ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF OPENLY GAY UNDERGRADUATE MEN INVOLVED IN ELECTED STUDENT GOVERNMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUEERING

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This is a study at the intersection of sexuality and student involvement in higher education. Exploring the lived experiences of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government, this study enlists a phenomenological queering that unconceals and reveals that which is otherwise hidden in elected student leadership. Eight men were selected for participation in this study, and all identified as openly gay before and after their election to undergraduate student government. These men come from varying U.S. geographies and positions, and conversations and themes were rendered through the methodological approach of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Four major themes came from multiple participant conversations and journals. First, these men understood *coming out* and *being out* as deeply related to visibility and their work as leaders. They are more than *just* gay, and at the same time, they *just so happen* to be gay. Additionally, participants displayed independent ways of being within their outness. For example, some represented a *palatable* kind of being gay, and some navigated deep religious dissonance and other tensions within the (queer) margins.

Re(-)presentation was also a major theme, as participants were advocates for their peers, and were "called" to this work of leadership. Finally, these men were leaders through their identities, and engaged in undergraduate student government as something that was bigger than them, but better because of them. This includes their call to leadership *and* student government, the political nature of this work, and a desire for things to be better.

From this study, insights were gleaned that capture the nuances of this intersection of sexuality and student involvement in higher education. Specifically, this study is a calling to better understand what it means to live and work alongside students who hold these dual identities (*out* and *elected* in student government, and within student affairs). This includes a queering of student government *and* phenomenology, as well as a queering of van Manen's (1997) existentials of lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived relationship to others (sociality).

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF OPENLY GAY UNDERGRADUATE MEN INVOLVED IN ELECTED STUDENT GOVERNMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUEERING

by

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DEDICATION

To the *out, not-out, not-yet-out, never-out,* and *out-adjacent*.

May you find your way, and write about it. March on, march often. *Onward*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is nothing without the out men who gave up hours of their time to speak with me about their experiences in student government. Ben, Bradley, Christopher, Edward, Hunter, Jack, Owen, and Sam, I cannot thank you enough for being *in*-community with me. You showed me parts of your life that not many get to see, and I am forever in debt to your generous gift of time. This project is only possible because of you. Additionally, thank you to Professor Roger Platizky and Timothy Arliss O'Brien for granting me permission to use some of your beautiful poetry.

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• • •

I am only able to write this dissertation as an out, gay man because of the many openly LGBTQ+ people who came (out) before me, many of whom are featured in this dissertation. And still, there are scholars and leaders who will never have the ability or safety to come out, or to be out. I do this for them, to open doors (or windows) to further uplift our stories—our voices—and our histories. To Kathy Kozachenko, Elaine Noble, and of course, Harvey Milk, Tammy Baldwin, and even Pete Buttigieg…thank you. You are seen and heard. You resonate. You truly paved the way, and continue(d) to do so. To Chris Armstrong, Bobby Brooks, and of course, Jack Baker…thank you. You led in student government in ways that I was never able. You were bold and fearless. You were unapologetically *you*. Each of you sit at the intersection of being openly gay and being elected, and your histories are ones we can never forget.

To the LGBTQ+ people and allies who boldly write, highlight, and research LGBTQ+ people, identity, and current events…thank you. Keep writing, keep highlighting, keep illuminating our stories into existence. March on, march often. Onward.

Denied Too Long

The boy scouts are always prepared
To reject him
If they can find him
In their pup-tents
Behind their crackling fires.
The military will allow them
To march across the windy desert,
Get sprayed with napalm and agent orange
So long as their purple hearts
Don't bleed into pink triangles and red ribbons
As they march single file in the long veterans' parade.
But only on television—
After all, the law **is** the law.
His art and her art
Are not art
So say the men at the helm of our culture
Who hold out insurance premiums
Like wild cards in a marked deck—
As if AZT and HIV were not part
Of their alphabet
(This, too, is the law).
But we
Who have been burned and flogged,
Gassed and incinerated,
Stoned and pilloried
But we
Who have been excommunicated and blackmailed,
Despised and rejected,
Called sinful, insane,
Unnatural and abnormal
Yes, we
Who have been fired and shunned
Stigmatized and silenced
Even in this land of spacious skies and spacious lies,
Reject the unutterable chants
The unkind, unholy political slants
That deny a whole people
The way a blind astronomer
Misses a firmament of dazzling stars
Ever growing in number
Symphonic like the sky. (Platizky, 1998, pp. 345-346)

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CHAPTER 1
A "RADICAL," HOMOSEXUAL AGENDA

Homosexuals Among Us

> As the technology of writing encounters and spreads through a previously oral culture, the felt power and personality of particular places begins to fade. For the stories that express and embody that power are gradually recorded in writing. Writing down oral stories renders them separable, for the first time, from the actual places where the events in those stories occurred. The tales can now be carried elsewhere; they can be read in distant cities or even on alien[1] continents. The stories, soon, come to seem independent of any specific locale. (Abram, 1996, p. 183)

I begin with stories that embody the focus of my study, from others as well as my own. In 2010, Chris Armstrong was attacked online by Andrew Shirvell, an assistant attorney general in the state of Michigan. At the time, Armstrong was serving as president[2] of the University of Michigan student assembly, and was openly gay. In his blog, Shirvell wrote, "This site is for concerned University of Michigan alumni, students, and others who oppose the recent election of Chris Armstrong -- a RADICAL HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVIST, RACIST, ELITIST, & LIAR -- as the new head of student government" (Stewart & Payne, 2010). Shirvell also accused Armstrong of "flagrant sexual promiscuity," "sexually seducing and influencing," hosting a gay orgy in his dorm room, and trying to recruit students to "join the homosexual 'lifestyle'" (Stewart & Payne, 2010). Shirvell even went as far as protesting outside of Armstrong's house, calling him "Satan's representative of the student assembly" (Stewart & Payne, 2010).

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[1] I use this passage from Abram (1996) with the acknowledgement that the term, "alien," may come with painful or insensitive connotation. Human beings are not alien(s), nor are the continents or countries from which they come.

[2] "Assembly," "student government," and "student association," are all terms to capture the naming of the student government entities of which I aim to unearth. Additionally, "student government/association president" and "student body president" will be used interchangeably based on how they are named within this research, and including how I came to know and understand the various stories of which I uplift.

Shirvell was fired in 2010, and in 2012 a jury found that he had stalked, defamed, and invaded Armstrong's privacy, which ultimately led to his disbarment (Slagter, 2017).

In 2017, a different student at an institution 1,200 miles away faced similar attacks from a public official. Early that year, Bobby Brooks was named student body president at Texas A&M University. Similar to Armstrong, Brooks identifies as gay. Brooks won the presidency after his opponent was disqualified for election violations (Collins, 2017). In an open letter in the *Houston Chronicle*, Texas A&M University alum, Rick Perry, former Governor of Texas and former U.S. Secretary of Energy, said the election was "stolen outright" (Perry, 2017). While he initially stated that Brooks' win was commendable as student voters judged on "character rather than on personal characteristics," he later argued that there were a series of "dirty campaign tactics" against Brooks' opponent (Perry, 2017). Perry (2017) posited that the outcome would have been different had the victim been different, and that Brooks' presidency was treated as a victory for diversity. "It is difficult to escape the perception that this quest for 'diversity' is the real reason the election outcome was overturned" (Perry, 2017). While Texas A&M University fired back at Perry, asserting that students run the election—not administrators—damage was still done before Brooks even stepped into office.

So why do these two stories matter? How do these stories intersect with my own experiences, and the lived experiences of out, gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government? Why is the lived experience of out, undergraduate men something to unearth at all? Simply put, Armstrong and Brooks are not alone. They were not the first to face the public's response to a gay student government president, and they will not be the last. Their stories matter. There is great power in stories, and especially the stories

of these men. Their stories should be told. Stories, in general, reveal possibilities—what could and might possibly be—stories are a *calling in*. In many ways, I am brought to this phenomenon as a result of the experience—the stories—of these two men. Additionally, I am brought to this phenomenon as a result of my own experience in student government, though as a closeted president, at the time unable and unwilling to come out as gay. If being out as gay, or any lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), or queer (Q) (LGBTQ/+) identity, complicates serving in an undergraduate student government, what, then, is the lived experience of these individuals whose professional roles become defined by their personal livelihood? **What *is* the lived experience of out, gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government?**

> ["Same Love," Verse 2: Macklemore]
> If I was gay, I would think hip-hop hates me
> Have you read the YouTube comments lately?
> "Man that's gay" gets dropped on the daily
> We've become so numb to what we're sayin'
> Our culture founded from oppression
> Yeah, we don't have acceptance for 'em
> Call each other faggots behind the keys of a message board
> A word rooted in hate, yet our genre still ignores it
> "Gay" is synonymous with the lesser (Ben Haggerty, Mary Lambert, & Ryan Lewis, 2013)

If YouTube comments lead us to believe hip-hop, or society at large, hates gay people, as Macklemore suggests, what does this mean for individuals who make the brave decision to come out of the closet? If gay is synonymous with the lesser, as Macklemore implies, what does this mean for individuals' attempts at personal and professional growth? Why would someone come out of the closet if they do not feel they can be their true self? What repercussions exist in the quest to be one's true self? Are gay, or LGBTQ+ people more generally, unfree? Unequal? There is a statement that is made

in the "out" of coming out. There is a release. But in that release, that freedom, there is also inequality, lesser-perceptions, and repercussions.

More than "Homosexual:" The L, G, B, T, and Q (and +) Community

As an entree to engaging in topics about sexual orientation and sexuality, a shared language is necessary to define. There is an important distinction between sexuality and gender identity as different psychosocial constructs (e.g., *gay* or *transgender*), though people often link these groups together as one community (Renn, 2007). *Lesbian, gay,* and *bisexual* describe sexual orientations, whereas *transgender* relates to gender identity (Renn, 2007). As I use the term "LGBTQ+," the "Q+" represents an identity of *queer*, including any sexual identity that might not be considered when someone identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual[3].

The Bible tells me so. As a child growing up in church and conservative communities, the term, "homosexual," was a clinical labeling that equated to something wrong or bad. For many individuals in my life, the Bible was used as a benchmark for definitions about homosexuality. Many equated homosexuality with "immoral," "perverse," or unethical behavior, and this was a constant narrative articulated within my church and family community. For example, 1 Timothy 1:8-10 was frequently used as a weapon to hold my church-going peers and me accountable for any deviations that might be as a result of the possibility that one of us might be gay.

> [8]We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. [9]We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, [10]for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for

[3] In much of my writing, I use "LGBTQ+," however there are some scholars, authors, and reports that are not all encompassing (and some due to the scope of their study or writing). When I use "LGB" or "LGBT," it is often intentional to be most reflective of the source from which I am drawing.

> slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. (1 Timothy 1:8-10 New International Version)

If not a direct naming, others used messages from the(ir) Bible as a threat regarding what could be when this one life is over and done. They would argue, "There is only one lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge your neighbor" (James 4:12 New International Version)? The sentiment within this verse exuded an "It's not my place to judge" judgment, implying that the behavior is, still, something to be (J)judged. Others were more direct, citing that marriage should be kept "pure," free from sexual immorality (Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 7:2 New International Version), and that men should not commit "shameful acts" with other men (Romans 1:27), as such relations are considered "detestable" (Leviticus 18:22 New International Version). These bounded standards, and the constant legal emphasis connected to homosexual(ity and) behavior, had a profound impact on me, and imbedded a massive amount of fear into my life. Growing up, the stakes seemed very high, and I cringed each time I heard the term, "homosexual." This uneasy feeling lingered into adulthood, and it took many years for me to connect with a term that had previously done so much damage in my life.

> The dilemma of a homosexual: told by the medical profession he is sick; by the law that he's a criminal; shunned by employers; rejected by heterosexual society. Incapable of a fulfilling relationship with a woman, or for that matter with a man. At the center of his life he remains anonymous. A displaced person. An outsider. (Morgan, Peters, Wallace, & Davis, 1967)

In the 1967 CBS news report, *The Homosexuals*, correspondent Mike Wallace shared that "homosexuality is an enigma," a subject people find disturbing and embarrassing. At the time, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance (APA, 1952; Drescher, 2015).

Addressing concerns about the increasing visibility of homosexuals, CBS conducted a survey on public attitudes toward homosexuality. They found that Americans, at the time, thought of homosexuality as more harmful than adultery, abortion, and prostitution, and that two out of three Americans looked at homosexuals with disgust, fear, and discomfort (Morgan et al., 1967). One in ten surveyed felt hatred toward homosexuals, and many were repelled by the mere notion of homosexuality, favoring legal punishment and believing that homosexuality was an illness (Morgan et al., 1967).

Wallace interviewed individuals[4] with varying perspectives, including a Reverend who noted that he had the tendency to pull away when homosexuals approached him, and used the word, "dirty," to describe homosexuals, despite also stating that compassion and concern were appropriate responses (Morgan et al., 1967). One professor who was interviewed asserted that men engage in homosexual acts as a way to achieve masculinity, which developed from early childhood fears associated with overprotective mothers who are too close to their male child (Morgan et al., 1967). In one of the few interviews with homosexual men, one individual compared his homosexuality to having a certain hair or eye color; that it was part of him (Morgan et al., 1967). Was this an early example of someone asserting they were "born this way?" Despite later examples in the news report suggesting that homosexuality is learned and behavioral, I was struck by this individual's assertion that his sexuality was as simple as the physical traits with which he was born. I was also struck by the interview with the Reverend who could consider a population, "dirty," especially given everything I knew and understood about Christianity, religion, and faith.

[4] Those interviewed were almost exclusively White and male.

> If the churches must embrace the great commission of announcing God's love with more conviction, gays must embrace an equally important truth: We *are* loved. We are loved despite what particular congregations have to say about us, and we have a right to disagree—to assert ourselves and our inherent equality as children of God and as members of the human family. (Gilreath, 2006, p. 77)

Macklemore raps, "When I was in church, they taught me something else; If you preach hate at the service, those words aren't anointed; The holy water that you soak in has been poisoned" (Ben Haggerty, Mary Lambert, & Ryan Lewis, 2013). Sometimes acknowledging that *we are* loved—that *I am* loved—is no easy task. When the metaphorical holy water has been poisoned, as Macklemore describes, it is hard to believe that the church and G/god(s) are as loving and open-minded as I want to believe (or as I need). To believe there is, in fact, nothing dirty about a homosexual identity, for some, takes years of unlearning - especially when the homosexual is you.

Reclaiming, "homosexual." As I turn to the phenomenon of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government, I intentionally use the term, "homosexual," first as a reclaiming, and next as a benchmark from which I grew to understand, know, and love myself. Claim: "to demand, call out for," summon (Skeat, 1911, p. 92). Proclaim: to call out, to cry out (Skeat, 1911). Re-claim, pro-claim, re-clamat-ion, pro-clamat-ion. If *claim* is to demand or call out, and *re* is a prefix for again (Skeat, 1911), *reclaim* is to call out, again. But if I never called out the term, "homosexual," am I really reclaiming it? Can one reclaim something they always resisted claiming in the first place? In this paradox, perhaps I am *pro*claiming the term, and crying out; perhaps I am re-proclaiming, again, and again.

Similarly, Martin (1985) illuminates a reclaiming of conversation regarding women and education in society. Martin (1985) suggests, "One of the lessons to be

learned from our conversation is that institutions, roles, tasks, traits are detachable from one another and from gender" (p. 177). In this task of reclamation, Martin (1985) encourages critical examination of education programs and proposals, which includes questioning some of society's most basic assumptions. Could the same be said about sexual orientation? Could the same critical approach be useful in looking at sexuality, as Martin has done in looking at gender? I draw on this text as an additional, similar turning to that which can be a (pro/re)claiming. With sexuality, as Martin (1985) declares (about gender), the conversational circle must be increased to include race, ethnicity, and economic status (as well as gender). Martin (1985) notes, "It is imperative, also, that we examine the heterosexual assumptions of the parties to our conversation and trace the implications for education for alternative constructions of female sexuality" (p. 178). Reclaiming, in these contexts, sits at the heart of inclusion and openedness, further lifting the voice(s) of those who have been historically or societally marginalized and oppressed.

I also draw on Gilreath's (2006) prior assertion as a personal reminder that I am loved within this naming and reclaiming; that the clinical and the spiritual are not intertwined as a rigid and "dirty" description of who I am. And still, there are many people who witnessed and valued the 1967 CBS news report, and remain individuals who hold close to the ideals and values espoused in that piece of television, and through churches like the ones led by the interviewed Reverend. Many of these individuals are alive today, and some have passed down those ideals and values to their family and community. Many are also deeply ingrained in the fabric of places like my home state of Oklahoma, where people believe something like homosexuality can be cured. For example, in 2015, Oklahoma state legislator Sally Kern sponsored bill 1598, "The

Freedom to Obtain Conversion Therapy Act," which provides parents with the right to send their child to conversion or reparative therapy (Mason, 2015). This same state legislator once asserted that homosexuality was a worse threat than terrorism (Mason, 2015). Kern's bill was amended in committee, and eventually failed to pass (Mason, 2015). And still, there is danger in such legislation.

Perhaps my reclaiming is holistic, and an act against a system and environment that I only knew during the most formative years of my life. Perhaps my reclaiming is in spite of those who created the 1967 CBS news report, or Representative Sally Kern, or the Bible. I use the naming, "homosexual," believing that this term still holds a dark and, at times, trauma-infused stigma for people. It certainly does for me. For leaders, this term can be a targeting, a barrier, and a limitation to leadership and opportunity. As a result, the reclaiming involved in its use must rely on a proclaiming, a crying out, that demands an external taking, and an amplified claiming.

Leaders Like Me

To *lead* is different from *leader*, and *leading* is not the same as *leadership*, though all circle within a similar community of semantics. These terms hold different meaning, and academically and professionally, it has taken many years to understand them personally and societally. To lead is to conduct (Skeat, 1911), and leadership remains a subjective concept and practice. Some scholars have even rejected the notion of a singular definition of leadership to encompass what it means to lead, theoretically and in practice (e.g., Dugan, 2017). My own leadership philosophies include the idea that leaders are not *born* leaders, and that all people can be *made* (into leaders, into leading opportunities). The notion that leaders are born reinforces the idea that people are born

with a fixed trait (monarchies, dynasties, genetics), which creates a false dichotomy (Dugan, 2017). As Dugan (2017) puts it, “We get let off the hook” if we embrace the mindset that leaders are born rather than made (p. 39), which allows individuals to think outward rather than inward about leadership.

One does not have to be elected to lead, though elections are a common frame of reference for those associating leaders and leadership (opportunity). There are many examples in history of those who led their peers, country, and movement without ever having received an elected vote (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Malala Yousafzai). While this dissertation is a call for the experiences of gay men in *elected* student government, I acknowledge there are other ways leadership can be enacted in this context (committee representation, student activism, and communication and campus engagement). However, I use positional leadership as a starting point to unearth and illuminate these experiences at the intersection of elected student government and *out*wardly identifying as gay.

I learned about Armstrong’s story when I was twenty-five years old. Before that point, any connections between “leader” and “gay” were mostly nonexistent for me, and growing up on an Air Force military base in central Oklahoma, there were very few messages to support LGBTQ+ identities. I did not see people like me in leadership positions, and especially the public sphere. For those who did come out (including those who were forced out), there was always controversy or negative attention surrounding their experience or process. For example, Ellen DeGeneres, Greg Louganis, and George Michael were three famous individuals whose coming out stories I remember watching

and celebrating (internally). And still, none of these individuals, at the time, were elected, or considered "leaders" in the same context from which I was raised. Furthermore, each of these individuals faced an immense amount of backlash in their respective fields. But what is leadership, and who gets to become a leader is subject to context.

As a child, I was surrounded by individuals who I perceived to be notable and important; generals, sergeants, and officers were a few of those who garnered power and prestige. These individuals were admired and valued. People listened to them, and people followed their lead. Growing up on an Air Force military base from 1985 to 2000, I did not see a single LGBTQ+ family, and I cannot recall any individuals in my life who identified as LGBTQ+. At the time, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* was in full effect, which stated that homosexual acts would lead to service members being separated from the armed forces (United States Code §654, 1993). This included service members engaging in, attempting to engage in, and soliciting another in a homosexual act, simply stating that one is homosexual or bisexual, and marrying or attempting to marry a person of the same biological sex (United States Code §654, 1993). *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* was called, "A 'hyper-private' realm (the closet) where all nonheterosexual (queer) identifications and behaviors must be hidden" (Rich, Schutten, & Rogers, 2010, p. 272).

In the military, homosexuality was associated with (a lack of) masculinity, and there were advantages that [hyper-]masculinity held within the historical contexts of war and physical combat (Allsep, 2013). This also included higher education, and the U.S. Air Force Academy specifically, as Lehmkuhl (2007) recalls as "one of the most conservative places on the planet" (p. 149). Lehmkuhl achieved fame by winning the reality television competition show *The Amazing Race*, alongside his at-the-time partner,

Chip (Lehmkuhl, 2007). In his memoir, Lehmkuhl (2007) recalls his time at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the sentiments around gay people serving in the military. At the time, some argued that gay people should not be in the military because it might lead to sex, or that it might frighten those who do not like or care for gay people (Lehmkuhl, 2007). "To single out gay people as being deviant, when heterosexual sex is pervasive in the military, is absurd. To single out gay people for exclusion because of the kind of sex they want to have is equally absurd" (Lehmkuhl, 2007, p. 219). The fact that being gay was about sex, within the military context, is problematic and positions gay people only as sexual beings. This led to the fear of *being considered* gay, which Lehmkuhl (2007) notes created a hateful and anti-gay environment.

> The persistent attempts to defend the cultural status quo of the military and exclude people who threaten notions of hegemonic masculinity rests not on military necessity, but cultural prejudice. This prejudice is not readily apparent because it comes dressed in the garb of heritage and patriotism, yet beneath the veneer of concern over military effectiveness is the presumed right of the military profession to protect its own culture against what it considers undue and harmful meddling by outsiders. (Allsep, 2013, p. 390)

This description of the military culture accurately captures my personal perceptions of what it meant to be gay in or around the military. I was an outsider, and anyone like me—even those I could not see—were, too, outsiders in this arena. In a very personal experience, the comment, "We're going to treat this like *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*," was eventually used by individuals and leaders in my life as a way to keep me from being initially, fully out. After all, military values have long been associated with heterosexuality (Allsep, 2013). But in December 2010, the U.S. Congress passed a law to repeal[5] *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, which was signed by U.S. President Barack Obama, and

[5] While the repeal of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* was an initial success for lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, there were still additional limitations that existed in the military. Alford and Lee (2016) posit,

took effect in September 2011 (Alford & Lee, 2016). The repeal eliminated the practice of discharging lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members as a result of their sexual identity (Alford & Lee, 2016). As Obama signed the repeal into law, he stated:

> No longer will our country be denied the service of thousands of patriotic Americans who were forced to leave the military—regardless of their skills, no matter their bravery or their zeal, no matter their years of exemplary performance—because they happen to be gay. No longer will tens of thousands of Americans in uniform be asked to live a lie, or look over their shoulder, in order to serve the country that they love. (Obama, 2010)

I remember watching this speech. I remember the internal reverberation of the voices of all those who told me they would not ask and I would not tell. I remember the feeling of privilege I had as a military *dependent* rather than a *service member*, and the pressure and power associated with my peripheral relationship to the military. I could not imagine what it was like being *in* the military and hearing the president speak in this manner. I thought, *If I feel this good—this proud—those serving must feel an immense amount of relief*. It was as a result of the appeal that I realized my initial understandings of leadership might eventually, someday, be enacted by people like me: individuals who were *openly* gay. Consequently, the repeal also taught me the real and perceived threats involved in coming out, and being out. Outness, in this context was a statement and a garnering of attention - a statement or level of attention that took years for me to accept and embrace.

***Elected* leaders like me.** It took several years for me to see my seminal understanding of leadership (generals, sergeants, and officers) collide with sexuality (namely a gay identity). While I eventually met service members who identified openly

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"Full inclusion would mean involvement of transgender service members, access to services and benefits for all LGBT service members, and a culturally responsive and affirming culture" (p. 264).

as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer(+), seeing these individuals in larger public leadership roles was lacking. But in May 2016, the U.S. Senate confirmed Eric Fanning as U.S. Secretary of the Army, and he became the first openly gay leader of a military service (Wagner, 2016). However, Fanning only lasted 248 days as secretary (Killelea, 2017).

As LGBTQ+ people hold just around 0.1 percent of the elected leadership positions nationwide (Parker, 2018), many LGBTQ+ individuals are running for office. At this time in history, more LGBTQ+ Americans are running for elected office than ever before (Parker, 2018). This leads to an unprecedented number of openly LGBTQ+ individuals in elected roles (Parker, 2018).

> It seems like almost every month an LGBTQ candidate shatters another lavender ceiling or becomes a historic first—slowly chipping away at long-held conventions about what is possible for LGBTQ leaders seeking elected office. And while the progress is undeniable and victories significant, LGBTQ people continue to be severely underrepresented in every state and at every level of government. (Parker, 2018, p. 3)

Here, the "lavender[6] ceiling" reflects the barrier that exists for many LGBTQ[+] individuals who disclose their sexual orientation in workplaces (Hill, 2009). Hitting the "lavender ceiling" is "a perceived tendency for organizations to not promote or advance LGBTQ members in the system" (Hill, 2009, p. 41). In the case of elected positions, *shattering* the lavender ceiling is breaking through the barrier and achieving what was assumed unachievable as a result of one's sexuality or sexual orientation. And the ceilings continue to be shattered, and have been more publicly shattered since the 1970s when lesbian and gay people first became elected as out in early and notable ways.

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[6] Lavender was the choice color for the Gay Liberation movement, and based on the proximity to the color purple (Dawidoff, 1997). The color has been long associated with the LGBTQ+ community.

Aside from the historic "firsts" associated with running for and achieving local, state, and national political roles in the 1970s, Harvey Milk is perhaps the most known of those elected during that era. In the beginning, Milk established a group of gay merchants as the Castro Village Association, and spent great time forging political alliances (Miller, 2006). After an initial run (and loss) for Supervisor[7], Milk was appointed to the Board of Permit Appeals by the Mayor of San Francisco, California, George Moscone, who also named several lesbian activists to the city human rights commission and Commission on the Status of Women (Jo Daly, Phyllis Lyon, and Del Martin) (Miller, 2006). In Milk's third run for city Supervisor in 1977, he beat sixteen people with 30 percent of the vote (Miller, 2006), and was elected as a San Francisco, California Supervisor (Robinson, 2013). Milk served until his assassination the next year in 1978 (Robinson, 2013).

> The first Gay person we elect must be strong, a fighter, one who is not content to sit in the back of the bus. He must be above wheeling and dealing. If I had been a wheeler and dealers, I would be on the Board of Permit Appeals today. If I had been content with the back of bus, I wouldn't have broken party ranks. The first Gay person to be elected must for the good of all of us, be truly independent. Unbossed and unbought! (Milk, 1977/2013c, p. 174)

The United States has come a long way since Milk became a notable openly gay person heavily involved in city politics. Since Milk's election, many others have sought to achieve in a similar way. In the 2018 midterm elections, some coined the historic number of LGBTQ+ candidates running for office as a potential "rainbow[8] wave" (All Things Considered, 2018), which reflected the large mass of potential for LGBTQ+ leadership across many levels of representation. This rainbow wave came at the heels of a

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[7] The role of a Supervisor is similar to what most U.S. cities categorize as a City Council Member.
[8] The rainbow flag serves as a symbol of the LGBTQ+ movement (Hogan & Hudson, 1998). It was designed for the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1978 by artist Gilbert Baker (Hogan & Hudson, 1998). "Today, the rainbow flag is a feature of gay pride celebrations around the world, and many lesbians and gay men fly it at their homes" (Hogan & Hudson, 1998, p. 471).

contentious political climate in the United States, specifically following the 2016 election. Savage (2018b) contends:

> From the minute [Donald Trump] was sworn in, he began attacking LGBTQ Americans. His Justice Department has argued that anti-gay discrimination is legal, filing a friend of the court brief claiming that the federal Civil Rights Act does not protect gay and bisexual workers. Trump fired all the members of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, and he has overseen the creation of a "Religious Liberty Task Force," also at the Justice Department, religious liberty, of course, being code for the right to discriminate against LGBT people. And he's appointed rabidly anti-LGBTQ bigots at every level of the federal government, starting with rabidly anti-gay [U.S. Vice President] Mike Pence and on down, and he's packed the courts, including the Supreme Court, with anti-LGBTQ jurists.

Savage illuminates many of the policies and practices rejected and enacted by Donald Trump's administration, including those established by leaders who share Trump's same political ideologies. Over the past few years, hundreds of bills were introduced in legislatures across the country that contained anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments (Victory Institute, 2018). State legislatures sought to restrict adoption rights, legalize discrimination, and ban transgender people from bathrooms (Victory Institute, 2018). "State legislatures have become the laboratories for regressive efforts to rollback equality—their tactics being exported to both federal and local governments—making it crucial LGBTQ representation grows in these legislative bodies" (Victory Institute, 2018, p. 7). For many LGBTQ+ people, these pieces of legislation are a threat to their very existence and well-being. This has become a calling, and specifically, a call to action.

One such person called to action is Sam Park, who was the first openly gay male elected to be a state legislator in the state of Georgia in 2016 (Lee, 2016). With 51 percent of the vote, Park unseated an incumbent, and was the only Asian-American representative serving in the Georgia House of Representatives during the 2017-2019

session (Lee, 2016). He was reelected in 2018 with a larger margin. Shortly after his first election, Park shared with *NBC News*:

> I'm a gay, Christian, Korean man sitting in the intersection of faith, sexual orientation and ethnicity. I feel that being myself, I have the opportunity to build bridges between communities that haven't seen eye to eye – or may have necessarily been aware of one another. (Lee, 2016)

Here, visibility lies at the intersection of Park's racial, spiritual, and sexual identities. Additional "firsts" were presented in the 2018 midterm election. In Indiana, J.D. Ford unseated his district's incumbent to become a state Senator, and is thought to be the first openly gay state lawmaker in the state of Indiana (IBJ Staff, 2018). In Colorado, openly gay U.S. Representative Jared Polis was elected Governor (Watkins, 2018). While Oregon's Governor Kate Brown identifies as a bisexual woman, Polis is the first openly *gay man* elected to a governorship (Swenson, 2018; Watkins, 2018). However, this is not his first elected leadership role. Polis has been open about his sexuality for decades (Swenson, 2018), and in 2008, he became the first openly gay man elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (Watkins, 2018). Parker (2018) contends:

> LGBTQ elected officials in positions of power are fundamental to moving forward equality legislation and policies, but their unique experiences also bring an authenticity and values framework that makes them better public servants. At a time when many Americans are questioning both the motivation and seriousness of the nation's politicians, LGBTQ elected officials bring a refreshing sense of openness, empathy and drive to get results. While small in number, LGBTQ elected officials are making an outsized impact on many of the most pressing issues affecting the nation. (Parker, 2018, p. 3)

But are (U.S.) Americans ready for this sense of openness, empathy, and drive that Parker suggests? What becomes personally at stake when one's professional role(s) become viewed through the personal identifiers of which a person possesses? This was a reality for Pete Buttigieg, as he embarked on a run for U.S. President in 2019.

Is the United States ready for a gay President?

