college and had not completed the FAFSA, he simply requested tax figures from them. He went on to describe the financial aid process: “Navigating the FAFSA is very difficult, I think, especially because I was 18 [years old], and I don’t think I even filed taxes before then. So it was a very, the whole process was a very strange thing to me. I thought it was very complicated, very hard to understand. It’s been made easier the past couple of years, definitely. But that was difficult.” Participants expressed mixed reactions about completing the FAFSA process, but most characterized it as mundane and forgettable.

A few of the participants depended almost exclusively on their parents to complete the financial aid process. Anthony’s parents took care of all details for the
financial aid process and FAFSA, as did Tyler’s parents. Anthony relied on his parents
to manage his money from part-time jobs, so it was a natural extension for him to leave
the FAFSA completion process to his parents. Although Evan said he and his parents
knew almost nothing about how financial aid worked, his parents completed the process
for him. “They’ll literally text me like, ‘Hey, log in. Fill this out.’ And I’m like, ‘Okay.’
And they’ll handle it from there. That’s how dependent on them [I am].” He said he and
his parents struggled with communication about the financial aid process. “There’s no
willingness from all three of us to go collectively or individually” to the financial aid
office and ask questions, he said. He expressed his tenuous financial situation during the
interview and said the lack of communication in his family is “just one cluster of a crash
and burn train wreck for my financial ends.” Like David, also a first generation college
student, Evan related his experience with financial aid and difficulty understanding the
process to his parents’ lack of knowledge and familiarity with financial aid. Evan
explained:

Since my mom didn’t go to college, she does not know a single frickin’ thing
about it. So, my mom and I are kind of in this boat together, and my dad only
knows about it through one way. And we are very much confused and lost and
whatever in all this paperwork. And it’s really frustrating, actually, because my
mother will expect me to just know. And I’m like, ‘How am I supposed to just
know?’ It’s not just being like, ‘Oh, here’s everything you need to know about
college finances all in my head one day.’

Brandon also drew attention to the lack of communication within his family, saying his
parents were not open about how much they were willing to spend on college. When his
financial aid package arrived and his parents said they could not afford it, he said he felt
hurt. Other participants with college-educated parents relied on them for knowledge of
the process, like Matthew and Hunter. Hunter did not apply for financial aid, and he said he did not know why, an instance where he relied on his parents’ judgment. Only Paul recalled another set of people, his aunt and his dad’s accountant, as playing a significant role in his financial aid process outside of his immediate family. He explained, “I didn’t really do a lot of it myself. [My aunt and I] kind of just like asked my dad’s accountant for data…. And she basically filled it out while I sat there because I didn’t understand how it worked.” Outside of families, participants did not receive much help to navigate the financial aid process. Nearly all relied exclusively on their parents.

**Dearth of Guidance.** Participants reported that counselors and teachers did not serve as a major source of information for financial aid, nor did they provide assistance in obtaining financial aid. No one talked about assistance from mentors or community-based organizations, nor did participants talk about any other family members assisting with the financial aid process, besides Paul’s aunt and Logan’s and David’s siblings. In short, gay and bisexual men in this study did not rely on many people for financial aid and scholarship information besides their families, and even then, some parents offered little advice or information to their sons.

Some men recalled counselors and teachers identifying local scholarships for which students could apply. In instances where counselors were aware of their students’ sexual identities, participants said they did not hear about LGBT-related scholarships. Of all participants, only three men mentioned a counselor’s role in financial aid and scholarships. Logan’s counselor most notably helped him leverage a financial aid offer from one college to another. Otherwise, counselors helped with small, local scholarships.
Evan termed these funds as “stupid scholarships” because they required very specific criteria for eligibility and offered small amounts of money toward college. While David did not mention counselors directly, he said, “School let us know about scholarships that were happening, but I mean once they would say, ‘This is the scholarship, and if you want more information, we have a board [where] you can read about it.’” Others mentioned the passive nature of their counseling department, a place where participants could retrieve information if they sought help. David went on to say, “It was active for some people. It was kind of like, ‘We’re here if you need me.’” Participants provided little evidence of assistance from school personnel for financial aid and scholarships, and no one discussed their counselor’s role in helping them complete federal and state financial aid forms.

**Personal Knowledge of Financial Aid.** Most participants had scant knowledge about the college financial aid process. As previously mentioned, Evan said he felt confused and lost, and he admitted to having no knowledge of financial aid. James said, “[I knew] almost nothing. Not until it was actually time to [apply for financial aid].” James also could not claim the benefit of having engaged parents in his financial aid process like many other participants, so he had to complete it on his own with little comprehension. Anthony completely depended on his parents for financial aid information. When asked how he was paying the cost of attendance, he said he did not know. He admitted:

> This is going to sound kind of stupid, but I’m not really sure how. Like, my parents took care of all the initial financial stuff. Like, they did all of the paperwork and all that stuff was done by them. And I know that I did get loans
out, but I haven’t had to pay it back yet because I think that I’ve gotten them deferred at this point…. I never have physically paid for any of my classes to this point, but I know that they’re being paid for. I don’t know.

Other participants understood the need to apply for financial aid, but they did not identify any other understanding of financial aid components beyond the expectation to apply. “I feel like it’s the understood thing you do when you apply to schools,” Brandon said of the financial aid process. Tyler had a similar take on it. “My understanding was that we did it, and we should do it, because…. it’s worth it to save money,” he recalled.

Some participants remembered messages from their parents about their financial situation and not having to apply for financial aid. This memory related to future understanding, or lack thereof, of the financial aid process. Since Nicholas’ mom paid for his schooling, he “never really researched it that well.” Other participants with wealthier parents also recalled not knowing or thinking about financial aid. Paul’s father paid the total cost of attendance. As a result, Paul explained, “I had no understanding of the financial [aid] situation. No details. No one told me anything.” He only remembered hearing others tell him that his father would pay, so he should not worry about financial aid or paying for college. William did not know how to say “FAFSA,” he recalled, and he did not know how to apply for federal or state resources. He thought about potential ramifications of his parents declining financial support because of his sexual identity, but he neglected to engage in financial aid research. He explained, “I think that was more avoidance on my end where I was like, ‘I don’t even want to think about that. I have to think about it, but I’ll avoid it.’ Because, you know, that’s what you do.” Given participants’ reliance on their parents for knowledge and information and a lack of
personal understanding of the financial aid process, implications may exist for students without parents present, available, or willing to assist them.

Of all participants, Samuel and Logan had the most sophisticated understanding of financial aid and scholarships, though Samuel also said he did not completely understand the term ‘financial aid.’ He recalled, “[Financial aid] was something people always threw around, but I didn’t understand exactly what it was. I didn’t really grasp college loans until I went to college and had friends who were taking them out who were talking about it, and I was like, ‘Oh, okay. This is the bullet that I dodged,’” as a result of having his father’s employee benefit of tuition remission and parental contributions. He remembered hearing about Barack and Michelle Obama’s loan repayment:

They had only recently paid off their law school loans, and that was a big, like, ‘Wow.’ That was a big moment for me of, that really kind of drove home in a way that I was kind of privileged enough not to be as aware of it so early. And so it took some more real world experience with my friends in college who did have to take out loans for me to truly understand.

Logan had previous knowledge of financial aid and scholarships because he applied for private school scholarships during middle and high school. Perhaps because he was aware of his family’s low-income background or because he had older siblings who had gone through the process, he knew the only way he would be able to go to college was with financial aid.

**Intersection of Sexuality and College**

The sixth theme, the intersection of sexual identity and college, serves as the main crux of this study. Two formative and foundational experiences, parental disclosure of sexual identity and going to college, often overlap in time and space, interacting with one
another and at times, colliding. Participants reported grappling with the real possibility, or at least the perception, that their family of origin may not support them in the college-going process upon disclosure. Few openly connected disclosure with the act of pursuing college, as many men found support from parents post-disclosure regarding their sexual identity, and all had some type of support in pursuing college. Yet participants reported almost universally that they knew friends or peers in high school or college with parents who demonstrated rejecting behaviors, sometimes affecting college attendance. One finding became clear across interviews: had what happened to peers occurred in their own lives, few participants claimed a distinct, identifiable pathway toward attending or completing college in the absence of parental support, financial or otherwise.

**Influence of Sexual Identity on College Search and Financial Aid.** Most participants reported that their sexual identity influenced their college search and selection process. Participants said that in searching for colleges, they often looked for open and accepting campuses and locales, diversity, and large LGBT communities. The most often cited reasons for a particular college or most popular considerations in the college search process pertained to academic programs and majors as well as geographic location. As previous research suggests (Human Rights Campaign, 2012), much of the college search process for participants centered around academic programs, majors, and other non-LGBT related programs and activities. About half discussed factors in their college search process unrelated to their sexual identity, yet several mentioned LGBT acceptance and diversity in choosing a college.
Participants said geography served as an important criterion when selecting colleges. They related geographic location of the college to diversity, openness, and LGBT acceptance, explaining almost universally that institutions in the northern part of the United States and urban colleges were more accepting of LGBT people than rural and small town campuses and those located in the South. Paul said he would not feel “emotionally and mentally safe” in a rural area for college. Brandon said something similar: “I really thought about where I would be, I guess, safe, for a lack of a better word, or maybe more comfortable.” He steered away from rural campuses, ending up in Philadelphia. Four participants said they would not feel comfortable outside of a major city. After growing up in a tiny town the size of one square mile, Evan related his college search to his emotional well-being back home. He explained, “I can’t be in a small town. I can’t not be comfortable with where I’m at because it really affects what I do. I can’t think straight. It just weighs on the back of my mind, so I knew that I wanted to get out.”

A few participants did extensive research on a college’s LGBT acceptance and community. Nicholas said, “I was looking at, ‘What’s the best college for gay people?’” Gregory searched online for colleges known for LGBT acceptance, political ideologies, and safety.

Paul and Vincent said they did not want to be the “token” gay men on campus. They wanted a large enough community where a critical mass of LGBT people existed. Vincent said he went on a tour of a college in northeast Pennsylvania and visited with the college’s director of the Gay-Straight Alliance. “He was like, ‘Oh, I want you to come here.’ And I kind of took a step back, and I was like, ‘I don’t know if I want to go to [this
college] if their LGBT community is so small and so in need of an activist like me.’”

Vincent said he thought he would do better in a much larger city, like New York City, with a sizeable pro-gay community, as did several other study participants.

When asked if they thought their sexual identity or coming out had anything to do with their search for financial aid and scholarships, no participant said that their disclosure affected financial aid or paying for college. Four participants talked about LGBT-related scholarships, and several young men talked about some apprehension related to coming out and how that might play a role in financial aid, though none of those fears or worries were realized. William related his sexuality and identity disclosure to the price of college and his parents’ role in paying for it. He explained:

[The college I chose] was the cheapest. I think, you know, you carry a lot of shame. It certainly perpetuated a lot of shame. I didn’t think about it cautiously, but I didn’t want [my parents] to have to spend any extra money on me because I didn’t think that I was necessarily worth it. The University of Utah costs a little bit more [than my college], and so I felt kind of uncomfortable around that. I mean, I still kind of did feel uncomfortable about them funding my education because I thought it came with a price. And the price was me being engaged in the LDS faith and not being gay.

In the end, William chose not to engage with church activities and decided to be out of the closet. His parents funded his studies throughout college despite some earlier threats and bargains they made.

**No Clear Pathway Forward.** In asking the hypothetical question, “Had your parents not assisted you with financial aid or paying for your college education, do you know what you would have done?” participants speculated and offered many different answers. Some participants said they may need to drop out of college. Others assumed
that they would have chosen less expensive college options, transferred to community
college or colleges with a lower cost of attendance, taken out significantly more loans, or
worked more hours. Some participants did not know what they would have done had
their parents not assisted them, with one participant almost refusing to entertain that
possibility. Except one participant, no one in this study could articulate a clear course of
action to pay for college without parental support. Fortunately, all men in this study
received adequate financial aid support from their parents.

