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No Place Like Home: The Coming Out Experiences of Gay Men in Student Affairs and Higher Education Preparation Programs

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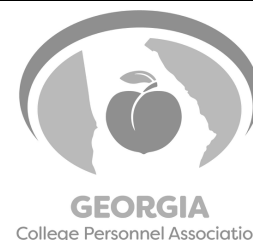
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Development occurs over the lifespan, and student affairs educators are not exempt from that life-long process. This article examined the coming out experiences of gay men within student affairs master's preparation programs. The study was comprised of 11 participants representing seven different higher education/student affairs administration programs. The findings of this study offer the following: first, the study offers insight on the coming out experiences of gay men in graduate preparation programs. Second, the findings showcase the role that student affairs programs, curriculum, and instruction play in the identity exploration process for gay men. Finally, findings from this study offer implications for pedagogical approaches and frameworks within student affairs/higher education administration programs.

Keywords: student affairs, gay, coming out, graduate preparation programs

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In the field of higher education and student affairs (HESA), scholars have frequently pointed to the pivotal roles that graduate preparation programs serve for the development of practitioners' professional identities (e.g., Hirschy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014). Specifically, these graduate preparation programs are seen as shaping how student affairs practitioners conceive of professional norms and values. And yet, many researchers have also emphasized how HESA graduate programs can influence how individuals think about and reflect on their social identities (Bondi, 2012; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015; Robbins & Jones, 2016). This body of scholarship has largely focused on topics of race, showcasing how individuals experience these programs differentially based on their racial identities. For instance, literature focused on White students emphasizes how they may encounter dissonance relative to their White identity by virtue of their graduate coursework (Robbins & Jones, 2016) and how they may protect Whiteness through the engagement in their programs (Bondi, 2012). Conversely, research on Students of Color showcases how they are often called to be an educator on racial topics in the classroom and how they ex-

perience racism in graduate education (Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015). What is clear from this scholarship is that it is not only professional identity that graduate students explore during their time in programs, but also their own social identities.

As researchers continue to take a look at how HESA graduate preparation programs affect how individuals make meaning of their social identities, it is important to examine how minoritized people explore who they are through their graduate education. Specifically, scholarship has yet to largely touch upon the realities that those who identify with the queer¹ community face in their HESA graduate program experiences. Notably, researchers have described the challenges rooted in heteronormativity that queer student affairs professionals report in their roles at higher education institutions (DeVita & Anders, 2018; Kortegast & van der Toom, 2018; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies are oftentimes limited to their time after their graduate programs, leaving questions about how queer individuals navigate their sexuality as graduate students. Relatedly, the extant research on queer student affairs practitioners also rarely considers how these practitioners negotiate sexual

¹ In this manuscript, we use queer as an umbrella term to refer to those minoritized on the basis of their sexual identity. However, because all participants in

this study identified as gay men, we employ the term gay when discussing this specific research project and these individuals.

identity disclosure and how the profession may influence these decisions.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to take a critical look at how environments of higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs informed identity disclosure for gay men. Specifically, we were interested in how gay men discussed their understanding of coming out, as well as their experiences sharing their sexual identities in their graduate preparation programs and what informed their decisions to do so. Notably, the following research questions informed this project:

1. How do gay men make meaning of their past coming out experience, as well as identity disclosure when it occurs during their student affairs preparation program?
2. How do higher education student affairs graduate programs influence gay men's coming out process?

This project will be of significance to graduate preparation faculty, as well as student affairs professionals who are in the position to support individuals as they explore questions of identity disclosure during these formative years.

Literature Review

To set the stage for this project, we examined two different areas of literature relevant to the study's research questions. To begin, we first turned to the scholarship on higher education

and student affairs graduate programs, specifically examining the influence they have on students' identities. Next, we briefly examined the research on queer professionals in the HESA profession in order to understand the experiences they may face on college campuses.