> The first time I came out was the summer I turned 18. The last time I came out was about an hour ago when I explained why I kissed the mayor backstage. We're always coming out. Sometimes every single day. (Buttigieg, 2019a)

In early 2019, "Mayor Pete" Buttigieg became a household name. On April 14, 2019, he officially announced his candidacy for president of the United States (Merica, 2019), followed by a kiss with his husband, Chasten. At the time, Buttigieg was an openly gay 37 year old from South Bend, Indiana (Merica, 2019). If elected, Buttigieg will be the youngest president in the history of the United States, and the first mayor to ascend directly to the presidency (Janes & Scherer, 2019). He and his husband live unapologetically out, as suggested in Chasten's tweet above. In his official announcement to launch his campaign, Buttigieg addresses acceptance and his younger self, and states:

> To tell him that one rainy April day, before he even turns 40, he'll wake up to headlines about whether he's rising too quickly into becoming a top-tier contender for the American presidency. And to tell him that on that day he announces his campaign for president, he'll do it with his husband looking on. (Buttigieg, 2019c)

While Buttigieg appears not shy of his gay identity, during his initial months as a candidate, there were many questions about his sexuality: *Is he gay enough? Is he the right kind of gay? Does it even matter that he is gay?* These questions encapsulate many of my seminal, personal questions around gay men and leadership, and the visibility that would or ever could be, regarding this possibility. I wonder(ed), what does it mean to be gay *enough*? What does it mean to be the *right* kind of gay? Is there a *wrong* kind of gay? Is there a quantified version of gay(ness) that one must acquire before representing the(ir) community? And by simply being gay, is one, then, representing the(ir) community (and which ones!?)?

At the time of his launch, Buttigieg was a unique disruption to both the Presidency and to gay men (in leadership). Bruni (2019) asks, "Do his whiteness, upper-middle-class background and Harvard and Oxford degrees nullify his experience as a minority and undercut his status as a trailblazer?" Similar sentiments of *is one enough(?)* also existed for U.S. Senator Kamala Harris from California, as some reporters and press asked if she was "Black enough" (Bruni, 2019) after announcing her own bid for President. Critiquing an article[9] that questions Buttigieg's gayness, Bruni (2019) asserts, "That he didn't come out until he was 33 is all the proof you need that he wrestled privately with his sexual orientation and with fears about how the world would respond to it and to him." The salience of one's identity cannot be understood through the lens of other people's perceptions (or desires) for what one's gayness is or could be (or should be). As a veteran, and being from a rural part of the United States, it comes as no surprise that Buttigieg did not come out until he was in his 30s.

More than being ready for a president who is gay, is the United States ready for a gay president, who also has a (gay) husband? Or, is *this* the "right kind of gay," the quaint life of two (White) men in the Midwest city of South Bend, Indiana? Buttigieg's husband, Chasten, became an influential voice in his campaign, commanding a twitter following of over 390,000. But Pete and Chasten Buttigieg are anything but radical, and some have even called for limiting the way they are framed as "open" and "gay" with each introduction. In the Opinions section of *The Washington Post*, one reader comments:

> Would The Post please stop using the term "openly gay" as if it were still standard for most gay people to be in the closet? We're just gay. When do you

[9] I am intentionally not citing the article Bruni (2019) is critiquing, but instead will illuminate only the critique so as not to further draw attention to an article questioning a person's definition or experience(s) as gay.

> hear anyone say they are openly straight? Or openly Jewish, Christian, Muslim, agnostic or anything else? (Coyle, 2019, p. A17)

The reader contends that "openly gay" is an offensive description, and wonders why it is necessary to classify Buttigieg as such, and not, for example, former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden as "openly straight" (Coyle, 2019). There is a courage to coming out that is rarely experienced by a straight person (Milk, 1978/2013a). Biden, in Coyle's example, has not faced job, family, or friend disruptions as a result of his (straight-)outness, things Milk (1978/2013a) asserts are all possible losses associated with gay people living as out. Thus, there is an importance to Buttigieg being introduced as openly gay (and identifying as such). The Buttigieg's represent a perspective of gay identity that is not representative of all. They are both White, Christian, able-bodied, and married.

But Buttigieg reflects on the media attention, and specifically, the question of the United States' readiness for a gay president. He shares, "I'm gonna give them the only answer that I can think of that's honest and it's this: I trust my fellow Americans, but at the end of the day, there's exactly one way to find out for sure" (Buttigieg, 2019b). While time will tell, Buttigieg is received with mixed response. In 2019, the satirical news site, *The Onion*, wrote a piece to illuminate this dissonance. The title reads, "Pete Buttigieg Tries Appealing To Moderate Boomers By Announcing He Doesn't Agree With His Choice to Be Gay But Respects His Decision." In this bit, *The Onion* highlights the overarching feel of assimilation that is represented by Pete and Chasten Buttigieg. This is a connection that leaves the question of readiness one to be discovered.

My own "rainbow wave." It has not been until now, deep into my adulthood, that I see this rainbow wave. I never saw a rainbow anything when I was growing up, and certainly not something rainbow that was associated with elected/leadership. Being gay in

a public sphere is important. Being gay and leading in any capacity is a form of representation that is important, as is this representation in other disciplines and fields. For example, it was a groundbreaking announcement when Apple CEO Tim Cook came out publicly in 2014. At the time he had not yet publicly acknowledged his sexuality (Cook, 2014). In a *Businessweek* editorial, Cook (2014) notes:

> So let me be clear: I'm proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me… It's been tough and uncomfortable at times, but it has given me the confidence to be myself, to follow my own path, and to rise above adversity and bigotry. It's also given me the skin of a rhinoceros, which comes in handy when you're the CEO of Apple.

In my own leadership endeavors, I had not seen this type of explicit outness from someone at such a high position of power and esteem. I did not know I, too, could be out and open, like Park, and Fanning, and Polis, and Buttigieg, and Cook. And while these men and their outness have been part of my turning to and understanding of this phenomenon, they might still ultimately be outliers in the larger landscape of leadership. They were certainly unaccounted for when I was growing up. I never saw this type of leadership. I never knew this type of leadership, and never knew that being out and being gay in an elected capacity was possible. I never knew that this was something I could do and be, and that it was (would eventually) be valued in ways that only my adult self would understand. Instead, my outness and my leadership journey would both be delayed, and in my own elected student government role, I failed to see the intersection that sits at the heart of this study.

The *Not-Out* President: The Beginning of the Journey

In middle school, I made the decision that I was not going to come out of the closet. I made that decision again in high school, and then again in college. While

initially tempted to place responsibility on others or the environment, I made this decision alone. I was on a process of self-discovery, and O'Donohue (1997) posits, "This process of self-discovery is not easy; it may involve suffering, doubt, dismay" (p. 108). This was certainly the case for me. Amidst self-discovery, I was also in full self-doubt. I was suffering on the inside, but remained strong on the outside. In this capacity, "being strong" covered over what was really going on inside. I went to college not far from where I went to high school, and student government and campus involvement became part of my existence. I also joined a fraternity. I did the things I assumed a straight college student was supposed to do. I later learned that these were all forms of *passing*, contributions to heteronormative environments that would serve in the place of being gay, and would overshadow the possibility that I might be gay. If I contributed to society by having a public relationship with a woman in a fellow sorority (social capital), or intramural soccer championships (athletic prowess), or achievement like serving in elected student government (success, reputation), the community might overlook that I might possibly be gay.

I wonder, as gay men pass within this achievement-mentality, are they minimizing their sexual identity in order to contribute something that is more valuable to society? What makes something *of value* to society? How are those values quantified and appreciated? I was minimizing the possibility of being gay in order to appeal to more opportunities, more success, and more people. Perhaps the *male-ness* of being an out, gay man contributes to this feeling of quantifying self-offerings to society. In this case, I did all the things I thought I needed to do in order to be a successfully contributing member of society - to be quantified as valuable.

Ultimately, the community overlooked that I might possibly be gay. In 2006, I was elected president of the student association of my alma mater, the University of Central Oklahoma. While Armstrong and Brooks' incidents would happen years later, I had many assumptions about what being gay meant in student government, especially in the context of my institution and state, and especially at the time I served as president. As a result, I did not come out. The self-doubt and suffering continued. Being known on campus as a leader was at odds with being known as gay. I understood the realities of social capital, and in what ways social capital made it easier to navigate through society (e.g., as a "straight," White man, rather than out as gay). Student government was always linked to capital for me. One has to have some sense of social acumen to move through and be successful in these spaces. This is similar to the "secret clubs" that Bourdieu (1986) references, groups that concentrate social capital in a way that secures the profits of membership to one arena. This includes relationships and symbolic profits associated with the prestigious group (here, student government). In order to reap these benefits, I needed to stay hidden. Further, I needed to be "profitable" to these prestigious groups, and hidden in a way that accommodated to them rather than to me.

Not Out… But *They* Were

While Armstrong and Books' stories led to my turning to this phenomenon, they are not alone as gay men seeking to lead student government entities. Prior to and after their elections, other openly gay men were running for office, and were elected to student governments at varying institution types. For example, in 2006, at the same time I was elected student government president at the University of Central Oklahoma, Tim Andreadis became the first gay student elected as student government president at

Dartmouth College (Schweitzer, 2006). Andreadis was previously the school's Gay-Straight Alliance president, and despite not making his sexual orientation an issue during the election, people knew him to be out (Schweitzer, 2006).

The next year, Ryan Fournier was elected the first openly gay undergraduate student government president at The Ohio State University (Sapp, 2007). At that time, I was still not out, and was ending my term as student government president. Fournier endured hateful name-calling and cruel messages on a university blog about the election (Sapp, 2007). In an interview, he shares an example of a time when he spoke at a College Republicans meeting after a U.S. Senate candidate who enlisted anti-gay rhetoric in his speech (Sapp, 2007). He followed this speech by calling out to the Senate candidate, saying, "Sir, you might want to stay and hear what a university student has to say about some of your comments" (Sapp, 2007). During his campaign, Fournier named issues like domestic partnership benefits for faculty as a hiring barrier (Sapp, 2007).

Over the next decade, I would learn of Armstrong and Brooks' stories, as well as additional new narratives that would emerge as openly gay men became "firsts" and more public than ever before. But today, not all stories of gay men seeking student government positions are drenched in controversy and bias. Noah Riles, having served in two executive positions of the University of Kansas Student Senate, was elected student government president in 2018 (Smith, 2018b). To Riles' knowledge, he is the first openly gay student government president elected at the University of Kansas (Smith, 2018a). After learning of his election, Riles shares:

> This isn't a win for me. This is a win for the LGBTQ+ community… It speaks volumes to the progress our entire community has made... If there's anyone out there who's worried about being who they are or lives in fear every single day of being themselves, something that I lived for 18 years of my life, I want you to

> hear this and know that you're awesome, you're loved, and if you are yourself, people are going to love you too. (Smith, 2018a)

Riles was speaking to my 20-year-old self. Following the election, Riles shares the following sentiments with his university's newspaper:

> It is crazy how, if you internalize something, and you are the only person thinking about it like, your brain will trick you into thinking it's this terrible thing that is just beating you down, but as soon as you tell one person they dispel all those fears immediately ... I definitely became more of an optimist and more of a believer in humanity because I had all these big fears, and I know everyone's experience is different so I don't want to discount that, but a lot of them were just like fears, and that was it. (Smith, 2018b)

Riles connects his coming out process to the courage it took for him to be his true self, which ended up being more seamless than he imagined. In 2019, not far from the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri - Kansas City elected Justice Horn, an openly gay man, as student government president (Dial, 2019). Similar to Riles, Aaron Chávez was the first gay student body president at his institution, University of the Incarnate Word, a religious institution (Platoff, 2018). In an interview, Chávez notes that his win gives the LGBTQ+ community a platform and voice, "and he hopes that his visibility helps other people like him feel empowered" (Platoff, 2018).

Unlike these men, I stayed in the closet while in college, and mostly as a means of existing with no inferences about my personal life attached to the role. In reflection, it was during graduate school and through learning about Armstrong's story specifically that I started to understand this part of my experience, which included the potential repercussions of being out and gay in student government. The leadership "call" appeared in my professional (student) *and* personal life. I was a leader on my campus, but also a leader among my friends and social communities. I was constantly "called" to contribute as a leader; this trust in my abilities felt good. It was affirming. While inside I knew that I

was different, and working at a deficit, the outside reactions to my leadership interest and abilities were nothing but positive. Though I did not know of Armstrong's experience at the time, or any of these men for that matter, I was not willing to take the same risk(s), to complicate my existence in campus and student government spaces. This unsettling turmoil remained with me until the end of my undergraduate journey when I realized the possibility of what it might mean to give up that hidden space, and to come out – that maybe once college ended, my journey as a gay person could actually begin. And it did.

My *Coming*-Out-to-*Being*-Out Journey

> 'Lost' is said in many ways. It is juxtaposed with both winning and finding. One can lose something and one can be lost.
>
> When we lose instead of win, there is a permanence to loss that appears to make it different from losing, for example, the car keys. The keys, under the status *lost*, seem capable of being found. But the permanent loss of, say, the World Series can never be undone. Still, it is not the notion of competition—of winning versus losing—that is troubling here. It is this permanence. For we can lose our virginity to a loved one, lose a loved one to death, or lose a weekend to alcohol: all permanent losses with no mirror possibilities of winning. The issue, however, is still more complex. That which is lost can never truly be found. *All* loss is permanent. The lost dog who makes his way home is found to be a new dog. Lost love is never regained—even with the same person—but can only be replaced by another. Ulysses always returns a new man. (Steeves, 2006, p. 55)

I started the process of coming out shortly after my college graduation. Following that summer, I took an internship in Los Angeles, California. The company arranged for me to live with a group of interns, two of which picked me up from the airport. They were friendly and excited about living with me. On the ride to our apartment, they started sharing all of the things they wanted to do with me and our other roommates. "We'll go to the beach, Santa Monica, Venice Beach- oh, and The Abbey! You will love The Abbey, it's the best gay bar in Los Angeles." I remember this conversation. I remember this list. I was paralyzed. I had not yet spoken the words, though I knew them all too well.

I was gay. And somehow, they knew that I was gay, or at least assumed it. There is grave danger in assumptions. I dealt with assumptions my whole life. This was not the first time someone had projected being gay on to me. However, it was the first time I did not disagree. In this instance, I engaged in a way that this assumption was *projected on to me*, rather than simply a *seeing me* for who I truly, actually am.

I let the assumed-to-be-gay conversation unfold, and over the next few months I endured the dissonance of proving myself as a leader and successful employee, while also existing as assumed-to-be-gay. In this case, assumed-to-be-gay felt like a defense. I felt that I was working at a deficit. I was in overdrive. I believed I needed to work harder and better than everyone else. And I did. I was promoted to overseeing the Intern program just after one month, and tried to keep an active social life that proved "I could do it all." But I rarely spoke of being gay. I let people assume, and I never corrected. At the time, I did not yet know how to *be* gay in a way that was void of an apology or overcompensation. At the time, I did not know how to socialize or engage in gay- and queer-centered spaces without attempting to remain hidden. And while I did, indeed, enjoy The Abbey, I did not know how to articulate that enjoyment without feeling an overwhelming level of guilt. I was out-adjacent, and I was not free.

Out-adjacent. It is in the in-between world of being kind-of-out and not-really-out where I found myself as *out-adjacent*. In this context, I was comfortable (and more me) around people who had been verbally accepting of me (and potential for me) being gay. Furthermore, I found that other people who were LGBTQ+ in some capacity established community amongst one another, and found a chosen-like family that made up for any biological disappointment and abandonment. However, I also knew the

limitations that existed by not being out to those "back home" in Oklahoma, or for those who made assumptions that I was straight (e.g., "Oh, are these flowers for your girlfriend," "I'm sure your wife will appreciate this," and other public sentiments by strangers or passersby). There were few places I felt I could be out, and where that outness would be accepted and embraced. Far too often, and as my gay identity was mostly invisible, I was assumed as straight.

> I arrive at Damen's, one of my favorite fast-food restaurants. I place my order and take a seat. Since she's not busy, the cashier comes and sits at my table. I tell her that I'm moving to Chicago. She asks if I'm moving with my girlfriend.
>
> "No," I say.
>
> Should I tell this cashier, an acquaintance, that I'm gay? Do I say, "No, I'm not moving with my girlfriend or my boyfriend because I am single?" I assumed that she assumed I identified as heterosexual by possibly being in a relationship with a woman. Why couldn't, or didn't, I say that I date men? Even though I believe that I am comfortable with my gay identity, mundane encounters like these make me question myself; they make coming out difficult. (Adams, 2010, p. 244)

In his autoethnography about sexuality, gay identity, and the closet, Adams (2010) illuminates ways these instances take place in everyday interactions. Outness, almost-outness, maybe-outness, and is-he-outness are all within the realm of out-adjacent. Within these initial reflections, a colleague challenged me to think about what Los Angeles as a physical environment meant to me. Specifically, was Los Angeles a sanctuary space or sanctuary city for me (Y. I. Lerma Jones, personal communication, September 2018)? Was it here that I was seeking refuge, safety, and security from the lack of support I perceived about my home state of Oklahoma? Was Los Angeles, in the capacity of safety and refuge, my *sanctuary city*? While not minimizing what it means to be a sanctuary city for, as an example, undocumented people, I draw on this concept by

highlighting that for many populations, urban sanctuary cities exist in reaction to legal and administrative circumstances (Bauder, 2016).

In the United States, dozens of cities have passed legislation to protect people who have become de-facto residents of these cities (Bauder, 2017). In San Francisco, California, municipalities have issued resident identification cards to serve in the place of federal or state-issued documentation (Bauder, 2016). These measures are enlisted as a way to protect and support undocumented people to exist in society within a safer and more manageable way. In this example, undocumented people, too, have an *out-adjacent* status that, depending on the circumstance, bring them in and out of society's boundaries. Similarly, for gay people (and LGBTQ+ people, generally), the sanctuary of affirmation or policy both provide space to be authentically one's true self. And while this space can change, pending the circumstance, there is a feeling of reprieve once that space has been felt. Even through my own dissonance, that space—my Los Angeles sanctuary city—gave me hope for what could and might be ahead.

> San Francisco is a refugee camp for homosexuals. We have fled here from every part of the nation, and like refugees elsewhere, we came not because it is so great here, but because it was so bad there. By the tens of thousands, we fled small towns where to be ourselves would endanger our jobs and any hope of a decent life; we have fled from blackmailing cops, from families who disowned or 'tolerated' us; we have been drummed out of the armed services, thrown out of schools, fired from jobs, beaten by punks and policemen.
>
> And we have formed a ghetto, out of self-protection. It is a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs. Straight cops patrol us, straight legislators govern us, straight employers keep us in line, straight money exploits us. We have pretended everything is OK, because we haven't been able to see how to change it - we've been afraid. (Wittman, 1970)

It is this self-protection that Wittman (1970) names in *Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto*, that deeply reflects one's out-adjacentness. While there is liberation, there is

also a systemic set of standards that must be followed, adhered to, and honored within larger societal structures. Times have surely changed since 1970, and still, LGBTQ+ people and policies, with various intersections of identity, can be found outside of, and among the margins of society. This out-adjacentness also has the capacity to create community.

***Out*(side), and among others.** The aforementioned CBS news report named New York, Chicago, San Francisco, *and Los Angeles* as refuges that attract homosexual men (Morgan et al., 1967). What was it about the Los Angeles refuge—this sanctuary-like-city—that was a calling for me? What did I see or believe that I did not know at the time? And was I *lost* within that sanctuary? For many gay men, their out-adjacentness is at odds with a desire to be *out* and *about*. Out(side). My own status as out-adjacent was certainly at odds with the desire to be publically free, and publicly me. For some, this is a physical place. Historically, gay men found community within bars and clubs, and most notable, bathhouses, which were safe and private alternative spaces to gather and convene (Bérubé, 2003).

> Before there were any openly gay or lesbian leaders, political clubs, books, films, newspapers, businesses, neighborhoods, churches or legally recognized gay rights, several generations of pioneers spontaneously created gay bathhouses and lesbian and gay bars. These men and women risked arrest, jail sentences, loss of families, loss of jobs, beatings, murders, and the humiliation that could lead to suicide; in order to transform public bars and bathhouses into safety zones where it was safe to be gay. In a nation which has for generations mobilized its institutions toward making gay people invisible, illegal, isolated, ignorant and silent, gay baths and bars became the first stages of a movement of civil rights for gay people in the United States. (Bérubé, 2003, p. 34)

There was—and arguably still is—great risk in publicly identifying as gay. Even entering a gay space like a bar or bathhouse contained great vulnerability and courage. For many, these spaces were spaces for *others*. These were alternative spaces. These were

spaces like The Abbey. But what is *otherness* as it relates to society's bounds? Etymologically, other is different (Skeat, 1911). In the case of gay men out/side among others, it is to be both different and among difference. In some ways, this is to be outside of society's bounds, adjacent, and in many ways, lost in between each of these arenas.

***Lost*, in-between.** The positioning associated with being out-adjacent was also built upon an understanding and acknowledgement that I was out, and I was gay, and that in those times, there was a great risk involved with this self- and public-understanding. Shortly after my experiences in Los Angeles, I endured the excruciating reality of grief, pain, and *loss* associated with coming out. While I was on the journey to being open and honest about myself in Los Angeles, this was not the case for my friends and family back in Oklahoma. It was at the moment of returning to Oklahoma that I realized the coming out process was ongoing, and that mine would certainly be over a period of time. I started by telling the friends who I thought might respond better than others. I worked my way through my friends and family, and experienced mixed results. One friend cried with me at a lunch table at McAlister's Deli. Another accused me of being a liar. More Bible verses were used, and tears were shed. Some family accepted and embraced me, and others shamed and discarded me. "You are loved, and you are exactly who you are meant to be," was juxtaposed with, "You are going to hell, and while we love you, the sinner, we hate the sin." Through both forms of reactions, and all those in between, I realized I was leaving a part of myself behind. I was experiencing dissonance. I was the same me, but still so totally different.

In that loss, I learned more about myself than ever before. I was abandoned. I was criticized. I challenged many of the beliefs to which I had previously held tightly. I asked

questions. I embraced my authentic self: a gay man. With that embrace, I continued to grieve the loss involved in my coming out, including family members no longer speaking to me, friends' changed perceptions of me, and religious and political tensions at work and in my community. In that loss, I became closer to my newly found beliefs. Like Steeves' (2006) lost dog who made his way home, I was a new person amidst the loss. In reflection, I hold close the feedback of an advisor, illuminating the reality that loss does permit possibilities. "Loss was probably necessary to be found" (F. Hultgren, personal communication, December 2017). In that finding, a new me emerged, open and out, more myself than ever before. I moved through the self-doubt, and came to terms with many of the demons that haunted me over the years of pre- and post-coming out.

I also found my community, people like me who understood the power and importance of building a chosen-family full of love and support for one another. Similarly, Lamott (1994) asserts:

> I was drawn to oddballs, ethnic people, theater people, poets, radicals, gays and lesbians—and somehow they all helped me become some of those things I wanted so desperately to become: political, intellectual, artistic. (p. xxi)

It took soul-searching to understand how this appeared in my life, including searching that allowed me to thrive amongst my peers of fellow-oddballs. This soul-searching also helped me move past the belief that being gay was a form of imperfection. Lamott (1994) illustrates this in her connection to writing. "Of course, there will always be more you can do, but you have to remind yourself that perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor" (Lamott, 1994, p. 93). In this case, and by way of existing and previous environmental factors, I was the oppressor to my own experience. I was drawing on what I had always known and understood as reality, which was in conflict with my eventual state of being.

The radicals—the gays and lesbians—as Lamott names, all helped me become who I was meant to be: Me. And in that becoming, I realized that my desire to be "perfect" was based fully on the stigma that being gay meant being *im*perfect. This was an unfair and dangerously inaccurate expectation to take on.

> Accidental or chance encounters do happen, and they redirect us and open up new worlds. Sometimes, such encounters might come as the gift of a lifeline, and sometimes they might not; they can be lived purely as loss. Such sideways moments might generate new possibilities, or they might not. After all, it is often loss that generates a new direction; when we lose a loved one, for instance, or when a relationship with a loved one ends, it is hard to simply stay on course because love is also what gives us a certain direction. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 19)

I often wonder, was my time in Los Angeles a "gift of a lifetime?" Was this an accidental world, newly opened? Was there anything *accidental* about my coming out? Would I have ever come out had I stayed in Oklahoma? While loss came from (after) my Los Angeles experience, it certainly generated new possibilities. I became a new person, and that contained a new personal and professional direction. Some loved ones came along with me, and others were left cast aside. In learning to grieve the loss of love(d ones), I found myself. And in finding myself, I learned how to love myself in a way that loved all of me...including the gay parts.

"There Are a Lot of Gay People in Student Affairs"

When I started graduate school in pursuance of a master's degree, I was told early on, "There are a lot of gay people in student affairs." This was clear in my admissions interviews at Indiana University and the University of Connecticut. At each institution, I was introduced to the other queer people, despite not being fully *out*. At the time, I still had friends and family members who had not yet received the news about my being gay, and with each conversation, I shook my head in agreement at all the queer offerings the

school thought (assumed) I might take advantage of, many of which I did not know were even possible. A whole Center for LGBTQ+ people? A Coordinator who was paid, with state funds, to program for and support LGBTQ+ students? Events to foster and support community and relationship building among LGBTQ+ people? That I knew of, we did not have such things at the time in central Oklahoma.

It was in student affairs where I saw my "firsts" associated with gay people in leadership and institutional roles at levels that impacted me to my core. While I come to this phenomenon through the openly gay men who served in ways I was never able or willing to, I also come to this phenomenon as a result of seeing openly LGBTQ+ people living active, healthy, *normal* lives. Up until starting graduate school, there was something *ab*normal about being gay. Etymologically, "normal," is like a pattern, and, "according to rule" (Skeat, 1911, p. 351). "Ab-"normal, in this instance, would be *from* normal (Skeat, 1911), and interpreted as away from the pattern or rule. In this case, I was seeing people, gay people, following the *rules* or *patterns* of society. In each of their personal versions of outness, I grew to see a little bit more of myself as who I could (would) become. Here, the possibilities became actually possible. It was through meeting, studying alongside, and working with other out people that I saw what a life could look like beyond abnormal. For example, a few months into graduate school, I scheduled a meeting with my program coordinator, Dr. Danielle DeSawal, to check in about my studies, and to make a firmer introduction of myself to her. Internally, I was also struggling and needed to process my transition with someone. I did not know what that meant necessarily, and minutes into our conversation, I burst into tears. Around this same time, several suicides had been reported across the country, each as a result of LGBTQ+

individuals facing bullying, and not being supported or protected in various capacities (e.g., Tyler Clementi, Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh, and others). Those feelings resonated, and I, too, felt very alone. Danielle reminded me that I was worthy and loved, and she validated my existence as an out gay man. As an out lesbian, Danielle also opened her doors to me, and she and her partner, Martha, became a massive support system.

Next, it was through my interactions with the campus LGBTQ+ Culture Center that I started to see what it meant to identify publicly with the tangible, theoretical, and social parts of being gay. I remember the first time I walked into the LGBTQ+ Culture Center at Indiana University. At the time, it was named, "GLBT Student Support Services house," and I experienced an immense amount of anxiety attempting to connect to a space that was publically enacting inclusion and social justice for LGBTQ+ people. I remember taking time before I was ready to walk through the doors. There was something public about walking into that house, as an out person or ally, and at the time, that was a struggle for me. *What if someone sees me? What will they think?* These thoughts rushed through my brain. Meeting the coordinator of the office, Doug Bauder, and other folx[10] who worked at the GLBTSSS house helped me feel like that place *was* for me, and that I did belong. Doug eventually became a mentor and role model to me. He helped me feel more out and free, and gave me permission to be my true self. I would meet often with Doug when I was both a graduate student and a professional at Indiana University. I used the LGBTQ+ Culture Center as a place to breathe. I would often go

[10] "Folx," is an inclusive umbrella term to describe people with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations (Martin, 2018; Peters, 2017). "Power is deeply ingrained in language, and folx is an attempt to disrupt the social ills our society perpetuates with gendered language" (Martin, 2018, p. 4). Avoiding gendered terms such as, "guys," or male-associated terminology when addressing a group of peoples(s), the x replacement in folks makes the term more gender inclusive (Peters, 2017). Latinx and Womxn are additional illustrations of this usage (Peters, 2017).

into the Center's library and run my fingers across all the DVD shells and books that existed for people like me. Up until that point, I had never been exposed to or around that much queer-centered content. There was so much queer-centered content that I did not know about. That library was an important environment for me. Additionally, my conversations with Doug were important, and led me to a mindset that solidified the belief that I, too, could achieve a career and professional life as a gay person. And more than a career, at the time, these interactions encouraged me to seek out LGBTQ+-based scholarship to aid in my academic journey.

My Scholarly Awakening

I discovered Chris Armstrong's story during my first year of graduate school, two years after graduating from college. It was 2010, and I was writing a paper about a gap I found in higher education/student affairs student development literature. As a first year master's student, I received a crash-course on student development theory, retaining very little over the course of the semester. When it came to my project, finding a gap in the literature, I latched onto one theory that left me with more questions than answers: D'Augelli's (1994) Model of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Development, and the concept of entering a LGB community/commitment to social action. While I was mostly able to visualize this lifespan model as a foundational piece, I wondered about the changing landscape of students in college, and the different types of factors that might exist as a barrier to an individual being in this model while in college. Specifically, I wondered about men who were involved in student government, fraternities, and athletics. Selfishly, I wondered about myself, and what this could have meant for me; namely, where was I in this model? And what about the other men who were involved in student government,

fraternities, and athletics? As these are all heteronormative environments on a college campus, and ones that can contribute to a person's fear of coming out, these functional areas felt like a necessary gap to explore.

For me, student government was the most personal of these environments. When I discovered this model, I thought deeply about myself while in college, the barriers that existed to me coming out, and whether environments like student government, or even my fraternity, contributed to my decision to stay in the closet. Theories can often overlook the nuanced part of personal experience, as well as the relationship to said-experience as "lived." Theories are not all-encompassing. There have been many developments since D'Augelli's (1994) model, including both critique and enhancement to how we know and understand gender, sexual orientation, human sexuality, and the development of individuals' "coming out" process(es). But during graduate school and now after, I continue to wonder, was the standard or process of coming out different for students involved in student government? Certainly the standard of *being out* was different, especially in the case of Armstrong and Brooks. But what was their *lived* experience? And what possibilities might exist as a result of that experience?

Where am *I* in the Student Affairs Literature?

Similar to learning about D'Augelli's (1994) model, I had other questions that led me to search for myself in the student affairs literature. What about those who had not yet come out? How were they developing? And why did some come out and others refrain? What was it about environments like student government, fraternities, and athletics that limited students' ability, interest, or capacity to come out and be out? These questions were both personal and professional. As a person, I centered myself, my experience, and

the experiences of other men like me. As a professional, I wondered what it meant to be out and elected. I wondered about the multiple dimensions of leadership, and how openly gay men challenged a possible masculine or male leader prototype. I wondered what was next, and who next I would meet—like Danielle and Doug—who would sharpen my perspective of what it meant to be gay (in southern Indiana, in student affairs, in work and family life, in society at large)? Would I meet an openly gay student government president? What would they be like? What would their *experience* be like?