The perceived need of financial assistance, any kind of financial aid from parents
and others, was high among participants. As previously noted, none of the participants
had financial resources to pay for college on their own. Therefore, they all depended on
their parents for some type of assistance. Some participants had a difficult time
envisioning their parents not helping them. That was the case for Paul: “I don’t know
what I would do,” he said as he contemplated the absence of his father’s financial support
for college. “Like, that was, that’s not something in my universe. That is an alternate
reality that I cannot even fathom. Because people [said], ‘You will go to college if you
want to. Your father will pay for it.’” Logan also had a difficult time thinking about a
scenario where his parents did not assist him. “I can’t see that happening,” he said.
Understandable considering their parents’ support for them, their responses were also
noteworthy since many participants identified peers in situations without parental
support.

Going to college or staying in college was a concern among participants had their
parents not assisted them with the financial aid process. Paul and David recalled the
FAFSA process as a potential barrier in this scenario. Paul said without the assistance of his father’s accountant, “That would be a huge block in the road because I wouldn’t have any information. I wouldn’t have been able to fill out my FAFSA. I don’t know exactly what the rules are, but, like, I knew that I couldn’t go to [my college] if my FAFSA wasn’t done and in there. That was a requirement for enrolling. I wouldn’t be allowed to attend.” David said he was in a similar situation at his college. “I don’t know. I mean, if [my parents] hadn’t have helped me with that, I don’t think I would have been able to do my FAFSA, and I wouldn’t have gotten the financial aid, and I wouldn’t have gone to college.” Christian mentioned not completing the FAFSA paperwork may have prevented him from receiving scholarships. “That would have definitely impacted my ability to stay in college, probably,” he concluded.

Other participants identified other pathways for going to and staying in college in the event their parents chose not to support their college and financial aid process, though most had not thought about the logistics of applying for financial aid or staying in college until asked in the interview. The most popular option for students was to take out additional loans. Hunter and Nicholas, both of whom did not apply for financial aid, said they would have searched for scholarships, and Nicholas would have transferred to a community college and worked full-time as well. Tyler said he would have chosen a cheaper college option than his expensive private university. Anthony also said he would have relied on scholarships, though he admitted that he lost his academic scholarship in college. “I would have sought outside help because I don’t really know. I would have made it work, obviously. I mean, I had enough grades to where, like, I would have been
able to get some help. I mean, I would have made it work, but I guess I took a backseat because my parents would do it for me," Anthony explained. Since James relied on his parents to co-sign loans, he said he would have tried to find someone else to co-sign for him. Samuel, William, Ryan, and Gregory would have also taken out loans, they said, and Gregory would have worked more, though he acknowledged he only made minimum wage as a work-study student. Only Matthew described a cogent pathway forward by working. He already worked full-time in college and paid for most of his costs, though he said he borrowed some money from his parents. Since his college already had a lower cost of attendance compared to other men in this study, he said he was prepared to pay for all of his costs if his parents declined support. In contrast, because Evan had little access to money in college, he worried about the next step after departing the institution. “If I did get financially cut off from my parents, I’d have no clue how I’d get from Philly back to my small town. So there was still like a big roadblock in my way,” he said. Hunter concisely explained his circumstances had his parents not paid for his cost of attendance: “Basically without them, I would have been fucked.”

Experiences of Peers. Most participants in this study found acceptance from their parents as a result of disclosing their sexual identity. Some received immediate, initial affirmation through words and acts, and other participants initially experienced resistance or rejecting behaviors and later received support from their parent or parents. Three participants experienced significant familial rejection in their lives. Despite the relatively diverse array of disclosure experiences, most participants identified personal friends or peers who experienced some form of parental rejection or fear of potential
rejection, and some of those peers had difficulty accessing college or financial aid as a result.

As previously described, some participants identified coming out stories of same-age or near-age peers from traditional and social media, both fictional accounts and real situations. In part, participants’ perceptions of negative reactions in popular culture, real or not, seemed to instill fear, anxiety, and apprehension among most participants. Still, about half of the participants identified personal connections of peers distressed about their own coming out experiences and peers who received negative reactions from parents.

Some participants explicitly recalled friends and peers who came out to their parents and were prevented from going to college. Christian’s friend, who did not have a healthy relationship with his father, tried to pay for college himself, but he needed the FAFSA. Christian said he knew peers with parents who were not willing to complete the FAFSA or help them with the process. William identified a friend who never went to college because his parents would not pay for college as a result of coming out as gay. “And they sent him to reparative therapy, and he was telling me this shit. It was awful,” William said, not going into detail of what happened to his friend. Several men said they had friends who waited until college to come out, as did about half of the study participants themselves, but few peers told participants why this was the case.

Some men talked about their friends’ experiences of coming out, though not necessarily related to the college search process. Anthony’s fraternity brother came out to his parents after getting to college. He said, “His family is very conservative and
Christian’s friend with a religious family sent him to conversion therapy as a result of coming out. Brandon had a close friend who was not supported in college and whose dad used the word “faggot” regularly growing up. He pointed to another peer, a bisexual woman, who chose not to come out to her “very conservative Chinese” family, he said. Vincent had a lesbian friend who was banned from dating girls by her parents, who then inflicted “lots of different kinds of punishments” on her.

Other participants said their peers have not come out to their parents because they were nervous or fearful of their parents’ reaction, just like many of the participants themselves. Vincent explained, “[My LGBT friends are] so worried about their parents accepting them.” As the president of his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, Vincent knew several closeted peers before college. He remembered, “I think a lot of them were hesitant to come out to their parents because they wanted their parents to pay for college…. I think part of it was, ‘Oh, I don’t want to get kicked out. Oh, I don’t want to not be able to go to college.’” Gregory explained that one of his friends felt like they could not disclose that they lived in his campus’ LGBT house to their parents. Had his friend’s parents discovered the living arrangements, “their parent would have just cut them off.” While parental reactions were factors in peers’ decisions to forego college, participants pointed to other reasons as well. Nicholas described a peer from high school who chose not to go to college due to bullying. “He was having a really hard time coming out,” Nicholas explained. “He was constantly walking the hallways, and people were, like, throwing him up against a locker and calling him a faggot. I don’t think he
ended up going to college because he was just so afraid. He had such a terrible experience in high school that he thought that’s what [college] would be like.” Most participants know of people or stories where teens had experienced forms of rejection from their parents.

Only one participant, James, discussed positive peer experiences in the series of interviews. Since he went to an art college, he said he attended school with a large number of LGBT students. He identified several friends who brought their partners home with them during the holidays or went out to dinner with parents and significant others when their families visited Philadelphia. He could not recall any peers in college who experienced negative parental reactions like him. One should not, however, extrapolate his story and assume that other participants had not encountered peers with positive experiences. The question asked of participants pertained to peers with differing experiences than their own as it related to coming out and going to college. In asking that question, no other participant discussed any positive experiences of peers.

Outcomes

The seventh and final theme, outcomes in the lives of participants, relates to the after-effects of coming out and going to college. Throughout the interviews, several questions emerged. Recognizing that many participants identified challenges and issues of adversity, both in their sexual identity development and subsequent disclosure as well as in the college selection process, what strategies and tools did participants employ to conquer obstacles? Considering the various shades of parental disclosure reactions, how did participants interact with and relate to their parents today? Did family relationships
improve, deteriorate, or remain unchanged, and did any changes pertain to participants’ sexual identity or disclosure? Given the shared experiences of participants – coming out and going to college – what advice could they provide parents of other young gay and bisexual men who wished to pursue college?

**Strategies for Overcoming Barriers.** Participants identified key strategies that they employed to overcome adversity and barriers in their lives. At times, these coping mechanisms related directly to one’s sexual identity and disclosure, but there were several instances when participants managed stress as a result of personal and family health issues, unrelated to sexuality. They discussed reaching out to parents for support when appropriate, as well as peers, friends, teachers, and counselors. A few participants mentioned seeking professional mental health services, and other men coped with challenges on their own. Vincent had to become independent early on in his life due to his parents’ physical and mental health problems. “Starting really young,” he said, “[if] you want something done, you do it yourself. And that’s how I got myself into college and jobs. So it’s kind of like, ‘I don’t need you to accept me. I’m going to do it on my own.’” David also pointed to his independent and self-driven personality that helped him forge ahead despite economic circumstances at home. Paul sought treatment after his suicide attempt and met with a therapist. He said he now practices self-care and mindfulness, and he relies on his family for help. He realized that he required help and needed to accept it. Of all participants, William had the clearest understanding of ways he dealt with his family’s rejection. During the tense and difficult moments, he said, he shut down. “Honestly, I was alone,” he reflected, mirroring participants who recalled
feeling isolated during early sexual identity development. He added: “And I think you go into that survival mode, and your mind does what it needs to do. I think that definitely comes with a cost. It’s certainly not a healthy way to operate. It’s exhausting, and it was exhausting in college. But I mean, you just do what you have to do. You have to survive. You have to thrive.” He also spoke of his own resiliency, asserted and advocated for himself within his family, and “demanded respect” from his parents and siblings. In overcoming potential college obstacles related to his parents, he said: “I’ve been strategic about certain things and critically examined stuff, so that served me well. I didn’t, like, manipulate anything, but like I said, I knew I was coming out so I had to hurry and get shit down before I came out. So when I did, it was an easier transition. Easier, but it was still difficult.” Strategies for overcoming obstacles employed by participants certainly helped these young men prevail and can instruct other gay and bisexual men in similar circumstances.

**Parental Relationships Post-Disclosure.** Two-thirds of participants said that they believed their relationships with their parents have improved over the years since coming out, and all participants experienced either a positive change with at least one parent or the relationship with parents has remained stable over time. Notably, participants who reported more accepting behaviors and statements from a parent after disclosing their sexual identity characterized their relationships as unchanged. They essentially said that they had relatively good and healthy relationships with their parents prior to coming out and that the rapports remained positive and supportive. Brandon’s statement summarized several responses: “[The relationship] wasn’t like particularly
changed before and after, at all. We kind of just went about our days.” For those men who reported positive changes since coming out, participants said they felt more comfortable, more supported, more understood, more accepted, and more loved by their parents. Among the three participants with rejecting families at the time of disclosure, all three reported an improvement in their respective relationships, but only William said the change had to do, in part, with his parents’ acceptance of him and his sexual identity.

Positive changes occurred in the lives of several participants, and some identified sexual identity disclosure as a reason for this shift. Evan, in particular, feels comfortable with his family now. “There’s no really tip-toe ing around questions about my sexuality. Now, I’m like, ‘Hey, I’m gay,’ and they’re just like, ‘Okay, cool.” There’s just such a freedom to be myself…. I don’t have to fake who I am as a person.” His relationship with his father has improved tremendously, he said. Ryan, Paul, and Brandon all said their relationships with their fathers have improved as well. Some participants expressed their disappointment that they had to, or felt they had to, lie or deceive their family and friends before disclosure. Nicholas said when he stopped lying to his mother about his sexual identity and activities surrounding it, their relationship strengthened. William remarked that the change in his relationship with his parents, while at times contentious, has been a “slow, gradual process.” Now, though, he said he sees them more often, does not “walk on eggshells anymore,” and maintains a more open and honest relationship with his mother in particular. Most participants with improved parental relationships, though, claimed that their relationships have gotten better as a result of time, moving out
of the house and off to college, and being able to be more of a friend than a son, as opposed to anything overtly relating to their sexualities.