As noted above, researchers interested in graduate preparation programs have largely attended to how these academic spaces influence students' professional identities (Hirschy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014). Though past scholarship communicated a worry that these programs did not offer enough opportunity for people to explore their professional and personal selves (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), this no longer appears to be the case. Specifically, these pieces of literature communicate how graduate coursework, the work experiences one has during their programs, and the interactions that one has with faculty and students informs how people view themselves as professionals (Hirschy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014). However, research has started to expand beyond this interest by instead exploring how these graduate preparation programs can influence how students perceive their social identities. Given the reflective nature of the HESA profession, individuals frequently encounter moments of dissonance that lead them to take an introspective view

on their own selves (Perez, 2017). Frequently, this body of scholarship has attended to how HESA graduate programs inform people's understanding of their race, though little perspectives exist concerning sexuality.

Within the area of research on HESA graduate preparation programs and students' social identities (Bondi, 2012; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015; Robbins & Jones, 2016), scholars examine the specific influences that inform individuals' identities and how these people then respond to these environments. For example, the work of Robbins and Jones (2016) on White women showcased how these students had differential responses to their racial identities in graduate preparation programs. On one hand, some participants reported to strive toward educating themselves on topics such as race and helped others do so as well. And still, on the other hand, there were some White women who resisted this process of learning. Related to this point, Bondi (2012) noted how graduate preparation programs may not adequately push students to challenge ideologies of racial dominance, instead protecting Whiteness through coursework. The research on People of Color in HESA graduate preparation programs painted a similarly harrowing reality in which these students are oftentimes placed in the position of educator, together with encountering racist remarks in

the classroom (Harris & Linder, 2018; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015).

Though research on sexuality in HESA graduate preparation programs is lacking, scholars have taken a concerted look at how professionals in the HESA profession navigate their sexual identities as practitioners (DeVita & Anders, 2018; Kortegast & van der Toom, 2018; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020). For instance, DeVita and Anders' (2018) study on LGTQ faculty and professionals in higher education examined how these individuals identify allies that will support them and their identities. These authors discussed the monumental impact that allies can play in these participants' lives, while at the same time, acknowledging the hollow forms of allyship that these people experienced. For those in Pryor and Hoffman's (2020) research on LGBTQ+ professionals engaged in LGBTQ+ work, they noted the feelings that these practitioners had of being overtasked and isolated. Finally, the scholarship of Kortegast and van der Toom (2018) showcased how lesbian and gay student affairs professionals had to carefully make decisions concerning their sexual identity disclosure, frequently only being out in certain spaces. Although these studies reveal differing perspectives on the experience of being a queer HESA practitioner, they helped set the foundation for the current study.

Conceptual Framework

To help guide this project, we developed a conceptual framework integrating perspectives on sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011) and sexual identity disclosure (e.g., Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Orne, 2011; Potoczniak et al., 2009). Specifically, sexual-identity theorists like Dillon et al. (2011) underscored that development involves both a personal and social process, in which individuals engage in internal exploration of their identity (i.e., personal). Additionally, people negotiate how they navigate their sexuality with others, including family, friends, and peers (i.e., social). Related to this point, for many queer individuals, coming out is a life-long process that is dependent on the contexts that one occupies (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Orne, 2011). Due to both the internal and external factors that play a role in this process, coming out can be put off or avoided entirely. Some of these inhibiting factors include fear of rejection, bodily harm, and loss of social status (Potoczniak et al., 2009). For others, coming out may not be a central priority, meaning that disclosure is not a need to actualize their identity. Ultimately, this wide range of perspectives on sexual identity development and coming out informed how we as authors conceptualized this study and the participants' narratives.

Study Design

This study utilized a general qualitative approach for data collection. In particular, qualitative researchers seek to understand how people create meaning from their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A general qualitative approach examines events as they take place in the natural world while also attending to context and to participants' perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Thus, qualitative research provided a broad approach to the study of social phenomena and the lived experiences of participants.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

To engage in the study, individuals must have been "out" for less than four years at the time of the interviews. They also did not have to be current graduate students, but they had to have been in a program recently. In an effort to ensure the experience was a clear memory for participants, the time parameter of coming out within less than four years of the time of the interview was included to narrow the scope of eligibility in the study. The term "out" is intended to describe how one has publicly shared their sexual identity. Note, there were still people to whom participants had not disclosed their sexual identity (e.g., parents), but their sexual identity was known to a vast majority of their community. With these criteria in mind, network selection was used to identify participants, which

enabled the researcher to use personal contacts to locate interested individuals for the study (deMarrais, 2004). In particular, the primary researcher reached out to individuals that they knew who identified as HESA faculty to pass along study information. Additionally, the primary researcher also engaged snowball sampling, asking participants to recommend others that they felt fit the central criterion. Through both network

and snowball sampling, eleven self-identified gay men in total met the criteria and participated in the study. Table 1 highlights these men's race, age, program name, and their personal selected pseudonyms in order to be de-identified in the study. The 11 cisgender men represented seven different HESA preparation programs in which they were enrolled at the time of study or from which they had recently graduated.