Studying student affairs and higher education, I wonder about some of these same questions. I also wonder about the experience of students identifying as LGBTQ+. For sexually minoritized individuals more broadly, higher education is poised to become a place to learn, develop, and grow as empowered citizens and engaged community members (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Might this citizenship and engagement include student government? Identity occurs in different campus contexts, such as student organization involvement, leadership positions, and institutional fit with regard to access and retention (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). For example, in one study, Miller and Vaccaro (2016) explore the phenomenological essence of the leadership experiences of queer students of color. All of their participants talk about the importance of leaders being culturally competent and authentic; this includes an awareness and honoring of their multiple intersecting identities (Miller & Vaccaro, 2016). For participants, this leadership style means more than authenticity to themselves, and means leading in a way that also encourages authenticity from others (Miller & Vaccaro, 2016).

For many LGBTQ+ students, and gay men specifically, leadership can happen at the campus-wide level and within-group (e.g., LGBTQ+ student organizations and

spaces). LGBTQ+ student organizations and gay-affirming student cultures are a vital role for many gay males and their meaning-making (Tillapaugh, 2013). Students feel most authentic in LGBT student organizations on campus, which influences gay males' meaning-making and critical reflection around their gay identities (Tillapaugh, 2013). These spaces also allow gay men to create social support systems with peers and campus administrators (Tillapaugh, 2013). In a study of LGBT-identified student leaders and activists, Renn (2007) found the merging of a "gay leader" self-concept within LGBT and leadership identity. For many, LGBT student leadership is a springboard for exploring activism and issues of social justice (Renn, 2007). With the involvement identification cycle, Renn (2007) posits, "Increased leadership promoted increased public identification as LGBT/queer, which in turn promoted increased leadership" (p. 318). However, while some students may be open about their sexual identity, they may choose not to participate in related student organizations (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). As such, I wonder, might students have this same aversion to a role such as student government?

Queer*ing* Phenomenology

Leadership is complicated due to radical shifts in how diversity is recognized and represented across organizations and relationships (Dugan, 2017). For LGBTQ+ undergraduate students, campus climate is a central narrative, including the warmth or chilliness of a college or university environment (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, & Windmeyer, 2017). With regard to gay undergraduate men in elected student government positions, there is a calling to understand the essence of their lived experience. This is the starting and end point of phenomenological research (Hultgren, 1995). Phenomenology gets at the *essence* of a lived experience. And with a hermeneutic imagination, I ask what

makes it possible for us to think, speak, and act in the ways that we do (Smith, 1991). This includes an intuitive scanning of my own life-world (Willis, 1991), as well as the gathering of information about the life-world of the men I came to know through this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an approach that enlists deep interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/1975; van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenology provides a compass for the general direction of how to proceed (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002), however, I have been trained in other inquiry capacities to seek more concrete and theoretical grounding (e.g., *theory to practice*). As hermeneutic phenomenology resists that which is fixed in theory (Gadamer, 1960/1975), I also understand that there is often confusion and misapprehension about the concept of "lived experience" in qualitative research (van Manen, 2019).

> As well, the "example" can make the singularity of phenomenological meaning understandable… Whether the lived experience descriptions are derived from factually or historically observed events, whether they are recorded accounts from reliable witnesses, or whether these are personal experiences—no matter, because once the accounts are engaged and mediated in reflective phenomenological explications, they are transfigured and "reduced" or, perhaps we should say, "elevated" to the status of "fictivity" in the sense that they could have been imagined examples. (van Manen, 2019, p. 11)

Within this thinking, I remain(ed) open to whatever queering might be as it relates to this topic and within this context. This work takes imagination. This work requires wonderment as part of both my turning to and my (further) exploration of the phenomenon. Thus, the illumination of phenomenological explications, as van Manen calls them, is part of the process of doing research in this very way.

According to Ahmed (2006), "A queer phenomenology might find what is queer within phenomenology and use that queerness to make some rather different points" (p. 4). It is in the spirit of this queerness that I use phenomenology to illuminate different

perspectives related to being openly gay in student government. Here, there is a queerness when thinking about student government (differently) that draws on a lived experience that is not otherwise illuminated. The queerness that can be found in Armstrong and Brooks' experiences opens up the possibilities that can be further associated with this population.

Queer*ing* (Hermeneutic) Phenomenology + Gay (Men) (+ Leadership)

Through Armstrong and Brooks' stories, I have a better understanding of the importance of researching the lived experience of this population: out, gay undergraduate men in elected student government. As a higher education and student affairs practitioner, I am drawn to stories of underserved student populations, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+ in some capacity. Do certain students maneuver through their college experience with less equity or equality of opportunity compared to their college-going peers? In higher education, is gay synonymous with the lesser, as Macklemore suggests? Furthermore, I wonder, what has changed since I served as undergraduate student government president all those years ago at the University of Central Oklahoma?

More broadly, qualitative research can greatly inform student affairs practice (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Arminio (2001) enlists hermeneutic phenomenology as "a method of the possible not the general," makes as few assumptions as possible, and points to the possibilities involved with this type of inquiry (p. 250). Additionally, Bergerson and Huftalin (2011) contend that their intent is not to develop theory, and instead, to develop an understanding of college students becoming more open to social-identity based difference. Simply put, demarginalizing communities and personal voices can lead to more inclusive practices in student affairs (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). The

study of identity is something that has been pursued phenomenologically in student affairs, and hermeneutics, in this case, allow for a deep rendering of the experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government. Rendering in this way points to insights gleaned through conversations and texts from men across different student government contexts.

Never having had the courage or capacity to come out in college, I benefited from the privilege of masking—*passing*—as straight. This also led to detriments. "What could have been" of my undergraduate journey, both personally and professionally, continues to bounce through my brain as a reflection and a charge to continue pressing onward. Now out and unapologetically gay, I illuminate the phenomenon further of being out and gay in student government. After all, we are still in a system with an alarmingly low number of out and LGBTQ+ elected local, state, and national leaders (Parker, 2018). Armstrong and Brooks' leadership experiences were certainly centered and captured in ways that were rooted in controversy and bias. But were experiences such as those taking place in other contexts, campuses, or capacities? Drawn to interrogate these thoughts, the focus of this hermeneutic phenomenological study centers out, gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government.

The Study to Follow

In light of the question I am asking, hermeneutic phenomenology is a way of inquiry that supports a study such as this. Specifically, van Manen's (1997) methodological structure of human science research includes six research activities that helped guide this study. Van Manen (1997) suggests the following guidelines in pursuance of hermeneutic phenomenology as human science research:

(1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;

(2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;

(3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;

(4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;

(5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;

(6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

In this chapter, I have detailed my turning to the phenomenon of openly gay men involved in elected student government, including the way this topic interests me and commits me to the world and the many worlds in which I operate (as a human, as a gay human, as a student affairs practitioner). Chapter two contains an exploration of the phenomenon, including the associated possibilities at the intersection of what it might mean to be openly gay and involved in elected student government. Chapter three provides the philosophical grounding for hermeneutic phenomenology, and van Manen's (1997) six guidelines are addressed and explored further within the chapter. In chapter four, I introduce the undergraduate men in this study who identify as openly gay and elected to student government, and in chapter five, I illuminate themes that came from our conversations and their journals. Finally, in chapter six, I share insights associated with what it might mean to live and work among and alongside this phenomenon.

Gnight to you
& the stories that you tell yourself,
The ones that whisper,
"And that's who I am."
You are not your worst moment nor your finest hour.
Not your most maddening habit nor your mother's favorite childhood anecdote.
You've got the pen.
It's your story. You, love. You. (Miranda, 2018)

CHAPTER 2
"*OUT*" OF THE CLOSET AND "*IN*" TO STUDENT GOVERNMENT: A HOMOSEXUAL LANGUAGE

> Unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have "world." (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 441)

I am captured by the "willingness to live the language of our lives more deeply, to become more truly who we are when we refer to ourselves" (van Manen, 1997, p. 59). Language and words are part of this congruence and willingness, both with great meanings and possibilities. Etymology is the study of the words we use, some of which that might have lost their original meaning (van Manen, 1997). In many ways, this study is also an interrogation of language, and how language lives in the world. As I think about this study, I first think about the origins of *outness*, and what it means, historically, to be out, and how that connects deeper into what it means today to come out and be out. For example, what does it mean more broadly to be out and identify as gay? What does it mean to come out and be out as gay in the context of higher education student leadership and involvement? Further, in what ways do we understand a person as "out?" Is "out" the opposite of "in?" And in what capacity? Out of what? A closet? *The* closet? Is this among baggage, dirty laundry, or our uniform for each day? Are there skeletons in the closet? Is that place safe? And is that place different for leaders in public office, much like Armstrong and Brooks' undergraduate student government experience? These questions exist as a calling to explore the many ways outness can manifest, including my own perceptions and renderings to accompany that understanding.

> Finding ourselves in built places is no straightforward matter. In fact, it is often decidedly circuitous, both in time (requiring not only much time but many

> different times) and in space (where we must often move between places to find the "right" place and where byways may be more significant than the straight path). (Casey, 1993, p. 120)

The terms, "straightforward," "right," and "straight" are not lost on me, especially related to "coming out of the closet." In Casey's (1993) reference to wild places, the body is put into action, which includes observation, seeing-around, and physical movement. "Instead of walking straight toward a destination, we must often *walk around* it...At times, we cannot even find a way to get around a natural object but must backtrack and take elaborate byways that lead us into a number of peripheral places" (Casey, 1993, p. 223). For many, these challenges exist within the closet from where they must come out, and be out. Here, there is a need to maneuver, to move beyond the straight/forward and right. Here, there is no direct route.

The (1) Closet from Which (2) One Comes (3) and is, Out

> Even though I consider myself comfortable with my gay identity, I leave many of my encounters feeling trapped in paradox, trapped in contradiction made possible by premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. For instance, I feel that many of my mundane interactions happen in heteronormative contexts, thus marking me, for others, as heterosexual. Consequently, in these interactions my gay identity is invisible; there is, therefore, a need to come out of the closet, to say or do something in order to indicate my same-sex desire. I feel that there is no end to coming out; I can never be out always and forever, as new interactions make for new times to come out, new evaluations about whether a time is right, new worries about how others will respond. I feel that coming out is necessary and important while recognizing that coming out—the revealing of a (contextually stigmatized) identity—can be dangerous. And I feel that in most every new interaction, I may be held accountable, by myself and others, for being manipulative, dishonest, self-hating, and politically irresponsible with whatever action I choose to take—for coming out too soon or not soon enough, for coming out most of the time, some of the time, or never at all. (Adams, 2010, p. 247)

"Coming out of the closet" is an idiomatic phrase, and idiomatic phrases are born out of lived experiences (van Manen, 1997). Out of context, there are connections to other places from where one comes "out:" the shadows, darkness, a painful experience.

Gay youth are introduced to the closet early on, often in conflict with what it might mean to have an honest living (Gilreath, 2006). For many in the United States specifically, the closet is a defining structure for gay oppression (Sedgwick, 1990). The closet holds deeply rooted connections to the coming out process for many LGBTQ+ people, and in order to explore the phenomenon of *out, gay* undergraduate men in elected student government, I first unpack the possibilities surrounding the closet from which one comes and is, out.

(1) The Closet

"Closet. An enclosed space…; close, to shut in" (Skeat, 1911, p. 95). There is tension between these defining terms. In the case of "enclosed space," there is a safety implied that differs from the forced perspective of "shut in." Like enclosing a letter in an envelope to be mailed, there is security in this enclosure. To be "shut in" can be a trapping, an immobility limited by that which shuts. But the closet, more generally, holds significance for many, even outside of the LGBTQ+ context. In text, C. S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe,* contains the story of four children stepping through their wardrobe and into Narnia, a world other than their own (Lewis & Baynes, 1950). In Pixar's film, *Monsters, Inc.,* closet doors separate the monster world from the human world (Monsters, Inc., 2001). "As most kids know, a closet door is one of the few things capable of keeping monsters at bay…Each side had its own rules, the most important of which was forbidding anything from the human world to cross into the monster world" (Monsters, Inc., 2001). In these example, the closet (or "wardrobe") can take many forms. Bachelard (1994) posits:

Every poet of furniture—even if he be a poet in a garret, and therefore has no

> furniture—knows that the inner space of an old wardrobe is deep. A wardrobe's inner space is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody. (p. 78)

For many, the closet is an intimate space, a space that contains a deep secret, a salient part of their identity that, until ready and able, remains closed off from the rest of the world. Here, individuals might choose to confront the secrets of their identity, or to experiment with the possibilities of what their identity means in various contexts. For individuals in the public eye—students involved in undergraduate student government—the closet may contain even more comfort than their non-involved peers. For these students and leaders, adding potential personal complexities to professional endeavors might contribute to a sense of security within the intimate, safe closet.

Bachelard (1994) continues:

> But words carry with them obligations. Only an indigent soul would put just anything in a wardrobe. To put just anything, just any way, in just any piece of furniture, is the mark of unusual weakness in the function of inhabiting. In the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order. Order is not merely geometrical; it can also remember the family history. (pp. 78-79)

This passage has profound impact on how I understand what it means to be out of, specifically, a closet, and I use these sentiments as a guide to understanding the origins of the metaphor. Have we lost the story that exists *within* the closet by capturing stories of those coming *out* of the closet? Must one leave the closet? The deepness of the wardrobe, as Bachelard (1994) contends, can reflect the depth of what it might mean to emerge from this intimate space. However, if the wardrobe is the center of order that protects the entire house (Bachelard, 1994), might that space contribute to the safety that exists before coming out and being out? This reasoning seems potentially contradictory to the related idiom, 'skeletons in the closet,' and as Kushnick (2010) contends, "…you can't rely on

things in the closet to remain unexplored by others or not to reveal their own existence" (p. 679). For example, one might hear an individual state, "I have too many skeletons in my closet." I have heard this rhetoric before. Related to one's sexual identity, the closet can contain difficulty, darkness, precariousness, isolation, feelings of potential failure (Kushnick, 2010), and even skeletons. "But it's also safer than the outside—enclosed and controllable, the closet protects its contents from exposure and harm" (Kushnick, 2010, p. 679). Like the letter, its enclosedness to the envelope is a safe keeping from the elements and harm that face the outside protector. But must every letter be protected? What about postcards and packages, metaphorically? Is the envelope, the closet, an unnecessary, maybe even unneeded, protective force?

At the same time, the closet might also limit the possibilities of what one might envision for their self. Perhaps there also comes a time when a closeted-individual recognizes the need for growth in both being and becoming. But if the closet is also a proverbial safe space, why, then, would an elected leader choose to leave its confines? Is this departure tied up in growth? Can the closet provide solace for those who may not be ready or able to live as their authentic self? Do those involved in student government have additional barriers to overcome when considering coming out? What leads those individuals to starting or enacting that process?

(2) Coming Out

In a medical narrative about the treatment of LGBTQ+ patients, Kushnick (2010) illuminates the historical origins of persons concealing their sexual identity as, "in the closet." It is as a result of widespread intolerance that enables people to conceal, "leading to incompleteness or inaccuracy in their histories and impairing the ability of their

physicians to treat them" (Kushnick, 2010, p. 678). This idea spans beyond the medical community, and exists as relevant to many LGBTQ+ persons and their interest or capacity to be "out." From the closet, many LGBTQ+ people will be faced with the decision to or not to come out. "Precisely because homosexuals can easily 'pass' as heterosexuals, hiding in the closet was considered a viable option for gay men and lesbians in a homophobic society" (Tamashiro, 2015, p. 1). This was certainly the case for me, as passing became the most useful tool in navigating society.

The ability to pass and mask enables individuals to stay—or hide—in the closet while still existing in their day-to-day lives. To *pass* is to move onward, and *passport* is the written permission to travel from a port (Skeat, 1911). "See 'port.'" *Port* can reflect demeanor, or to carry, or in the case of *port-er*, as a bearer of a burden (Skeat, 1911). If *port* is also a gate or entrance (Skeat, 1911), what, then, do we make of passing in the context of gay men? Is *passing*, then, the gateway through a burden, with permission to travel however the individual sees fit? Is being gay-identified that burden? Tamashiro (2015) asserts, "In the new political awareness fostered by the gay and lesbian political movement, the closet came to be regarded as a stultifying and stifling place that itself contributed to the sense of shame and stigma that homosexuals experienced" (Tamashiro, 2015, p. 1). This shame and stigma also came at a great cost. To come out, or to not come out? How to come out? When to come out? With whom to come out?

> The closet does not create mere passive victims, stripped of their dignity by forces outside their control. Instead, the closet makes us each complicit in its dignity-robbing operations. Ultimately *we* make the choice to be other than we are, to remain less than whole; and through our deliberative complicity in the circle of dishonestly maintaining heterosexual dominance, the choice is, thereby, all the more wounding, the more devastating. (Gilreath, 2006, p. 24)

For some, these questions include a "mask" that many gay men feel they must wear in order to pass. *Mask, masque*: a disguise for the face; "the sense of 'entertainment is the true one; the sense of 'disguise' is secondary" (Skeat, 1911, p. 317). It also reflects performance, to perform. In order to pass, must one wear a mask? Is the act of wearing a mask the performance in and of itself? When one comes out, where does that mask go? Is there ever an instance where the mask is cast aside indefinitely? Is one, then, no longer passing? Are they simply *being*? And if or when one is simply *being* gay, or LGBTQ+, what does it mean for the mask to be on or off? On again. Off again. Again, and again. Merleau-Ponty (1962) contends, "Sexuality conceals itself from itself beneath a mask of generality, and continually tries to escape from the tension and drama which it sets up" (p. 194). There is power in the escape, power that specifically can be given and taken away in an instance. But Patrick Haggerty, the son of a Washington dairy farmer in the 1950s had a different experience. Through *NPR*'s "StoryCorps," he shares about an interaction he had with his father, upon learning that his son might be gay.

> "Now, I'm gonna tell you something today, and you might not know what to think of it now, but you're gonna remember when you're an adult: Don't sneak. Because if you sneak, like you did today, it means you think you're doing the wrong thing. And if you run around spending your whole life thinking that you're doing the wrong thing, then you'll ruin your immortal soul."
>
> And out of all the things a father in 1959 could have told his gay son, my father tells me to be proud of myself and not sneak.
>
> My reaction at the time was to get out in the hay field and pretend like I was as much as the man as I could be. And I remember flipping fifty pound bales three feet up into the air and going, "I'm not a queer, what's he talking about?"
>
> But he knew where I was headed. And he knew that making me feel bad about it in any way was the wrong thing to do. I had the patron saint of dads for sissies, and no, I didn't know at the time, but I know it now. (Zammarchi, 2015)

Closets as a stage: Coming (*toward (Bb)eing*) out as performance art. I wanted to be an actor for as long as I can remember. It is only now in reflection that I realize just how great my acting was - to spend decades as not-out, passing as not-gay. My first experience with wearing a mask was in elementary school, where I started to find a passion for theater. I acted on stages locally and regionally, and found a home with other theater people. There was something special about auditioning, being cast in a show, learning lines, and having the responsibility officially to play—act out—another human being. This was a temporary mask, never at odds with my permanent, passing, mask. On stage I could be anyone, and I would later learn that the stage was a refuge for many LGBTQ+ people like me. The theater was a place of liberation. The community held tight to one another. And as I grew up, the theater community contained many of the first LGBTQ+ people I ever met. Historically, while employment more generally contained discriminatory practices for openly gay homosexuals, in the creative arts, homosexuals often received equal and sometimes better treatment (Morgan et al., 1967). On stage we were not ourselves, which was exactly what I wanted: to be anything but myself. And even among my peers, including out LGBTQ+ people, I still never felt safe or comfortable to just be me.

> Concealment conceals and dissembles itself. This means that the open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course. (Heidegger, 1956/2008e, p. 179)

Who is it that one becomes when they are acting? Further, what is it that one can be that is not one's self when acting? *Act*, "to do, drive," act-ion, act-ive, act-or, act-u-al, act-uary. "To perform, put in action" (Skeat, 1911, p. 5). As acting is performing, to perform is to achieve (Skeat, 1911). In acting, through representations and illustrations,

there is an achievement. Here, too, there is accomplishment. But there is tension between acting and being one's authentic self. There is a difference between *acting* as someone and *living* something out. As a closeted person, I was acting as not-gay. In addition to the practice of performance, I was learning the ways to be most convincing. But in the effort to convince others that I was not gay, I convinced myself that anything other than myself was not good enough.

These memories are tightly bound to my experiences with being in the closet, wearing a mask, and coming out as gay. The clearing, according to Heidegger (1956/2008e), is not always rigid. It can be assumed that one steps into a process, and the process begins. This was never the case for me, nor was it the case for the other LGBTQ+ people I met early on. There are no official "steps" to coming out - there are certainly no official steps to *being* out. These are not linear processes. Unlike the masks involved in theater, coming out (was) is complicated. But, still, it is not linear. While the process of putting on a theatrical production might have linear components, the process of coming out is unpredictable. This lack of direction might leave some to feel stuck, or concealed on someone else's terms. In theater, the opening and closing of a show provide a fixed start and end to a mask. This is not the same for coming out of the closet. While a tragedy might unfold on stage, hours later that tragedy is just a memory. But for some, tragedies may play out in real life, with no fixed start or end date. Referencing tragedy, Aristotle's views, and "the tragic," Gadamer (1960/1975) notes that pensiveness is a kind of relief and resolution, where pain and pleasure are mixed. Here, pensiveness frees us from whatever tragic fate has bound us (Gadamer, 1960/1975).

> Thus tragic pensiveness reflects a kind of affirmation, a return to ourselves; and if, as is often the case in modern tragedy, the hero's own consciousness is affected

> by this tragic pensiveness, he himself shares a little in this affirmation, in that he accepts his fate. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 127)

Here, there is reflection and processing (praxis, even), and self-healing and self-validation. In many ways, the process of masking, concealing, and "being in the closet" are all forms of art, and of performance. To Gadamer (1960/1975), occasion matters with regard to coming-to-presentation. In the case of gay men in student government, there is a performance of sorts one must undergo as a result of the occasion. Even more broadly, performance is attached to leadership. The "stage" is a political institution, and performances at different times and on different occasions must be different (Gadamer, 1960/1975). What makes sense for one person in one context might show up differently to another. And this includes the person (or people) on the other side of one's outness. Gadamer (1960/1975) writes about the spectator (which could be a person on the receiving end of one's outness, or out-existence), and how the person plays a role in affirming tragedy or the person and one's experience/existence. The spectator makes this performance a spectacle, and in turn, great responsibility is placed on the actor. This is parallel to the art of *presentation* that Gadamer talks about. Presentation *is* an art.

In the theater, the audience (spectators) are in the dark. The spotlight is on the actor, and there is a great risk to this kind of exposure - to being seen. As an actor, the audience can see you, but you can rarely see them. This makes the importance of the art that much more grave. There is a risk to being seen. There is a risk to be not-believed, as pretending. In the cases of presentation and performance being by force rather than by choice, there is great power in the ability to opt-in to performance (or acting) versus being forced-in to acting based on the norms of one's surroundings. In this case, the love of acting goes away, and instead, acting becomes a means to survive - performance

(light) to make it through the darkness, performance to make it through, as Butler (2014) names, "an imaginary chorus that taunts 'queer!'" (p. 226).

> If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction. (Butler, 2014, p. 226)

The actor (or performer, or closeted person), in this case, is performing to heterosexualized standards, ones that are held tightly together by a hegemony that requires social (and societal) spaces to be straight. Resistance of these standards has consequences. For out, gay men in student government, the standards are amplified and public. For many, their experience is actually lived out on stage, in front of an audience, in front of an actual chorus (some of which, in turn, may be taunting, "queer!").

Sexual orientation as *lived*: Possibilities in student government. Just as sexual orientation can be lived, as Ahmed (2006) suggests, the same can be said of leadership. Leadership is a social construction that is identified and understood through social interactions among people (Dugan, 2017). Leader prototypes are based on people's experiences with leaders and leadership (Dugan, 2017), and gender role perceptions are shaped by messages people receive from their environment (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013). If a person never sees an out gay man in student government capacities, they, too, might believe it is not a space or opportunity for them. Furthermore, seeing gay men in student government roles might also disrupt the expectation that only one type of maleness can be in leadership (cisgender, straight, or White).

If increased leadership and public identification as LGBTQ[+] thus promotes increased leadership (Renn, 2007), sexual orientation as *lived* can influence one's experience and/or practice of leadership. I approach this idea as a process of opening up

the possibilities involving one's sexual orientation or identity as influencing both the experience and the practice of leadership. The phenomenological approach to, as Ahmed (2006) coined, *queer* phenomenology, assists in the suggestion that one's sexual orientation *is* lived. And in that living, it should be noted that the way one's sexual orientation lives within student government leadership positions might be different for each person. For one gay man in student government, perceived gender roles and the gendering of roles might be a barrier to effective or successful leadership. For another, the authenticity felt within gay-centered spaces might be replicated in non-gay-centered spaces such as student government. Finally, other gay men might understand their outness in relation to their Blackness, or ability, and as their identities intersect within their leadership role. Here, the possibilities are endless.

(3) Being Out

> It's something we all share, it's our heroes journey, it's the one thing that all out gay people have in common - that we had to look mom and dad in the eye and tell them, after we finally looked ourselves in the eye, and told ourselves this truth. And that's a searing experience. And for many of us it's a crucible, in which we are tested, and getting a sense for when and how someone came out, and how it was received, and how they did it, that's a touchstone for a lot of guys. (Savage, 2018a)

Coming out is often thought of as a maturity moment in the LGBTQ+ community, though it is not a single life event (Tamashiro, 2015). Instead, it is "a gradual and lifelong process through which homosexuals integrate their personal identities with their public personae" (Tamashiro, 2015, p. 4). Being out first requires a decision to *be*, or "to exist" (Skeat, 1911, p. 42). Bachelard (1994) posits, "But the real wardrobe is not an everyday piece of furniture. It is not opened every day, and so, like a heart that confides in no one, the key is not on the door" (p. 79). The intimacy involved in being out

can be filled with authenticity, and should be at the discretion of each individual person. But "outness" is exclusionary, and Butler (2014) asks:

> For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? (p. 227)

Much like Butler's line of questions, for some public leaders, the choice is not theirs to come out or not to come out in various capacities. "Outness" appears different given different people, places, and contexts. For example, in 2013, University of Houston—Downtown student Kristopher Sharp, who was an openly gay man running for student body vice-president, was outed as HIV-positive (Carlson, 2013). During the campaign, it was discovered that Sharp's opponents made a flyer with a large "X" over his photo, accompanied by his medical records and the words, "WANT AIDS? DON'T SUPPORT THE Isaac and Kris HOMOSEXUAL AGENDA" (Carlson, 2013). Sharp had previously been involved in student government as a representative and senator, and helped get LGBT protections added to the university nondiscrimination policy ("Houston student targeted for HIV status…," 2013). Sharp told the *Houston Press*, "I knew, going into the election, that I could possibly be targeted because of my sexuality – but I had no idea that it would go to this level" (Carlson, 2013). Much like Armstrong and Brooks, Sharp faced additional professional scrutiny as a result of being gay, *and* HIV-positive, and again under the guise of a "homosexual agenda."

In a piece about challenging inequalities, Higher Education scholar Cristobal Salinas Jr. writes about his personal journey to discovering and advocating for social justice. As an undergraduate, Salinas was heavily involved in student activities at the

University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), and eventually ran for Student Body President his junior year (Salinas, 2018). Salinas was the first Latino and student of color to run for the position, and during the campaign received an anonymous note that stated, "Chris, take your name off the ballot before you get hurt. We do not want a Mexican or fag as student body president" (Salinas, 2018, p. 314). Similarly, in an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Andrew Levitt, better known as Nina West, a drag performer from Columbus, Ohio, opened up about an incident of harassment he experienced in college. Levitt ran for student government his sophomore year, and was openly gay on his small conservative campus (Murray, Bailey, Barbato, RuPaul, Corfe, McCoy, & Mills, 2019). An underground hate group targeted Levitt by threatening his life and carving "fag" into his door (Murray et al., 2019). Shortly after the episode aired, Levitt wrote an op-ed for *Out*, and shared more about the experience he referenced on the show. "Fast forward to me going there, and being super out, and super vocal, and super visible, and super gay — and by super gay I mean just being myself. The situation just kind of erupted from there" (West, 2019). Levitt ultimately moved out of his residence hall and came out to his family (Murray et al., 2019; West, 2019).

Can the ability to be out as one's true self be a positive consequence, despite being at odds with society ideals and expectations around being gay or being a man? Do other gay men involved in student government have the similar intuition that Sharp, Salinas, and Levitt had about a potential for being targeted? What is it about the intersection of gayness and maleness that draws this potential attention? Are the stories of Armstrong, Brooks, and others unique or only in isolation? Do positive consequences exist? And what, exactly, *is* the "homosexual agenda?"

Being out, *with context.* All people have salient social identities based on attributes such as culture, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013), and for many, heteronormative and traditionally-held stereotypes exist as a benchmark of what it means to be gay (Tillapaugh, 2013). For some, this might include the idea that they cannot be leaders in elected capacities. For example, a gay man in student government might embody a different form of masculinity, maleness, or even gayness as compared to individuals' preconceived ideas of what each of these might mean. One's characteristics might even disrupt the notion of leadership or queerness on one's campus (e.g., what it means to be a leader, what it means to be gay, and how different leaders reflect others' perceptions of being gay). Specifically, notions of masculinity and femininity might affect the way people—particularly gay people—are perceived. Morton (2017) found existing stereotypes that frame gay men as less masculine than heterosexual men, and that a lack of masculinity could lead to a negative evaluation of gay male leaders. Believing masculine traits are exclusively associated with leadership and feminine traits with being gay, a gay man elected to a student government position might be a needed disruption for those seeking to understand the experiences of openly gay men serving in non-LGBTQ+ leadership contexts in education.

Being out *in education contexts.* Some LGBTQ+ individuals choose to engage in leadership opportunities, and within open stratospheres that elevate the personal and public part of their life and experience. LGB undergraduate students are not a monolithic population in higher education, and many young people redefine their sexuality as they seek accepting communities in the defiance of heterosexual cultural norms (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). This occurs both within and outside LGB communities

(Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Visibility of LGBT people increased during the gay liberation movement, and sexual minorities were pulled into the public sphere due to civil rights advocacy and the AIDS epidemic (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002). Homosexual-based groups and organizations were also cited in the aforementioned CBS news report as picketing Independence Hall and the White House regarding government and employment discrimination (Morgan et al., 1967). This "pulling" was oftentimes not by choice, and demanded that LGBTQ+ people lead on an issue that was personal. This created a new layer of advocacy and work. For gay men in education, this pulling might also be related to policy, visibility, and access.

In higher education and society at large, LGB students represent an aspect of diversity that has faced oppression and marginalization (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Because of multiple identities, LGBT people often experience dual, triple, or even quadruple oppression (Harley et al., 2002). However, since a person's sexual orientation is not identifiable through physical features, LGB students in higher education may strategically navigate disclosing their sexual identity (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). On campus, some students are out to peers and administrators, but not out to family or relatives; some students are out in one student organization but not another; and some are out in class but not in the workplace (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Therefore, sexual identity is often referred to as a hidden identity (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015), and students' performativity of their gender and sexuality shifts within gay-affirming and non-gay-affirming spaces (Tillapaugh, 2013).