Only three participants said their relationship with one parent has declined since coming out, yet scant evidence from the interviews exists to suggest this is due to sexual orientation. Paul’s mother, for instance, had and continues to have severe mental health issues that have “eaten her alive,” he said. While he did not have a positive coming out reception from his mother, he refrained from pointing to his sexual identity disclosure as being a factor in their current relationship. Evan said his relationship with his mother may have declined since coming out, yet he was not sure if this had to do with his sexual identity, moving away from home for college, or his recent mental health issues. Finally, David did not believe his relationship with his mother had changed since coming out, though he believed his mother felt otherwise. “I think that she feels closer to me, in a way.” Yet, he felt that his mother’s inquiring about dating has made their interactions “awkward” and “uncomfortable,” a feeling expressed by Tyler as well. Overall, none of the participants identified their sexual identity or disclosure as the main reason why the quality of relationships has declined since coming out.

Parent-son discussions today around sexuality, dating, and relationships was mixed. Four participants said they have had or continue to have conversations with their parents about dating and relationships. Other participants, such as Tyler and Vincent, said they were comfortable talking about their own sexual identity with their parent, but the subject of boyfriends or significant others has not been discussed. David clarified that while he does not generally talk to his parents about sexual identity or dating issues,
there is no particular reason. “We don’t really talk about it as much. Not that we can’t talk about it. We just don’t.” He said he has friends to turn to if he has things to talk about regarding that part of his life. Matthew and James, two participants with particularly negative coming out experiences, have not discussed dating with their families. James said, “No, not in the least.” In James’ case, his parents pretend like he is straight, he said. He believed they are in “deep denial,” sometimes asking him if he has a girlfriend. William, the other participant who experienced significant rejecting behaviors for several years from his parents, now talks with his mother about his dating life. He explained:

My mom asked, ‘Are you dating? Or are you seeing anyone? Are you going on dates?’…. She’s getting a bit more inquisitive about it. I think it’s because she feels obligated to, not because there’s, like, this genuine. There probably is some genuine concern. Not concern, but some interest. But I think it’s a little bit forced for her, which is, you know, that’s great. She’s still getting comfortable with it, and I can’t be angry at that.

Regarding college, all participants attended college, are attending college currently, or will attend college in the fall, as previously noted. They sought assistance from others as appropriate, and most received emotional, college-related, and financial support from their parent or parents. No parents, as described by participants, prevented their sons from attending college due to their sexual identity. In at least seven cases, though, participants came out to parents after enrolling in college. Parents chose not to decline financial assistance when their sons disclosed their identities, nor did they prevent their sons from completing the federal financial aid forms. College-related support varied from one participant to another, yet parents universally supported their sons’
financial aid and paying for college process, despite earlier fears among men in this study. Participants maintained relationships with parents throughout college and often relied on parents for general support, and for those men still in college, they said parents continue to support them. Overall, parents of study participants supported their sons’ college search and selection process in general and financial aid process specifically.

**Counseling Parents.** Study participants offered parents several suggestions on how to support their gay and bisexual sons and their sons’ journey to college. Most often, participants said parents should listen to their children and provide general emotional support. All men offered advice to parents of gay and bisexual sons, mostly related to identity development and supporting their sons’ sexual identities. Only a few participants said their parents should assist their sons in finding safe and accepting campuses in the college search process.

Advice suggesting parents should listen to their sons was brought up repeatedly by participants. Related, a few participants also suggested that parents should trust their children, take them seriously, and offer them space to come out on their own terms. “Don’t question how well they know themselves because it’s their own process,” Brandon stated. Three participants reported that their parents asked if their sexuality was a “phase” or said parents should not ask that question. Christian said sexual identity development and disclosure is a person’s own “journey.” In his trajectory, Christian said his sexual identity development was a gradual process, so he counseled parents of children like him to have patience. He said: “In society, we are pressuring youth to figure out and know what they want and expect them to have a sense of self and have identity
right away, and I think identity forms slowly. It may take more time…. So I think that to
not rush that process and to be open-minded and being able to listen to your child.”

Similarly, Anthony said his mom didn’t “push or prod,” allowing him to come out when
he was ready. Conversely, Paul’s mother kept asking him about his sexual identity when
he was younger; he said it felt like she was “picking at a pimple.” He recalled, “She
would just kind of ask me, ‘Are you gay? Are you gay? Tell me if you are gay. Please
just tell me if you are gay.’” His mother’s prodding proved unhelpful, he said, and other
participants agreed that gay and bisexual men need their own time to come out. Two
participants asked parents to create a space where their sons could feel comfortable
coming out to them and not to overstep their boundaries. David said parents should
signal to their children that they are there for them, like Christian’s and Anthony’s
parents subliminally signaled their support for them growing up.

Some participants related their advice for parents and guardians directly to sexual
identity development. Language is important, they said. Evan said “be careful about
word choice,” after hearing heteronormative and homo-negative terms and phrases in his
home. Recently, Evan said, he heard his mom jokingly call his father a derogatory word
used for gay men, and he felt like he was “back in that place of feeling bad for doing
something I can’t change.” Tyler mentioned that before coming out, his parents often
started sentences like, “When you have kids…” But when he came out to them, they
stopped saying that to him. “I don’t really need the stress of [being a] young adult
deciding if I would ever want kids or not, but I still didn’t really appreciate that that
happened…. I think it’s imperative to see [their gay and bisexual sons], to really like treat
them as much as possible like you would treat any child.” He added that parents should attempt to “normalize” non-heterosexual identity as much as possible. Matthew and Christian said their parents also feared that they would not have grandchildren as a result of their sons’ sexual identity.

Participants also asked parents of gay and bisexual men to provide emotional and general support while attending college. “Expressing love” and “just generally being there for their children is incredibly important,” James said. Kyle agreed, adding “it doesn’t matter who they love”; parents should support their children. Logan offered a similar sentiment. Six participants mentioned emotional support and acceptance as being important to gay and bisexual children. “And if they have problems” in college, David added, parents should let their children know that “they’re always welcome home. Making them feel they’re really and truly part of the family” is important, he said.

Feeling part of the family system post-disclosure was something another participant, William, lacked. Not experiencing acceptance from his family and many friends, William described what happens when acceptance does not occur: “We know that if you’re in survival mode and you’re just extremely emotional, executive functioning of the brain just shuts down. So if the gay individual, the student is so concerned about being gay and is so hyper-vigilant around their sexuality, that really distract them from learning.” This mirrored Evan’s assessment that he would not be able to “think straight” had he attended college near his homogenous hometown. He said he always had to be “very, very discreet” about his sexuality back home. William’s and Evan’s comments demonstrate implications for college-going students who might be struggling in school.
and how parents’ acceptance could help alleviate these concerns regarding sexual identity. Samuel provided advice to parents based on what he saw at school and in his community in providing a support structure to LGBT teens:

What’s most important for parents of queer children is it’s all about being unequivocally and emotionally supportive and creating and fostering a positive psychological environment that allows them to build a level of confidence…. I would say the absolute wrong thing to do is to throw people out in the world and make them learn it all themselves. That’s one of the worst things you can do. It’s all about, it needs to be nurture, you must, every single effort to help them is worth it. Like, everybody grows up and learns how to be an adult, learns how to function emotionally as an adult, but this is something where they need every bit of help that you can give them, and you need to be willing to offer any kind of help that they require. It’s like, it’s not optional.

Vincent related his advice to students leaving high school and entering college as gay and bisexual people. He said, “If parents kind of encourage their children that college is one of those times they can really start to pick their future and get them excited about that, you know, to try and say, ‘Yeah, you’re getting bullied in high school or you’re having problems, but you can start defining your future starting at age 18.’ I think that’s a really cool thing.”

**Summary of Findings**

The guiding research questions in this study pertain to the following experiences for White gay and bisexual men who have disclosed their sexual identity to a parent: 1) the nature of the college search experience; 2) the navigation of the financial aid process; and 3) other experiences that serve to facilitate or restrict access to financial resources. Before understanding college and financial aid access, though, one must consider the personal and situational context surrounding the act of parental disclosure. How did
participants grow up as gay and bisexual young men? What feelings did they have toward themselves and toward future parental disclosure? Who played important roles in their development? Only after understanding the answers to these questions can we interpret the inquiry sitting at the intersection of these two worlds: How does sexual identity disclosure to a parent relate, if at all, to college-going behaviors and access to financial resources?

As noted throughout this chapter, the young gay and bisexual men interviewed identified internalized homo-negative feelings, thoughts and attitudes throughout their childhoods and into their teen years. In their early awareness of same-sex attractions, they attempted to switch their sexual orientations to heterosexual and experienced confusion and isolation. They heard negative messages from parents, peers, and the media, and they failed to identify any LGBT adults or many LGBT peers growing up, yet positive and affirming adults played important roles in many participants’ lives. Fear, anxiety, and apprehension was pervasive in disclosing their sexual identities to other people, especially parents. They remained uncertain about their parents’ reactions to disclosure, and some feared family rejection and eviction, often as a result of earlier homo-negative and heteronormative comments made by parents. Despite their concerns, the young men in this study largely found acceptance from parents and indifference or positive responses from same-age peers. Parental affirmation and acceptance was not universally delivered to participants, though everyone in this study received some type of support post-disclosure.
The nature of the college search experience for these young gay and bisexual men followed similar patterns compared to the larger college-going population. They searched for academic programs and majors and considered various locales, though these participants typically preferred larger cities and accepting communities to those in small, more rural locations. They derived their college information from parents, peers, and school officials, and many sought assistance in applying to college from those same individuals. Others expected them to go to college, and several participants identified internal motivations to attend as well. Navigating the financial aid process, however, differed greatly compared to college-going actions. Instead of receiving information from counselors and teachers, participants turned to parents with varying success. School officials failed to serve as a source of information in the financial aid process, providing only meager information to few participants about small scholarships. Indeed, parents played a pivotal role in participants’ access to financial aid, facilitating both college and financial aid opportunities. They paid for some men’s educations, and others supplied valuable information to their sons to complete the federal financial aid process. Without independent financial resources on their own, participants relied wholly on their parents. They reported scant knowledge on their own regarding financial aid and failed to identify pathways toward graduation in the absence of parental assistance. Despite these obstacles, both real and theorized, all participants on this study went to college with at least some parental support.

So again we ask, “How does sexual identity disclosure to a parent relate, if at all, to college-going behaviors and access to financial resources?” It does not, or rather, it
largely did not for this set of participants. But the potential for this relationship most certainly exists. Indeed, participants did identify some ways in which sexual identity played a role in their college search process. They searched for gay-friendly campuses, critical masses of LGBT people, and urban centers. Many also had the unrealized fear of total family rejection, financial and emotional, as well as eviction from their home. Some thought about how potential reactions may have negatively impacted their subsequent access to college and financial resources, but none of the young men in this study had this experience directly. Insufficient evidence exists to suggest disclosing sexual identity to a parent had any positive or negative effect on or relationship with college or financial aid access.

Yet, some findings from this study are alarming. Participants identified same-age peers in high school and college who could not access college due to parental disclosure. Other friends struggled with rejecting behaviors, feared their own families’ reactions, or were prevented from completing the financial aid process after parents declined to participate. Participants relied on their parents alone for financial resources and information. They lacked personal knowledge in applying for financial aid. School and school official played little role in figuring out how financial aid works. Fortunately, parents of these participants, regardless of their feelings about their sons’ identity disclosures, supported their sons in their pathways toward college.

Most findings of this study provide a refreshing addition to the literature on LGBT youth. This study fails to show the grim, deficit-based findings on everything that plagues gay and bisexual youth. Sure, some participants struggled with their sexual
identities and endured bullying at school. They felt alone oftentimes and wondered if people like them existed. But the participants in this study were resilient in the face of LGBT-related and non-LGBT-related obstacles. They found lots of acceptance from friends, families, and other adults. Earlier accepting messages proved helpful to questioning young men, as did affirming adults. They enjoy better, healthier, and more positive relationships today than they did upon disclosure to their families. They tapped into resources to pay for the costs of attendance, some securing lucrative scholarships and need-based aid largely on their own. Perhaps most importantly, at least for a study of behaviors and actors in higher education access, all went to college.
CHAPTER 6

Thematic Connections, Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter provides an analysis of thematic linkages that transcend the boundaries of themes and sub-themes from Chapter Five. Thematic intersections, overlapping ideas and findings, and ways in which results informed one another to articulate a more complete picture of the phenomenon are highlighted. A discussion of how this study’s findings confirm or conflict with previous literature follows. Some findings prove inconclusive compared to other empirical research, and mixed results are explained and discussed. Suggestions and recommendations for practitioners, gatekeepers, and support systems, as well as policymakers and future scholars, conclude this study.