Table 1. Demographic Information for Participants (Self-Reported)

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Graduate Program of Study
B.W.	White	26	College Student Affairs Administration
Cain	White	25	Higher Education
Dean	White	25	College Student Personnel
Don	Black	24	Student Affairs & Higher Education
Isaac	White	27	Student Affairs & Higher Education
Jonah	White	22	College Student Personnel
Kevin	Black	27	Higher Education
Micah	White	26	Student Affairs Administration
Nelson	Latino	23	Higher Education
Paul	White	25	College Student Affairs Administration
Timothy	White	28	Higher Education & Student Affairs

Data Collection

Once selected, participants engaged in two in-depth interviews with the primary researcher. In-depth interviewing employs open-ended questions that build upon and explore participants' answers (Marshall &

Rossmann, 2011). A modified version of Seidman's (1998) approach to in-depth interviewing was used in this study. Interviews took place virtually using Skype. The first interview with each participant lasted between 90 minutes to two hours and was a life-history

interview. Participants began the first interview by drawing a timeline that marked major life events, people, decisions, and other milestones. Such life histories allowed participants to share their stories, building perspective from which further questions are derived (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Following the creation of the timeline, individuals had the opportunity to expand on their initial reflections by talking about their sexual identity development broadly. In the second interview, questions focused more explicitly on participants' graduate school experiences. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on how they engaged in identity disclosure during their time in a student affairs graduate program and the environmental factors that led them to do so.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

To analyze the data, the primary researcher engaged two different rounds of manually coding the data. Initially, data was coded holistically for words or phrases that were repeated across conversations with participants. Data was highlighted in codable moments, which are large sections of text connected with the research questions, in a technique often referred to as lump coding (Saldaña, 2009). The primary researcher repeated this coding process several times to ensure no pieces of data were overlooked. A second round of coding took place using two

additional coding techniques. Specifically, the primary researcher employed both structured and simultaneous coding techniques to organize the data (Saldaña, 2009). From there, the primary researcher grouped these codes into segments known as categories (Saldaña, 2009), which led to the formulation of study findings. Notably, the primary researcher brought in the second and third author of this manuscript as a form of trustworthiness. Though the first author conducted the initial data analysis, he turned to the additional two individuals to provide feedback on his findings. Both the second and third author reviewed the first author's narrative description of the findings, the original data set, in addition to the codes created by the primary researcher. This process resulted in the themes that are presented in a subsequent part of this paper.

Positionality Statements

Central to qualitative research is the belief that the researcher plays a significant role in how they make sense, analyze, and represent participants' stories (Stewart, 2010). For this reason, we see it necessary to highlight the authors' individual journeys and how they influenced their approach to this project. Darren Pierre identifies as a Black cisgender gay man. In engaging in this project, Darren vividly remembered his own coming out pro-

cess which occurred while enrolled in a master's program in higher education. Using reflective journaling as a process, Darren recognized that he had his own internal stories about what it meant to be gay and come out in a graduate program due to the feeling of acceptance that he felt. Therefore, Darren had to challenge himself to not let his own experiences play too much of a role in the ways that he analyzed the participants' realities.

Cameron Beatty identifies as a Black cisgender gay man. Through reflection, [Author Two] shared his narrative of having to constantly out himself in education spaces since his undergraduate experience. Also, employing reflective journaling, he connected his own experiences to those of participants in the study and the findings shared. Cameron acknowledges how his own positional roles and power as an educator now in a HESA graduate program, similar to what the participants in this study navigated, inform and may contribute to his own bias in understanding participants process of disclosure in HESA programs. Antonio Duran identifies as a Latino cisgender queer man. In engaging with this project, Antonio constantly reflected upon his own experiences of identity disclosure before and during his graduate school experience. In particular, Antonio journaled about his classes informed his will-

ingness to share his queer identity in graduate school and sensitized him to consider what may have influenced the participants' own identity disclosure in this project.