Being out *at work*. In 1950, a Senate Appropriation subcommittee recommended an investigation of alleged homosexuals in the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government

(White, 1950). It was estimated by a Washington, D.C. police officer that 3,500 "perverts" were employed in government agencies, whom U.S. intelligence officers described as security risks and vulnerable to blackmail (White, 1950). A 1950 report from the U.S. Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Department, led by U.S. Senator Clyde R. Hoey of North Carolina, declares:

> It is the opinion of this subcommittee that those who engage in acts of homosexuality and other perverted sex activities are unsuitable for employment in the Federal Government. This conclusion is based upon the fact that persons who indulge in such degraded activity are committing not only illegal and immoral acts, but they also constitute security risks in positions of public trust. (p. 19)

The report suggests that homosexuals[11] have an ability to gather other homosexuals around them, thus polluting a government office (U.S. Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments & Hoey, 1950). The report continued:

> In further considering the general suitability of perverts as Government employees, it is generally believed that those who engage in overt acts of perversion lack the emotional stability of normal persons...there is an abundance of evidence to sustain the conclusion that indulgence in acts of sex perversion weakens the moral fiber of an individual to a degree that he is not suitable for a position of responsibility. (U.S. Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments & Hoey, 1950, p. 4)

When not directly referred to as "homosexuals" or "sex perverts," associated individuals were often called "moral weaklings," "sexual misfits," and "undesirables" (Johnson, 2004, p. 7). Some called this period the "Lavender Scare," and compared the presence of homosexuals working in the government to the concern of Communists working in the same capacity (Johnson, 2004). During that time, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an executive order to deny employment to homosexuals (de la Croix, 2012). Those who worked in the government were forced to resign, enter a false

[11] The report repeatedly uses the terms, "perverts," and, "sex pervert," to describe people in this capacity.

marriage, or change social behavior so as not to be outed or known (de la Croix, 2012). Sixteen years later in 1968, the APA reclassified homosexuality as a sexual deviation (Drescher, 2015).

Here, lavender—being gay or lesbian—was bad. Much like the examples of men drawn from the turning to and exploring of the phenomenon, a similar lavender filter should be noted. Considering the governmental context, there are connections to the possible pressures experienced by those in elected undergraduate student government roles. For those impacted by the Lavender Scare, their job(s) and their livelihood were jeopardized by the fear of their personal life intersecting with their professional life. It is at this same intersection of coming out and being out that there is a possibility and reality of being out *at work*. This might be most reflective of the experience of out, gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government. Being out and being out *at work* are part of students' student government identity, as they exist at their institution as "student leaders" involved on campus.

> We want to belong to a group, to a family, and particularly to the place in which we work. Here is the point at which an immense creativity could be released in the workplace. Imagine how lovely it would be if you could be yourself at work and express your true nature, giftedness, and imagination. There need be no separation between your home, your private life, and your actual world of work… Instead, too many people belong to the system because they are forced to and controlled. (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 143)

To be out at work is to be *open*. In a space otherwise private to personal characteristics or perspectives, this opening is also a revealing. Being out as gay and open about that part of one's self may require disclosure and courage. But what does it mean to move from out to open? What does it mean to be *openly* gay? And how does opening up about one's outness appear in relation to leadership? O'Donohue (1997) references

community and closeness, and illuminates the intersections of *self* and *work*. But this is not always an easy process. Many people fear being open about their sexuality at work because of the possibilities of being stereotyped or making people feel uncomfortable (Human Rights Campaign [HRC] Foundation, 2018). Roughly 46% of LGBTQ workers are closeted—not out—at work, and one in five have been told by coworkers to dress more feminine or masculine (HRC Foundation, 2018). So, must one be out or open in order to build community or closeness? How might one reveal parts of their *self* at *work*, but without the risk associated with discrimination or potential bias? Here, there is a shift from *out* to *openly* that is necessary to engage with regard to this phenomenon.

Homosexuals (Out, Open, and) Leading (!?)

> And so, as the first generation to serve openly in our Armed Forces, you will stand for all those who came before you, and you will serve as role models to all who come after. And I know that you will fulfill this responsibility with integrity and honor, just as you have every other mission with which you've been charged. (Obama, 2010)

While I draw on the military as my first glimpse of leadership, it is in higher education that I position the possibilities associated with this population of gay men within the context of elected student government. While there is not one set definition of leadership (Dugan, 2017), there are assumptions and stereotypes about who is a leader and how leaders are perceived. It is within this perception that gay men—out *and* open—may be left behind or at a disadvantage.

Traditional Notions of Leadership

In a seminal piece about student activities in U.S. education, Frederick (1965) posits that the following identity considerations make someone eligible for election to a representative student body: race, color, national origin, intelligence, social class, athletic

ability, and scholarship. That *gender* is an identity group missing from this list might suggest that there was an assumption at the time that being male was a dominant characteristic of leadership. For example, in their study about gender consistency in leadership, Embry, Padgett, and Caldwell (2008) found that 70% of their respondents were more likely to perceive a leader as male rather than female. Similarly, Singh, Nadim, and Ezzedeen's (2012) findings reveal that most men and women felt a man had been their best boss, and that society still associates leadership with maleness and masculinity. Furthermore, some scholars have identified masculinity associated with a trait approach to leadership (Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986; Mann, 1959). In student leadership, there are often traditionally-held stereotypes found in masculinity (Beatty & Tillapaugh, 2017), and some scholars suggest there is a perception of good leadership to be associated with masculine traits (Embry, Padgett, & Caldwell, 2008; Powell & Butterfield, 2016; Ridgeway, 2001; Singh, Nadim, & Ezzedeen, 2012). However, while men are included as participants in studies on student leadership, there is a gap in the research on the leadership experiences of young men and their gender, and considering their experience as men and as leaders (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016).

The separation of gender based on sex and roles sends the message that those outside of society's boundaries are less effective or unevenly matched (Kersh, 2017). While there is a traditional masculine male leader prototype often portrayed in the leadership literature, it should be understood that this does not always align with men and how they lead (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). Gender roles assigned to men and women can be limiting and inaccurate (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013). For example, in a study of the leadership experiences of college men who held positions in

campus organizations, Tillapaugh and Haber-Curran (2016) found a resistance to masculine and feminine leadership dichotomies. Participants' perspectives conflicted with the literature that upheld a gender binary associated with leadership (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). One participant identified as a relational leader, and felt that he was more effective as a leader by disregarding traditional gendered norms. For the participant, relationships and collaborations were important despite not being associated with masculine leadership norms (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). LGBTQ+ students in leadership roles might experience a similar struggle, including expectations related to heteronormativity.

Heteronormative dominance in leadership. Heteronormativity is defined as creating and reinforcing power inequities by emphasizing a binary that heterosexuality is normal or superior, and any identity that is not heterosexual is abnormal or inferior (Kasch, 2013). Examples are based on assumptions, such as gay and lesbian couples having a masculine person and a feminine person; that heterosexual men are not emotionally sensitive; that gay men are or should be more sensitive; and the expectation that men and women wear clothes that match masculinity or femininity (Kasch, 2013). However, the ideology that there is a "correct" way to act and live is a problematic system of privilege that reinforces heterosexuality (Few-Demo, Humble, Curran, & Lloyd, 2016). Here, heteronormativity relies on the binary of "real" versus "deviants" in gender, "natural" versus "unnatural" in sexuality, and "genuine" versus "pseudo" in family structures (Few-Demo et al., 2016). Society's messages of heteronormativity root as far back as childhood, with reference to gender norms for toys like Barbie and E-Z Bake Oven (Tillapaugh, 2013). In addition to expectations around gender (that *male*

equals *leader*), leadership often comes with heteronormative assumptions. For LGBTQ+ students, the process of leadership and leading might be affected as a result of their homosexual identity, and the understanding that male is often associated with masculinity (thus, masculine *and* man equal leader). However they define it, for many gay men, masculinity is an important construct (Sánchez, Westefeld, Liu, & Vilain, 2010).

Functionalities such as fraternities, athletics, and military training programs are areas where heteronormativity, masculinity, and homophobia are increasingly present (Rhoads, 1995; Tillapaugh, 2013). Traditionally, men involved in these experiences exude masculinity as associated with their maleness (Rhoads, 1995). This becomes an expectation of leadership and leading. A type of leader prototype that is based on race, sex, gender, or age often operates subconsciously as a function of socialization (Dugan, 2017). It is within this social stratification that people might embrace a leader prototype that is White, cisgender, male, and more youthful (Dugan, 2017). With this in mind, I was not surprised that, in Frederick's (1965) aforementioned text, sexual orientation—or sexuality—was omitted from the list of social and identity markers considered for election to a representative student body. It was not until 1971 that the first known gay person was elected student body president in the United States.

Jack Baker was elected student body president at the University of Minnesota in 1971, becoming the first known openly gay president of any university student body; in this case, a population of around 43,000 students (McConnell, 2019). In one of Baker's campaign posters, he is featured wearing high-heeled shoes, which he notes was done to be "ludicrous" and "something with impact power" (Anderson, 1972, p. 1B). Opponents asserted that his campaign was a "gay takeover" of student government (Anderson, 1972,

p. 1B). In 2017, the University of Minnesota Student Association tweeted a photo with Baker, and commented, "Jack Baker, the first openly gay Student Body President in the country, paid us a visit today. So great to learn from his leadership" (UMN Student Gov't, 2017)! Several years later, in 1978, openly gay Dan Jones was elected student body president at Michigan State University, just one year after the University included sexual orientation in its non-discrimination policy (University of Michigan Library, n.d.).

Violating "tradition." While Armstrong, Brooks, and Sharp (and Baker and Jones) were and are all openly gay, their experiences differed on what that work environment was like as an out man in student government. And conversely, some of their peers had more satisfying or rewarding experiences. For example, in 2015, former student government association president of the University of Oklahoma, Joe Sangirardi, was awarded The Horizon Award by Freedom Oklahoma (McElhaney, 2015). Sangirardi co-founded the university's LGBT alumni association, and felt his undergraduate experience was positive toward the LGBT community (McElhaney, 2015). "I thought that it was generally pretty accepting. I was able to get elected to Student Body President without it being an issue" (McElhaney, 2015). But what stands behind whether one situation might be felt as positive and another not? Like Sangirardi, I, too, come from Oklahoma. But my experience seems almost opposite of his. Was it the timing? The regional-nature of my institution? My lack of outness or how I understood my maleness within the heteronormative environments of which I was involved (e.g., fraternity, athletics)? Was Sangirardi's experience in isolation? I draw on Dugan (2017) to respond to some of these questions:

> There may be little difference in one's capacity for leadership based on social identity, but the ability to enact that capacity may look radically different because

> of the hegemonic normativity that permeates most group and organizational contexts. (p. 289)

Despite my experience (and environment; and understanding of social identities), Sangirardi was not alone in his positive perception of his experience. Over the last decade, many others have joined the ranks as openly gay student government leaders on their campuses, some existing as "the first" at their institution. In 2011, DePaul University elected its first gay student body president, Anthony Alfano (Forman, 2011). Alfano cites a first-year retreat as when he started to understand the importance of coming out, and that coming out was a "long, continuous journey" (Forman, 2011). At the Catholic-affiliated Georgetown University, Nate Tisa was elected president of the Student Association in March of 2013 (Haven, 2013). While Tisa said he received a few hateful emails from peers during his campaign, he believes he and other Catholic LGBT student government leaders "set new, inclusive standards for involvement" (Haven, 2013). This includes Notre Dame, another Catholic institution, where Bryan Ricketts created PrismND, the first official LGBTQ student organization on campus. In 2015, his senior year, Ricketts served as student body president, and won the election by a 10-point margin ("How this openly gay student body president…," n.d.).

> When I was student body president, we were inclusive and welcoming and encouraging diversity to include sexuality. We weren't going out there on some crusade, but people did come up to me and thank me for doing what they couldn't – be out and open. In so much of the country, coming out was a political act before – and it's still kind of like that here. Coming out still matters here. (Ricketts, in "How this openly gay student body president…," n.d.)

U.S. cities and the homosexual agenda. College and university campuses are like miniature cities. They have housing, dining, community engagement, police and accountability structures, and more. Just as there are many firsts in the student

government context, a similar wave is present in city governments across the United States. For example, the city of College Park, Maryland, home of the University of Maryland, has an openly gay mayor, Patrick Wojahn, who was elected for his first term in 2015, and re-elected in 2017 (Brennan, 2017) and 2019. Prior to being elected as the city's first openly gay man to serve as mayor, Wojahn was a District 1 councilman for eight years (Brennan, 2017). He has spent over a decade in *public* public service. Buttigieg, as noted in chapter one, is another example of a city mayor who spent significant time in public office as publicly out, openly gay.

In 2019, my own home city of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, elected an openly gay man, James Cooper, to the city council (Kemp, 2019), a space I once occupied as a Youth City Councilman through Oklahoma City's Youth Leadership Exchange (YLX). Marching to be sworn in and accompanied by hundreds of supporters waving rainbow flags and holding signs reading, "OKC + LGBT IS PROUD," and, "#LOVEWINS," Cooper addressed the crowd with stories of his time growing up (Kemp, 2019). Cooper was elected to Ward 2 of the City Council, and is the first African American elected to the Oklahoma City City Council outside of Ward 7 (Kemp, 2019). This win is particularly impactful to me, as I saw friends and colleagues of mine marching and supporting Cooper's win and swearing-in ceremony. I wonder, what might life have been like for me as a young Youth City Council member, witnessing an out, gay person taking such an openness to his leadership role? Similar to College Park and Oklahoma City, Jim Gray served as a two-term mayor of Lexington, Kentucky, and was the city's first openly gay mayor (Musgrave, 2018). Inclusion was a big part of his approach to his role, and his sexual orientation was rarely an issue (Musgrave, 2018). Gray saw his gay identity as a

benefit to the city, and as one of the few openly gay mayors south of the Ohio River, cites his city in the South's Kentucky as a welcoming place (Musgrave, 2018).

In 2019, openly lesbian leaders also experienced their own rainbow wave. In April 2019, Jane Castor won a seat as the mayor of Tampa, Florida (Frago, 2019). Castor is Tampa's first queer mayor and the first openly lesbian woman to become mayor of a Florida city (Ogles, 2019). During her campaign, she did not make her sexuality a focus, and did not think it would be particularly noteworthy (Ogles, 2019). But while she did not "flaunt" her sexuality, she was certainly out and public about being a lesbian (Ogles, 2019). For example, early in her career as a police officer, Castor created Tampa's first LGBTQ liaison community (Ogles, 2019). Additionally, she experienced previous career "firsts," as she was also named the first female Police Chief for the City of Tampa Police Department in 2009 (Ogles, 2019). In Chicago, Illinois, Lori Lightfoot was elected as the first openly lesbian and first Black woman to lead the city (Helsel & Associated Press, 2019). And also in 2019, Satya Rhodes-Conway was elected mayor of Madison, Wisconsin, and is the first openly gay mayor of the city and the second woman to hold the office (Becker & Speckhard Pasque, 2019).

Are these firsts the future of politics and representation, or just a queer fluke? It is certainly not a fluke for cities like Palm Springs, California, which has had three openly gay mayors in its history (Bruni, 2017). Elected to the City Council in 2017, all five members held gay, transgender, or bisexual identities, one of whom was the first transgender person elected to a non-judicial office in the state of California (Bruni, 2017). At the time, the city was also represented by an openly gay city manager, assistant city manager, and city clerk (Bruni, 2017). Not one elected city official in Palm Springs

identified as straight, and Bruni (2017) asked, "So what does it mean that for the first time in this storied city's history — and, it seems, the first time in the history of any city with the national profile of Palm Springs — not a single elected official at its helm identifies as straight?" Here, leaders sought to be a post-gay government, where LGBTQ people and their skills are valued for what they are, not because they are solely LGBTQ (Bruni, 2017). In addition to Palm Springs, Wilton Manors, Florida is the only other known city in the United States with a city council made up of all LGBTQ+-identified individuals (Crespo, 2018).

I wonder, what is the climate that allows these "firsts" to happen (individually and cabinet-wide)? Why are there such differing experiences for openly gay individuals involved in student government? What have each of these leaders done to create a space that cultivates an opportunity to live beyond the mask (or the stage)? Perhaps there is a layer of self- or community-acceptance in these leaders and spaces that might exist as the springboard for their positive experience. Perhaps these leaders came to these positive consequences as a result of their post-experience reflection. Or perhaps the mask these individuals were wearing was easier to re/move, and that their community, or theater, was one more able to be navigated.

The Intersections of Leadership and Being Out

Even with the added narratives and representation, tension might still exist as a result of being out in student government, including the expectation that one wear many "hats" – their sexuality, their professional role, or more. For many, this dissonance exists at the intersection of their leadership role and their gay (or LGBTQ+) identity. What means something for one person might mean another for the next. This also includes

code-switching, or moving from a linguistic system of one dialect or language to another (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Many minoritized individuals experience this disruption, including who they are out with, why and when they are out, how people see them, and how they want to be perceived. Some might be out with their family but not their coworkers, out with their coworkers and friends but not their boss, or out with other out people but not their family and neighbors. Each person's journey and identity—out or not—is still theirs alone. This compartmentalization might fall in conflict with one's leadership, or ability to hold multiple identities at once. But what does it mean to hold multiple identities all at once? Is there danger, or risk, associated with code-switching, passing, or simply possessing a mask? Furthermore, do we conflate experiences down to a single narrative rather than the malleability of which they might maintain?

In my case, I wanted to be "Michael Anthony Goodman, the Leader," instead of Michael Anthony Goodman, the [Gay] Leader." For me, the thought of identifying as gay would dominate the perceptions of what I could and would do as a leader. Similarly, in Ostick's (2011) unpublished doctoral dissertation study, one participant, Dean, struggled with identifying as out in his university's National Coming Out Day newspaper "Out List." Dean contends:

> The other perspective is having that thought of, if someone else sees that and that makes them either wanna come talk to me or talk to somebody about it. So they feel more comfortable about themselves, I guess that [is] social responsibility, it's a real struggle for me. And I am kind of talking myself into doing it now, because if I am out there, what does it matter? At the same time, I don't wanna be one of those people like, "I'm gay and here I am" and – which I feel as though some people may think. (p. 71)

In Dean's case, the responsibility is on the student to self-disclose something about one's self that many other peers might not have to (namely, heterosexual, straight peers). In my

case, I was not "Michael Anthony Goodman, the [Straight] Leader;" however, if I had been out, I would have been, "Michael Anthony Goodman, the Gay Leader." This possibility also creates a social or societal expectation that a student's outness is a certain kind of out. Perhaps there is a sensitivity that should be observed here.

Ostick (2011) also found that some students explained that if an organization they were involved with was not focused on LGBT issues, their gay or lesbian identity was less important to their functioning in the group. "The saliency of sexual orientation was low because the purpose of the group did not require disclosure of personal identity" (Ostick, 2011, p. 120). But when relationships in the group were considered important, "it was important to be out and the degree to which they were comfortable being out influenced their comfort engaging in those spaces" (Ostick, 2011, p. 120). Comfort, in this case, is subjective, and hinges on many factors. While I never associated with LGBTQ+ organizations until after coming out, as an adult, I now understand the importance of validating identity. Now, I am very much, "Michael Goodman, who is gay, and…" I wear this as a badge of honor. So much of my outness has aided in how I approach leadership, and how I engage with others in a way that attempts to make them feel valuable, wanted, and whole. I learned this as a result of my own social- and self-oppressions. I am more me as out, and a better leader as a result of my openness.

Additional, formal intersections. While this study centers on male-identified undergraduate students, men are not the only leaders in student government who have captured national attention. Lynn Pinckney, an out lesbian, was elected student government president of the University of Oregon in 1985 (Creating Change: University of Oregon Libraries, n.d.a). Pinckney was supported by the University's active gay

community, which contained a long history of gay and lesbian student activity (Creating Change: University of Oregon Libraries, n.d.a). However, a few years later, a gay man running for student government president at the University of Oregon endured harassment, verbal and physical abuse, and death threats (Creating Change: University of Oregon Libraries, n.d.b). Outside of Pinckney's election, and the election of other individuals highlighted in this capacity, student governments can also be a space for LGBTQ+ decision-making as it relates to campus policy. Aside from representation of leaders, student governments also interact with campus policy in ways that directly impact LGBTQ+ students and student organizations. But what happens when identity and policy are at odds with one another?

In 1970, the University of Michigan Gay Liberation Front (UM-GLF) experienced an immense amount of tension with the campus student government. The UM-GLF and the Radical Lesbians, recognized by the student government, requested university space for a conference (Burris, n.d.). The University president cited the illegality of homosexual activity represented in these student organizations, and denied the request for space (Burris, n.d.). However, at the time, a closeted gay man was serving as student government vice president, and gave the keys of the Student Activities Building to a representative so they could hold the conference (Burris, n.d.).

Around this same time, Pennsylvania State University student organization, Homophiles of Penn State (HOPS), experienced a similar tension. HOPS requested a student charter in 1971, which was approved and then suspended three weeks later by a university student affairs administrator (Rhoads, 2000). After several months, the student charter was officially denied, and the administrator wrote to the group:

> We are advised that based upon sound psychological and psychiatric opinion, the chartering of your organization would create a substantial conflict with the counseling and psychiatric services the University provides to its students and that such conflict would be harmful to the best interests of the students of the University. (Rhoads, 2000, p. 163)

HOPS filed a lawsuit the next year (Rhoads, 2000).

In 1970, students at the University of Iowa had a float in the Homecoming parade, and donned a sign that read, "Gay Pride is Gay Power" (Gowans, 2019). Students were part of the Gay Liberation Front, and were an early LGBTQ+ group to receive student government funding, and to be recognized by a public university (Gowans, 2019). Years later, Carlson (1998) writes about an experience at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, when the campus Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance (GLBA) first had a float at the 1995 Homecoming parade. Wedged between fraternities, sororities, and other student organizations, GLBA's float boldly read, "We're here, we're queer, and we have a float" (Carlson, 1998). The sentiment of, "and we have a float," suggests that being part of the (diverse) community means having the right to participate in a college ritual like Homecoming (Carlson, 1998). While Carlson references the float at Miami University, a similar sentiment can be understood about the presence of the Gay Liberation Front in the Iowa Homecoming parade (though, the times were arguably more tense in the 1970s). Asserting the right to participate in the Homecoming parade, and further enacting a queer identity on campus, these students disrupted the ritual of Homecoming as a "taken-for-granted valorization of heterosexuality" (Carlson, 1998, p. 108).

In a newspaper editorial in 1983, the president of the Duke Gay and Lesbian Alliance (DGLA) was forced to clarify the role of the organization after the student government president vetoed their charter due to the illegality of homosexual acts

(Bright, 1983). The charter had been in effect for eleven years prior to the president's veto (Bright, 1983). Bright (1983) posits:

> We think that [student government's] actions call more attention to its own procedures than to any quibbling over certain archaic North Carolina laws that have not been cited publicly. In a larger perspective, we wonder if this action has any relation to other similar actions to discontinue funding of certain student publications and organizations this year. Where is the money going? (p. 14)

The next month, the student government debated language in the DGLA's constitution that suggested they provided "a social outlet for gay people of Duke" (Rader, 1983, p. 4). However, at the turn of 1984, with a new student government president, legislators voted to overturn the previous president's "embarrassing episode," and charter the DGLA (Opinion, 1984).

Despite challenges to their right to participate in campus activities, non-heterosexual students involved in campus governance discovered new aspects of their identities within the student leadership realm (Dilley, 2002). In this way, and through knowing that cases and people have existed over time, it was here that I started to flirt with the ideas that were emerging as a dissertation topic: what is the experience of openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government roles? And in what ways did this type of role intersect with campus policies, politics, and environments? These ideas eventually led to a pilot study in Fall 2017, which further illuminates the value of this topic, and the possibilities that exist within this form of inquiry.

An Initial Exploration

To initially explore the possibilities associated with this phenomenon, I conducted an IRB-approved pilot study that looked at *queer*-identified men who were *involved* in undergraduate student government. This study was my first attempt at "doing"

phenomenology, and also my entree into considering this topic for my dissertation. Of the four[12] participants in the study, one served as President, one as Vice President, one as Senator, and one as University Representative, and all from different institutions (and types) in the Midwest. Because I remain(ed) curious about the intersection as it exists solely for *gay men* in leadership (and specifically in *student government*), I conducted this study to explore this topic further.

First, participants shared experiences about being different, and the understanding they had as it related to difference in and out of student government contexts. Elliott, a participant, shared an experience he had lobbying for his institution at his state's capital.

> Sometimes when we lobby, and we're downtown at the statehouse with the Senators and the Representatives, especially when we're meeting with conservative ones, I'll try to lower my voice, slow down my speech I guess, so that they I guess take me more seriously because I know, especially in [state], the conservative elected officials at the state level, at least, are very conservative usually. (Elliott)

It is in this description that Elliott enabled an approach to leadership that involved *passing*. I wonder, does representation automatically mean acceptance? In the lowering of his voice, what heteronormative assimilation was expected of Elliott as a gay student government representative? Passing, as Elliott suggested, seemed necessary in order to be taken seriously. Here, passing as a form of evasion makes it difficult for gay individuals to see others like them in the community (Humphreys, 1972). In this capacity, representation becomes im/possible. In Yoshino's (2006) experience, there becomes a micromanaging of one's gayness.

> When I came out, I exulted that I could stop thinking about my orientation. That celebration proved premature. It was impossible to come out and be done with it, as each new person erected a new closet around me. More subtly, even

[12] Elliott and Leo are pseudonyms for the two participants who I reference in this section.

> individuals who knew I was gay imposed a fresh set of demands for straight conformity. (Yoshino, 2006, p. 17)

Even after gay people come out of the closet, it is often reentered due to context (Yoshino, 2006), and due to time and place. Reflecting on his own experiences coming out to people, Eddy (2008) shares, "After the gut-wrenching decision to come out to someone, the gut wrenching continues" (p. 67)! For some, this is as a result of tokenizing and visibility. In self-examination, Elliott reflected:

> So I never touted that I was gay. I think one issue with that is that, not only are you tokenizing being gay, but tokenizing yourself as gay, and I don't believe in that in politics, though a lot of people do.

Experiences and people differ. So, what does it mean to be tokenized? What makes a token? Who is a token? Token: "To point out; which is not wholly satisfactory" (Skeat, 1911, pp. 561-562). What changes when one is pointed out, and if one is not wholly satisfactory, a token? The difference is then seen differently, and *being* different means understanding yourself as different. Elliott interfaces with this decision, to be different, and adjusting to the possibility to being tokenized. Furthermore, Elliott distanced himself from being gay, despite internal and external realizations. Conversely, Leo shared that representation (and outness) has implications:

> It's that visibility aspect, like saying that ... a gay person on student government and Executive Cabinet is always a good thing, because we have a decent amount of Senators who are gay, so they can aspire. They're like, oh if he's doing it, I definitely can... promoting that visibility of, not breaking the glass ceiling, but saying that, yeah, if he can do it, I can do it. (Leo)

When working with openly gay men in student government, it should be acknowledged that their experience—or even outness—is not a reflection of all others' outness, including those who came before them. Elliott and Leo were both aware of their own outness as it related to others, and others' outness. However, as an example,

Armstrong and Brooks' experiences came with great external and political attention. Ultimately, this may not necessarily be the case for all who exist as openly gay within the confines of student government. It is this kind of engagement that allowed me to see value in this study, including the richness of varying types of student government experiences for undergraduate gay men at different institutions. Here, the discourse and dialogue about gay men is expanded in both considerations of *identity* and experience and *leadership* and experience.

As a result of my initial exploration, I realized that my interest was in looking more at the *gay* part of an LGBTQ+ identity. While each of my participants responded to a study that was calling for *queer* men in student government, they all identified as gay, and one individual felt no strong connection to the term *queer*. Furthermore, one of my participants had been appointed to his position in student government, and from my conversations with him, I found myself drawn more to the *elected* component of student leadership rather than the *involved* component (while also understanding that *elected* and *involved* can be very much intertwined). Additionally, this pilot study affirmed my interest in looking at the experience of undergraduate gay men beyond, yet not excluding, the president. In this dissertation study, I look at the *elected* component of student leadership, and specifically from a positional perspective; here, a positional leader typically has some type of title (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013): representative, Senator, Vice President, President, and beyond. While I am drawn to the prestige of the presidency, this study was available to any openly gay undergraduate man who was (out and) elected to an undergraduate student government position.

Onward, Through the Anticipated, Unpredictable Path

This brings me back to *Monsters, Inc*. In the infamous door chase scene, the lead characters, Mike and Sully, are taken through a factory of closet doors, each of which are used as a portal into children's rooms to access their screams (Monsters, Inc., 2001): yellow door, blue door, door with flower details, doors with imprints, cracked doors, multi-colored doors, thousands of doors, thousands of rows. Much like the closet from which many gay men come out, each closet door in *Monsters, Inc.* holds significance to the monsters who come out of them to solicit screams. Like in the movie, some doors are opened multiple times, while others are closed off forever, never to be opened again. Our stories exist in this same manner, and the process of coming out of the closet can be an ongoing process, one that may continue or cease to exist depending on the person. For openly gay undergraduate men involved in student government, the closet might appear to be more burdensome, or unique, in ways that do not exist for their gay peers. Even for those who come out before college, coming out again, and in this new context of leadership and student government, can be an added layer of pressure, and might complicate their existence as simply *being* (out, open, gay, or involved).

Understanding the expectations involved in undergraduate student government, coupled with the reality of being out and gay, it is easy to surmise that this phenomenon is one worth deep investigation. Through existential exploration, what it means to be an openly gay undergraduate man involved in student government is contingent on the experience of the very individuals who occupy these roles and spaces. This includes the social reality of the place and time where this *out* is lived out. Casey (1993) contends, "An important part of getting back into place is having a place to get back into. Since we

don't have any such place by the mere fact of existing on earth, we must build places in which to reside" (p. 111). This idea is beautifully pertinent to many gay people, especially when there is great need to find community and chosen family. Getting back into *that* place, that *queer* place of leading and leadership, oftentimes requires persons to be their own builder of said place. Here, to build that place contains great vulnerability. In this case, does the leadership within that building, then, create vulnerability? Brown (2013) defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Consequently, Brown (2013) contends that vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. But first, to get back into that place, that queer place, one must be vulnerable and open.

Coming out and *being* out, more broadly, are also dependent on those whose stories are elevated into existence. I am brought to this phenomenon as a result of my personal experience, my initial understandings of others' experiences, and the variations of each layer involved. In understanding "coming out" as "a lifelong self-acceptance process," and "living openly" as "a state in which LGBT people are out about their sexual orientation or gender identity in their personal, public and/or professional lives" (HRC Foundation, n.d.), I am drawn to the lived experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in student government as an act of both bravery and authentic leadership.

> Being brave doesn't mean that you're not scared. It means that if you are scared, you do the thing you're afraid of anyway.
>
> Coming out and living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or supportive straight person is an act of bravery and authenticity.
>
> Whether it's for the first time ever, or for the first time today, coming out may be the most important thing you will do all day. (HRC Foundation, n.d.)