Thematic Connections

Throughout the interviews and qualitative data analysis, it became evident that themes and subthemes often overlapped and informed each other to tell a nuanced, detailed account of both shared and divergent experiences in the lives of the participants. Naturally, early messages pertaining to LGBT issues, sexual identity, going to college, and paying for college later informed how participants interacted with and experienced processes such as sexual identity disclosure, the college search and selection process, and financial aid and scholarships. Yet beyond these naturally connecting themes, we learned that a lack of personal understanding of a financing college education and an absence of financial aid discussions at school also forced gay and bisexual adolescents and young
adults to rely more heavily on others, particularly their parents. Some parents, often
college-educated themselves, claimed knowledge of these complex systems and assisted
their sons, and other parents could not help because they also did not understand financial
aid. Additionally, we learned that participants mimicked their heterosexual peers in
choosing colleges based on academic programs and majors, but they also sought out
affirming and open campuses and thought about the size of LGBT populations in college.
Several interesting thematic connections reveal new areas of knowledge not yet
discovered empirically in other higher education literature.

First, we learn that early exposure to homo-negative messages, and an absence of
homo-positive statements by others, drove fear, anxiety, and apprehension among
participants when thinking about their coming out experience. In reflecting on the source
of participants’ distress regarding their disclosure process, men pointed to their parents’
own words, media stories, online chat boards, books, and experiences of peers. As
previously discussed, they also lacked LGBT adults and peers who could have talked
with participants as boys and adolescents and prepared them for the coming out process
or offered advice. The participants mainly expressed fear in getting kicked out of their
homes and being disowned and rejected by their families. Some participants explicitly
said they worried about coming out to others because they did not know whether or not
their parents would have paid for college. Vincent said his peers in the Gay-Straight
Alliance at his school told him that was why they declined to disclose their sexual
identity to their parents. This finding linking early homo-negative messages with later
anxiety of disclosure yields few surprises, but it is striking nonetheless.
Participants also reported that sexual identity development and acceptance from others related to the college search and selection process. In addition to the usual criteria for selecting a college campus, such as academic programs, participants recalled searching for accepting and open campuses, “safe” communities, and urban colleges. They refrained from applying to rural schools, colleges in the South, and those campuses with few out gay and bisexual students, acknowledging stereotypes associated with such campuses but still declining to apply and attend. In asking participants how their sexual identity may have influenced their college choice process, most failed to discuss a connection between disclosure and their parents’ assistance and support. Rather, participants brought up their considerations for choosing a particular college, research employed in looking at LGBT college rankings, the size of the campus and critical mass of other gay and bisexual students, and the ability to live an authentic life while in college. Some participants also recommended that parents assist their children in finding safe and supportive campuses.

Another connection among themes and sub-themes concerned early messages about financial aid from counselors and teachers and the point in time when these men applied for financial aid and scholarships. Not only did the gay and bisexual men in this study not hear about financing a college education from school officials, but they also lacked assistance to do so. Only one participant made a short reference to his school assisting with FAFSA forms, and even then, he claimed that he only received help from a family member in completing the process. Participants received early messages about financial aid and scholarships at home, so they universally knew that they would need
assistance from parents or others to pay the cost of attendance, yet counselors and teachers did not assist with this process. The only references made to financing college educations at school pertained to local scholarships. These local scholarships, as explained by participants, paid for a small portion of total cost of attendance – James’ scholarship for British ancestry, Evan’s reference to a $100 scholarship for left-handed students, and Vincent’s award for being a gay student leader. Participants discovered the larger need-based awards from other sources, such as colleges and older siblings.

Considering the importance financial aid and scholarships play in the lives of low-income participants, in particular, it is notable to learn in this study that counselors and teachers played only a marginal role in students’ access to this information and these resources.

When openly asked about how their coming out process related to paying for college or financial aid, no participant claimed disclosure had any role or influence on their process. A few participants said they worried about their parents’ reactions and whether they would pay or continue to pay for college, though participants did not connect their coming our process directly to their ability to receive financial aid. The only reference brought up by participants relating financial aid and scholarships to sexual identity pertained to LGBT scholarships. Of those who mentioned LGBT financial resources, most had not heard of LGBT scholarships or knew of any specific information during their college choice process, but during the interviews, several referenced the fact that they did not apply for such scholarships. One participant said he searched for LGBT scholarships and was surprised he could not find many available. In his comments, he connected rates of LGBT homelessness to the need for college access and financial aid,
remarking that LGBT people were in need of such funding. Furthermore, all participants who applied for federal financial aid via the FAFSA discussed the requirements for parental tax and other information in order to complete it, yet no one overtly said they worried about the ability to complete it or related the financial aid application process to their sexual identity disclosure experiences. While we do not know the reasons, participants did not relate disclosure to parents and the financial aid process during the interviews.

Another thematic connection made over the course of the study pertained to feelings toward parents prior to disclosure and after disclosure. Prior to coming out, participants expressed fear, anxiety, isolation, apprehension, and a lack of confidence in knowing what kind of reaction they would receive. They reported that they were unsure how their parents would react, even when parents had earlier indicated subliminal support for their sons. In the months and years since disclosure, nearly all participants reported positive changes or a sustained level of support in parental relationships. Participants said they felt more comfortable, more supported, more understood, more accepted, and more loved by their parents. Their fears failed to become reality, though it should be noted that three participants experienced particularly negative and rejecting behaviors from their parents, while other men reported some initial resistance from their parents. Still, positive and healthy parent-son relationships since disclosure are a noteworthy discovery considering how nervous and fearful they said they were prior and leading up to disclosure.

Perhaps most importantly, all participants went to or will attend college. In spite
of receiving some negative or mixed messages after disclosing their sexual identity to parents, the participants forged ahead with their post-secondary plans. They sought out support from their parents and affirming adults and received college choice and financial aid support. The act of parents accepting their sons based on sexual identity may have served as a protective factor in ensuring their sons could apply to and attend college. Such acceptance extended to financial aid or personal financial assistance as well. Despite some negative disclosure experiences, all participants received the necessary support from their parents to go to college. This finding serves as a powerful implication for future gay and bisexual men and perhaps the larger LGBT community.

Discussion

The theoretical framework used in this study, Perna’s Conceptual Model of Student College Choice (2006), guided all aspects of the study, from reviewing the literature related to the role of schools, counselors, and young people’s home lives and internalized thoughts and feelings toward college, to development of the open-ended, semi-structured script used in interviews and analysis of data and findings. Both human capital investment theory and sociological-cultural models of status attainment informed Perna’s model, and responses indicated that men in this study thought about pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits from a college education. Samuel and Hunter, in particular, connected their future college educations to middle-class earnings, owning a home, and living comfortably with advanced degrees. Participants also discussed weighing direct costs of attendance with financial resources from parents and institutions, making different decisions based on social and cultural capital afforded to them primarily through
parents, school, and communities. Certainly, preferences for specific college types and locales also played a role for gay and bisexual men in this study. Most indicated a preference for urban campuses and accepting colleges. Evan’s preference, for example, dictated his choice in finding an urban campus, even though his choice in city colleges may have cost his family more income than a college closer to his home in central Pennsylvania. Participants also discussed having incomplete or differential access to information regarding the college choice and financial aid processes (Perna, 2006), indicating gaps in knowledge concerning how much their family could afford for a particular college’s education as well as unfamiliarity with how to finance a college education for the lowest possible cost. Without question, participants’ habitus and school environment, or rather one’s “situated context” (Perna, 2006, p. 116), heavily shaped their college search and selection processes and decision making process with regard to financial aid and paying for college. The findings of this study suggest, though, that one’s habitus, external and internal expectations to attend college, and messages from parents likely played a greater role than one’s school and community context.

Findings in this study confirm previous findings that the age of self-awareness of one’s same-sex attractions and feelings is approximately 10 years old, and the age of self-identification or labeling oneself as non-heterosexual occurred for participants in this study around the age of 16 (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2013). Disclosure to parents occurred more frequently with mothers than with fathers, also confirming earlier research studies (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Nelson, 2006).
Additionally, participants first revealed their sexual identity more frequently to women compared to men. Of the 18 participants, 15 men had relatively positive coming out experiences with regard to a parent or parents, though as previously noted, some of the participants initially experienced some rejecting behaviors or resistance. Other research studies confirm parents’ and families’ positive reactions to their children’s sexual identity disclosure (Ryan, 2009a; Ryan et al., 2010; D’Augelli et al., 2005). In particular, Ryan and her colleagues (2009, 2010) found that accepting behaviors from one’s family “promotes well-being and helps protect LGBT young people against risk.” This finding seemed to also be confirmed based on the results of this study, especially in relation to college matriculation and financial aid assistance. Participants with accepting parents as a result of sexual identity disclosure seemed well-adjusted, had positive attitudes about their lives, felt supported and loved, and generally did not report homo-negative feelings or attitudes post-disclosure (Vincent was one exception to this finding). While not a focus of this study, participants also did not report risky behaviors in the time since disclosure; the three participants who reported attempted suicides or suicidal ideation at one point did so either before disclosure or reported that suicide ideation has nothing to do with their sexual identities. Largely, participants felt accepted by most family members and nearly all peers. The Human Rights Campaign (2012) found that 60% of LGBT youth reported their family is accepting of non-heterosexual people. The results of this study indicate a slightly higher percentage, though the sample is extremely small and cannot be generalized to a larger population.

Participants extensively discussed their internalized homoprejudice, which I term
homo-negative feelings throughout the dissertation, confirming earlier studies (D'Augelli et al., 2005; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Bregman et al., 2012; Shilo & Savaya, 2012). However, it appears that once the young men in this study started self-identifying as gay or bisexual and subsequently came out to parents and families, feelings toward their sexual identity reportedly improved. In a study by D’Augelli and colleagues (1998), they found that those adolescents and young adults who chose not to disclose their sexual identity to their parents reported more fear of future physical and emotional abuse than those who had already come out. This finding aligns closely with participants’ retrospective responses pertaining to expected parental outcomes. Fear of rejection in verbal, physical, and financial forms represented a pervasive feeling prior to disclosure, said participants. While these fears rarely converted to reality, confirming Savin-Williams’ research (2001), fear and anxiety persisted prior to coming out nonetheless. Post-disclosure, some participants experienced rejecting behaviors and heard negative messages from parents, other family members, peers, and church members, confirming results from several studies regarding the loss of support from friends and family (D'Augelli, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2010; Ueno, 2005; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Saewyc et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006). It should be noted, however, that friends and same-age peers almost unanimously supported participants, and all young men in this study receive some type of support immediately following disclosure to other people. D’Augelli et al. (1998) found that youth who had disclosed their sexual identity to their parents experienced more verbal and physical attacks from family members due to their sexual identity than peers who had not disclosed. While we cannot compare
participants in this study to undisclosed men since this is not a comparative study, several participants experienced verbal assaults and negative messages from parents and family members, yet no participant reported physical attacks from parents or family members of any kind post-disclosure. Additionally, poor health outcomes, such as substance abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts, did not represent a major line of inquiry in this study, though some participants reported some mental health issues, and in James’ case, he related his depression and attempted suicide to bullying for being gay. While not confirmed in this study, poor health outcomes, found by several other researchers (Ryan et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Ueno, 2005; Needham & Austin, 2010) should be investigated further as the results were not necessarily confirmed nor explored in this study.