Findings

Based on the research questions and the data collected through interviews, three themes emerged from the data: 1) barriers and the fluidity of coming out; 2) a sense of freedom experienced as a result of being in a new location; and 3) the positive influence of graduate preparation programs. The eleven participants identified coming out as a fluid process, spoke to the importance of faculty, staff and supportive classmates, and opportunities to engage in reflective exercises all as consequential factors in supporting their sexual identity development.

Coming Out: Barriers and Fluidity in this Process

To understand the participants' descriptions of coming out, it was imperative to explore their rationale for not coming out previously. In reference to religious beliefs, many of the men spoke about messages that came from their upbringing in Christian and Protestant faiths, where they were taught to believe, as Micah put it, "You are going to hell and gay is a sin." Paul stated simply, "I had a firm belief in the Bible and that firm belief told me

that gay is wrong.” B.W. described his religious upbringing as follows:

I was raised Southern Baptist and I went to a Christian school where we were really ingrained in the hetero-normative, like traditional gender roles . . . anything that varied as perceived as gay was labeled sinful, you were just going to hell. The whole culture of my church was homophobic.

As captured in these sentiments, the previous relationship that individuals had with their faith backgrounds substantially influenced their decision to conceal their sexuality.

Additionally, participants repeatedly mentioned that “being busy” was a way to cope with having to remain closeted about their sexuality. Participants suggested that co-curricular involvement freed them from having to think about their sexuality. This particular pattern was meaningful given that the gay men in this study found their passion for student affairs through their involvement. And yet, this very pathway enabled them to avoid making meaning and disclosing their sexuality. As Jonah noted, “Being involved kept me from thinking about a lot of things...it was like a nice way to stop thinking about all the things going on.” Reflecting on his undergraduate co-curricular involvement, Micah observed:

I actually remember the conversation with people just to say like, oh, the more involved I am, the busier I am, the more I don't have to think about it or deal with the issues. Or I don't have to face reality; or the flipside of that is, you know, the busier I am, the more involved I am, you know I can actively, umm, I guess portray this idea of who I wanted to be.

As Micah, Jonah, and other participants remarked, involvement was a way to distract themselves from either reconciling with their sexuality or sharing it with others. Though these gay men did name several barriers to coming out, they also recognized this process as a fluid reality, meaning that they did reflect on when and how they could disclose their identities. For example, Dean said, “Coming out is a process and it is still going on.” Micah shared similar sentiments, noting, “It is not a defining experience; it's a gradual thing over a number of years.” For others, coming out was less about directly sharing their sexuality with others, and more about being less passive and showcasing public displays of affection with other men to those around them.

From the interviews, participants presented the idea of coming out as an internal dialogue that leads to an external conversation with friends and family. For example, Cain described coming out as “a very long process; in my undergrad it was completely

an internal process. I was okay with my identity; it was just the public exposure that was the part that was really new for me.” Cain shared that for him, coming out was a long process; conversely, Jonah shared his experience was more spontaneous. Although coming out may have been observed differently, one pattern that was found across the interviews was the notion that coming out is a fluid and ongoing process. Participants spoke about freeing themselves to act and behave in ways that were more authentic. For example, Timothy kissed another man in public and found that to be the catalyst for others to learn about his sexuality. Timothy described:

It wasn't an explicit coming out, but [members of the cohort] saw me kissing another man and saw that it was a little bit, more than just friendly, and so that I think that was really like [good] because I didn't have to worry about starting that conversation with them.

Like Timothy, Paul relied on actions to change others' opinions about his sexuality. He initially told a couple of people in his graduate school community that he was gay, but he found one event in particular helpful to announcing his sexuality on a larger scale. He shared:

I came out to my cohort essentially in April. It wasn't through words; it was through actions, essentially. The

town I lived in had this huge AIDS benefit to improve awareness on AIDS . . . the culminating event is this huge drag show, so I was at the dance with a few guys that evening. At that point in time, you know, everyone in my program whether they were gay or straight realized clearly I was gay if I am dancing with other men. Most people in my cohort were just upset because I had not come out sooner.