Veering Off the Already-Paved Path

Traces of student government in the United States were found as early as William Penn Charter School in 1777 and the College of William and Mary in 1779 (Frederick, 1965). But student *governance* and *self-government* existed long before this, and in a more global context (and including Thomas Jefferson's influence on the University of Virginia, more notably) (Dungan & Klopf, 1949). In higher education literature, Kuh and Lund (1994) found that student government experiences were more meaningful than other areas of involvement, in that students actively involved in student government engaged in activities that contributed to learning and personal development. Student governments are useful in developing the basis for citizenship (Alexander, 1969; Frederick, 1965), collaboration between students and university representatives (Bloland, 1961), maintaining social and non-academic affairs (Alexander, 1969), and embody the principles of democracy (Peterson, 1943). Students put in long hours managing campus events, funds and budgets, and student issues (Compensation for Student Government Leaders at HBCUs, 1998). For some, assuming the task of president, specifically, can often amount to a full-time job (Compensation for Student Government Leaders at HBCUs, 1998). Terrell and Cuyjet (1994) posit:

> The most apparent vehicle for identifying students for participation in college or university governance is through the positional leadership in student government. As a group of student leaders formally selected to represent the issues, concerns, and interests of the entire student body, student government has, traditionally, been afforded some degree of authority in extracurricular matters. (Terrell & Cuyjet, 1994, p. 1)

Students in student government act as the official voice of the student body, and conduct elections, appoint individuals to committees within the institution's administrative structure (Cuyjet, 1994), and have a unique opportunity to form institutional policies with

other students and alongside administrators (Terrell & Cuyjet, 1994). Some students even gain a seat on their institution's Board of Trustees, as well as a voice at the "table" of decision-making and administration (The Student Voice Index, 2018).

However, the way individual students experience leadership can differ based on their identities (including both the experience and opportunities for experience). For example, engaging in the combining of power and leadership creates space for understanding the intersection of leadership and gender (Tillapaugh, Mitchell, & Soria, 2017). In 2004, Miller and Kraus explored whether women were equally represented in student government leadership roles, and found that women were elected mostly as representatives, and much less in president and vice-president positions. At the time, women held nearly half of the student government positions, whereas men held over 70% of the president and vice-president positions (Miller & Kraus, 2004). More recently, the National Campus Leadership Council (NCLC) reveals that 74.4% of student body presidents surveyed in the Student Voice Index (2018) report an equally or more racially diverse student government than compared to their student body. Roughly 83% say their student government is more gender diverse than their student body (The Student Voice Index, 2018). While these are statistics related to student government (at large), similar arguments can be made with reference to leadership opportunities, and certainly in the realm of veering off the path that was historically represented by (White) men.

Are non-heterosexual non-male people a disruption to what has always been true for leadership and for student government? What about non-heterosexual people in general? Gay men? If coming out is an important way to show society that gay people are just like straight people (Gilreath, 2006), what new insights are needed in student affairs

and higher education to support students in this capacity? It is here where the veering commences. But what does it mean to veer off the path, and specifically an already-paved path? If traditional notions of leadership and student government are what has always been known and done, the veering, here, are the very existences of the gay men who occupy these spaces. To veer is to turn (Skeat, 1911), and this turning from tradition(al) makes space for gay men to serve in such a manner. Here, there is a calling to understand the experience of openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government. And here, I, the researcher, also veer off the path. Here, alongside the participants in this study, I become a veering voice in the context of this phenomenon.

Deeply rooted in my interpretation of phenomenology are the subtle connections to Native and Indigenous culture. For example, the "Question of Being" can be understood in relation to our groundedness on the earth (Levin, 1985). The idea of groundedness links up beautifully to confidence and security, and a sense of these feelings in order to "show up" each day. There is a lot to learn from Native peoples and teachings.

> As we lose our foothold, our sense of the ground, as we falter, as we feel ourselves unable to respond to the most extreme danger, it is only sensible that we test the stretch of our capacities and give heed to the wisdom of other times and other cultures. Out of such encounters, it is possible that the capacity for historically original response might still be granted us. (Levin, 1985, p. 293)

What might it mean to feel ourselves unable to respond to danger, or to test the stretch of our capacities? We are not perfect beings. We will lose our footholds and sense of the ground. But we are capable. As I continue to reconnect to what it means to come out and be out, I think of this as *capacity* - one has capacity to "give heed to the wisdom of other times and other cultures." And there is both capacity for the person who is

coming out and the person receiving that coming out. There is also a capacity to be real with one's self before *coming* and *being* is even possible (and before such an openness occurs). But this is still a process, and the idea of faltering or responding to danger, at times, exists as deeply embedded in the task of taking risks. But might faltering also be considered in the search for different grounding? In Levin's chapter, "The Ecstatic Leap of Faith," I am drawn to the *leap* more than I am to *of faith*. Levin (1985) contends:

> Although every single movement, every single step we take, requires - is - an act of faith, a 'passion' of trust which entrusts our balance, our sanity, our very existence, to the *support* of the grounding earth, the leap is unquestionably our most *supreme* act of faith. (p. 306)

But these are also separate concepts - there is the leap, and there is the faith. Perhaps, at times, there is something in the leap that the faith sometimes misses, and vice versa. In acknowledging Native culture and a connection to the earth, there is something beautiful here about the idea of the grounding earth as a *support*. And from that support, we take steps, and ultimately leap. I wonder, if we felt more secure in the grounding (support) of the earth, would we be more comfortable and able to take more leaps (of faith, of courage, of truth)? To Levin (1985), the leap is a momentary defiance of gravity.

> ["Defying Gravity," Verse and Chorus: Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth]
> Something has changed within me
> Something is not the same
> I'm through with playing by the rules
> Of someone else's game
> Too late for second-guessing
> Too late to go back to sleep
> It's time to trust my instincts
> Close my eyes and leap!
>
> It's time to try
> Defying gravity
> I think I'll try
> Defying gravity
> And you can't pull me down! (Stephen Schwartz, 2003)

Because students' experiences are not the same, a hermeneutic phenomenology approach helps capture participants' experiences at the intersection of being openly gay men in student government *and* the environment and world around them. Enlisting hermeneutic phenomenology to conduct a study such as this focuses on the essence of the students' experiences (as gay and in student government). As hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher (me) to bring forward previous understandings related to the phenomenon (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002), there is also value in a practitioner (me) doing research in this area.

Conducting a phenomenological study requires that I reflect deeply on my own life journey (Polach, 2004). Gay people are teachers, doctors, lawyers, friends, and family (Gilreath, 2006). And in the context of being openly gay, there is a calling for authenticity in my own identities that is required to exist in such a research capacity. Here, my own experiences with outness and with student government aid in my turning to the phenomenon, and are used as a foundation for exploring the possibilities that orbit around this topic. If one purpose of qualitative research is to illuminate and understand the richness in the lives of both human beings and the world (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), my research question sits at the intersection of student affairs and my own associated experiences: *What is the lived experience of openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government?* Here, the possibilities are endless.

> It should be obvious that establishing a common humanity with heterosociety is of vital importance for gay rights. I have come to the conclusion that, as much as he professes to be bothered by stereotypical gays—men with limp wrists who sway when they walk and refer to each other as "girl"—the bigot is really much more uncomfortable with assimilationist or straight-acting gays. The stereotypical gay man is easy to spot at a hundred yards; he can be isolated, ghettoized, and easily identified as aberrant. The ease with which this individual can be labeled and identified is exactly what the bigot wants. What frightens him most is the gay man

> who plays tennis at the country club, plays guard on the soccer team, or showers at the gym: the undetected presence that can be neither labeled nor isolated, because he is exactly like his straight counterpart—except, of course, that he is sexually attracted to other men. (Gilreath, 2006, p. 36)

Gasp! There are Homosexuals on this Path!

For years the (mis)treatment of gay people was supported through government (in)actions and a social consensus that people who identified as gay were degenerate and predatory (Gilreath, 2006). These opinions are unfounded, and change can be credited "to the countless courageous gay men and women[13] who have come out of the closet over time" (Gilreath, 2006, p. 97). Despite generational (mis)understandings, homosexuals existed all along. And within this exploration of the phenomenon, there is a connection to that which moves beyond simple possibilities associated with what it means to ever come out or be out of the closet. Perhaps, the possibilities are not simply possible, but actual. Perhaps, Armstrong and Brooks are only just the start to exploring the idea of gay men at the intersection of leadership. Perhaps Fanning, Park, Polis, Sangirardi, Alfano, and Ricketts all show that the possibilities are, indeed, possible. Perhaps, this is only just a snapshot of all that can, actually, be explored or possible of this phenomenon. Perhaps, indeed (Gasp!), there have been homosexuals on this path all along (Gasp!).

I must approach this work holding tight to the tenets of phenomenology that, at times, disrupt the traditional qualitative/quantitative dyad often prescribed in research methodologies. I am inspired by stories, human life, and people's lived experiences. I am inspired by a curious desire to inquire. Phenomenology supports this inspiration. It is not about answering questions or discovering determinate conclusions; instead, it serves as a

[13] While Gilreath (2006) names "men and women" as those who paved the way by coming out over time, it should also be considered that many non-binary and transgender people—particularly transgender individuals of color—were part of, if not essential to, this movement as well.

philosophical method for questioning (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology asks about the nature, meaning, significance, uniqueness, or singularity of any given experience as one lives through it (van Manen, 2014). It is intentional (van Manen, 1997). It describes, and is not a matter of explaining or analyzing (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). I am brought to phenomenology in the same manner that I am brought to this phenomenon: curiosity and wonder. I am curious about the lived experience of out and open gay undergraduate men who have been elected to student government. And I am curious about how their experience might intersect with my own. Consequently, I wonder about the connections to philosophy that set up this phenomenological inquiry and phenomenon in ways that move beyond what I have always known and understood to be true. I wonder, what *could be* and *will be* as a result of this inquiry.

This is an exploration of the phenomenon of openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government. And within this exploration, within the endless possibilities, a philosophical grounding is necessary to continue on in the phenomenological realm. There is a homosexual language associated with one's coming *out* of the closet and *in* to student government. This language, not defined, determined, or complete, is part of an uncovering that is explored in the next chapter. While the closet doors may symbolize a *coming* and *being*, it is the opening of such doors that will truly reveal that which connects this phenomenon to phenomenology. Here the possibilities are not only endless, they are limitless.

CHAPTER 3
QUESTIONING AND (UN)CONCEALING: *QUEERING* A PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING

Room for Questioning

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to *know* the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of 'intentionality.' (van Manen, 1997, p. 5)

I enter this work as a scholar who is drawn to phenomenology. I engage with this entrance as a questioner present with the question, placed in the question, and questioning the here and now for myself (Heidegger, 1937/2008g). I have always had an understanding and need to question the world - both the way I experience it, and how others around me experience it. Questioning the world has always been a way to understand myself in the world: a scholar, a leader, an athlete, a gentleman, an Oklahoman, a gay person. *Questioning* became *seeing* as I approached the world through each of these lenses.

I believe in this work, understanding that the process is often the product. I hold close to Lamott's (1994) assertion about writing, "It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward" (p. xxvi). In phenomenology, I needed to write my way into something. But what was that something, and philosophically, how did I make meaning of my place in phenomenology? Through questioning and writing, I found my way into phenomenology without accepting philosophic limitations. Interrogating van Manen's (1997) idea of *becoming* the world, I

found my way into understanding the experience of gay men in student government, including asking questions of what it might mean, today, to be an out gay man in student government. This includes seeing past what might be preconceived about this phenomenon, including my own experience as the not-out president. As I wrote myself into this methodology and way of knowing, phenomenology found me.

Queer and Questioning

> There have always been children from immigrant families, children who are "different" but who must still be initiated into what we conceive to be our way of life. There are always strangers, people with their own cultural memories, with voices aching to be heard. They have always been coming; they are still coming from the ravaged places, the police states, the camps, the war-torn streets. Some come for sanctuary; some, for opportunity; some, for freedom. What they understand to be freedom depends on their traditions and their life experiences, their hopes, often their dreams. (Greene, 1988, p. 87)

Similar to the sanctuary named in chapter one, LGBTQ+ people have always been "coming." Their voices have always been aching to be heard. Within that coming and aching, from the ravaged and war-torn places, gay people have been coming out and coming into sanctuary as both a refuge and a pathway to visibility. In the context of higher education, and certainly student affairs, education and liberation might be wrapped up in the life experiences and traditions that Greene illuminates. Are questions, then, the dreams that exist for those who never thought they could be [a leader, a well-received contributing member of society]? While phenomenology provides space and capacity to question, myself as a queer being brings forward that questioning in a way that challenges a form of inquiry designed to illuminate and interrogate. Here, I question without an expectation of answers.

I face this work as an openly gay man who understands the heteronormative nature that radiates from philosophy and research disciplines. In my questioning, as a gay

man, a phenomenologist, and a gay phenomenologist, questioning has become a way of seeking clarity. Like many gay men, questioning is part of a personal turning-to of one's sexual orientation. Furthermore, questioning is a way in which gay men are interrogated for their sexuality and sexual orientation. While we may perceive ourselves within that questioning, we also experience a questioning of others, and the way they (might) perceive us. Here, we are questioning into coming (out). In that realm, the possibilities for engagement are limitless.

(Make) Room for (Queer) Questioning

As I engaged in the phenomenological teachings of Dr. Francine Hultgren, I found questions as a way to explore my own understandings. But more than asking the questions themselves, I had to learn how to engage with questions beyond a question for question-sake. I found questioning, and I had to make room for questioning. For many LGBTQ+ people, sexuality and sexual orientation are bound by rigid standards of what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (or +). You either are, or you are not. But this is not always the case.

I draw on Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues in an initial questioning, and as a way to understand that sexuality is more than just a homosexual-heterosexual binary. Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin's (1948) heterosexual-homosexual rating scale reveals that there are individuals who are exclusively homosexual and heterosexual, but that this is not the case for all people. "The record also shows that there is a considerable portion of the population whose members have combined, within their individual histories, both homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, &

Martin, 1948, p. 639). Furthermore, some may have a type of relation at one point in their lives, and another type later (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948).

We must question the assumed binary associated with sexuality and sexual orientation. Understanding questioning should not solely involve a questioning of ourselves and the world around us, but should also consider who we are *within* that world around us. Here, I am making room for questioning, starting with a belief that *to question* is not always an option. The possibility of questioning is one reason why I continue to be drawn to this work and this form of inquiry. I must move beyond the "neutrality" that is often called for in research, as this consciousness is not about being "neutral" (Gadamer, 1960/1975). This lends to how I situate and bring forward myself in this study.

> Lacking embeddedness in memories and histories they have made their own, people feel as if they are rootless subjectivities—dandelion pods tossed by the wind. What does it mean to be a citizen of the free world? What does it mean to think forward into a future? To dream? To reach beyond? Few even dare to ponder what is to come. (Greene, 1988, p. 3)

These questions point to an eagerness to find one's place in the world. Here, as a queer person, I question what it means to be both a citizen in the free world, as well as a person who thinks forward into the (a) future. At this intersection, I find myself, a queer person, with questions that can only be derived from and inspired by my queerness.

Engagement Through Question(ing)

To simply question is different from questioning. Here, questioning is an active process that involves an intentionality around said-question(s). In the realm of phenomenological inquiry, van Manen (1997) asks, *How do you question the meaning of something*? Initially, I am drawn to my personal examples of what it means to identify as gay, out, and involved in elected student government. Each of these concepts has a

specific meaning to me, and in order to capture these meanings beyond my initial understanding, they must be further examined societally and etymologically, and as they existed long before I came (out) to know them. I continue to question each of these dynamics. Questioning is necessary to complete a deep(er) rendering. I must also confront the unexamined assumptions of my personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs, views, and theories (van Manen, 2014). This is the nature of human science. Some of these assumptions include what it means to "be in (and/or break out of) the closet," and how a reframing of this old adage might be essential to understanding today's version of what it means to be out, and specifically in student government.

Engaging in human science. As ontology deals with the nature of what it means to *be* among things and entities (van Manen, 1997), human science is an important precursor to asking questions in the phenomenological way. For example, Heidegger believed that the origin of meaning was found in the actions and tactile things of the world, and not found in some primal realm (van Manen, 2014). He dealt mostly with ontology and the nature of being, and believed that nothing was ever the same or unchanging (van Manen, 2014). To engage in human science with this understanding is to acknowledge how one orients to lived experience(s) (van Manen, 1997). Here, human science studies people, and specifically, beings that have consciousness, act purposefully, and create meaning as expressions of how they exist in the world (van Manen, 1997).

The meaning or essence of a phenomenon is multidimensional and multilayered, and phenomenological themes can be understood as the *structures of experience* (van Manen, 1997) gathered from prereflective experiential accounts (van Manen, 2014). Similarly, van Manen (1997) posits, "The end of human science research for educators is

a critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness" (van Manen, 1997, p. 8). This pedagogic understanding of both research and (human) science enables a praxis that is rooted in thoughtful reflection and engagement.

Engaging in phenomenology. To engage in human science and phenomenology is to also have an understanding of the philosophical grounding associated with this form of research. In this context, philosophy cannot be measured by the standard of the idea of science (Heidegger, 1937/2008g). Further, science does not capture a "snapshot" of a person's lived experience, nor does it offer a deep interpretation of said experience. Phenomenologically, Heidegger asked himself, "What attitude must I choose in order that human life can reveal itself in its specificity" (in Safranski, 1998, p. 146)? However, there is a risk with the attitude, choice, and revealing that Heidegger names. As a gay person, there is often still a societal expectation that involves perceptions (attitude?), engagement (choice?), and disclosure (revealing?). Not all space or time is conducive for a person to "see" human life in the way that Heidegger suggests.

Heidegger taught that human life escapes us if we try to capture it from a theoretical, objectivizing perspective (Safranski, 1998). Sometimes a theory or objective view do not fully capture the intricacies of human life. For LGBTQ+ people, theories are not always fully reflective of our experience. And for many, simply being "counted" is not enough to understand who we are at the many intersections of our identity (e.g., the intersections of sexuality and race, sexuality and religion, sexuality and political affiliation, sexuality and social class). Phenomenology does not seek to generalize, and rather seeks a view of the unique, *what* the essence of something *is*. And in general,

qualitative research requires a question or calling to gain additional insight for improved practice (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). This calling may look different in a study such as this, especially considering the possibilities involved in such a revealing.

Space and time. Heidegger acknowledges that one's existence is embedded in the world, through both space and time (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). For many gay people, acute awareness is associated with space and time. Who am I in this (a) specific space? Are there other people like me? What does it mean to take up space at any given (place or) time? As an example, Casey (1993) posits:

> The home, the garden, and surrounding regions are likewise worlds of birth and rebirth in human experience. All of these are distinctive place-worlds that offer ways into continually enriched implacement. Everywhere we turn when we build and dwell—and we always turn with and upon our lived bodies—we find ourselves turning in the places we have elicited or encountered by our own actions and motions. (p. 181)

For many LGBTQ+ people, coming out is a rebirth, and like San Francisco mentioned in chapter one, there is a refuge within this rebirth. Like coming out as an ongoing process, there is a building and dwelling (and a building and dwelling, again and again). There is also a back and forthness related to the experience of interpreting texts (Eddy, 2008), and this is certainly the case with regard to the very closet from which one comes and is out. It is common to hear of one being "in" or "out" of the metaphorical closet (Eddy, 2008), an *in* and *out* that mirrors a physicality of space and time that cannot be ignored.

While the closet is surely physical, it is *the* closet for gay people that is fully subject to (their) space and time.

> The temporalization of time, as it shows itself in the said, is indeed recuperated by an active ego which recalls through memory and reconstructs in historiography the past that is bygone, or through imagination and prevision anticipates the future, and, in writing, synchronizing the signs, assembles into a presence, that is, represents, even the time of responsibility for the other. … This anarchy, this

> refusal to be assembled into a representation, has its own way to concern me: the *lapse*. But the lapse of time irrecuperable in the temporalization of time is not only negative like the immemorial. (Levinas, 1998, p. 51)

What is it about this *lapse* that makes space and time so important and relevant to this topic? And in this context, what role is the anarchy that Levinas names? I am drawn to an older generation of men who stayed in the closet, and those who kept distance and resistance from any notions or coming or being out. But they are not alone, even if their space and time does not allow for a coming or being out.

> IV.
>
> This moment as I sit alone, yearning and pensive, it
> seems to me there are other men, in other
> lands, yearning and pensive.
> It seems to me I can look over and behold them,
> in Germany, France, Spain—Or far away
> in China, or in Russia—talking other
> dialects,
> And it seems to me if I could know those men
> better I should love them as I love men in
> my own lands,
> It seems to me they are wise, beautiful,
> benevolent, as any in my own hands;
> O I know we should be brethren—I know I should
> be happy with them. (Whitman, 1860/2019)

Engaging hermeneutically. As she brought forward the experience of a class of students learning phenomenology, Hultgren (1995) posits, "It is in providing a place where the extraordinary can be found in the ordinary that phenomenology makes its appearance" (p. 386). While there are dozens of types of phenomenology, I approach this methodology with an interest in hermeneutic phenomenology. Through hermeneutic conversations, the questioning of meaning is kept open (van Manen, 1997). My interest lies in the extraordinary that Hultgren names as associated with phenomenology. *I am* one of those students of phenomenology who is drawing from the ordinary to reveal the

extraordinary in phenomenological research. Such research contains a set of texts to be explored with an openness and sensitivity to their historical tradition (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when the inquiry is essentially interpretive and oriented toward the explication of such texts (van Manen, 2014).

As part of this process, I must also acknowledge the pre-judgments and pre-understandings associated with this topic and this work. Gadamer (1960/1975) believes that all knowledge consists of prejudice (pre-judgments or pre-understandings), and as such, I must approach this work with an openness and sensitivity. For many (LGBTQ+) people, openness and sensitivity can be situated in the everyday experiences of what it means to be open(ly something), and what sensitivities are required as a result of that openness. If the hermeneutical task is a questioning of things (Gadamer, 1960/1975), is one's mere L, G, B, T, or Q (or +) existence hermeneutical in and of itself? The significance of prejudice cannot be ignored (Gadamer, 1960/1975), which can be found through the hermeneutic interpretation of how, when, and where one (un)conceals. This is a concealing and a revealing of one's identity. To be hermeneutic is to see and capture; to unconceal is to reveal and make space. Here, these concepts are intertwined within the interpretive process.

Hermeneutic Interpretation(s): Toward Un/concealment

> The understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. xx)

> When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 484)

The history of hermeneutics includes the revival of classical literature, involving "a rediscovery of something that was not absolutely unknown, but whose meaning had become alien[14] and inaccessible" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 176). This not-quite-unknown, yet alien-and-inaccessible, is something to interrogate further.

> For what is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only on the basis of its context, is also true of their content. Its meaning is not fixed. The context of world history—in which appears the true meaning of the individual objects, large or small, of historical research—is itself a whole, in terms of which the meaning of every particular is to be fully understood, and which in turn can be fully understood only in terms of these particulars. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 178)

Can things ever be fully, actually understood if we were not there (wherever *there* might be), and if not directly validated or verified by the author, creator, or originator? For many LGBTQ+ people, this is the Bible-conflict, that there are pieces within the Bible (from "miracles" to views on homosexuality, gender, and beyond) that have caused people to ask a similar question related to their belief system: are they believing such ideals as fixed, or are they interpreting them based on themselves as the receiver? If these beliefs are fixed, they are not hermeneutic interpretations. Perhaps these fixed beliefs were a barrier to true inclusion and acceptance within my own previously illuminated examples regarding the Bible and Christianity. Perhaps the interpretations were never fluid, or ever actually interpretable to begin with.

Accepting and Exploring Prejudice(s)

> If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us, this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text or the other person accepted as valid in its place. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 298)

[14] I use Gadamer's (1960/1975) language involving, "alien," with an additional acknowledgement that human beings are not alien(s), nor are the cultural origins from which they come.

Phenomenologically, "prejudice," holds a different understanding than a definition that might contain a more hostile interpretation of the term. As a foremost representative of hermeneutic phenomenology, Gadamer asserts that prejudice cannot be traced back to a single source, and that prejudices are embedded in historical consciousness (van Manen, 2014). When brought to light, pre-judgments look differently from when and how they were concealed. A preconceived and opinion-nature of prejudice is a parallel to what it might mean to be gay, including the pre-understandings (prejudices) that might exist about those men who are openly gay and serving in student government capacities. Especially thinking about the concepts of concealment, prejudice, masking, and outness (*being* out), there is a lot to work with regarding a leadership role at that level. But it is essential to examine any pre-understanding that is brought into a situation. And as a result, these pre-understandings should be exposed.

Understanding prejudice as active is also something to explore further (e.g., What does it mean for prejudice to be *active*? Is there an action built within prejudice for an opinion to *be prejudicial*? Is all prejudice coming from a deficit-based point of view?). Initially, when I think about prejudice (and prejudicial treatment), I am led to *pre*- and -*judicial*. Pre- as in before, and judicial related to judgment, both appear as if there is some layer(s) of bias or apprehension before judgment. In this case, what we are doing is pre-judgment. We will always carry these pre-judgments with us; the work here is simply acknowledging that they exist. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the word, "prejudice," is loaded, and carries great meaning for some people. Without proper interrogation of these pre-understandings, including how we bring them to light, it might be a concept that never moves past a negative rhetoric. Not all prejudice is negative.

Gadamer's analysis of prejudice is related to human understanding (van Manen, 2014). And within that human understanding, the hermeneutic phenomenon is not concerned with amassing verified knowledge - yet, it is concerned with knowledge and truth (Gadamer (1960/1975). Referencing his studies, Gadamer (1960/1975) posits:

> The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world. (p. xxii)

The attempt at knowing is so much more than *just* "a research method." When meaning is found in the way that Gadamer illuminates, the methodology disappears into the background. Gadamer applies textual hermeneutics to human experience and life in general (van Manen, 2014). With regard to the idea of *an* (one's, lived, living) experience, Gadamer (1960/1975) contends:

> Experience has a definite immediacy which eludes every opinion about its meaning. Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life. (p. 58)

These sentiments validate a person's lived experience, and beyond validating, affirm that the experience is theirs, alone. The true being of language exists in dialogue, and in *coming to an understanding* (Gadamer, 1960/1975).

There is strength in *coming to an understanding*, especially in the context of interpretation and prejudice. But there is no understanding that is free of all prejudices (Gadamer, 1960/1975). "The will of our knowledge must be directed toward escaping their thrall" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 484). We bring our prejudices (pre-understandings) into conversations with us, and have to make a conscious effort to move away from what they may be un/consciously telling us. We must constantly question these prejudices. For

example, in my own experiences, I have to get beyond any predetermined ideas of "coming out of the closet" as "exclusively hard or difficult." I also must get past my idea of what it means to *be involved in* student government, and *at the same time* as *being openly gay*. Just as I did not come out while serving as president for fear of what implications might exist as a result of that outness, I have a predetermined set of ideas of what *outness* and *involvedness* might mean in the context of openly gay men involved in elected student government. In order to be fully present, I check these pre-understandings in ways that leave me fully open.

The (Nonlinear-Yet-Holistic) Process of Interpretation

> Consequences do not need to be such that a theory is applied to practice so that the latter is performed differently—i.e., in a way that is technically correct. They could also consist in correcting (and refining) the way in which constantly exercised understanding understands itself—a process that would benefit the art of understanding at most only indirectly. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 268)

Freely chosen actions that have a decisive effect on history are coined as epoch-making moments or crises (Gadamer, 1960/1975). While some might believe being gay is a freely chosen action, it is not the act of being gay, but rather the act of coming out as gay that can be a freely chosen action with a decisive effect. Here, a crises can arise. These are two very different points of view. This is also a note about power. *Freedom* is about *power*. In some ways, gay people are societally (and systemically) powerless. Also in some ways, as an example, a student serving as student government president garners massive amounts of positional power. This power might manifest differently in different individuals. According to Gadamer (1960/1975), "The concept of power has such a central place within the historical worldview because in it interiority and exteriority are held in a peculiarly tense unity" (p. 202). This idea of a unity between interiority and

exteriority is something that can show space for hope and perspective. But it can also show pain and oppression.

Heidegger's process of interpretation begins with *fore-conceptions* replaced by more suitable ones (Gadamer, 1960/1975). "This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation" (p. 269). Sometimes the fore-meaning that determines one's own understanding goes unnoticed (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Is this the idea of checking (or at least acknowledging) our biases, or our positioning, and in how we approach the phenomenon (or text)? Naming *fore-meanings* and how we understand something in preparation to interpret is connected to prejudice around "coming out," and the potentially outdated narrative around "the closet." I wonder if much of the "coming out" process is actually determined by what one thinks or feels about coming out before it even occurs. Perhaps this concept is like an outdated theory that has run its course. The interpretation is contingent on what we think, feel, and believe (our pre-understandings). Additionally, our interpretation involves a relation to the question asked by the interpreter (Gadamer, 1960/1975). "To understand a text means to understand this question" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 363). Here, one can find deep insights. In this case, much can be learned about the changing framing of "coming out."

Next, Gadamer (1960/1975) writes about situating meaning in relation to the whole. In the field of semantics, we face the problem of acknowledging our language as unconscious (Gadamer, 1960/1975). With regard to "coming out" and "the closet" (and "*being* out"), context matters, especially if the whole, in some of these circumstances, involves geographically unique or historically controlled limitations (e.g., how someone might or might not be able to come or be out, of the closet). In this situating, one must be

aware of one's own bias, which might allow a text to present itself in its otherness, asserting one's own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer, 1960/1975). This also helps us understand the reality of an insight rather than an implication. In this context, an insight comes more from the "I" lens rather than an implication, which might suggest an applied theory. Gadamer (1960/1975) talks about tension, and specifically the play between a text's strangeness and familiarity to us (historically intended, distanced object and belonging to tradition). This in-between is the true locus of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1975).

What does it mean to be nonlinear-yet-*holistic*? Etymologically, linear is "belonging to a line" (Skeat, 1911, p. 296). To be nonlinear is to stray away from that which makes a (straight) line. In student affairs, the idea of holism is all-encompassing. Students are more than the academic, curricular, and co-curricular components of higher education. A holistic and nonlinear approach considers the whole of a student and their experience, including any deviations to what would be expected as straight (or in line).

(un)Concealment and Revealing

> Truth has been wrested from concealment, either as a result of the revealing or emergence of something that exists, or as a result of its being brought out, unveiled. In either case it is a kind of struggle being waged. (Safranski, 1998, p. 219)

For many, *coming* out of the closet is an unveiling; *being* out of the closet is a constant revealing. And for many, the struggle being waged sits at the center of this (un)concealment. This is similar to the un/concealment that can be unveiled and revealed in phenomenology. To conceal is to hide (Skeat, 1911), and concealing is the act of hiding. In the case of this naming, the (un) part of concealment is the representation of coming out of concealment - to be unconcealed. Here, I show the (un) associated with

concealment as a charge and an assumption that there is always something to be unconcealed. In order to un-wrest truth from concealment, perhaps the emergence of (un) is actually liberation from that which is concealed. Related to Heidegger's conceptualization of concealment, Greene (1988) asserts:

> Concealment does not simply mean hiding; it means dissembling, presenting something as other than it is. To "unconceal" is to create clearings, spaces in the midst of things where decisions can be made. It is to break through the masked and the falsified, to reach toward what is also half-hidden or concealed. (p. 58)

To conceal, for gay men, is to be something other than one's self. To come out of the closet is to create a clearing, and to be out of the closet is to unconceal, and to remove any masks contained an expectation of one to be someone other than who they are (or were). It means no longer hiding. Within this unconcealment, one's truth can come forward.