Shilo and Savaya (2012) found that religiosity played a role in disclosure. More specifically, they asserted that the more religious one identifies, the lower instances of acceptance among family and friends and the less likely disclosure occurs. Religious identity among participants was not extensively explored or reported, though all participants were asked about their parents’ religious orientations. The results are mixed. At least three participants indicated a negative parental reaction based on religious beliefs and identities, and some participants also said they received negative reactions from peers and church members as a result of their disclosure. One participant also said his father’s and grandparents’ religious beliefs informed their negative opinions of LGBT people. However, some young men in this study also indicated their parents identified as religious or as a member of a particular denomination, and for these young men, they
received mostly positive or neutral reactions to their sexual identity. Future research in religious communities and with participants ascribing to a particular faith (i.e., Mormon) would provide additional accounts and findings to fully address this question.

One of the more positive findings in this study pertained to parent-son relationships at the time of interviews, especially with regard to parents who exhibited rejecting behaviors at the time of disclosure. Earlier research found that the relationships with families expressing rejection of one’s sexual identity improved over time (Saltzburg, 2004; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Coolhart, 2006). These findings are confirmed in this study. All participants reported an improved or constant (positive) relationship with at least one parent since disclosure. Even William, who for years experienced negative messages and rejecting behaviors from parents and siblings as a result of his sexual identity disclosure, reported a better relationship with his parents and a more honest and open dialogue about dating with his mother.

Maitra’s (2002) findings and categorization of parental relationships fit well with the findings of this study. In short, Maitra interpreted relationships in a study of homeless LGBT youth in four ways: functional, deceptive, strained, and separated. Based on the descriptions Maitra employed, most participants reported a functional relationship with their parents, characterized as the most accepting type of relationship where parents and families were comfortable with their children’s sexual identity and participants felt accepted. Overall, most young men in this study reported accepting behaviors, perhaps not always in the immediate aftermath of disclosure, but certainly soon after. Only three participants’ relationships with families could be categorized as
“strained” using Maitra’s study and findings as a guide. Strained relationships included conflict, verbal assaults, physical or sexual abuse, and a feeling that made LGBT youth feel unwelcome at home. In this study, James reported that his parents threatened him with eviction and that disclosure resulted in verbal abuse. Matthew feared he would need to move out and also received negative messages from his parents, and William felt isolated and unwelcome, reporting that his father said harsh and unhealthy words to him. Based on the findings of this study, most of the relationships participants had with their parents prior to disclosure could be categorized as Maitra’s “deceptive relationships,” or those drive by fear of abuse, eviction, and an overall withdrawal of support from parents, though as previously noted, most of these fears did not come to fruition after actual parental disclosure.

In the literature review, I proposed a hypothesis with regard to adolescents and young adults’ contact with authorities in the event that turmoil occurs within the home. Turmoil could be defined as any type of abuse, and at worst, eviction from the home for a person under the age of 18 years old. The hypothesis I proposed is that gay and bisexual men may be reluctant to disclose their sexual identities to adult authorities who could assist in these circumstances. I should note that first, none of the participants experienced home eviction from their parents upon disclosure, and second, the results of this study cannot adequately confirm nor deny this hypothesis. However, one should consider the responses and resulting actions of adults in the lives of William and James in particular. James reported that upon the forced disclosure by his parents to his therapist at age 15, his therapist sided with his parents, saying he was too young to make a decision on his
sexual identity, causing a break in trust between him and his healthcare provider, James said. William indicated that he had to “walk on eggshells” in his heavily Mormon community and felt that telling adults about his sexual identity was not “safe,” or at least, he did not perceive it as safe. These accounts represent only two responses, but they demonstrate the idea that disclosing to adult authorities may represent a hurdle for gay and bisexual men in the event of extreme family rejection, and further research must explore this issue in the future.

Participants’ experiences with college choice and financial aid search and application also added perspectives to current literature pertaining to college-going behaviors and financing an education. An important finding from this study indicates that even in the absence of support for a son’s sexual identity, parents’ support for the college and financial aid process continued. This finding refutes an assumption I made in the literature review. More research must be conducted, however, as this finding only represented the experiences of a small number of young, White gay and bisexual men. Also, previous research found that parental involvement, support, and encouragement is related to a student’s decision to enroll in college, and results from this study confirm earlier research (Perna & Titus, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Many participants indicated hearing expectations and encouragement from parents regarding future attendance in college, and they also received some support from school officials, confirming another set of studies (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Several studies indicated that high school counselors play important roles in students’ access to college information, though participants
downplayed their counselor’s role in accessing college (Bryan et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, Rafiullah Miller, & Scott Krei, 1996). The young men indicated some supportive behaviors, such as assistance with essays, transcript submission, and letters of recommendation offered by counselors and teachers, though most of the messages participants received about college and college application support came from parents, and for a few, older siblings. Ceja (2006) reported that Chicana women, in the absence of significant assistance from their parents, turned to older siblings to help in the college process. The results of this study are mixed and limited. Two participants indicated older siblings helped extensively with their search for college and financial aid, but other participants who received limited assistance from their parents and who had older siblings did not report any assistance from their brothers and sisters. More research must be conducted to better understand the role of older siblings who completed the college choice process before younger siblings and whether they served as surrogate parents in assisting with college search and financial aid.

Finally, as Cochrane, LaManque, and Szabo-Kubitz (2010) asserted, “The FAFSA is a critically important step” in the federal financial aid process, and participants who applied for financial aid all agreed. Participants reported, as previously indicated, that information held exclusively by parents, such as the amount of income and assets, was required, and many indicated they would not be able to complete the FAFSA process without their parents’ assistance. Parents played an important role in supplying information and assisting some participants with their FAFSA process. Clearly, completion of the FAFSA process is dependent on a student’s ability to retrieve parental
information, as found in this study as well.

Implications

**Implications for Practice.** Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions for practice help inform practitioners and “helpers” in the lives of gay and bisexual men, including parents and families, high school counselors and teachers, elementary and middle school educators, higher education professionals, and private scholarship providers. The following suggestions are based primarily on the findings of this study.

**Parents and Families.** Participants’ parents and families exercise the most influence over participants’ lives. Parents, in particular, play a powerful role in the identity and social development of their gay and bisexual sons. Most often, parents provide food, shelter, care, monetary and non-monetary resources; they take charge in their children’s educational choices and decisions; they offer advice in terms of relationships and friendships; they hold power and legal responsibility for their children; and they are expected by the United States government to contribute financially to their legally mature (18 to 24 years old) young adult children for college purposes. Because government and bureaucratic institutions, including colleges and universities, require parental contributions in both finances and information to complete the federal and often state financial aid processes, parents are urged to help their gay and bisexual sons in whatever ways they can, regardless of their views about LGBT issues and sexual identity disclosure. With parents’ help and support, gay and bisexual men may be more likely to attend college compared to peers without parental support, though this comparative
assertion cannot be confirmed by this study alone. All participants in this study, despite various disclosure reactions from parents, went to college, and we know that based on the interview responses, parents assisted greatly in helping their sons get to their college destination.

Another suggestion for parents pertains to participants’ advice in this study: listen to your children and trust them. From early in their development when, perhaps, they do not wish to talk about who they like at school to when they choose to come out to you, remain open-minded, allow your child time and space to disclose, and refrain from casting judgment. You may have your own views toward LGBT issues and your son’s disclosure, but whatever you can do to be supportive, loving, and accepting will promote healthy self-image, well-being, and self-confidence in your children. Participants reported relief and positive feelings when they received acceptance from their families. Other participants with rejecting families reported more fear, stress, and disappointment after disclosure. Children and young adults rely on their families for unconditional love and support.

One important finding in this study also concerned the college search process for gay and bisexual men. Perhaps different compared to heterosexual peers, gay and bisexual men reported a search for open, inclusive, and diverse campuses, as well as colleges that could offer LGBT-related support and services and a welcoming atmosphere. Most often, participants characterized urban campuses are more inclusive and LGBT-friendly; however, accepting campuses and welcoming environments probably exist throughout the United States and in all different regions and city types.
Parents can assist their children in finding good-fit colleges that will welcome and embrace their identities and offer solid academic programs and majors, another attribute for which men in this study searched.

Finally, parents should help their children better understand financing a college education early on. The men in this study said they had mostly a clear understanding about the need to earn scholarships or communication about their families’ ability to pay for a college education. However, participants also reported little knowledge about how financial aid works and the various terms associated with financial aid. Rather than completing the federal financial aid process for their sons, parents should teach and cooperate with their sons to complete the aid process together. In the absence of personal knowledge for financial aid, especially for parents without college educations themselves, parents should reach out to their school counselors or college financial aid offices for resources. Parents and students alike will never have all answers to all questions, but increased communication and working together will have a positive impact on all those involved.

High School Counselors and Teachers. Given that this study found participants had little knowledge about the financial aid process in particular, high school counselors and teachers serve as a lifeline and a gateway to such information. Clearly, participants gain college choice and financial aid information from various sources, including parents, siblings, community members, peers, school counselors, teachers, traditional media, and social media. However, knowing that high school students spend upwards of 35 hours each week in school, counselors and teachers should leverage the time they have with
students and provide helpful and meaningful instruction on college search and selection as well as financial aid resources.

As previously noted in the literature review, we know high school counselors, especially those located in public schools, have little time to devote to individual students. Limited resources, few staff, and large caseloads and counselor to student ratios all constrain counselors’ time to devote to college and financial aid processes, among other responsibilities. However, we also know from the findings in this study that some students, gay and bisexual men in particular, report scant personal knowledge about the federal and state financial aid processes, government loans, private loans grants, scholarships, part-time jobs, work-study and other ways students pay for the costs of attendance. Therefore, students must rely on parents, older family members, and other trusted adults to provide this information to them. While all participants in this study received some assistance from parents regarding financial aid, the distribution of resources depended largely on parents’ background and educational levels. In general, first generation college students received less information and reported more confusion than participants with college-educated parents. Knowing this, counselors and teachers should find ways to provide as much information to as many students, especially first generation college and low-income students, as possible, starting early in high school.

Most participants reported a clear understanding of their personal financial need. Parents had conversations with the men in this study and made it apparent whether they could afford to pay the costs of attendance or if the student would need scholarships or loans. Therefore, gay and bisexual men need logistical support to apply for financial aid
and scholarships. Merely providing a list of local scholarships, which usually provide few resources toward the total cost of attendance, is often not enough. Counselors should develop or partner with non-profit organizations or school districts to offer guides and training to students that define terms and the ways students can apply for federal and state need-based financial aid, in addition to merit scholarships. A few participants reported attending “assemblies” about financial aid, but they did not talk about any follow-up conversations or support for completing the FAFSA. If gay and bisexual men do not have the support of their parents, just like any other student lacking parental support, it is crucial that high school counselors and teachers help their students navigate the complex financial aid bureaucracy to receive financial aid. In nearly all circumstances, the FAFSA requires student and parent information, and counselors can help serve as mediators between students and parents if parents refuse to provide this information. In the event that mediation is not possible, students need counselors to help navigate the dependency appeals, secure external scholarships (including those organizations geared toward LGBT students, such the Point Foundation), and review less expensive college options. Participants reported that teachers and counselors served as important people who helped complete college applications, help edit essays, submit high school transcripts, and write letters of recommendation. School official should continue helping with this logistical support, but they should also help, to the extent possible, counsel students on campuses who might offer support services for LGBT students, provide an inclusive and open-minded climate, and celebrate diversity. Participants recognized these attributes in future college campuses, and students would benefit from counselors’ and
Elementary and Middle School Educators. College aspirations develop early, and participants in this study were no exception to this. This study found gay and bisexual boys from an early age heard messages about going to college. While professionals should be careful not to place too much pressure on young people – to either select their college or major early, or to come out and disclose their sexual identity – early encouragement of college-going behaviors, such as good grades, writing and communication skills, and involvement outside of the classroom is key. One participant noted his school had a map of where eventual graduates go to college; years later, he recounted that map in a doctoral dissertation interview as something he still remembered. Messages and words can be powerful for young people, and gay and bisexual men especially benefit from positive and affirming adults in their lives.