What these examples reveal is that the participants made differential decisions to disclose their sexuality and acknowledged that coming out was not a one-dimensional phenomenon that looked the same for everyone.

New Place, New Coming Out

The participants' stories showcased the impact location had on their decision to disclose their sexuality. Paul, Micah, and Timothy referred to the change in location as a sense of liberation. Nelson, Kevin, Don, and B.W. spoke of motivation that came from moving away from their previous environment, which provided the opportunity to let go of what others thought of them, to embrace their true selves. Conversations with participants illustrated the environmental factors that supported their sexuality identity development. The men repeatedly used words like “free” and phrases like “create a new

identity” to describe their feelings about being in a new place where no one knew them. Some participants saw being in a new environment as an opportunity for self-discovery that illuminated hidden truths about themselves and their sexual identity. For many whose college experience was away from home but still in their home state, being in another state altogether made the difference in the freedom they felt to explore their sexual identity. Paul discussed the influence of his distance from home on his coming out experience in graduate school:

I think that being six hours away from home [felt] close enough where I could escape to get home if something was to happen, but far enough away where I felt liberated. I could do me; I didn't have to worry about running into people [from home] at the gay bar or being out with friends that were gay and things of that nature. I am not sure, if I would have went [sic] to grad school near home, if it would have been a similar coming out experience even if the opportunity would have been there, because I would have been so close to home.

By being away from their previous environments, participants like Paul were able to live out their sexuality in ways different than before.

For a number of the men in the study, moving away for graduate school represented a time of reinvention and an opportunity for a fresh start. Timothy spoke about this when they commented:

I was completely starting over in a different city, a different part of the country and all that kind of stuff . . . I was able to start my new identity all over again and be who I wanted to be. . . . doing that far away from my family and they didn't know where I was going or who I was going out with, I think there was a lot of freedom to really kind of finally explore some of these other parts of my identity.

Micah used words like “liberating” when he described the opportunity to move away for graduate school. He shared:

It was my first time that I had been in a city where I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. So I was really kind of like liberated, I guess, to be whoever I wanted to be. It was so liberating; I think back and I didn't know anybody there, I could reinvent myself, I can be myself without having to, you know, be one person to a different group. For so long I had been hiding behind a façade . . . it was just a breath of fresh air.

For individuals like Micah and Timothy, the locations themselves were reason enough to

be able to explore and disclose their sexuality in a novel fashion.

For others, it was a combination of the location and the graduate preparation program that influenced their willingness to disclose their identity. Cain stated that the decision to come out during graduate school started at an open house for the program, prior to formal admission. Through the graduate admissions interview process, Cain sought out attributes in the graduate program's environment that would indicate whether the program would be supportive of his gay identity. He recalled that his initial decision to be "out" in graduate school occurred during college and was affirmed when he met faculty, students, and staff affiliated with the program. Cain shared:

I made the decision that at grad school I wanted to be at a place I could finally be out. [The graduate program] had a roundtable on what it was like to be LGBT both in the town and at the university. I remember in my folder, they had a sheet of different marginalized identities and people in the current cohort that matched those identities . . . so it was really a great place and a part of the reason I accepted it was because it seemed like it would be a good place to take this next step.

Several participants knew that they were going to come out in graduate school; it was less about a personal realization of their

identity and more a perception that the time was right. Timothy explained, "From the beginning I knew that even though there weren't many gay people in my cohort, there were a couple of people on staff and faculty that identified as LGBT so it was nice to see that." Timothy and Cain's comments exemplify the participants' perceptions of how their contexts influenced their ability to share their sexuality with others.

The Positive Influence of Graduate Preparation Programs on Coming Out

The academic curriculum of the program played a large role for many participants in understanding their gay identity. For example, Nelson commented, "The program really opened my eyes to a lot of issues of social justice and really wanting to make me more open about my sexual orientation." The vast majority of student affairs programs offer a course on student development. These courses often examine various sets of theories pertaining to identity development. In multiple conversations with participants, it became clear that student development theory served as an opportunity for the men in this study to learn about themselves. For example, Micah described in detail his experiences:

My first, like, student development theory class was the first time I had heard that there was a such thing as gay identity

development, and that there was a process or you know identity development series. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I am not the only one with these feelings!" Every single thing that was on the identity development process, I had gone through; that was the first time I realized nothing was wrong with me . . . I would just sit in class, tears running down my face, and just be like, "Thank God!" You know, exactly what I have been needing to hear. That every message that I have heard until this point was complete opposite and I am finding research and history. It was like someone was telling me about myself without me even knowing.