Heidegger and *aletheia*. The early Greek term for truth, *aletheia* (van Manen, 1997), was captured by Heidegger and other scholars ushering phenomenology into the human sciences. Here, truth "is better seen as something that must be uncovered or as something that reveals itself into unconcealment" (van Manen, 1997). To Heidegger (1927/2008a), truth, in the traditional sense, grew from self-manifestation, revelation, and disclosure. Heidegger interpreted *aletheia* as the truth that disclosed, uncovered, and revealed. While openly gay people may be in the process of coming out, they are also on the journey to, what many will colloquially capture as, "living their truth." Here, the *aletheia* unearths and uncovers that which may otherwise be hidden.

(un)Coveredness. What does it mean to be covered? Is it to be hidden? Underneath? Could it be behind a closed door? A closet? Like (un)concealment, phenomenology involves uncoveredness, and letting things be seen (Heidegger,

1949/2008c). To go from being covered to be un-covered is to reveal, and to open. Yoshino (2006) writes about his experience moving from *passing* to *covering*. Yoshino (2006) describes covering as part of a set of demands expected of society, in order for gay people to minimize their gayness. Everyone covers, and tones down a "disfavored" identity in order to fit into mainstream culture (Yoshino, 2006). Heidegger speaks of "openedness," and a play of concealment/unconcealment. Safranski (1998) describes this by positing, "If this openedness did not exist, man could not distinguish himself from what surrounds him" (p. 218). For many LGBTQ+ people, this openedness is a form of living one's "truth," as openly gay—out—and uncovered.

As I sought to understand better what this means, I was first brought to notions of truth (what is/is not truth; one's truth; *the* truth). For many gay people, the art of "living your truth," links to *outness*. To be out is to "live your truth." In this case, one's truth is one's identity as gay. Conversely, my earliest understandings of truth came from religious teaching. This kind of truth was fixed. As my early phenomenology and philosophy readings progressed, this interpretation became more complex. Heidegger (1962/2008b) suggests that there is no metahistorical criterion of truth. Does this, then, mean that one's truth is their truth alone? Is it possible to have many truths? And what is the difference between unconcealment and truth? Krell (2008) describes this, and asserts, "To *let* unconcealment *show itself*: this is perhaps the most succinct formulation of the task of Heidegger's thinking" (p. 113). In this case, truth is more than the reverse of concealing. There is something explicit about (un)concealment that requires an openly gay person to show oneself.

While Plato believed in an absoluteness of truth, Heidegger asserts a "truth happening" taking place in one's self- and world-relationship (Heidegger, 1927/2008a). The more inward Man becomes, the more burdensome life becomes (Heidegger, 1927/2008a). In many ways, this relates to the coming out process and what it means for a person to be gay as the truth happening within one's relationship with self. Furthermore, I think about the difference between *truth* and *truth happening*. "Truth happening" is more active, and in real-time. This is inwardness, and "such inwardness, as a rule, is too weak to bear his own world, but it is strong enough to let him perceive the necessary objectification and institutionalization of his social world as an imposition and an 'untruth'" (Safranski, 1998, p. 160). Before living out one's truth (declaratively and *out*-wardly), one must conquer the untruth that is held captive in struggle. For many out gay men, this might require a queering: acknowledging their place as different in the world. A queering takes place within that (un)concealment, and as one defines oneself as different. Here, in their uncovering, a queering is possible.

A Queering

> What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as orientation? What difference does it make "what" or "who" we are orientated toward in the very direction of our desire? If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1)

What does it mean to *queer* something? To queer phenomenology? For something to be *queer*(ed) is to make something different. Butler (2014) (re)connects "queer" to the question of opposition, stability, and variability within performativity. "The term 'queer' has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation"

(Butler, 2014, p. 226). Here, "queer" is linked to accusation, pathologization, and insult among homophobic communities and formed through time (Butler, 2014). Much like my own experience with "queer," there is a layer of homophobia built around what it means to be or even possibly be queer. Queer is different. Queer is abstract. Within the homophobia associated with queer(ness), the masking and passing involved with outness are more clear and present than ever. As a result, I approach this study, and the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, as a calling to *queer* research.

In 2005, Renn and Bilodeau studied the relationship between student involvement in leadership activities and the development of LGBT campus leaders and activists. The authors looked at experiences that supported participants' growth as student leaders, as well as context-specific involvement in the LGBT community (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Context-specific student leadership is where my study will add to the discourse, moving from *LGBT* to *gay*, and *campus leadership* to *student government*. Next, Renn's (2007) study of LGBT-identified student leaders and activists supports a calling for more dialogue at this same intersection of identity- and context-specific involvement. Renn (2007) found that leadership in an LGBT group led some individuals to serve in other leadership capacities, including student government, administrative committees, and activism within other social justice arenas. Participants' involvement in an LGBT student group aided in their leadership development, which led to increased outness (Renn, 2007). Here, outness and visibility enable student leadership and growth.

Queer(ing) Phenomenology (Again)

I always understood "queer" as a noun, and as a slur or attack on people who were different - namely, LGBTQ+ people. It was not until years into coming out that I realized

“queer” also (re)claimed (and proclaimed) a home within both academic contexts and personal liberation. For many, queer is a badge of honor. It would be many years until I identified myself as “queer,” and I juggled understanding how difference was related in this context. This included my personal sexuality, and to others, my sexual orientation. Phenomenology, like queering something, makes things different. And there is freedom within this difference. Greene (1988) posits, “The matter of freedom, then, in a diverse society is also a matter of power, as it involves the issue of a public space” (Greene, 1988, p. 116). The public space in this capacity involves a coming out and being out that is absolutely queer.

According to Ahmed (2006), “A queer phenomenology might find what is queer within phenomenology and use that queerness to make some rather different points” (p. 4). In the case of Heidegger, as I acknowledge that his work is essential to use in phenomenology, I will not leave out his anti-LGBTQ+ affiliations, especially as they conflict with the topic of this study. Instead, I illuminate the way *queering* something parallels with that which is made different in phenomenology. There remains a tension when “queer,” the previously pejorative term, is reclaimed. Ahmed (2006) notes that the question of orientation becomes not only how we “find our way” but how we come to “feel at home” (p. 7). Again, this is not linear. Further, “The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 21). Where “coming out of the closet” can be perceived as an act of rebellion, it is also about liberation. In coming out within the queerness, one comes closer to finding “one’s way,” one’s home. One is out. One is liberated. And in many ways, one is free.

Queering Heidegger

Acknowledging Heidegger's Nazi past moves beyond his passive affiliation. Here, Nazi wrongdoings also impacted the gay community, as homosexuals were deemed "socially aberrant" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.a). In 1933, Adolf Hitler banned all gay and lesbian organizations, and gay men were subject to a criminal code that named their behavior as "lewd and lascivious;" as a result, sexual acts between men were banned (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.a). Nazi Heinrich Himmler was a central architect of the persecution of homosexuals, and this hatred within the Nazi party was as a result of his personal obsession that viewed homosexuals as "incarnations of moral degeneracy" (Miller, 2006, p. 195). Nazi officials persecuted homosexual men by dissolving homosexual organizations to assigning internment in concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b). Because they did not "contribute to the desired growth of the 'Aryan population,'" gay men were targeted and perceived as corrupting German values (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b). Under Himmler's order, and despite there being some homosexuals in the Nazi party who were overlooked by Hitler, detained homosexuals were subject to castration and medical experiments (Miller, 2006). It is estimated that around 100,000 men were arrested between 1933 and 1945 in violation of Germany's homosexuality law, and under Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code, homosexuality remained illegal (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b).

The use of Heidegger in reference to a study of gay men is at odds with what it might mean to be gay. The acknowledgement that gay men and lesbian women were also persecuted in the Holocaust as a result of their sexual identity (sexual orientation) is

essential and necessary to name. While containing much less violent and egregious outcomes, the themes of "aberrant" and "lewd" existed as some of my first understandings of "queer," what it might mean to be queer, and who and what exactly was queer. Furthermore, while the number of gay men who perished is unknown, it is estimated that 5,000 to 15,000 gay men were sent to concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b). Homosexuals were treated harshly and abused in concentration camps, and were marked by pink triangles to signify homosexuality (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b).

In a Phenomenology II course, my colleagues and I challenged one another to make meaning of Heidegger's Nazi affiliation, and how that past influences or appears in phenomenological writings. Some scholars use Heidegger without apology, whereas others intentionally name his Nazi past as a form of positionality. Some choose not to include Heidegger at all. Consequently, there is no doubt that Heidegger contributed greatly to scholarship and understanding around phenomenology and knowing. But Heidegger was a Nazi, and his wife, Elfride, who stood by his side throughout his career, was also a Nazi. She was even cited as an "aggravating circumstance" for Heidegger during his denazification process (Safranski, 1998, p. 378). At the time, people questioned if Heidegger was a good philosopher, or a "charlatan," as some named him (Safranski, 1998, p. 390). And still, people might ask the same question of this once backer of the Nazi regime.

A history such as this might also lead one to wonder why I chose to use Heidegger as part of my philosophical grounding. To do phenomenology is to also name and unpack the politics and possibilities of a painful past. This includes my use of

Heidegger as a pioneer for this form of inquiry, while also naming and noting—not honoring—the associations that he held dear. I sat in dissonance with Heidegger's texts – valuing his work, and at the same time, critically questioning his personal history. In some ways, this can be an interpretive form of liberating ourselves, as Heidegger (1937/2008g) names as a question of metaphysics. This liberation is centered when looking at Heidegger's body of work as a grounding for this form of inquiry. In many ways, *queering* Heidegger is a form of reclaiming the spaces that are occupied by his passive involvement in the Nazi party. To leave Heidegger out of this philosophical grounding would be a disservice to the way(s) I understand and came to know phenomenology. But does this come at a cost? What does it mean to have Heidegger as a "grounding," and associated with my (queer) work? Beyond this study, I must continue to sit with Heidegger and his body of work as a way to challenge and further queer the ways I capture and understand his work in this context.

Heidegger (1949/2008c) contends that the essence of truth reveals itself as freedom. But what is this freedom that Heidegger names? Is it unconcealment? Is it self-realization? Is it t/Truth? According to Heidegger (1949/2008c), concerning truth as disclosedness, concealment is undisclosedness, an untruth that is proper to the essence of truth. Like coming out of the closet (in a not-yet-out state), there are deep connections to Heidegger's idea of letting beings as a whole be. This discloses and conceals at the same time (Heidegger, 1949/2008c). There is mystery in this frame of thinking, much like that of one's coming out journey. In this case, would being not-out but gay be an unconcealment of one's concealed truth?

> Man clings to what is readily available and controllable even where ultimate matters are concerned. And if he sets out to extend, change, newly assimilate, or

> secure the openedness of the beings pertaining to the most various domains of his activity and interest, then he still takes his directives from the sphere of readily available intentions and needs. (Heidegger, 1949/2008c, p. 131)

In the context of someone not yet out, clinging to the controlled is part of establishing one's place in one's own coming out process. This can be a positioning of sorts. "Truth is the unconcealment of beings as beings. Truth is the truth of Being" (Heidegger, 1956/2008e, p. 206). Heidegger goes on about the parallel of concealment and conformity:

> The entire *realm* in which this "conforming to something" goes on must already occur as a whole in the unconcealed; and this holds equally of that *for* which the conformity of a proposition to a matter becomes manifest. (p. 177)

When I first started to explore the possibilities of what Heidegger means in reference to the "whole in the unconcealed," I learned of one colleague's interpretation of unconcealed as an all-encompassing approach. Can one interpret Heidegger's idea of concealment outside of something as major as the (whole) (B?)being? With regard to the coming out journey, there is a whole-ness that is missing within the concealment of one's gay identity. For some, they feel *un*-whole, or empty. Their t/Truth had yet to be acknowledged or explored. But this is an active process, to conceal something that which makes someone whole. This idea is captured by Heidegger (1956/2008e):

> One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the latter, a few obstruct many, one denies all. Here concealment is not simple refusal. Rather, a being appears, but presents itself as other than it is. (p. 179)

Is Heidegger's questioning of Being, in turn, *queering* Being? For whatever reason, one making the conscious decision to *not* come out is not a simple endeavor. Similar to the aforementioned act of wearing a mask, a person may feel personally obligated to present as something other than one's true and authentic self. Is this

Heidegger's idea of the being placing itself in front of another being also as a person placing one part of this in front of another part of oneself? Is this a more philosophical version of *masking*? Without explicitly using the mask metaphor, Heidegger is calling out the idea of wearing a mask ("a being appears, but presents itself as other than it is").

Queering. For many people who have yet to come out, this idea is critical for survival - figuratively and sometimes, literally.

Queer Groundedness, Rootedness; Queer *Existence*

Heidegger had a passion for asking questions rather than providing answers (Safranski, 1998), and developed the philosophy of *Dasein* as (human) *existence*. As I initially sought to understand the intersections of *Dasein* and Being, I was drawn to Heidegger's (1927/2008a) assertion, "The question of Being demands that the right access to beings be gained and secured in advance with regard to what it interrogates" (p. 47). Are Being and *Dasein* one in the same? Does Being describe the *existence* that *is Dasein*? In the context of being out as gay, there is also a calling for authenticity that is required to exist in such a capacity:

> I think we need to ask ourselves: of what are we capable? This question focuses attention on our capacity to *develop* the character of our primordial relationship to Being as a whole *by virtue of* our motility. What is at stake? Among other things, we may say: Our groundedness, our rootedness, our autochthony, our balance and upright stature, our bearing and carriage, our steadiness of gait, our path, and the goals on this path: in sum, every aspect of our motility *in relation to Being as such.* (Levin, 1985, pp. 94-95)

Is this association with Being what Heidegger suggests as *Dasein*? For queer people, our groundedness and rootedness *are* our existence, the makeup of our Being, and the all-consuming and malleable nature of motility. Ultimately, we have a choice as we establish how we live our lives. Our existence is not given to us. We create our existence

by the choices[15] we make. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes about an interfusion between sexuality and existence, in that existence permeates sexuality and vice versa. Here, sexuality is a form of being rather than a sexual act between beings. For many, being out and/or gay, *is* a moral-existential dilemma. The pure essence of their being, and specifically their Being as gay, is a pure and exact act of being one's true self. To unconceal this philosophically, both hermeneutics and prejudice are paths to unearth additional possibilities.

A Queer, Approaching Hermeneutic Phenomenology

> While there is great relief from finally revealing the secret of your true sexuality, another internal tug-of-war begins to churn within you. You feel compelled to become the best, most successful, beautiful, and creative man you can be. You lurch forward into life, leaving achievement and creativity strewn in your path. You must prove to the world that you are no longer shameful. It is at this juncture in life, torn between the shame of your sexuality and a burning rage at the world that made you feel shameful, that you enter the second stage of the gay man's journey. (Downs, 2006, p. 70)

I, too, experience the tug-of-war that Downs names. I feel compelled to become the best, to be successful, beautiful, and creative, and to prove to the world that I am not shameful, and that there is nothing shameful about me. I am on this journey, as a gay man doing the work of phenomenology. Here, I name myself, "a queer," with a similar reclaiming that is required of me within the context of homosexuality. No longer clinical or shameful, I enter this realm of research as a (reclaiming and) proclaiming that my identities are intertwined with not only the topic of openly gay men in elected student government, but also the ways I do research and identify with any type of human inquiry.

[15] Here, the "choices" are to come out, and how, and when. "Choice," in this context, does not signal that being gay or identifying as LGBTQ+ (in some capacity) is a choice.

But to be beautiful and creative, as Downs suggests, might be at odds with what it means to do research. To do phenomenology, in this case at the intersection of being gay and being a leader, I must resist the shame and rage that might sit at the center of another (queer's) questioning. I must move from homosexual to queer, and from clinical to liberated. I am no longer just a homosexual doing research. I am a queer, inquiring. Much like that of questioning, I wonder, how do my own lived experiences connect to others' experiences? Are they as queer as mine? Do they have to be? And what of society qualifies what is and is not queer (enough)? Here, the hegemony of straightness may complicate the possibilities for queer advancement. Greene (1988) posits:

> The [hegemonic] persuasion is often so quiet, so seductive, so disguised that it renders young people acquiescent to power without their realizing it...This may be because the message or the direction emphasizes an opportunity system or a stratification system offering a limited range of possibilities. (pp. 133-134)

Green's points about hegemony are necessary to be named in order to infiltrate such a stratified system. This system (of higher education, heteronormativity) may limit the range of possibilities for openly gay undergraduate men. Within this limitation is a calling to conduct research in a way that reveals the essence of the phenomenon. This revealing is done through phenomenological research, as I seek to understand the lived experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government.

Doing Phenomenological Research: A Call for the Unconcealed

When I finished my master's degree at Indiana University, I walked across the stage and swore that I would never pursue a doctorate degree. At the time, I did not understand what it meant to research, nor did I understand the multiple dimensions of research. It was tapping into my curiosity and desire to question that led me not only to a doctoral program, but also to phenomenology as a form of inquiry. Phenomenology seeks

to get at the essence of what it is like for multiple individuals to be openly gay in various student government contexts, rather than a description of one person being openly gay (e.g., narrative inquiry), or a bounded system of multiple gay men in student government at a particular institution (e.g., case study). I enlist hermeneutic phenomenology over other approaches because I want to look beyond a single person or institutional experience, and want to examine the experience in multiple geographic contexts and from different perspectives. For example, I frequently wonder, what are the geo-political contexts that provide different spaces for naming this experience? In my study, I have participants from various institution types and geographic backgrounds. Furthermore, being "out" in a student government leadership position might mean something different if the student were at a religious-affiliated school, a school in the Northeast versus the South, or at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Being out may be different for a president than it is for a chair or speaker of the representative body.

I came to this study acknowledging my background being from Oklahoma, having served in an elected student government role, and consciously choosing *not* to come out. In this situating, I am aware of my own biases, which might allow a text to present itself in its otherness, asserting my own truth against my own fore-meanings (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Here, I create meaning within the hermeneutical approach (Hultgren, 1993). This includes my story as a past student government representative as just as important as the experience of the men who participated in this study. In many ways, I am *in*-community, in my community, with my participants. Dahl (2010) asserts:

> Let me now pause to ask: what does it mean, then, to study 'one's own community'? First of all, any study of a 'community' requires that we define that community– in time and space as much as in movement and this requires a

> discussion of how belonging to such a community is structured." (Dahl, 2010, p. 152)

Belonging to both the student government community and LGBTQ+ community allows me to study "my own community(ies)" in a thoughtful and descriptive manner. This includes the importance of words, environment, etymology, and the deep interpretation of multiple conversations and texts, some of which only an *in*-community member will be able to access, examine, or understand. In order to do this work it is also important to understand the work that has been done before. The following dissertation studies have captured phenomenology in a similar way in which I initially sought to do this work.

Previous Dissertation Research and Phenomenological Unconcealing

A review of unpublished student affairs phenomenological dissertations conducted at the University of Maryland help illustrate the approach I am taking with hermeneutic phenomenology. For example, Grande (2004) engages with college students becoming secular Jews, and focuses on the day-to-day experiences of Jewish individuals who were challenging conventional interpretations of Judaism. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, Grande (2004) brings forward the voices of students by starting with his own journey into secular Jewishness. Also studying identity within a similar context, Gomez-Riquelme (2012) explores the experiences of nine peer mentees in a Latina/o program, and reflects on his personal connection to the topic:

> For me, it has been very difficult to stay focused on my phenomenological question. One of the reasons is that the gains and the descriptions I can recall during 10 years of contact with mentoring have made it easier to follow the typical clichés of mentoring, rather than the pursuit of a deeper understanding of what is meant or rather lived when being mentored. (p. 165)

Here, Gomez-Riquelme (2012) illustrates the challenge involved with studying the *essence* of an experience, one that might be complicated by the researcher as a co-

researcher. Similarly, Eddy (2008) focuses on the college aspect of gay males' experiences, and specifically refers to his participants as "co-researchers." Nadler (2007), exploring the experiences of doing academic advising, refers to her participants as co-constructors in the research project. She worked with six academic advisors while reflecting on her own experiences with students.

Within these and other studies, *questioning* emerges to align with van Manen's (2014) approach to phenomenology as a philosophical method for questioning. For example, in Monahan-Kreishman's (2012) study of six sexual assault survivors who lived through rape while in college, questioning continues even after the study officially concluded.

> Here, at the end of the path, at the end of the (re)search, I find that I am at no ending at all. I am standing on the edge of a new beginning, where new questions have yet to be asked. Where do we go from here? Now that we have explored this piece of survival, what pieces have been opened up? (Monahan-Kreishman, 2012, p. 402)

It is in this questioning that Monahan-Kreishman (2012) illuminates the "new beginning" that presents itself. Here, the study is not over, and instead, a newness has emerged. Similarly, in a study of low-income African-American students' encounters with social class in elite HBCU environments, Mobley (2015) asks:

> What happens when we confess the hurt and scorn that has occurred in the past within higher education environments? Who has been forced to change? Who has been pushed out? This questioning emancipates and delivers, because far too many college students have and continue to suffer in silence. (p. 329)

These examples illustrate the opening that exists within the closing of a phenomenological study such as this. At the end, there is no end at all - only more possibilities.

One difference in these studies than other studies that might enlist a non-hermeneutical approach is the interpretation of texts and textual connection to participants. From journals to email exchanges, participants have an opportunity to share their experience in non-verbal ways (e.g., written text). Additionally, each of these scholars focus their turning to the phenomenon (chapter one) on their own experiences within that phenomenon. This personal positioning is central to their turning to the phenomenon. Many authors refer to their participants or self as "co-researcher," "co-traveler," or "co-builder." In this example, their engagement with the research topic becomes *with* the participant rather than as an objective inquirer or outsider.

A Study of Openly Gay Undergraduate Men in Elected Student Government

The interconnections of our Being (to beyond) make me think about compassion and *essence*. In what ways does *Dasein* intersect with *essence*? Further, I continue to wonder how these points and perspectives connect to hermeneutic phenomenology. Safranski (1998) contends, "Essence is not something 'hidden' behind the phenomenon; it is itself a phenomenon to the extent that we think it or to the extent that we think that it evades us" (p. 75). Here, philosophers looked for new ways of letting "the things" approach them, including how reality "showed" itself. O'Donohue (1997) asks, "What did you see" and "what did you *not* see" today? We pay attention to the things that are in our consciousness (objects, people, ourselves) (Safranski, 1998), and compassion exists as a calling, calling us out of ourselves and into the openness (Levin, 1985). Just as doctors are not born performing surgery or teachers teaching, philosophers are not simply born philosophizing. They ask, challenge, seek, and are sought. They are also works, in progress. While the experiences of openly gay men in elected student government can be

examined using multiple forms of inquiry—including other forms of phenomenology—I use hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach that allows the researcher (me) to be centered in the study alongside a participant.

> Hermeneutic phenomenology brings implicitness to explicitness through phenomenological deconstruction, reflection, and hermeneutic recovery. The researcher, as the interpreter, is not an objective observer but an active ingredient in the research process and as such is referred to in the first person. (Arminio, 2001, pp. 241-242)

I illuminate Arminio's (2001) idea of being an "active ingredient" in the research process, while remembering that hermeneutics allow one's own subjectivity to take up new responsibility (Hultgren, 1993). Phenomenology is about the *essence* of an experience – in this case, the experience of being openly gay and in student government.

Understanding begins when something addresses us (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Furthermore, understanding begins when light presents itself and we can see, (more) clearly, more intentionally. This brings me back to asking questions. Gadamer (1960/1975) posits, "The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open" (p. 298). But what does it mean to *open* and *keep open* possibilities? In some ways, I think this is where we must, as writers (and researchers), both check and nurture our biases. This "checking" of our biases will help foster a more developed understanding of insights associated with a particular phenomenon. To Gadamer (1960/1975), insight is something that comes to us, and in closing, I am drawn to the connecting of questioning and understanding as what gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension.

> Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing. That is why we cannot understand the questionableness of something without asking real questions, though we can understand a meaning without meaning it. *To understand the questionableness of something is already to be questioning*. (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 368)

It is this asking of real questions, rooted in the philosophical groundings of hermeneutic phenomenology, that allow for an authentic view of the phenomenon of out and openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government. I enlist questions as a way of uncovering, and also as a way of illuminating the possibilities and insights that can be discovered as a result of this study. Research methods should be judged by criteria other than that of a methodological qualitative/quantitative dyad (Hultgren, 1993). There is not one form of phenomenological research. The phenomenological methodology consists of the art of being sensitive to the subtle undertones of language (van Manen, 1997). However, "method alone is insufficient," and we must move beyond *method* as the sole criterion for judging research approaches (Hultgren, 1993, pp. 23-24). In this case, hermeneutic phenomenology is the vehicle for unearthing the lived experiences of openly gay men in elected student government.

My Phenomenological Process

As I engage with this phenomenon, I do so with a phenomenological structure. Van Manen (1997) suggests six research activities to pursue hermeneutic phenomenology as human science research, as well as a way of processing a phenomenological description through the four existentials of lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived relationship to others (sociality). Lived experience is not one-dimensional, and is the starting and end point of phenomenological research (van Manen, 1997). To do research in this way, I illuminate van Manen's (1997) six research activities that guided this study.

The *Not-Out* President, and My *Homosexual* (Pro)Claiming

> Phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to

> be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist...It is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. (van Manen, 1997, p. 31)

Van Manen's (1997) first research activity is "turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world" (p. 30). Van Manen (1997) posits that phenomenological human science begins, and eventually turns back, to lived experience. Here, experience is also lived by the researcher, in that writing a question is not enough in phenomenological research. But what does it mean to *turn* to a phenomenon? In chapter one, my turning contains several news stories of men who experienced some type of interaction between their sexual identity and their role in student government. Additionally, I draw on my own experience as not-out and questioning what might have been had I had the courage to come out and be out.

Within a turning, there is also an orienting to the phenomenon, where I as the researcher question the nature of a lived experience (van Manen, 1997). Much like my experiences as not-out, and my personal (pro)claiming of homosexual(ity), I wrote my way into a description of an experience that was mine alone. And just as my own experience is one single story associated with this phenomenon, it is important to remember that a phenomenological description is only just one interpretation. One single interpretation of human experience is not the sole representative of that description, and there can potentially be additional or complementary descriptions that are deeper or richer (van Manen, 1997).

Closet Doors and Associated Lavender Leader(s)/ship

Van Manen's (1997) second research activity is "investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it" (p. 30). Here, the researcher actively explores

the specific lived experience, including all of its modalities and aspects (van Manen, 1997). Just as I explored notions of coming out of the closet, and various dimensions of leadership for gay men, personal experience is a starting point for phenomenological research (van Manen, 1997). For example, this includes tracing etymological sources and idiomatic phrases (e.g., the origins of many of the words and terms with which this phenomenon associates), observations, biographical information, and consulting phenomenological literature (e.g., Heidegger, Gadamer) (van Manen, 1997).

This also includes experiential descriptions from others. Gathering and collecting human science "data" is ambiguous in a phenomenological study, but is done through means that challenge quantitative or "hard" science entities (van Manen, 1997). In order to investigate the experience as it is lived, a collection of "data" was done through engagement with participants who met the criteria of the study. While there are many modes of inquiry that cite "lived experience" as part of their scope, in the phenomenological way, there is a reflective philosophical thoughtfulness that appears to "respect the reality of our lived experiences-as-lived, the living of lived experience, and the meaningfulness of our lives" (van Manen, 2014, p. 13). Here, philosophical thinking that follows the call to the matter itself exist within its method, and within the free space of the clearing (Heidegger, 1956/2008d). The(ir) "lived experience" is lived, in the moment, both *as-lived* and *living*. Specifically, I engaged with participants who were willing to converse with me around their experience as openly gay and involved in undergraduate student government. This was a "borrowing" of other people's experiences and reflection(s) of experience that helped me come to a better understanding within the context of the whole human experience (van Manen, 1997).

Selection of participants: Their lived experience. To do this work, and in order to solicit maximum participation, I conducted a call for participants on multiple social media and online platforms (see Appendix A). I posted study advertisements publicly on Facebook, twitter, and Instagram, and sent the advertisements to colleagues associated with various higher education and student government organizations (e.g., the ACPA - College Student Educators International Commission for Student Involvement, and online groups for student government advisors and alums). I requested that campus advisors, students, and affiliates disseminate the information to their student colleagues and/or constituents. I left the advertisements posted for approximately two weeks before solidifying participation. While Creswell (2013) suggests that five participants are a minimum in phenomenological inquiry, I initially selected a range of eight to ten participants in order to do in-depth work with this population, and ultimately enrolled eight men in the study. All individuals interested in participating in this study were asked to fill out a screening survey and demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), and those who were admitted were asked to select a pseudonym[16] that is used in place of their name. Yao (2018) discusses the importance of participants selecting their own pseudonyms so as to give them agency that aligns with their identities and self-perceptions (opposed to me, a Western, White man selecting for them through my Western, White lens).

As I established my criteria for participant selection, I turned to Mobley (2015) who posits, "The intent of these criteria [is] not to 'sample' different aspects of the phenomenon in order to generalize, but, a diversity of perspectives is needed to provide

[16] Five out of eight participants selected a pseudonym, and three participants asked the researcher to issue them a pseudonym.

rich textual accounts of the lived experiences that are then interpreted" (p. 145). Phenomenology aims to get at diverse perspectives, but not in a compare/contrast manner. This is not about making generalizations or diversity for the sake of diversity. Here, I aimed to get a rich descriptive view of the phenomenon by engaging with difference across participants. It was in the spirit of this diversifying of perspectives that I enlisted the following criteria:

Primary criteria. The following are primary criteria that were expected of all participants:

1. Must identify as male
2. Must be enrolled as an undergraduate student at a U.S. institution for postsecondary education
3. Must be at least 18 years of age or older
4. Must identify as openly gay
5. Must be serving in an elected student government position at the time of conversations
6. Must have identified as openly gay at the time of student government election

Secondary criteria. The following are secondary criteria that were not mandated in this study, but rather, cared for and paid attention to during the participant selection process:

1. No more than 2-3 participants from one geographic region[17] (e.g., Northeast, South, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, West, Southwest)

[17] Participants were asked to self-identify their region in their own terms, with the listed prompts provided as examples.

2. No more than 4-5 participants who identify in the same racial category

While some of these primary and secondary criteria may be limiting, I sought to be intentional about those with whom I engaged in this study. For example, while the experience of bisexual- or lesbian-identified individuals is of interest, for the scope of this study, I only looked for participants who identified as *gay* and *male*. Additionally, I name "openly gay" with the understanding that openness may be (and is) different for each participant. Generally, some who are "openly gay" may be open at school but not at home. Others may be open as a result of an "outing" rather than by choice (to freely come out). I allowed participants to engage with this criteria based on their own definitions and self-identifications.

Finally, I had no set criterion for institution type other than that of a postsecondary status (e.g., public, private, mid-sized, community college, arts-based). I did, however, pay close attention to the geographic region and racial categories of the men who expressed interest in participating. Once participants were selected and notified, they were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix C) that was sent to them in an introductory email. Participants were required to sign and return the consent form in order to start the process. The consent form was overviewed to the participant during the first conversation, and participants received a $25 Amazon gift card for participating in this study.