Additionally, heteronormative and homo-negative messages can instill fear, anxiety, and apprehension for confused and questioning young people. Visibility of positive role models and LGBT people in the media and in society has grown, even in the years since participants in this study were young. However, educators of all stripes, especially those who work with pre-teens and teens, should choose words and messages carefully. One of the findings mirrored other research – children become aware of same-sex attractions and feelings around the age of 10 years old. That places students in elementary school around fourth or fifth grade, with some individuals becoming aware of same-sex attractions even earlier. Educators in elementary and middle schools should thoughtfully choose words and topics that are inclusive of all different kinds of families.
and relationships. While it is understandable that educators will refrain from talking about human sexuality with 10-year-olds, conversations about and visual representations of heterosexual marriage, normative family structures, childhood boyfriends and girlfriends, and traditional gender roles pervade classrooms, school yards, and family dinner tables. Whatever educators can do to minimize this language and speak in more inclusive terms will help gay and bisexual boys as they explore topics related to being non-heterosexual (or gender identity issues).

Higher Education Professionals. College admissions offices, financial aid offices, student affairs professionals, LGBT centers, and pre-college programs housed in the community or on university campuses can all help bolster college and financial aid access for gay and bisexual men.

Few articles and literature exists pertaining to college access for LGBT students because higher education institutions rarely ask about sexual or gender identity in surveys or on college applications. In this study, I had to employ a novel approach to finding young gay and bisexual men by utilizing online dating applications. National databases of young LGBT people are just developing. As a result, college access for LGBT people is unknown in higher education research. Because of this, colleges and universities should work with their LGBT centers and institutional research offices to research best practices and develop ways to ask prospective students, if they wish to answer, about sexual identity or orientation. Not only will institutions be able to better assess issues or challenges facing non-heterosexual students, just like they can for first-generation college students, students of color, or even students coming from schools in a particular state or
geographic location, but they will also be able to share macro trends with other campus offices and faculty. Student affairs and faculty committees would benefit from having more data related to LGBT students on their campuses.

College admissions officers, especially those who practice holistic, non-standardized admissions processes, should develop and refine ways to admit non-heterosexual students. The findings of this study, including internalized homo-negative feelings prior to disclosure and the various reactions received from parents and peers, should help inform admissions committees about home and school context for non-heterosexual students. For example, bullying may be a fixture and pervasive in the lives of gay and bisexual men, so perhaps students’ grades are lower during that time period. James reported that he had a particularly difficult time with bullying from peers, and he said his school administrators did little to address these issues. Are there ways in which college admissions committees can consider one’s sexual identity and disclosure in better understanding the student’s lived experiences and context? Findings from this study can help inform college admissions offices on gay and bisexual men’s search for LGBT-friendly campuses and how their coming out process may relate to other college application and financial aid factors.

Likewise, financial aid offices, charged with both guarding and stewarding institutional resources as well as serving their students to provide an equitable share of college and government resources to their student bodies, have an obligation to understand students’ financial circumstances at home. While all participants in this study accessed college and many receive financial aid resources, we also know that some
participants experienced rejecting behaviors from parents. How might these negative experiences relate to the financial aid application process? Financial aid offices should ensure their policies for non-normative family relationships are clear, concise, and readily available to students on websites and in high school counseling centers. Further, financial aid offices should educate and train their college admissions colleagues as they are often front-line people working directly with students and counselors so they know institutional policies for students with different levels of parental support due to sexual identity.

**Private Scholarship Providers.** Private scholarship providers can also benefit from understanding the findings in this study. Several young men mentioned a search for scholarships, most often locally-based scholarships. Others mentioned the availability of LGBT-specific scholarships. Private scholarship foundations and organizations that give scholarships based on sexual identity should reach out directly to high school counselors to ensure school officials can recommend these scholarships to young people. They can also make information available via social media, as some young men in this study said they often used Facebook and YouTube for information about college and financial aid. For those providers that do not specifically provide scholarships for LGBT students but are open to doing so (assuming other criteria are met by students), scholarship committees should attempt to understand the unique circumstances many gay and bisexual men encounter and navigate through their adolescence and young adulthood. Though young people of all sexual identities may be in need of financial aid and scholarships, students with shifting levels of parental support over time may be in need of
additional financial assistance, and understanding those student backgrounds would greatly help these young people pay for college.

**Implications for Future Research.** As this study represents one of the first or the first exploratory studies examining the intersection between sexual identity disclosure and college access, several lines of future inquiry exist. I chose to limit this study to students with the following characteristics and attributes: must now live in the Philadelphia metropolitan area; be ages 18 to 24 years old; be out to at least one parent; attended college, will attend college, or wished to have attended college; racial identity as White; identify as a cisgender man; and identify as gay or bisexual. While I did not request or require college matriculation as a condition for participation, all participants in this study attended or will attend college. This point cannot be overstated. In reaching out to more than 500 men on Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet, very few men indicated they did not attend college. Only one man said he did not attend college because his parents kicked him out and refused to pay. Unfortunately, he declined to participate in this study without giving a reason. Because of these findings, future researchers should focus on those who did not attend, but wished to attend, college. Reasons for not attending college among this group might yield fascinating and helpful results. Future scholars could tell a more complete picture of parental disclosure effects by interviewing young people who were not able to access college or decided not to go due to parents.

Decisions regarding race and gender limited the sample used for this study. As a White gay man myself, I chose to interview only White participants so the findings could focus only or mainly on the phenomenon of coming out to one’s parent and accessing
college. I believed that race and ethnicity, while adding some depth and nuances to the study, could have the effect of drawing attention away from the phenomenon at work. It is important, though, to examine Black, Latino, and Native gay and bisexual men’s lives and how their racial or ethnic identities may relate to the intersection of disclosure and college access. Perhaps racial attitudes from school officials, cultural beliefs at home, or community expectations relate to or influence sexual identity disclosure or going to college, or perhaps they do not. We do not know how race relates to sexual identity disclosure and college access, and I urge future scholars to explore this topic. I also chose to interview only cisgender men for this study. Not because I do believe that college education for lesbian and bisexual women is trivial; rather, the novel sampling technique I employed required me to authentically represent myself on dating applications. I used my own picture, real name and age, and actual location to ensure trust between myself and the prospective participant. To use the same sampling technique to find lesbian and bisexual women would have been inappropriate and unproductive. Therefore, future researchers, hopefully women scholars or teams of people with multiple gender identities, can conduct similar research to understand the intersection between sexual identity disclosure and the college choice process. Attention to transgender people and communities is also essential and requires additional research and understanding of issues that may differ for trans students. Transgender identity and college access represents an area rich for exploration.

Future research could also explore students enrolled in community colleges. While I attempted to target the location near the Community College of Philadelphia for
student participants, I did not interview any young men currently enrolled in community or junior colleges. Two-year institutions are usually lower-cost, open-access institutions serving a large group of students. Since several participants said in the absence of parental resources, they would have chosen community colleges or less expensive college options, perhaps community colleges may be a destination for students with limited family support. No current research exists to confirm this assumption, and a study focused solely on community college students’ journey to college and their sexual identity disclosure might yield different results than the results of this study.

About half of the participants claimed that they grew up in small, rural communities. While descriptions of their communities varied, several mentioned that these communities were less diverse and men perceived these communities as less accepting of LGBT people. Understanding feasibility for this type of study using the same sampling methods might be difficult, a study focused on young people currently living in small, rural, and isolated towns and villages may tell a different story about identity disclosure and college-going behaviors. Are LGBT students from smaller communities able to access college options at the same rate as their urban counterparts? Are rural students more likely to have accepting or rejecting parents compared to big city peers? The findings in this study yield mixed results. Some participants from smaller communities experienced rejecting behaviors, and some had accepting parents. Given the small sample size in this study, we cannot reasonably draw any firm conclusions based on hometown context.

Finally, the sampling technique itself may be an issue in identifying gay and
bisexual men for this type of study. Future researchers may want to consider additional or different strategies to reach hard-to-reach populations. I limited the sample to those men who had come out to at least one parent because I was deeply interested in understanding the intersection of disclosure and federal financial aid. Because federal financial aid relies so heavily on parental information, I assumed undisclosed men would be unable to talk about their federal financial aid access in the same way as disclosed men. This assumption may be flawed. I also encountered several people on the dating application without photos and profile information, many who told me they wished not to participate in this kind of study. Some explicitly said they did not want to participate because they did not want others to discover their sexual identity. These factors raise serious questions. Why do young men choose not to disclose their sexual identity to their parents? Does this nondisclosure relate at all to college and financial aid decisions and implications, or is the decision unrelated? How can researchers reach men with blank profiles on dating applications, and is there something about men who choose not to share personal details that might be interesting to study from this higher education perspective? Scholars and researchers should carefully examine language I used in the recruitment scripts. It is possible that small changes to the recruitment script language may yield vastly different results in who chooses to participate and who is studied for this important area of inquiry.

Conclusions

The following four closing statement summarize some of the findings and thematic connections, providing a succinct account of the most significant findings from
1. Paying for college and financing higher education appear to be far from the minds of gay and bisexual men when recalling their coming out experience. Except for a few mentions, participants did not connect their parental disclosure to their college process, though in general, they worried about potential reactions and how those responses might relate to their future. Men in this study reported fears and anxieties of receiving negative reactions, but no one overtly claimed that they declined to come out to parents because they fretted about college or financial aid access. No evidence supports the notion that young gay and bisexual men in this study have less access to college as a result of sexual identity disclosure.

2. Knowledge of differing peer experiences regarding coming out and going to college compelled men to worry and question whether their own parents might react similarly. Some knew of these experiences growing up or while they attended high school. Others heard about these scenarios only while meeting friends in college. We cannot be completely certain of the timeline involved. Did participants hear of near-age peers who could not access college and had rejecting parents prior to their own disclosure? Certainly some men did and this drove fears. Or did the gay and bisexual men in this study disclose to their parents and then learn of negative peer disclosure experiences? That seems to be true as well, as some participants said they considered themselves “lucky” for having accepting parents. The study of the
intersecting temporal nature of coming out and going to college warrants additional review with a much larger sample, as we know from these young men that the space that occupies pre-disclosure often includes fear, anxiety, and apprehension, regardless of actual parental views of being gay or bisexual. Even though all gay and bisexual men in this study were supported by parents in the college choice process, most could identify peers or stories of same-age peers who could not access college or financial aid, suggesting the existence of many alternate stories not represented in this study.

3. The act of parents choosing to accept their sons based on sexual identity and providing support for their children may serve as a protective factor in ensuring access to college and financial aid resources. Even those participants with less accepting parents accessed college, so can we assume there is no relationship between sexual identity disclosure and college access? Based on the limited results of this study and small sample size, we cannot purport that all gay and bisexual men who come out to parents can access college. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that parents, despite their personal feelings about their son’s sexual identity, can be supportive, nurturing, and helpful as their son navigates the college choice and financial aid process. Future scholars may want to explore the lives of men with exclusively rejecting parents at the time of disclosure to better understand whether this trend of college and financial aid support extends to this population as well.
4. Parents universally supported their son’s financial aid and paying for college process, despite earlier fears among men related to the college choice process specifically and negative outcomes in general. All participants attended college. As reported by participants, no parent prevented their son from attending based on effects of or feelings about their sexual identity disclosure, despite a few participants receiving prolonged and intense negative reactions. All men received some kind of assistance to attend college from parents, and for those who came out while in college, financial support from parents continued. Therefore, the prior supported narrative empirically studied in the previous two decades suggesting pervasive parental rejection seems to be shifting. Men continue to disclose their identity earlier to friends and parents. Despite societal changes, though, fear of rejection persists, represented in some form in nearly all interviews for this study.