In some cases, it was classroom discussion that centered on sexual identity development that challenged men to reconsider their own understanding of their sexuality.

For others, it was the interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students that informed how they thought about and disclosed their sexuality. Additionally, when discussing faculty, participants, like Dean, referenced the importance of one-on-one conversations, noting, "Some of my first conversations I had about being gay were actually with a professor who I had taken theory and multicultural competence with." Paul similarly recalled the "attention and support" he received from faculty when he shared that he was gay. Often, the men shared stories about seeing openly queer faculty and staff

on campus and the important role they played in their own identity development. As interviews continued, what began to emerge is that out queer staff and faculty were not only seen as source of support, but also as role models for what it meant to live as an openly gay person. B.W. shared:

Having role models . . . like people who worked in the student center and I could look to and say like, you know, they are successful, they have a family, they have friends, like they have a sense of belonging here at the university and I can have those things too.

However, it was not only staff and faculty that had this beneficial effect on their identity, but also their fellow students. Timothy, describing his cohort, observed that, in their affirmation of his sexual identity, "They were always supportive and like, you know, I think anybody I talked about it with, everyone, I never had any negative experiences." Timothy's comments capture how positive relationships with their peers, as well as faculty and staff, made a significant difference in the lives of these gay men.

Finally, of particular importance, reflection played a pivotal role in many participants' experiences of coming to terms with their sexuality. Jonah reported that many of the reflective exercises were included in as-

signments and papers, sharing how reflection helped him become more comfortable with his identity. He stated:

Our theory class had us do a personal theory paper, so before we learned about any student development theories, we kind of reflected on our undergraduate career and came up with our own development theories, so that was really awesome. . . . In our multicultural competence class that I am taking now, we have critical reflection papers that help us reflect on major life experiences. I think continuing to provide these experiences to reflect on your own life is really helpful.

Aligning with Jonah's comments, Dean said: A lot of what the program did for me was give me nothing but time. A lot of time to reflect on my decisions, on my life...and I think time got me to where I was and got me to a place where I am okay with everything.

Jonah noted assignments that invited him to reflect on his identity as being impactful in his coming out process; Dean appreciated the less-structured schedule graduate school provided, which allowed him to engage in personal reflection about his own identities. Like Jonah and Dean, other participants underscored the influence that reflection in their graduate preparation programs had on how they saw their sexuality.

Discussion

Using a conceptual framework attentive to sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011) and sexual identity disclosure (e.g., Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Orne, 2011; Potoczniak et al., 2009), findings from this study contribute to the field's understanding of how gay men make meaning of their sexuality, together with how they decide to disclose this identity during their graduate preparation programs. For example, seven participants spoke to how they felt prior to entering graduate school, the space they were coming from inhibited their ability to either explore their sexual identity or to consider sharing it with others. Therefore, for these individuals, their graduate program became a place where they felt more comfortable in exploring their sexual identity.

Faith was a central context for these gay men, as highlighted by participants like Micah, B.W., and Paul. As a result of their religious backgrounds, they had a fear of examining their sexuality in an in-depth fashion, resembling the scholarship on inhibiting factors to coming out (Potoczniak et al., 2009). For others such as Jonah, being able to escape into their involvement became a way to avoid reflecting on their sexuality. And yet, participants did concede that this was all a part of their sexual identity development, given that it does represent a lifelong pro-

cess (Dillon et al., 2011). They also described how they came to identify coming out as a similarly lifelong endeavor that depended on their environments, echoing the existing scholarship (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Orne, 2011).

Once in their graduate preparation programs, these individuals discovered a newfound freedom to live out and explore their sexuality. Of note was the fact that the participants in this study were in new locations, once again pointing to the saliency of contextual influences underscored in the literature (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Orne, 2011). The comments of Paul, Micah, and Timothy described the liberatory effect that moving away had for them as gay men. Similarly, other participants mentioned that going away specifically allowed them to divest from people's perceptions of them and their sexuality. These examples speak to the interconnected personal and social processes associated with sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011). Though internal exploration of one's sexuality is meaningful, the environments in which this happens is also significant. Therefore, graduate preparation programs represented a new home for these gay men to reimagine their relationship to their sexuality.