In conversation(s). Within this study, there is a contrast between an interview and a hermeneutic conversation (Hultgren, 1993). Stories, anecdotes, and recollections of experience are examples of how I gathered lived-experience material (van Manen, 1997). Instead of "extracting information" from the participant, my sense of self and pre-

understandings were a vital part of the conversation, leading to the interpretation of my own meanings as much as participants' meaning (Hultgren, 1993). Hermeneutics is about creating meaning, not simply reporting on it (Smith, 1991). In hermeneutic conversations, there is not a predetermined set of questions; rather, a general information guide is used to engage in ways that allow conversation to fall into place (see Appendix D and Appendix E). Structure did not necessarily tell me what to ask; rather, it guided me in unfolding the conversation (Bevan, 2014).

Gadamer (1960/1975) asserts that conversation is a process of coming to an understanding, where each person opens oneself up to the other, accepting their point of view as valid. It is not about "conducting" a conversation in this work; the more genuine a conversation is, the more we actually "fall into" conversation with one another (Gadamer, 1960/1975). In this "falling," I did not direct the conversations I had with participants. Instead, I sought to be led by the conversation *with* the participants (Hultgren, 1993). Ready to be interpreted, something emerges in conversations that no one from either side can predict or expect (Gadamer, 1960/1975). While I came into these conversations with pre-understandings, it was important that participants led me, rather than me leading them. There, I embraced the unpredictable nature of what could have been as a result of my conversations with participants. In remembering to allow them to lead the conversation (Gadamer, 1960/1975), I remained centered in the initial question ("What is their lived experience?") and pathway (hermeneutic phenomenology) that prompted the study in the first place (van Manen, 1997).

I conducted two conversations with each participant that lasted 60 to 120 minutes each. Additionally, I engaged with participants in an optional group conversation via

WebEx, of which three men participated. Since there are no set guidelines to the quantity of questions or engagement with participants (Bevan, 2014), I selected the range of two conversations and one group conversation to allow for flexibility once I began the study. The first conversation with each participant was in-person, and the following conversation was remote via Skype. Conducting the first conversation in-person required that I travel to each participant's campus, and engage with them in their (chosen) spaces(s). Connors Jackman (2010) illuminates the value of "fieldwork," and posits:

> Travel is an integral part of research, and regardless of whether movement occurs across a vast global expanse from Toronto to rural Indonesia, between one urban centre to another, or within one's own residential area, all research requires the movement of the researcher from his or her originary position into that of the data. (p. 119)

In the spirit of large-city Toronto and rural-cities of Indonesia, I was mindful to engage with participants no matter where their institution was housed, and as long as the aforementioned criteria were met. While flying into large cities and engaging with students at nearby institutions would have been more cost affordable, the depth of institution type required me to meet participants in different locations, further aiding in the diverse perspectives I was able to unearth. To be in their physical space created more comfort for participants, and the in-person human interaction was crucial to our connection. Despite a love and adoration for technology, I found great value in meeting participants in-person for the first conversation.

Between the two conversations, I listened to the audio recording for each participant, in order to engage deeper and follow up on concepts or points that I might have missed during our first conversation. While I initially intended to do additional interviews, I decided to host a conversation group as an opportunity for participants to

collaborate with and build upon one another's experience(s). I scheduled the conversation group after both individual conversations and journal entries were complete. From the initial posting to the final group conversation, participation in this study involved around 8-10 weeks of engagement. This included multiple processing opportunities, and at different points (some upon the completion of their term, or their college graduation; others before and after an election cycle for the next school year).

To assist with a large portion of the travel costs associated with the first conversation, I received a $2,500 dissertation grant from the University of Maryland Student Affairs Concentration. All additional costs not covered by the grant were paid out-of-pocket. All conversations were recorded with an audio-recording device, and I utilized Rev transcription services to transcribe each conversation. Following transcription, I went through each recording and transcript line by line to ensure all identifying information was removed and not associated with any of the participant(s), and that transcripts were properly and accurately completed.

In written reflection(s). In addition to conversations, I asked participants to keep a journal over a five-week period. Writing in a journal can help individuals keep a record of insights gained, document patterns in their work, and reflect on previous reflections (van Manen, 1997). A journal becomes a source of phenomenological value that may contain reflective accounts of human experiences (van Manen, 1997). The following prompts were suggested to assist participants in the process of journaling:

1. What is a typical day like for you, both personally and professionally within the student government context?

2. What parts of your identity do you spend time thinking about as related to your role in student government?
3. How does being gay show up in student government spaces (for you and/or another person in your community)?
4. How do you understand leadership through the lens of being out as gay, and in student government?
5. Write about times when you are aware of your sexuality within the context of your role in student government.

Participants were encouraged to find a way to journal that made the best sense for their reflective process (electronic, written, photographic, through song or poetry, alongside news stories or current events, and beyond). For some participants, more structure was desired, and the aforementioned questions helped generate thoughts while in-conversation with them. Participants were asked to write around five times (separate entries) over five weeks. Here, I was attentive to not only their experience as explained in conversation(s), but also the way they wrote about their experience through journaling. Additionally, I maintained a personal "researcher journal" in order to capture my own experience(s) during the process. This was an opportunity to collect my own lived experience while traveling to and from different parts of the United States, including internal and external observations. For example, I journaled the following sentiments upon leaving my first conversation with a participant:

> I am just now leaving [city] and feeling really excited by my conversation and the conversations ahead. The participant was so gracious and open, and the deeper we got into the conversation, the more I realized that I am certainly a co-constructor of this "data." I learned, he shared, we were authentically *in*-conversation. You can write and hypothesize about the *in* part of that, but it does not become real

> until you're seated face-to-face, and our body and mind are both *in*-tune *within*-conversation.

Moments and feelings such as these are important to capture, and helped my re-turning to this phenomenon when I was actually *in*-conversation. Up until that point, everything felt philosophical, and following my first conversation, I realized the power of conversation, and the importance of reflection.

Reflection: Through Thematic Analysis, Through Lived [Existentials]

> The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience. (van Manen, 1997, p. 77)

Van Manen's (1997) third research activity is "reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon" (p. 30). As meaning is assigned to lived life within a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997), I approached transcripts and journal texts with a "hermeneutical consciousness" (Gadamer, 1960/1975). This was done through thematizing, and with attention to the multi-dimensional and multi-layered reality of meaning (van Manen, 1997). Human science research requires a textual labor, and reflection in this capacity involves analyzing structural or thematic components of that experience (van Manen, 1997). Human science research is about meaning, and lived experience cannot be captured in abstract conceptualizations (van Manen, 1997).

Thematizing. The analysis of conversations and texts is the act of thematizing. Whereas other methodologies might consider this work "data analysis," thematizing looks at the experience of focus, of meaning, and of point (van Manen, 1997). Furthermore, themes are not a direct object, necessarily, and "*Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand*. Theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. 87). Thematizing is an exploration of

the essence or essences of shared experience (Bergerson & Huftalin, 2011). Van Manen (1997) contends, "The art of the researcher in the hermeneutic interview is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open, to keep [oneself] and the interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned" (p. 98). In this case, thematic analysis is not a conceptual exercise, and rather, one should look for phenomenological themes within the phenomenon as it is experienced (Willis, 2001). This includes looking for recurrent themes in a range of settings and episodes, and separating accidental elements from necessary or substantial ones (Willis, 2001).

Following transcription, I approached thematizing using van Manen's (1997) selective/highlighting approach, listening to conversations and reading the transcriptions and journals multiple times. In order to be "close" to the data, I printed out all transcriptions, journals, and conversation notes to engage in a deep review. In this exploration, I interrogated statements and phrases that were essential to revealing the phenomenon. For example, I wondered, "Are there any phrases that stand out? Can [I] select some sentences or part-sentences that seem to be thematic of the experience of [openly gay men in student government]" (van Manen, 1997, p. 94)? While I could not predict what participants would say, my interpretations of their statements and texts were most rich by reviewing them multiple times. Van Manen (1997) offers multiple suggestions for identifying themes, including the experience of focus, looking for simplification, a needfulness to make sense, an openness to something, and an insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure. Much like unconcealment, there is an uncovering as it relates to thematic aspects of human science research. Themes help a researcher proceed with phenomenological descriptions (van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenological human science research is an exploration of the experiences of the lived world in everyday situations (van Manen, 1997). Fundamental themes occur in the phenomenological sense, four of which are considered existential themes, and that penetrate the lifeworld of all human beings (van Manen, 1997). These themes, which are helpful as guides to reflection, are lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (van Manen, 1997). These existentials are not all lived in the same way, yet are still lived by all human beings experiencing the world (van Manen, 1997).

Lived space. The spaces where one finds oneself often affect the way one feels (van Manen, 1997). For example, I have early recollections of my own coming-to-know related to being gay, and when I started to entertain the idea that I might be something other than straight. One example is when I was 18 years old, exploring London shortly after my high school graduation. I remember the tight quarters of my tiny hotel room, a lobby filled with frames and prints, and a giant display of brochures suggesting I "EXPLORE LONDON." I snagged one brochure that led me to "EXPLORE [GAY] LONDON," and found myself breathing in the smells of the city, and the lights that eventually led me to a part of the city known for its queer culture and gay nightlife. In those moments, the lived space within my experience showed me what could and might be as a result of my own personal exploration - my own personal being. Here, I found myself at home. I felt surrounded by people who might be like me. I delighted in the opportunity to go from in- to out-of the closet, protected by the anonymity of an international excursion, of 2004, when social media had yet to truly capture all aspects of our place and space - free from even a digital record of my (gay) existence in Europe.

It was the nature of the lived space in London that helped me understand the quality of its meaning. Van Manen (1997) posits, "There are cultural and social conventions associated with space that give the experience of space a certain qualitative dimension" (van Manen, 1997, p. 103). This was certainly the case regarding my time in London, as the closet became less constricting as I flew further from its Oklahoma origin. And this was the case as I engaged with participants about their own relation to lived space. For example, what lived spaces illuminate their own experience(s) with being gay and in student government? And what is it about lived space that uncovers their day-to-day existence? Lived space helps to uncover some fundamental dimensions of meaning within lived life (van Manen, 1997).

Lived body. Our body is the first meeting when interacting with others in the world (van Manen, 1997). For example, our physical and bodily presence(s) both reveal and conceal something at the same time, which is not always conscious or deliberate, and is possibly even in spite of ourselves (van Manen, 1997). Perhaps lived body is an *expression* of one's gender (participants as men). Furthermore, perhaps lived body is the way one *performs* one's sexual identity (participants as gay). Here, the possibilities related to gay men and their experiences with lived body also intersect with their positions in student government.

Elliott experienced this element of lived body during my initial exploration, as he was conscious of lowering his voice when meeting State Senators and Representatives as part of his role in student government. His lived body experience was deliberate, and related to notions of masculinity and outness. As another example, a person might share a biological connection to someone ("family"), but still have a distance that leads them to

connect with non-biological (chosen) "family" in both physical and emotional capacities. For many openly gay people who are not accepted by a biological family member, despite the emotional violence that can exist between abandoned-child and abandoner-parent, there might be a longing to connect with someone who has done harm to them (and in/despite of their biological connection).

Lived time. Subjective time and objective time are different, and lived time is subjective in nature (van Manen, 1997). This way of being in the world transcends that which might be regulated by a clock or calendar. Instead, lived time is a temporal way of being in the world (van Manen, 1997). And while we regulate our lives by time, carry time on our wrist, and divide our day(s) into time(s), lived time is a reflection of the past and an anticipation of the time ahead (van Manen, 1997). Lived time is also about perspective, and how we understand a way of living life in reflection, or the hopes and expectations that exist ahead (van Manen, 1997). Greene (1988) posits:

> Human beings, of course, devise their life projects in time—against their own life histories and the wider human history into which those histories feed. They do so by means of language or series of symbol systems that provide a mode of articulation, of ordering and expressing what is lived. (p. 23)

My ability to be out as gay is a product of both history and time. In addition to the history of LGBTQ+ people and their fight for visibility, equity, and equality, my own history involves a needed time and distance to advance in my own notions of sexual identity and personal development. To become confident in my sexual orientation, my outness, and my gayness specifically was due to years of questioning myself and the world around me. As time passed, I experienced lived time in different contexts, and anticipate the ways I am allowed to exist as out (now, and in the future). Each year since my initial departure from the closet, this allowance and existence has shifted with lived

time. There is no age of adolescence or societal standard for *when* someone is to come out, despite the expectation that people *do*, which is often not left to the coming-out-person's lived time. Adams (2010) reflects:

> I find it… unfortunate for a gay person to feel guilty, shameful, and dishonest for not coming out; and naive to consider a gay person awkward, selfish, and politically motivated for coming out too early or manipulative, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible for coming out too late or not at all. When any of these assessments are made of a gay person, then I believe we must reflexively assess ourselves, recognizing that we may be holding a gay person to contradictory standards. (p. 250)

I have since evolved in my ability to feel and live (and *be*) authentically me, as an out person who is also a contributing member of society. And despite still being held to a societal standard of *when* and *how many years ago did I-*, long gone are the days where I walked the streets of London as a closeted, anonymous (queer) person. Now, I proudly walk the streets of Pride, live openly with my (also gay) partner, and am writing this very dissertation as an additional outing, all as complimentary notions of my developmental growth (over time).

Lived other. Finally, van Manen's (1997) fourth existential involves the lived relationship we maintain with others. Specifically, lived other moves us beyond what we might have known or thought to understand about a person theoretically, and instead, presents a shift or change based on how we interact with them in an interpersonal, current space (van Manen, 1997). For example, for many gay men, there is an assumption that they might be a certain type of gay based on what they look like or how gay men are presented publicly, online, or in historical contexts. It is confirming or negating the notion of a stereotype where lived other can be challenged (van Manen, 1997). Here,

there is a communal sense of experience, one that allows a person to transcend what they thought they knew, and to interact in this new light.

My own understanding of one's relationship to lived other involves my many experiences with (gay) Pride. My first experience with Pride was in Atlanta, Georgia, and there was something magical about being amidst thousands of people, and feeling both absolutely seen and completely unapologetic. This was the first time I had been among other LGBTQ+ people in such mass. This was when I started to see Pride as one of the (emotionally) safest periods of each year. A few years ago in 2018, I had an experience with Pride that shattered some of these preliminary safeguards. Following the Pride festival located in downtown Washington, D.C., I walked through the exit only to find a few dozen elementary and middle school students donning "Make America Great Again" hats and patriotic clothing. I was paralyzed. Moving from a place that is rich with support and inclusion, to be startled by a system of values that did not align with my own, I walked through the crowd quickly and nervously. As I continue to reflect on this experience, I am drawn to Adams (2010), who asserts:

> The closet is a relational construct: *others* may hold a person accountable for it at various times, in various places. Even though a same-sex desiring person may not feel as though the metaphor describes her or his experience, others may make meaning of and, consequently, evaluate the person's experiences in terms of the closet. (p. 236)

The way those children stared at me and the other rainbow-clad queers was a nonconsensual defining that felt stripping and marginalizing. I felt evaluated. I felt seen in the worst of ways while experiencing visibility in a space that was typically felt in the best of ways. And still, to look across the street at a sea of "MAGA" hats and red, white, and blue apparel, my relationship to lived other was not only compromised, but in

conflict with the actual other, those with whom I desired to relate, from those with whom I resisted relations. In, out. In, out. In this case, the in-out nature of my existence was compromised by one single street block.

Lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived other all work in conjunction with one another, and inform a perception of meaning that is sought through human science research (van Manen, 1997). As I engaged with the men in this study, their own lived space, body, time, and other all revealed and uncovered ways of being as associated with what it means to be openly gay and involved in elected student government.

The Art of Writing

> Writing is the reflexive activity that involves the totality of our physical and mental being. To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense. To write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself—of that which authors us, of that which makes it possible for us to be and speak...in the first place. (van Manen, 1997, p. 132)

Van Manen's (1997) fourth research activity is "describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting" (p. 30). Writing is the object of the research process, and not merely as a final step to achieve a phenomenological description (van Manen, 1997). This involves paying attention to language and the power of language (van Manen, 1997). In addition to being the communication portal of the human science study, writing is also a method for externalizing thoughts that are often internal (van Manen, 1997).

Gadamer (1960/1975) asserts, "When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us" (p. 484). There is something important and beautiful about writing. When writing, we make some aspect of lived world and lived experience understandable and intelligible (van Manen, 1997). Through taking courses

and personal reflection(s), I wrote myself into naming this phenomenon. As I continue to interrogate what it means to be an openly gay undergraduate man in elected student government, I write to illuminate the ongoing seeking involved with human science research (remembering that there is no definite end to this work). This requires that I remain a thoughtful researcher, and remain open to the distance writing creates between me and the lifeworld (van Manen, 1997). I also remember that writing draws me closer to the lifeworld (van Manen, 1997). While writing may pull me away from my own experiences and understandings of gay men in elected student government, it also allows me to reflect in ways that help me see this phenomenon deeper and clearer within the lifeworld (van Manen, 1997).

Writing is also about showing (van Manen, 1997). Words are just a small part of what it means to write, and it is necessary to see what is often unseen in this kind of research. I use my phenomenological skill and talent to see both the literal meanings and the rhetorical meanings within text (van Manen, 1997). This includes writing, *and* rewriting. This work is never complete, and writing in deep dimensions cannot be finished in one singular session (van Manen, 1997). Here, I remain patient and persistent.

The Theoretical and the Practical

Van Manen's (1997) fifth research activity is "maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon" (p. 31). The work of hermeneutic phenomenology is not about a theory being applied to practice in order to see the practice performed differently (Gadamer, 1960/1975). The hermeneutical task is itself a questioning of things. Similarly, Heidegger's process of interpretation begins with fore-conceptions replaced by more suitable ones. "This constant process of new projection

constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 269). Sometimes the fore-meaning that determines one's own understanding goes unnoticed. While I approached this study with an understanding of my own experience as being gay and being not-out in student government, there were certainly differences that arose from my conversations with participants. An openness to this difference was essential to grasping the phenomenon as it showed itself. Furthermore, an openness to this difference allows me to also engage with this topic as a student affairs educator and teacher, to illuminate insights for working alongside students such as those in this study.

Van Manen (1997) posits, "Discussions of method and methodology are meant not to prescribe a mechanistic set of procedures, but to animate inventiveness and stimulate insight" (p. 30). These insights might allow educators to view this phenomenon in a different light. To reach such an achievement, texts must be oriented, strong, rich, and deep (van Manen, 1997). My initial question was centered within each conversation and writing endeavor, and a rich and thick description became one that is concrete (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology is a philosophy of action in the pedagogic context, and gives educators a type of knowing that informs practice (van Manen, 1997). So, while there are not "implications" or "findings" in a study such as this, the insights gained illuminate the phenomenon in ways that can inform practitioners' work with this population.

The Research Plan

Finally, van Manen's (1997) sixth research activity is "balancing the research context by considering parts and whole" (p. 31). Here, it is important to have concrete research plans (van Manen, 1997). To honor the ethical practice of research, I conducted

my study with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Additionally, I utilized the aforementioned criteria and processes to serve as guides for this study. I also remained open within this human science research, as the research project required me to explore different techniques, procedures, and sources over the duration of this study (van Manen, 1997). This required a certain sense of flexibility that I had to possess as I waded through the original activity that is human science research (van Manen, 1997). After all, "There is no systematic argument, no sequence of propositions that we must follow in order to arrive at a conclusion" (van Manen, 1997, p. 173). This would reflect a technical approach that does not align with this hermeneutic phenomenology study.

Some Caution, as I Looked Ahead

> It is to the extent that my experiences could be our experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings. To be aware of the structure of one's own experience of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all the other stages of phenomenological research. (van Manen, 1997, p. 57)

There is a difference between a literal interpretation, and those who look for possibilities in (a) the text. I was cautious of this commitment to possibilities as I entered the realm of thematizing. Furthermore, I remained aware of the trap that some individuals encounter when attempting hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology, in that one might focus more on "lived experience" as already processed and descriptive rather than pre-reflective and interpretive. Avoiding this "trap" involved a clearer and deeper owning of my prejudice(s) and pre-understanding(s). This owning allowed me to be more in sync with participants as we engaged in this work together.

Another caution I experienced as I looked to the work was the possible physical, emotional, and mental labor involved for individuals. For example, many students in

elected student government do a lot of work on top of also being a student (e.g., being out *at work*, as previously noted in chapter two). For some, this was an additional "to do" in their already busy agenda. Additionally, the timing of the study fell during a season where some participants were at peak involvement or academic transition. Some participants were running reelection campaigns, and others were preparing for graduation and the passing of the proverbial and literal student government gavel. March, April, and May are a busy stretch of time in higher education, and it was with extreme selflessness that participants engaged during this timeframe.

Next, there is emotional labor involved in a study such as this. Participants may have experienced micro- and macroaggressions as related to being openly gay and involved in student government (e.g., Armstrong and Brooks). I am aware that my call for participants was also a call for vulnerability, openness, and unconcealment. Within that calling, I have an ethical responsibility to pay attention to the experience(s) of participants *within* conversation with me, and I was consistently mindful of any moments where participants might display emotional discomfort. I was conscious of how I ended conversations with participants, so as not to leave conversations in a destructive space.

Finally, my identities play a role in possible discomfort, and should certainly be called upon as a naming within this cautioning. As an able-bodied White man, I was very aware of the ways I entered spaces, especially for the three men in this study who self-identified as Hispanic/Latinx, Mixed Race, and Black/African-American. I was very careful not to claim their stories as my own, or to assume that I knew and understood their intersectional experience (e.g., as one participant shared about the dual-oppression associated with his gayness and his Blackness). As a White person, and specifically a

White researcher, I entered this study with my own frame(s) of reference, and was cautious not to make assumptions or pre-judgments that were clouded by my own, White, experiences with student government and leadership (and my gayness and maleness).

From Thematizing to Insights

The real questions will continue to emerge as I dwell in the text, and move from thematizing to uncovering insights about this phenomenon, nurtured through multiple perspectives. The perspectives, in this context, are gleaned from the men who participated in this study, and who committed to conversations with me in ways that opened up the phenomenon deeper as I sought to uncover the essence of their experience. It is here that the thread weaves beautifully through the experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government. It is here that insights are unearthed and point to the essence of this experience, their lived experience. It is here that the possibilities open further, and continue to be endless.

CHAPTER 4
THE ELECTED ONES, THE LEADERS THEMSELVES

> What about the homosexual as a political force? Is it possible for gay women and men to rise up, after centuries of oppression, to change the stubborn norms of a society, to throw off the burdens and penalties systematically imposed on them? (Humphreys, 1972, p. 168)

The homosexual—or gay man in this case—is a political force, and this study is a direct response to the *rising up* that Humphreys questions. To run for office amidst oppression is a *rising up*. To acknowledge, engage with, and throw off burdens imposed by society is a *rising up*. To seek to change any parts of a society is a *rising up*. To simply *be*, out and elected, is a *rising up*. The men in this study are continuously learning and growing, and such an evolution, too, is a *rising up*. One participant, Jack, shares with me, "I've come a hell of a long way. If you'd asked me [these] questions two years ago, I would have run away." Before our conversations, and now long after, these men have had additional, potentially (re)new(ed) perspectives. Their experiences as presented in this dissertation are lived in the place(s) and time(s) from which they were captured. Like phenomenology, they are not an end point, but merely a beginning.

The call for participants commenced on March 13, 2019. Over the following weeks after posting the study to social media and across my network(s) via email, I experienced an immense amount of anxiety about the study. There was something political about studying gay men and their rise to and role in undergraduate politics. In many ways, I was asking participants to come out, again, and for/in the context of this study. I initially wondered if this even meant anything to participants, as for me, it meant holding close to people's stories and perspectives as others did for me. To come out,

again and again, has been part of my own journey, and with this study, I asked participants to do the same. In, out. In, out. And in different ways and contexts.

The common thread(s) across (and through) the last three chapters moves beyond this phenomenon's turning to, exploration of, and philosophical grounding. The thread involves the men themselves. I utilized trains, planes, and automobiles to access and engage with Ben, Bradley, Christopher, Edward, Hunter, Jack, Owen, and Sam[18]. Graduation loomed for some. Contentious elections took place. New winners and losers were established. Transition ran rampant through March, April, and May. Time. Given time. Taken time. Time spent. Together. I sat in conference rooms, on outside patios overlooking a campus, academic buildings, and student affairs spaces. One interview took place in a diversity and inclusion office, and others in the student government offices themselves. Students passed by. Sun shined. Rain fell.

In 1999, Savage wrote in his *OUT* magazine column about Ryan Biava, the first gay student elected as student government president at the University of Washington. Between the timing and institution, Biava's win is a significant accomplishment. Savage (1999) writes:

> So 20, 15, or even 10 years ago, someone like Biava might have crowned his extracurricular career by heading the queer student group; today he's heading up all of student government. And really, given the choice, what smart, ambitious Ryan Biava-type would pick the queer group? Why be the homo-in-charge of posters and punch bowls at monthly campus dances when you can be the homo-in-charge of, well, pretty much everything? (p. 50)

Since Savage's column, a mass of out students have conquered student government roles, including those I highlight as part of my turning to and exploration of this phenomenon.

[18] The names of the eight men in this study are all pseudonyms, as a way to protect the identity of the participants. Bradley, Christopher, and Edward asked the researcher to select a pseudonym for them, and Ben, Hunter, Jack, Owen, and Sam all selected their own pseudonyms.

The men in this study elevated to roles as Speaker of the Representative Body[19], Vice-President, and President[20]. The "homo[s]-in-charge" of the queer group(s), as Savage colloquially calls them, have also transcended into power(ful spaces), occupying (and continuing to advance within) social roles, advancing activism, and leading on campuses across a spectrum of identities. While Savage displays a dismissiveness to their role and impact, these individuals are also necessary to the student governance model of outness and (in) leadership (roles). But it is within the "pretty much everything" that Savage cites, that I introduce the(se) gay men, those elected and serving, the leaders of this study.

(The/se) Gay Men in Elected Student Government

Miller (1971) questions scholars, institutional data, and assertions of who and how many might be homosexual.

> But how do they know? Because the closets are far from emptied; there are more in hiding than out of hiding. That has been my experience anyway. And homosexuals come in all shapes and sizes, sometimes in places where you'd least expect to find them. (Miller, 1971a, p. 9)

For years, one such place was the undergraduate student government. But today, it seems more men than ever are out and open about their sexuality, and are serving in elected roles across their campus(es). And while each of these men are out, their journey to outness is unique and theirs alone. They are the gay men in elected student government, but *the/se* men are those with whom I conversed and explored. As I went to be in-conversation with each participant, I was conscious of their independent reality. Generally, I am typically hesitant to assume someone had a coming out process that was

[19] The researcher renamed this role/title due to the type of position, and to not reveal specific identifying information about the participant(s). Furthermore, some participants will use a Senate-based framing when referencing this entity.
[20] Some participants also referred to this role as, "Student Body President."

prolific or an experience salient to their identity. In addition to avoiding assumptions, I was hesitant to assert such a process on to these men. When approaching this topic with participants, I asked them to instead share with me when they figured out or discovered they were gay, and to tell me about how they define or understand their initial experiences with sharing that self-discovery about their identity. One such example of this self-discovery-to-sharing is by participating in this study.

This study is comprised of eight participants, gay men identifying as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, mixed race, and White/Caucasian (see Appendix F). Their institutions are dispersed across different regions in the United States, and reflect a diverse range in institution type - from small private colleges and universities to large public institutions. Some participants were positioned in the heart of major cities in the United States, while others held their experience in rural parts of the country. Participants had declared majors and minors in various functional areas and fields, including biology, business, Spanish, environmental science, performing arts-based, international affairs, organizational leadership, communication, marketing, and history, among others. Specifically, and strongly related to the work of student government, three participants had political science as part of their major and minor selection(s). Some were double and even triple majoring at their institutions, and two noted that they had plans or interest in going into higher education and/or student affairs disciplines following graduation. The four non-graduating participants were all elected to serve their student government in different ways for the following year, including as president(s) and vice president.

While conversing with these men, I thought a lot about sentiments from Dr. Kristan Cilente Skendall, an affiliate faculty member in my academic program who taught an introduction to research/inquiry course my first semester of doctoral coursework. In class, Skendall shared a preference for interpreting numbers (quantitative) over the interpretation of someone's words (qualitative). After class, I wrote in a journal, "What makes me qualified to interpret someone's thoughts?" There is an objectiveness to quantitative research that is safe for some. Despite the initial fear(s) associated with the interpretive process, and through hermeneutic phenomenology specifically, I hold close to the responsibility that is interpreting people's thoughts, writings, and experiences. I hold close to their stories. This is what sets hermeneutic phenomenology apart from other qualitative tendencies. This includes keeping clear of prejudice (as previously illuminated), and Heidegger (1954/2008f) asserts that one must be ready and willing to listen, and that "such readiness allows us to surmount the boundaries in which all customary views are confined, and to reach a more open terrain" (p. 378). To reach such a terrain, I suspended myself in this process of research.

Lived experience occurs (long) before a reflective view of it is taken (van Manen, 2014). At the same time, I draw on Eddy (2008) as a reminder, "One must keep in mind that the phenomenon already existed prior to interpretation: it is what it is without the researcher naming it what it is" (p. 144). Experiences are always more complex, nuanced, and layered than researchers can fathom (van Manen, 2014), and realizing this is part of the phenomenological process. Similarly, there is additional unconcealing associated with this work, and beyond the unconcealment associated with one coming out and being out. Lived life in this way is also complex, and van Manen (2019) notes that this work

involves argument, as well as creative, expressive, and evocative languages and sensibilities. Here, one can capture the "primal and mature, pathic and cognitive, contingent and routine, rational and irrational, conceptual and inceptual, propositional and poetic" (van Manen, 2019, p. 8). I rendered conversations and journal entries with associated understanding. Van Manen (2019) notes the inclusion of "metaphor, myth, poetry, novels, etymology, experiential description, fictional text, sayings, phenomenological texts, and of course, also arguments, scientific observations, empirical research, and experimental conclusions" have a place in phenomenology and themes on human existence (p. 8). Unlike other qualitative methodologies, I enlisted these sources as means to further understand the phenomenon, and to explore themes through the descriptions of these participants. While there are many "hows" to which this work is done, each of these thematic descriptions are pathways to understand the phenomenon more deeply. Such descriptions are more than the texts (or stories) themselves. I am doing something with these texts, as a way to draw out the phenomenon further. Furthermore, this work is empirical in nature, and additionally draws out findings from physiology, biology, cognitive psychology, and other functionalities (van Manen, 2019). Here, phenomenological investigations continue (van Manen, 2019).

There is something powerful about someone trusting you with their story. Furthermore, there is something important about *holding* someone's story, especially stories that may involve an experience like a suicide attempt, family tension around conversion therapy, peer and school trauma, (un)concealment within coming out and being out, and additional triumphs and tribulations associated with leading as out and gay within heteronormative and as outliers to prototypical circumstances. Many of these

stories, as is known too well, force a person to fight for survival. And sadly, many do not survive. I felt an immense amount of gratitude for the eight men who agreed to be part of this study. I also felt a deep responsibility to carry these stories in a way that did justice to the participant. These are the stories, those of Ben, Bradley, Christopher, Edward, Hunter, Jack, Owen, and Sam.