Closing

Initially, I wasn’t sure how sexual orientation and the college application process might correlate or anything. I’m kind of seeing it all more connected than I did previously. I was aware of the way that alternative sexuality can impact your life, but I’m seeing more of how it can influence specifically the college application process through this discussion. Maybe it was not that clear to me before, but now I think [it is]. I’m seeing that the root cause, the root cause of it all, is the relationship with the parents and how the college process is one of the ultimate tests of the relationship between parents and children. It’s not easy for anyone.

The words above, spoken by Samuel, concluded one of the interviews conducted for this study. Indeed, many men on Tinder, Grindr, and Hornet, after finding out about this odd study examining the intersection of sexual disclosure and going to college, responded
with, “sure lol” after explaining the nature of the study and asking if I could ask them some questions. Perhaps they could not find the connection between coming out and going to college, or more likely, they found it peculiar that a doctoral student was attempting to find a sample of people on applications otherwise known for dating and other endeavors. Only a handful of participants – and far fewer of my colleagues and friends – linked these two seemingly disparate events together. Yet, the men in this study who expressed fear in coming out thought about the potential ripple effects of disclosure and how those might relate to their future plans. Is this simply a function of classic human motivational theory? Did most participants who voiced disclosure concerns think about what Maslow (1943) termed basic needs, only to have the idea of college represent a distant, elusive need for self-actualization?

The interviews did not explore Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, nor was I able to get inside the minds of 12, 13, and 14-year-olds as they were managing and negotiating their sexual attractions and identities with all of the other usual teenage concerns and drama, real and imagined. I was not privy to the thoughts and feelings of much older parents who grew up in a different time and with diverging cultural experiences. I refrained from reaching out to the financial aid administrators at these institutions where participants attended. How do you care for and provide financial aid access to young people with less supportive or unsupportive parents? I might ask. Are there steps or measures that counselors, teachers, or other adults could have taken to support James, William, and Matthew in the immediate aftermath of coming out? These questions, and many others, escape this study.
But by studying disclosure of sexualities, access to college, and financial aid outcomes among these 18 young gay and bisexual men, we are taking the first step in what might be a long road toward better understanding the college choice experiences of young people with an equally important developmental process in front of, among, or behind them. We found out that fear persists, yet trepidation is often unrealized. We discovered, like other college-going populations, that participants had limited external assistance beyond families and scarce personal knowledge of the financial aid system itself. We learned accepting adults, especially one’s parents, provide some safety and serve to protect young people in the face of adversity. Most of all, though, we encountered resilient young men with more positive relationships with their parents today, who found acceptance from loved ones and now lead authentic lives. And perhaps unexpected at the outset of this study, all participants interviewed found their way to college.
Appendix A. Recruitment Script Workflow

1. Greeting
2. Disclose study. Ask more questions?
   - Yes
   - No
3. Live in Philly
   - Yes
     - Age
       - Below 18 or Above 24: Ineligible for study
       - 18-24 years old: Attend college?
         - No: Ineligible for study
         - Yes: Want to attend college?
           - No: Ineligible for study
           - Yes: Decision not to attend - influenced by parents?
             - Yes: Out to parent? (Confirmed for sample)
             - No: Ineligible for study
4. No
   - Ineligible for study

5. Yes
   - Ineligible for study

6. Yes
   - Confirmed for sample

7. No
   - Ineligible for study
Appendix B. Recruitment Script

Below is a semi-structured recruitment script to determine if the potential participants fit the parameters of the sample. The structured questions and responses are based on testing conducted in October 2016 with a self-identified gay man serving as a thought partner. The actual responses given on social media/online platforms will vary to a degree based on potential participant responses. The hyperlinks re-direct to the interviewer’s response if the potential participant’s answer does not confirm a parameter of the sample.

Semi-structured Recruitment Script
Me (Greeting): Hi, how are you today?
• PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
• Me (Study details. Answer follow-up questions?): I’m going great. Thanks. My name is Andrew. So, for full disclosure, I am a graduate student at Penn, and I’m doing my dissertation research right now. I’m conducting a study with 18 to 24-year-old gay and bisexual men in the Philadelphia area. The study seeks to understand the experiences of out men who attended college or wished to attend college. If you fit the parameters of the study, I will contact you to participate in an interview lasting 1-2 hours. Participants will receive $25 TD Bank gift card for their time. Participants who have not attended college will have the opportunity to work with me over the upcoming year to complete the college search and financial aid processes, if desired. With that said, may I ask you a few questions?
  o PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
  o Me (Follow-up questions – No): I understand. Thank you for your time.
  o Me (Follow-up questions – Yes) Great! Thank you. First, do you live here in the Philadelphia area?
    • PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
    • Me (Live in Philly – No). Thanks for letting me know. I am only seeking men who live in the Philadelphia area, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.
    • Me (Live in Philly – Yes; Age?) Thanks. Next, how old are you?
      • PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
      • Me (18-24 years old - No): I understand. Well, thanks for answering my questions. You won’t fit the parameters of my study, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.
      • Me (18-24 years old – Yes; Attend college?): Great. Did you go to college or are you in college now?
        o PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
Me (Attend college – No; Want to attend college?):
At any point, did you want to go to college?
- PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
- Me (Want to attend college – No): I understand. Well, thanks for answering my questions. You won’t fit the parameters of my study, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.
- Me (Want to attend college – Yes; Decision to not attend influenced by parents?): Thanks for letting me know. Was the decision to not attend college influenced at all by one or both of your parents?
  - PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
  - Me (Decision to not attend influenced by parents – No): I understand. Well, thanks for answering my questions. You won’t fit the parameters of my study, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.
  - Me (Decision to not attend influenced by parents – Yes; Out to parents?): Final question: are you out to your parent or parents?
    - PARTICIPANT RESPONSE
    - Me (18-24 years old - No): I understand. Well, thanks for answering my questions. You won’t fit the parameters of my study, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.
    - Me (Out to parents – Yes): Awesome. So like I said, I’m conducting a study with 18 to 24-year-old gay and bisexual men in the Philadelphia area...
for my dissertation at Penn. The study seeks to understand the experiences of out men who attended college or wished to attend college. If you think you are eligible to participate based on this information, I would be grateful for an opportunity to interview you. Interviews typically last 1-2 hours, and they will be conducted either in a public place with a private area, or via Skype (audio recordings only will be kept confidential for the study). Participants will receive $25 TD Bank gift card for their time. Participants who have not attended college will have the opportunity to work with me over the upcoming year to complete the college search and financial aid processes, if desired. If you are interested, please complete the following Profile Form. I will contact you via e-mail to set up the interview and answer any questions you may have about the study. Do you have any questions at this point?

- Me (Confirmed for Sample; Profile Form): Great. Here’s the Profile
Me (Attend college – Yes; Out to parents?): Final question: are you out to your parent or parents?

- PARTICIPANT RESPONSE

- Me (18-24 years old - No): I understand. Well, thanks for answering my questions. You won’t fit the parameters of my study, but I appreciate your time. Have a great day.

- Me (Out to parents – Yes): Awesome. So like I said, I’m conducting a study with 18 to 24-year-old gay and bisexual men in the Philadelphia area for my dissertation at Penn. The study seeks to understand the experiences of out men who attended college or wished to attend college. If you think you are eligible to participate based on this information, I would be grateful for an opportunity to interview you. Interviews typically last 1-2 hours, and they will be conducted either in a public place with a private area, or via Skype (audio recordings only will be kept confidential for the study). Participants will receive $25 TD Bank gift card for their time. Participants who have not attended college will have the opportunity to work with me over the upcoming year to complete the college search and financial aid processes, if desired. If you are interested, please complete the following Profile Form. I will contact you via e-mail to set up the interview and answer any questions you may have about the study. Do you have any questions at this point?

- Me (Confirmed for Sample; Profile Form): Great. Here’s the Profile Form: 
  http://bit.ly/AndrewForm
Appendix C. Informed Consent

Consent for Participation in a Research Project

Coming Out and Going to College: How Disclosure of Sexual Identity Relates to Access to College and Federal Financial Aid Among Gay and Bisexual Men
Andrew S. Moe

Purpose:
You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore the college and financial aid search process in relation to disclosing sexual identity to one’s parent or parents.

Procedures:
Participation in this study will involve an in-depth interview. I anticipate that your involvement will require approximately 1-2 hours, as well as approximately 30 minutes at some point in time after the interview to review the transcripts and final dissertation for accuracy. You will receive a $25 TD Bank gift card for participating. Additionally, if you did not attend college and wish to do so, you may work with me to engage in the college search and selection process, as well as the financial aid process. This is completely voluntary.

Risks and Benefits:
You may experience distress over the nature of the questions. In general, the questions will pertain to your childhood, relationship with your parent or parents and other family and friends, and experience in school and searching for college. There are no physical risks associated with this study. However, some questions may make you uncomfortable and there is the possible risk of loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

Although this study will not benefit you personally, we hope that our results will add to the knowledge about gay and bisexual men’s access to college and financial aid. If you have not attended college and wish to work with me over the upcoming year, you may benefit personally from participating in the study.

Confidentiality:
All of your responses will be held in confidence. Only the researcher involved in this study and those responsible for research oversight (such as representatives of the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board) will have access to any information that could identify you. Your responses will be de-identified, and you will be given a pseudonym. Your name and the pseudonym linking your name with the interview materials will be stored in a separate cloud-based service. When we publish any
results from this study we will do so in a way that does not identify you unless we get your specific permission to do so. I may also share the data with other researchers so that they can check the accuracy of our conclusions but will only do so if we are confident that your confidentiality is protected.

**Voluntary Participation:**
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to end your participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual question. Refusing to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits or compensation to which you are otherwise entitled or affect your relationship with the University of Pennsylvania.

**Questions:**
If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the Dissertation Chairperson and Principal Investigator, Prof. Shaun Harper, at sharper1@upenn.edu or (215) 898-5147.

If you would like to talk with someone other than the researchers to discuss problems or concerns, to discuss situations in the event that a member of the research team is not available, or to discuss your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board, 215-573-2540, irb@pobox.upenn.edu.

**Agreement to Participate:**
I have read the above information, have had the opportunity to have any questions about this study answered and agree to participate in this study.

__________________________________________  ______________________________
(printed name)                                  (date)

__________________________________________
(signature)
Appendix D. Profile Form

Profile Form

Andrew Moe is conducting a dissertation study with 18 to 24-year-old gay and bisexual men in the Philadelphia area as part of his requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at the University of Pennsylvania.

Please complete the following Profile Form in its entirety. All responses will be de-identified before publication of the dissertation. Any questions or concerns can be sent to Andrew Moe at andrew.s.moe.upenn@gmail.com or to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania at irb@pobox.upenn.edu

Upon completion, you will be contacted via email. Andrew Moe will notify you if you are selected or not selected for the dissertation study. If selected and you agree, Andrew Moe will ask you to participate in a one-hour interview. All participants will receive a $25 TD Bank gift card for their time. Participants who did not attend or complete college will have the option to work with Andrew over the course of the next year to complete the college search and financial aid processes. This is completely voluntary.

Thank you of your time.

Your First Name: (Blank text)

Your Last Name: (Blank text)

Your Email Address: (Blank text)

Your Gender Identity: (Blank text)

Your Sexual Orientation or Identity: (Blank text)

Your Race and/or Ethnicity: (Blank text)

Your Birthdate: MM/DD/YYYY

Town or City where you currently reside: (Blank text)

State where you currently reside: (Blank text)

Did you attend college or university after high school?
   Yes
No
Other: (Blank text)

If Yes ----

Have you disclosed your sexual orientation or identity to at least one parent or legal guardian?
Yes
No
Other: (Blank text)

SUBMIT

If No ----

At any point, did you want to go to college?
Yes
No
Other: (Blank text)

Did your parent or parents influence your decision not to pursue or attend college?
Yes
No

Have you disclosed your sexual orientation or identity to at least one parent or legal guardian?
Yes
No
Other: (Blank text)

SUBMIT
Appendix E. Sample Confirmation Email Post-Profile Form

Subject: Penn - Dissertation Research Interview

Dear FIRST NAME,

Thank you for completing the Profile Form.