Related to this previous point, the final finding of this project highlights the posi-

tive influence that graduate preparation programs had for these gay men due to the coursework, relationships, and opportunities for reflection that they gained. This insight is necessary to continue showing that these programs not only influence professional identities (Hirschy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014), but also social identities. Moreover, this reality resembles research on students in programs that discusses how these spaces may encourage self-exploration (Robbins & Jones, 2016). And although research on queer student affairs professionals describe the challenges these people face in living out their sexuality in the profession (DeVita & Anders, 2018; Kortegast & van der Toom, 2018; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020), these participants were grateful for the chance to examine and disclose this aspect of themselves as graduate students. As Dean stated, the program offered him the time to unlock parts of himself that he had not gotten the opportunity to before.

Implications for Research and Practice

The stories that the gay men in this study shared can meaningfully shape both future research as well as practice in the profession of higher education and student affairs. To begin, scholars interested in contributing to the scholarship on queer identities relative to graduate preparation programs should take a concerted look at how individuals navigate

their sexuality in their assistantship sites or full-time work environments. Though the gay men in this project touched upon the influence of staff, the profession would benefit from understanding whether considerations regarding sexuality and sexual identity disclosure differs when students are outside of the classroom and are in their professional settings. Additionally, future research could expand the population of focus beyond gay men. Though these participants' narratives undoubtedly may relate to the experiences of individuals with other sexually minoritized identities, it would behoove scholars to conduct studies on individuals who hold other queer identities in order to understand their nuanced realities.

When it comes to practice, faculty working with graduate students may aid students in their own development by engaging them in classroom discussions on self-reflection activities related to diversity and inclusion that allow them to explore their own identities. Moreover, practitioners may consider ways in which they incorporate intentional discussion around classroom learning in their conversations with the graduate students they supervise. Students can be taught to engage in self-reflection from start to finish. For example, students may write a personal response paper that invites them to engage actively in self-awareness and write about why they want to be in the program.

Students may center their social identities into the work and functional area they aspire to work in. How do their identities contribute to the work that they do in the future? From there, participants should be given similar prompts in order to encourage them to constantly be reflexive about their professional aspirations in concert with their social identities. Additionally, faculty, staff, and students play an instrumental role in the overall program experience may have on the identity development of gay men. Repeatedly, participants mentioned the overall impact their program had on their sexual identity development. Beyond the curriculum and the contributions of individual faculty and staff, an overall inclusive environment must be created in such programs through language, in the recruitment of students, and through general practice among faculty and staff working with graduate students.

Finally, it is important to point out that these students were entering into their programs with preconceived views on their identities shaped by their faith, in addition to holding strategies to minimize their attention to their sexuality (e.g., by getting over-involved). Though graduate preparation programs may allow individuals to work through these realities, we as authors would be remiss to not acknowledge the emotional turmoil that these gay men may unpack during

these years of their life. For this reason, another implication for faculty and staff who come into contact with individuals exploring and making meaning of their sexuality during their graduate preparation programs to seek out counseling on or off their campuses. Having the opportunity to not only engage in reflection but to also potentially find therapeutic help may be meaningful for gay men as they navigate their sexuality as graduate students.

Conclusion

In reflecting upon his gay identity and the influence of his graduate preparation program, Nelson mentioned the following:

I can allow it to be a part of me without consuming me. . . . It doesn't have to be all of me. It is really comforting knowing what I have gone through emotionally and psychologically the past few years and also because

of that it has become a part of others' identity, like it can be something that other people accept, support, and identify with.

In a similar fashion to Nelson, the other participants in this study experienced the positive effects of attending and inhabiting graduate preparation programs that informed their perceptions of sexuality in beneficial manners. Though past research has shown the impact that higher education and student affairs programs can have on professional identity (e.g., Hirschy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014), these spaces are helpful for individuals in many more ways. The stories of the gay men in this project exemplify this point. For them, their HESA graduate programs allowed them to separate from past negative perceptions of their sexuality and instead explore their gay identity in healthy way.

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