Based on your answers, you fit the parameters of my study and can be included in the sample of participants. At this point, I would like to set up an interview with you. You may either meet with me in person (at a public location with a private room, such as a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania) or via Skype.

The interview will be recorded via a voice recorder only. If you choose a Skype interview, no video will be recorded. I will provide you with an Informed Consent Form so you understand the nature of the study, the interview format, and your rights as a participant. The interview should take at least one hour and no more than two hours.

For your time, you will be provided a $25 TD Bank Visa Gift Card after the interview. I will also reach out to you sometime after the interview to confirm the interview transcription.

I am available most of the day this Sunday, January 22 (except 1pm - 3pm), as well as in the evenings next week (starting at approximately 6pm, not Wednesday). Please let me know what will work best for your schedule. If this upcoming week does not work for you, please let me know when you might be available after next week.

Sincerely,

Andrew Moe
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education
Appendix F. Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As I indicated in my previous communication with you, this study is part of my dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania. The study seeks to understand the experiences of gay and bisexual men who attended college or wished to attend college. More specifically, I am interested in the intersection between your college and financial aid process as well as disclosure of sexual identity to your parent or parents.

Over the next hour or so, I will be asking you a series of questions to better understand your experiences thinking about and applying to college, your family background, your coming out process, and how those experiences may or may not have interacted with one another.

Just a reminder from the Informed Consent document, the information you provide today will be held in strict confidence. You will not be identified in the final dissertation. All information you provide will be de-identified, and I will be using pseudonyms to protect your identity. I will transcribe this audio recording after the interview today. Once I have transcribed the interview, I will send the transcription to you via email to ensure it is accurate. You will then have the opportunity to clarify anything you say today.

After the dissertation is published, I will destroy all identifying information, including this audio recording.

You have the right not to answer specific questions or withdraw your participation at any time.

As described in the Informed Consent, some questions may be uncomfortable for you. I am exploring a sensitive subject for many people, and as a gay man myself, I understand and empathize how this may make you feel. I appreciate your willingness to assist in exploring an unexplored topic in higher education research.

With that said, do you have any questions?

Interview Protocol:
1. Where did you grow up? What was your neighborhood or town like?
2. Describe your family. Tell me about your parents. Do you have siblings? What is your birth order? [Religious identity? Political ideology?]
3. What is your relationship with your family now? How have these relationships changed over time?
4. Are there any other adults who played an important role in your life as you were growing up? Is extended family an important part of your life?
5. At what point do you remember having same-sex feelings? Knowing about your sexual identity? Do you remember particular feelings around self-identifying as gay or bisexual? How old were you?
6. When you first came out to people in your life, what were their reactions? How did you come out initially?
7. Thinking back to when you came out to your [parent/parents], how did this play out? What were their reactions?
8. At what age did you first disclose your sexual identity to your parents?
9. How was your relationship with your [parent/parents] before coming out?
10. How did they react after they learned of your sexual identity? What specific memories of that time stand out to you?
11. How did you feel after coming out to your [parent/parents]? What thoughts did you have at the time about coming out to your family?
12. What is the nature of your relationship with your [parent/parents] today?
13. I’m interested in learning about the idea of college. Do you remember when you first thought about going to college or decided to pursue college?
14. What role did your parents play when decided to attend college?
15. Do you think your coming out had any influence on your process of deciding which college to attend or applying for financial aid? Where?
16. What role did your parents play in your decision to attend college? In your decision to attend x college?
17. Did you receive help or assistance in applying to colleges? Were there particular people in your life who were part of your college search and selection process? [Role of people at school or community leaders]
18. How are you paying the costs of attending college? Are you receiving financial aid? Are your parents helping to pay the costs?
19. I’m interested in learning about your search for financial aid and scholarships. What was your understanding of applying for financial aid?
20. In your opinion, to what extent were you in need of financial aid to make college possible or affordable? What was your personal need for financial aid?
21. What role did your parents play in your financial aid process?
22. Did you receive help or assistance in applying for financial aid? Were there particular people in your life who were part of your financial aid process?
23. We know that to receive federal financial aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, a student usually re-applies for aid each year. Did you re-apply for financial aid each year? How did this occur?
24. Had your parents not assisted you with financial aid or paying for your college education, do you know what you would have done?
25. On a scale from 1-10, how would you characterize your parents’ support for you when you were in college? Describe your relationship with your parents while
you were enrolled in college. How could your parent(s) have been more supportive of you when you were in college?

26. Did you know others people, either in high school or in college, who had different experiences after coming out to parents and how that may or may not have played a role in their college choice process?

27. What strategies did you use to succeed despite roadblocks and obstacles?

28. Are there other experiences related to coming out and your search for college or financial aid that you believe are important to discuss?

29. What advice do you have for parents of young gay and bisexual men who plan to go to college? In what specific ways can parents be most supportive?
## Appendix G. List of Codes and Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>Descriptions of town or neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Descriptions or details of role that religion played in his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Descriptions or details of role that politics or political ideology played in his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parent Ed</td>
<td>Descriptions of parental educational level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Other Home</td>
<td>Descriptions of other factors that may have played a role in his development in his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Good Adults</td>
<td>Presence of positive or affirming adults other than parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Presence of mental health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Parent Support Before</td>
<td>Supportive or neutral behaviors exhibited by parents around sexual identity or LGBT issues pre-disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Other Support Before</td>
<td>Supportive or neutral behaviors exhibited by others around sexual identity or LGBT issues pre-disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Good Messages</td>
<td>Homonormative or other messages heard growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Homo-positive</td>
<td>Reported internal homo-positive feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Parent Rejecting Before</td>
<td>Rejecting behaviors exhibited by parents around sexual identity or LGBT issues pre-disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Other Rejecting Before</td>
<td>Rejecting behaviors exhibited by others around sexual identity or LGBT issues pre-disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Bad Messages</td>
<td>Heteronormative messages heard growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Homo-negative</td>
<td>Reported internal homo-negative feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bullied</td>
<td>Being bullied or teased because of his sexual identity or perceived sexual identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>LGBT Adults</td>
<td>Presence or knowledge of LGBT adults growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Age Awareness</td>
<td>Age of initial self-awareness of same-sex attractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Feelings Awareness</td>
<td>Feelings around self-awareness of same-sex attractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Age Identification</td>
<td>Age of initial self-identification as a gay or bisexual person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Feelings Identification</td>
<td>Feelings around self-identification as a gay or bisexual person, prior to disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Presence of perceived fear or anxiety regarding reaction of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Fear Source</td>
<td>Source of perceived fear or anxiety (media, early messages, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Age Other Disclosure</td>
<td>Age of initial disclosure of sexual identity to another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Feelings Other Disclosure</td>
<td>Feelings around disclosure to another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Initial Person</td>
<td>Person who received initial disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Reason Other Disclosure</td>
<td>Reason for other person disclosure (not parents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Other Support After</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Other Reject After</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Reaction Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Expected Parent Reaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Age Parent Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Feelings Parent Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Initial Parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Reason Parent Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Events Parent Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Reaction Parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Parent Support After</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Parent Reject After</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Anecdotes Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Home Messages College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Parent Knowledge College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Parent College</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Parent Negative College Change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Sibling College FinAid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Expectations Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Expectations Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>School Messages College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Counselor College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Teacher College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Others FinAid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Other Support After**: Supportive or neutral behaviors exhibited by others around sexual identity or LGBT issues upon or post-disclosure
- **Other Reject After**: Rejecting behaviors exhibited by others around sexual identity or LGBT issues upon or post-disclosure
- **Reaction Other**: Reaction of initial disclosure person
- **Expected Parent Reaction**: Expected reaction by parents to sexual identity disclosure
- **Age Parent Disclosure**: Age of initial disclosure of sexual identity to parent or parents
- **Feelings Parent Disclosure**: Feelings around disclosure to parent or parents
- **Initial Parent**: Parent who received initial parental disclosure
- **Reason Parent Disclosure**: Reason he disclosed to his parent or parents
- **Events Parent Disclosure**: Description of the events surrounding parental disclosure
- **Reaction Parent**: Reaction of parent to initial disclosure
- **Parent Support After**: Supportive or neutral behaviors exhibited by parents around sexual identity or LGBT issues upon or post-disclosure
- **Parent Reject After**: Rejecting behaviors exhibited by parents around sexual identity or LGBT issues upon or post-disclosure
- **Anecdotes Disclosure**: Other interesting anecdotes around disclosure or sexual identity formation
- **Home Messages College**: Messages he received at home about college and going to college
- **Parent Knowledge College**: Parental knowledge of the college search and selection process
- **Parent College**: Role his parent or parents played in his college search/application/choice process
- **Parent Negative College Change**: Description of changes in college search and selection as result of negative parental reactions
- **Sibling College FinAid**: Role of older sibling had on college choice or financial aid/scholarship process
- **Expectations Others**: Expectations by others (including parents, family members, school personnel) to attend college
- **Expectations Self**: Expectations by self to attend college
- **School Messages College**: Messages he received at school about college and going to college
- **Counselor College**: Role his guidance counselor played in his college search/application/choice process
- **Teacher College**: Role his teacher played in his college search/application/choice process
- **Others FinAid**: Role of other adult had on college choice or financial aid/scholarship process
| 52 | Personal Search FinAid | Description of personal search for college or financial aid resources |
| 53 | Reasons College | Explanations for why he wanted a particular type of college |
| 54 | Anecdotes College | Other interesting anecdotes around college process or financial aid/scholarships |
| 55 | Home Messages FinAid | Messages he received at home about financial aid/scholarships and applying for financial aid/scholarships |
| 56 | Parent Knowledge FinAid | Parental knowledge of the financial aid and scholarship process |
| 57 | Parent FinAid | Role his parent or parents played in his financial aid and scholarship search/application process or financing college |
| 58 | Communication FinAid | Communication with parents about financing college |
| 59 | Perceived Need | Perceived need for financial aid |
| 60 | Personal Knowledge FinAid | Knowledge or understanding of the financial aid and scholarship process |
| 61 | FAFSA | Explanation of the FAFSA application process |
| 62 | Paying | Ways in which he paid the costs of attending college |
| 63 | Parent Negative FinAid Change | Description of changes in financing college as result of negative parental reactions |
| 64 | School Messages FinAid | Messages he received at school about financial aid/scholarships and applying for financial aid/scholarships |
| 65 | Counselor FinAid | Role his guidance counselor played in his financial aid and scholarship search/application process or financing college |
| 66 | Teacher FinAid | Role his teacher played in his financial aid and scholarship search/application process or financing college |
| 67 | LGBT Scholarships | Discussion about LGBT scholarships |
| 68 | Parental Change Positive | Description of a positive change in parental relationship since disclosure |
| 69 | Parental Change Negative | Description of a negative change in parental relationship since disclosure |
| 70 | Parental Change Neutral | Description of no change or no perceived change in parental relationship since disclosure |
| 71 | Parent Today | Characterization of relationship with parent or parents today |
| 72 | Conversations Parent Today | Conversations between his parents and him about sexual identity today |
| 73 | Influence | Influence of sexual identity on college choice or financial aid |
| 74 | Peers | Knowledge of peers' experiences disclosing sexual identity and/or going to college |
| 75 | Strategies | Strategies he employed to succeed despite obstacles and roadblocks |
| 76 | Parent Support College | Characterization of parental support while in college |
| 77 | Parent More Support | How parents could have offered more support |
| 78 | Advice | Advice he would give to parents of young gay and bisexual men going to college |
REFERENCES