Ben

I headed West to meet Ben, a senior serving as student government president of his private university, which is positioned in a large metropolitan city, and "very White, and straight, and affluent," he shares. Ben identifies as mixed race, Black and Mexican. He grew up in a middle-class, single-parent home, and was raised by his mother and grandparents. Ben's grandparents were heavily involved in the local community where he was raised, a community that is home to multiple generations of his family. Ben shares that he had an "easier" coming out process, one that was free from bullying. While he realized he was gay in middle school, it was at age eighteen when he came out to his mother. It was important to Ben that he was out in college, and he shares, "The reason why I was so out and proud from freshman year...people are going to take me as I am." Ben holds authenticity as a core value, and being out and open about who he is remains fluid through all parts of his personal (family, friends) and professional life (student government, other organizations and involvement). He surrounded himself with mostly queer- and woman-identified friends in his social network, individuals he feels were supportive of the varying intersections of his identities.

Ben participated in elected student government in high school, and served as Class Representative for three years. He onboarded to his university through a prestigious

leadership program, and started his collegiate student government notoriety as a Senator. While he initially did not want to run for student government president, his friends encouraged him and motivated him to do it. As he reflects on post-college possibilities, he toggles between a future career in academia or immigration law, and jokes about dreams of serving as a U.S. Senator (minus the part where he would have to go through an election process again). Ben is authentically self-aware, and engaged with his college leadership and his being as intertwined and radical within a system that he feels was not set up for him. He shares, "I think there is something violent about me taking up space, and it's just like there's violence within that." The violence Ben references is also connected to the historical nature of his institution, another location he believes was not set up for people like him (a queer, man of color). Ben's mission and concern is the liberation of all people. This resonated with me, and encapsulated all that Ben brought forward during our conversations.

Bradley

It was heading to the Southeast where I met Bradley, a junior serving as his student government's Speaker of the Representative Body. A few miles into my drive to the Southeast region of the United States, I spotted a large sign that read, "Jesus is real," and several thereafter, with related content regarding religion, Jesus, and (the Christian) God. As I got closer to Bradley's school, I rolled down my windows and breathed in the smell of grass, and my childhood spring. Bradley's campus sits in a very rural part of his state, and I was instantly aware of the oasis that a college campus often creates (especially in rural parts of the United States).

Bradley identifies as White, and grew up in the same city as his institution. He was raised by his mom and eventually his step-dad, and attended an elite science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) high school where he found a community of peers with similar goals and ambitions as his. Bradley grew up in academic and theater circles, and is an honors student on a prestigious academic scholarship at his institution. He participated in student government in high school, but it was in college where he ascended to roles that allowed him to chair meetings and engage with legislative elements of his institution's student government. Bradley is from a very politicized higher education system, and as part of his more recent elected position, he gained a seat on the Board of Trustees for his institution. Bradley cares deeply about the political happenings in his city and local community, and identifies as a servant leader who prioritizes service and people as core values within his leadership pursuits.

Bradley remembers as early as fourth grade that he might possibly be gay, and eventually came to terms with his sexuality several years later by coming out to his mom first. In reflection of those experiences, he shares:

> And I was like, "I *am* gay." Then, I had to sort of deal with the, how it used to trouble me in the past, and rephrasing that to be like, "This is who I am, so I can't let that make me feel bad."

Bradley has a somewhat intellectualized understanding of his gayness. He shares examples of others' gay-assertions on to him, such as having a high voice (or "more of a gay voice," as he names), not liking sports, and having easier connections with adults. But being gay became a passive part of Bradley's life, something he had not thought much about since his early experiences with coming out, and especially not at the intersection of his leadership. He identifies as a very "private person," and I was deeply

aware of the mental labor involved in our conversations - that, both reflection and introspection were things of which he does not do often.

Christopher

> I was the kid in the home that was very much ready for school. I was ready to get out of the small town and go on to bigger and better things. I'd already… participated and accomplished things that prepared me for a bigger population. (Christopher)

As a kid, I related to Christopher's feelings of something *bigger*. We share similar geographic upbringing(s), and yearning(s) to uproot, to move on, to get *out*. Much like my drive to meet Bradley, my journey to Christopher, a White student in the Midwest who was also serving as his student government's Speaker of the Representative Body, embedded layers of spiritual dissonance for me. There were multiple crosses and (Christian) churches sprinkled throughout the 2-hour drive from the airport, reminding me of where I (had) come from and where I had run from. Christopher was a senior, studying business, law, and marketing, and LSAT books sat on a shelf just behind his desk. He comes from a long lineage of family names, and grew up in a small, rural town not far from his institution.

In high school, Christopher held significant national leadership positions, as well as local, state, and regional roles at notable levels and extensive reach. He was involved in student council as early as middle school, and served as class president in high school. When Christopher got to college, he was rejected from a prestigious first-year leadership council, which was the first time he had faced rejection related to his leadership. He then got involved in student government as a Senator and committee chair, and was eventually elected by his peers to govern the Representative Body. Christopher is a passionate writer, and envisions himself as either an author or a judge in the future.

Christopher did not understand what it meant to be gay until late middle school, when he was referred to by some of his peers as "a little gay boy." He shares, "I googled what the word meant. And I read it, and I was devastated because I knew I had those feelings, but I never knew until that moment that it was wrong, or in their eyes wrong." He experienced severe bullying in middle school, and had an assault-like[21] experience in high school, which was followed by personal and self-victim-blaming. As a result of a suicide attempt, Christopher's parents sent him to a "spiritual therapist" for quite some time, one that resembled what is today called, "conversion therapy." This experience included exorcisms on his body, and other harmful attempts to rid him of any gayness. None of those efforts addressed his depression or suicide ideation. And through all of this, and now after, Christopher remains spiritual and religious.

It was publically coming out on the floor of the Representative Body that Christopher felt "fully out," and through his writing, he reflects on his journey from cold to warm, and dark to light, and draws a parallel to his pre-out and post-out experiences. This was a discovery Christopher had in therapy while reflecting on his writing and his life experiences. Christopher freely uses the term, "homosexual," to both define and describe himself, something that caused me to think about my own (re)definitions and (pro/re)claimings. Christopher was incredibly vulnerable and open in our conversations, and shared parts of his life and story that are more than could be expected from an at-one-time-stranger. Christopher remains a mental health advocate, and lives by the motto and mantra, "perfectly imperfect."

[21] Christopher did not identify the experience as, "assault," explicitly. The interpretation of the experience is the author's.

Edward

> When I wake up in the morning I see a gay Black man, and those are the three things that are most salient to my identity. And I think that those are what pushes me every day and really just gives me motivation to say that, "Hey, I'm here, I'm queer, and you're going to listen to me." And I've earned my place to be here. (Edward)

Located in the South, Edward is an aspiring student affairs educator studying organizational leadership and African American studies. He was raised by his mother, a public educator, in the same city and state as his institution. With love and adoration for Black women, fueled by his deep relationship with his mother, Edward grounds himself in a set of values that guide his life: God, family, education, and advancing social justice and equity. He spoke a lot of leadership and service being two additional core values, and believes honesty is essential to the leadership process. "Honesty is policy," he shares.

Edward's first "run" for office was in fourth grade, and he maintained leadership involvement in student government spaces through middle school and high school. He ultimately served as class president in high school. Edward started in college student government as a Senator in the student assembly, followed by Vice-President, and a more recent election to serve his senior year. While he accepted himself as gay in high school, Edward did not open up about his sexuality until college. The fact that Edward is gay is somewhat of a contentious issue between he and his mother, and they have resolved to not talk about it, despite him being open and out with her (and others).

While Edward values his time in the South as a training ground for his future career, he sees himself leaving the South when it is time to start his career. He shares, "While the South has prepared me, I'm excited to take those good 'ole Southern values and put a social justice twist on them and really hope to make some change." Edward is

guided by his religion and his spiritual, Christian faith, and envisions a future where he will ascend to the university presidency. Edward and I share past experiences related to the church, from youth groups to understandings of praise and worship (the act and the music). He was at his most passionate within this kind of reflection. He also has plans to pursue a doctorate, and we celebrated his successes on a research team he joined between our conversations. After our meetings concluded, I maintain no doubt that Edward will accomplish great feats in his career.

Hunter

Hunter resides in the Northwest, and served as his student government's Speaker of the Representative Body. He identifies as Hispanic/Latinx, and grew up in a predominantly Hispanic and Black neighborhood. Hunter came out at eleven years old, and shared with me that he is a survivor of a past, abusive relationship. He comes from a highly religious family, and high school student council helped pull him out of his shell. Hunter was eventually elected to the role of student body president in high school. It was during that time when he developed a passion for connecting with people, and became heavily involved in state student council endeavors. During that time, Hunter had a large number of leadership responsibilities, and worked across multiple political landscapes at his high school, in his town, and across the state.

Hunter is a first generation college student who pays for his education in full. He studies political science, international affairs, and Spanish, among other majors and minors. He engages with research in his academic program, and chooses to conduct research on queer communities and people of color. Hunter was heavily involved by the time I met him as a junior at his large, public state institution. He is active in a fraternity,

an honors society, and previously served as a Resident Assistant, all in addition to his ascent to various student government leadership roles. And still, Hunter battles impostor syndrome as part of his leadership success(es), and struggles with not feeling worthy to be in such prestigious roles and places.

Hunter got involved in student government as a first-year student, became a Senator, was eventually elected by his peers to be the Speaker of the Representative Body, and more recently re-elected to a student government role for his senior year. As part of his role(s), he meets frequently with state senators, a U.S. Senator from his state, the local government, and even the Governor, all on behalf of the student voice. I felt a deep connection with Hunter during our first meeting, and he offers a humble spirit and an incredible openness to discuss his experiences. He just wants to make his campus a better place, and to represent those who have not been afforded such opportunities. He is genuine and incredibly hopeful.

Jack

Jack, a senior, grew up out West, and attended college close to his hometown. Jack comes from a privileged and liberal background, and is aware of both his Whiteness and his privilege(s) - one of these privileges included the elite private school he attended, which he posits, "We go to an extremely disgustingly expensive school." He had only ever known an education that was accompanied by student government. Jack had been in elected leadership experiences for a very long time, including all four years of high school, and all four years of college. He achieved the role of student government president in both contexts. Jack shares:

> I say it's my 16th year in student government, 'cause I started in elementary school. I remember my little campaigns and I'll always remember my fourth

> grade one, against a boy...who I lost to because he stood on the blacktop and he said, "I'm going to get free candy machines and free soda machines." I stood there and said, "I want to help you have a better time here." And I lost.

It was not until college that Jack realized what he had been doing is serving as an "elected official," and he takes that responsibility seriously. Jack is "the political one" in his family, and is obsessed with politics. He spends a large amount of energy thinking about and engaging with politics. He has a goal of running for office in the future, and maintains expansive political career aspirations. Jack has a deep network of politicians whom he has worked with, campaigned for, and lobbied alongside over the past several years. He is well-developed in his political identity, and has been operating in national circles for many years. Jack is a clear example of someone who is doing hard work when it comes to politics, at every level possible and with a philosophy that transcends his (proud) Democrat ideologies.

Jack came out in high school, but resists the term, "queer." He took his high school boyfriend to prom, and wrote his senior thesis on LGBTQ+ issues. Still, Jack struggles with parts of his gay identity, something he was very open and honest about with me. For example, in his friend group, Jack is known as a "bad gay," as he avoids *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewing parties, and events like trivia night. Talking with Jack felt like meeting an old friend. During our first meeting, we sat outside on his campus, and he shared 'hellos' and positive affirmations as several people walked nearby. His connection to the campus was felt. He had pride for his campus, and grinned authentically as he looked out into the sea of students. Jack made a difference, and that was important to him. He is a total optimist, a reflective spirit, and absolutely self-aware. For years, he was

led by a quote from Oscar Wilde's 1895 stage play, *An Ideal Husband*: "I don't at all like knowing what people say of me behind my back. It makes me far too conceited."

Owen

The youngest of my participants, Owen, was a sophomore international student who served as student government Vice-President at a small private arts school in a big city in the Northeast. Owen's upbringing was remote and removed, but not quite "rural." He calls home a big small town. Growing up, Owen did not see a lot of openly gay people, but came from a progressive family. He recalls an interaction with his father regarding his use of the word, "gay:"

> I remember being in fourth grade or something, and hearing kids at school using, "that's gay," as a term to put something down. I remember saying something like, "Oh that's so gay," to my dad, and he snapped. He was like, "No, that's not okay." It was shocking honestly to see that switch in him. (Owen)

Owen is close to his family members, but knew early on he would eventually leave both his hometown and his country to pursue higher education. But Owen does not fully feel like an international student due to being partially homeschooled in high school, and having a history of visiting the United States during childhood. Owen lives a great distance from his family, and came from a town where many people did not leave, and especially not for higher education. He experiences a straddling of two worlds, two countries, from issues involving guns to concerns around Indigenous rights, and remains knowledgeable about the level of impact happening in both realms. Owen was drawn to his institution because of his interest and talent in the arts, and he performed from childhood into college. His institution is small enough that he knows the entirety of his class, and with a large population of LGBTQ+-identified students, he feels the space to be very affirming of his sexuality. To make money, he works as a student worker in the

campus student activities office, which eventually connected him to running for student government Vice-President.

Sam

Positioned in a downtown urban area of a big city, Sam's private college is tucked away amidst several busy streets. In the food court of the student union, two students sat at a table and advertised for a campus LGBTQ+ organization, one I would learn was part of Sam's onboarding to his institution. In the brief view of Sam's office space, which was shared by the other executives in student government, he had a visible HRC sticker and a rainbow flag. "I had to create this space for myself," he shares.

Sam, a senior at his institution in the Southeast, served as his student government's Speaker of the Representative Body. Originally from a diverse city in the Northeast, he was an out of state student who was far from home. Sam grew up around a lot of diversity, and he jokes that his college is the Whitest school he ever attended. He feels strongly that his upbringing was formative in how he views the world. Sam grew up playing sports and participating in the arts, and both football and academics led to early understandings of leadership. However, in addition to homophobic insults and an assault, Sam faced a serious trauma in middle school as a result of a bullying experience that changed his life. He came out in the eleventh grade to family and friends, and eventually on both Instagram and Facebook to share more widely. Sam often receives messages from people grappling with their sexuality, including parents from his hometown, who ask how to support their child who might be struggling with sexuality.

Sam and I connected deeply about his career interests, including going to graduate school to study higher education and student affairs the following fall. He sees a future

where he will eventually serve as a Vice President of Student Affairs. We talked about the importance and power of having a gay man as a therapist, his first gay man to serve in that role for him. We were truly in-conversation each time we talked.

The Themes That Follow

More than being gay, men, undergraduates, and elected leaders, these individuals are also whole human beings, with experiences before, during, and after the very elected positions that led them to this study. For example, three participants were in relationships at the time of our conversations, and others considered themselves to be actively dating in different ways. Several participants' experiences with questioning their sexuality involved covert google searches for gay porn, and some even leading to difficult conversations and outings with parents. Several participants were open about mental health navigation, including struggles and successes, and shared stories of therapy and healing along the way. And all participants acknowledged the relationship between being gay and simply existing as undergraduates students in college. They are their full selves, vulnerable from eight distinct places in time.

> How, then, I wondered, do other men who do not identify as heterosexual make sense of their lives in college? How do they understand who they are? What impact did their postsecondary experiences have on those understandings? What elements of postsecondary education contributed (or detracted) to the identities and experiences of non-heterosexual males? (Dilley, 2002, p. 4)

It is Dilley's similar line of curiosity that allows me to open up this phenomenon in a way that not only wonders what it is like to be a gay man, but also a gay man at the intersection of involvement in student government. Engaging in multiple conversations with Ben, Bradley, Christopher, Edward, Hunter, Jack, Owen, and Sam allowed me to know them in ways that went beyond mere questions and answers, and instead, opened

up space and time to be *in*-conversation with and alongside them. For example, introducing a critical approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, Mobley (2018) identifies as a scholar who engages research *with* people, not *on* people. "I understand that I must approach my work with both care *and* humility. I have been given the platform to question and seek truth; *everyone* is not granted this freedom" (Mobley, 2018, p. 93). Within my own freedom associated with this study, I, too, am out as openly gay, and to be *in*-conversation *with* people *requires* care and humility. As understanding begins when something addresses us (Gadamer, 1960/1975), I am addressed by these participants as a way to unearth a deeper phenomenological meaning.

To be in-conversation spans beyond the conversations themselves. The literary reflection (among others, as noted by van Manen), as well as written reflection, is part of gathering experiences as associated with meaning in the context of this study. Meaning is not fixed, and Gadamer (1960/1975) asserts, "For what is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only on the basis of its context, is also true of their content" (p. 178). Gadamer's (1960/1975) assertion of the interpretive principle of understanding (i.e., understanding parts in terms of the whole) stands out to me in reference to this study, and specifically regarding gay men and their experiences in general. When I think of my own experience, and the tension with those who have abandoned or rejected me due to my sexuality, I remember that much of that conflict is as a result of how people interpret(ed), for example, the Bible and pieces of homosexuality, as part of the whole (Bible). But there is a before and after associated with the horizon of lived experiences, and implies what is not meant and what is actually meant (Gadamer, 1960/1975). To draw this out, phenomenologists begin their phenomenological

reflections with an experiential anecdote or narrative example as a way to provide opportunity for phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 2019). It is *in*-conversation where I use my own phenomenological reflections to engage with and connect to participants as they share their lived experiences with me.

Following all of my conversations, Christopher's mantra of "perfectly imperfect" continued to resonate with me as I reflected on myself as a counterpart on this journey with participants. Christopher's mantra relates to a standard of perfection that, for him, equated being gay or out as gay as *im*perfect. Growing up, trying to be straight was Christopher's way of trying to be perfect. "Every time I fell short of it, I regarded myself as imperfect, flawed, impure," he shares. But it was his sophomore year of college when he realized that no one will ever achieve perfection, in any context. He remembers his internal reflection, and shares, "You can do more as an imperfect individual than you ever could as a perfect individual." Thus, Christopher embraced fully this concept that allows him to be both perfect and imperfect - *perfectly imperfect*.

This mantra also sits at the intersection of the fear that exists in being gay and being a leader. To be perfectly imperfect means that I am capable, yet there is something about me that might make me *in*capable. Perfectly imperfect means that something could be different for all of us, though for gay men, we know that it could be our sexuality. To own perfectly imperfect is an outing in and of itself. To be imperfect, to not be enough, perhaps, is still so very perfect. And that, within the confines and context of this study, is enough. Ahead I illuminate the themes of this study, which include *being out* as *coming out*, their way of *being* (*out*), advocacy as part of the(ir) experience, and a becoming that is part of something bigger than them, but better because of them. It is within these

themes that I further draw out the experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government.

CHAPTER 5
THEY JUST ARE (THEMSELVES): *OUT*, ADVOCATES, LEADERS

They Just Are: *Coming Out* and *Being Out*

> The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68)

Within the shaping presence of "the closet," there is a movement from *coming* to *being* that cannot be ignored. But what does it mean to experience the "in and out" associated with coming or going. Is it rigidly *in* and rigidly *out*? Is there a pushing and pulling? If we are not (always) coming out, are we, then, staying in? Going in? And where are we staying or going if not coming (out)? Eddy (2008) asks, "Do other gay men feel limited by the dichotomous terms of 'out' versus 'in'? Does the language of 'out' and 'in' restrict the discussion of being gay to the metaphor of the closet" (p. 40)? While the men in this study all identify with *coming out* of the closet in different ways, there are differences in their experiences with *being out* of the closet. And still, it is more complex than the dichotomy of the metaphor of which a closet might allude (Eddy, 2008).

Is one *in* or *out*? Are you *in* or *out*? Am I *in* or *out*? Are they *in* or *out*? For the men in this study, still, they just are (...out, and also themselves, existing, and simply being). From family and religious pressures to 'it just is what it is' sentiments, *being out* as gay reflects these experiences far more than the notions of that which *coming out* imply. *They just are*. Understanding "the closet" as a shaping presence, it is the visibility of being gay that first captures their experiences as openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government.

Their Visible Selves

To *be out* is to be visible. To *open* is to be seen. But what is *visibility*? Skeat (1911) defines 'visible' as that which can be seen, from the Greek, "to see" and to know, and the related, 'visage,' as look, face, sight, and afterwards look; also, *to see* (p. 594). 'See' means, "to perceive by the eye" (Skeat, 1911, p. 473), and 'able,' from the *vis*-able notion, is powerful, skillful, easy to hand, and active (p. 2). To interrogate what it means to be visible, we must also wonder, what does it mean to *be seen*? Furthermore, what does it mean to be *visible* and *seen* in elected student government? Able: refers to 'habit' (Skeat, 1911). Is *visibility* the *habit* of being *seen*? Habit: a practice, custom, dress, "to have, keep" (Skeat, 1911, p. 227).

So what is it about elected student government that allows one to be out and visible (and *seen*)? Does visibility equal seen(ness)? And within that visibility, what is it about student government that creates both passive and active spaces for seeing? For the men in this study, their visibility was their way of existence. They just are. Bradley is not ashamed of his sexuality, but shares, "I don't shake someone's hand and [say], 'Hi, I'm [Bradley], I'm gay. Nice to meet you.'" Similarly, Jack reflects on a conversation he once had with a friend:

> She brought it up at some point and said, "Yeah, I don't see you being the politician who is like, 'I'm gay. And I care about these issues a lot.'" She was saying that to me as a good thing. She was like, "Because you care about a lot of things and it's just a piece of you." Which I agree with.

Jack questions why he feels this way. And within both examples, there is something about being visible, but not *that* visible, that reverberated through our conversations. And still, Jack shares that while it did not impact his election(s), he did hear about comments on campus that mirrored, "I'm not voting for him, he's gay." These sentiments did not

dissuade Jack from being open about his sexuality, but they did make him think deeply about what that visibility and openness could mean at the time and in any future election.

Within this frame of reference, I also wonder about other senses, and responding to that which is heard. Can visibility be perceived by what is heard? And who is heard? Is student government a place for hearing, as much as it is a place for seeing (and being seen)? Associating with additional senses might help to understand further what it is that happens when things become visible. Levin (1989) asserts, "There are some things we *need* to hear, but probably never will. There are things we would *like* to hear, but we are also too afraid to listen" (p 19). I wonder, what makes something heard (and seen, for that matter)? If we can only hear what we want to hear, or that which is already known to us, as Levin (1989) suggests, and if not changing something about our existence, will we ever experience something new or previously unknown to us? Levin (1989) asks, "How many opportunities for friendship, for peace, for a deeply meaningful intimacy, have we missed and lost, because we failed to lend an ear" (p. 85)? How many men might have missed the opportunity to be visible because they were not able to come out or be out in this way? Furthermore, what becomes of any dual-place for visibility, between both the individual and the institutional context? Is there, here, a seeing *and* hearing?

For some, their sexuality is institutionally supported. Bradley shares that his institution has a strong support for LGBTQ+ students, and that they do not shy away from it, despite being in a southern geography. This was affirmed in how LGBTQ+ symbols and spaces exist on campus. I saw a multitude of public displays while at Bradley's institution, including messages that seem to compliment his assertion. These messages came as a surprise to me, as I expected a different setting from a southern, rural

institution. The Movement Advancement Project (2019) estimates that around 2.9 to 3.8 million LGBT people live in "rural America," and that LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to be represented by LGBT elected officials. I assume this to also be the case for men in elected student government roles, especially as we continue to see trailblazing LGBTQ+ students run for and be elected to their institution's student government. LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to have social infrastructures like a community center (Movement Advancement Project, 2019), but at Bradley's institution, students have access to a well-positioned LGBTQ+ center. Such a location can serve as space for improving support for LGBT people and issues (Movement Advancement Project, 2019), and this was certainly the case as I watched students come and go from the LGBTQ+ center as I sat on a couch nearby.

Christopher believes he is the first and highest ranked openly gay individual to serve in his institution's student government. Still, he saw messages on his campus that support LGBTQ+ students, and eventually engaged in outreach to support the LGBTQ+ community. For example, he once spoke at a campus gay-straight alliance meeting, and discussed being gay at his institution and at the elected level. Christopher was honored because he did not consider himself an anomaly, and was just existing as out and within his student government role. Hunter received a similar invitation on his campus, but for his institution's "Lavender Graduation," which is a graduation ceremony celebrating LGBTQ+ graduates. He was initially skeptical about participating, but was ultimately affirmed that his identity was supported in his role(s). He shares:

> When I was being asked to present at this graduation, they informed me how they want me for me and not as a token. They are proud of the strides I have made on this campus and where I am today, and they hope to celebrate this at the graduation. (Hunter)

Following the ceremony, Hunter was approached by several attendees who shared their gratitude for his advocacy and honesty. But not all are skeptical in this same way as Hunter's initial feelings. Some experience a visibility when not expected.

Found almost 100 years after they were written, and hidden in the "Calamus" cluster of poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman (1860/2019) writes:

> VI.
>
> What think you I have taken my pen to record?
> Not the battle-ship, perfect-model'd, majestic, that I
> saw to day arrive in the offing, under full sail,
> Nor the splendors of the past day—nor the
> splendors of the night that envelopes me—
> Nor the glory and growth of the great city
> spread around me,
> But the two men I saw to-day on the pier, parting
> the parting of dear friends.
> The one remains hung on the other's neck and
> passionately kissed him—while the one to
> depart tightly prest the one to remain in his
> arms.

This poem from Whitman is described by some as a love story between two men, and from a cycle of poems, called, "Live Oak, with Moss" (Whitman, 1860/2019). Like the men passionately kissing on the pier, prest, there is something about a visibility that leaves people both hopeful and in awe. For some of the men in this study, there was a vulnerability and a relief in such visibility (for self and others, as illustrated in Hunter's experience with "Lavender Graduation"). Furthermore, not all experienced "firsts" in the same way as the men who were part of my turning to and exploration of the phenomenon, and the men in this study who broke ground at their institution.

Several men saw openly gay presidents and other student government officials serving before them who modeled that they, too, could ascend to such heights. They, too,

just simply were (themselves, existing, simply being). For example, when he was a first year student, Jack noticed that the student body president was gay. Jack shares that he followed that path, and that seeing another out person in that way helped him to also achieve the role of president. Conversely, it was the absence of this type of visibility that led Hunter to engage in student government, and he became a role model for generations after him. He shares, "I saw...no people like me. And now that a lot of more openly gay individuals [are] within our student government, I think it's because they've seen me." And still, Hunter, like several others, found community in different ways (e.g., there are other gay men in Hunter's fraternity, other gay men in Owen's academic program, and Jack's ability to take a man to his fraternity formal). In these examples, while student government was not exclusively a gay-centered experience or existence, the men found ways to connect to and operate as "out" within other campus spaces.

[They] Just so happen to be gay. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Less* (Greer, 2017), the narrator explains that Arthur Less's former partner, Robert, was up for a writing award for being gay...within a gay community. Robert scorns the idea of being called "a gay writer," and he and his friends believed they were beyond that kind of association (Greer, 2017). "His first response to Peter was to ask: 'How did they even know I was gay?' He asked this from his front porch, wearing a kimono" (Greer, 2017, pp. 86-87). Robert, kimono and all, just wanted to be seen as a writer, one who just so happened to be gay. The idea of one 'just so happening to be gay' resonates with Jack. He is proud of the way he existed as president, and has no regrets, even as he envisions a future in politics. "[I] don't think it will be my biggest talking point," he shares. Jack does not envision being gay to be at the forefront, and notes, "I think people see, great,

he's successful doing this or he was elected and he's gay. Not, he's gay, so he was elected." Jack's experience resonates with how I framed my own existence (e.g., I wanted to be Michael Anthony Goodman, Student Body President [period], not Michael Anthony Goodman, *the Gay* Student Body President). Being gay is also not at the forefront for Hunter. In his journal, he recalls a conversation with a new student government officer who "freaked out" when she learned that Hunter was gay and was re-elected to student government. The individual told Hunter that his being out and elected was a momentous occasion and a "giant step for the University." This did not resonate with Hunter because he was just being himself, and that up until that point, it did not come up for him.

Similarly, Edward notes there is more to him than being gay, and that his sexuality does not come up as much as one would think. However, while being gay is important to Edward's identity, he also feels it is not more so than being a Black, able-bodied, Christian man. He shares, "So sometimes when I walk into rooms, it's not me thinking how am I showing up as a gay person, but how am I showing up as [Edward]." He *is* Edward, with all of his identities, each different from one another. And within that, he just so happens to be gay. And still, there is risk within this *just-so-happen-to-be*-ness. Adams (2010) reflects on an experience teaching a public speaking course, and sharing a story with his class about coming out to his father. Shortly after the class session, Adams received a call from his department chair saying that a student's parent complained to the university president. Adams (2010) shares:

> The conversation ends, and I reflect on the complaint against my claiming to be a particular kind of person as well as for coming out too soon. An identity I claimed and the timing of my disclosure threatened a student, a student who will probably dislike my gay body and dislike me for the remaining thirteen weeks of the course. I decide that I came out too early in the semester, and now worry about losing my job. (p. 235)

There is a second-guessing associated with Adams' experience with visibility. Simply being oneself, with all identities in tow, is personal, and still, those on the receiving end of such an outing can (and often will) control the narrative thereafter. Edward understands this risk, and in some ways, I wonder if this is why he also, equally, brings forward other identities within his self-definition(s). Might this be a normalizing of his gayness, if compared to or on even level as his ability, race, religion, and gender?

Sam created no room for assumptions about his sexuality, and maintains a strong association with *just so happening to be gay.* Sam shares:

> Every time I'm in the Board of Trustees lunch, I'm like, "Hey, I'm gay. Alright, that's off the table. Now we're going further." And the reason being is it isn't the fact that I want to wave a Pride flag every single day of my life to say, "We're here, we're gay, get used to it." … I'm doing it so others don't have to feel that there's a necessity that they need to come forward and literally have their heart on their sleeve all the time because that's taxing.

For Sam, this was visibility so that others do not have to expend that labor. Sam felt strongly about hyper-visibility in this way that his sexuality was always known - that he could operate in any space, and just so happen to be gay, and to let others know that (perhaps they, too, can also just so happen to be gay). And still, with this approach, there is a *coming out* implied. However, for Sam, just simply *being*, *out*, is what matters. I am struck by the juxtaposition of these experiences, both with great vulnerability to complicate possibly what it means within the act and art of being visible. Visibility can mean uncertainty and a feeling of exposure. There is no 'right' way to be visible, just as there is no 'right' way to just simply be. For some, like Sam, this is active; for others, their 'it just is what it is' mentality leads me to wonder why a person would *not* want to be visible. Here, there are also notions of *knowing, being,* and *being seen as* that further

connect to the ways these men might be developing in their sexual identity at this point in their lives. One *knowing* (they are gay) is different than *being* (out as gay), which are both different than the perceptions associated with *being seen as* (gay).

In the realm of *just so happening to be gay*, *knowing, being,* and *being seen as* might complicate the visibility associated with one's outness. But if visibility matters, what does it mean to be *in*visible? Can one be *visible* and *invisible* at the same time? For many, this desire for invisibility is rooted in a freedom from the attention that their role enables. Who gets the power and responsibility to just simply *be*? If one *knows, is,* and *is seen as* (gay), what then becomes of expectations associated with being gay *enough*, or being *more* gay? Based on previous examples of openly gay men in elected student government, it can be posited that not every person gets the choice to *come* or *be* – to be seen and be visible, and to be seen and visible in the way that they choose, and on their own terms (e.g., Armstrong, Brooks, Sharp, Salinas, Levitt). At times, there are barriers to creating such a habit, such a visibility free from complication(s).

Complicated visibility. With visibility comes, at times, unwanted attention. When Ben won president, he was told by people to watch what he was doing, including how he acted and socialized, and with whom he was hooking up. Ben felt a tension with defining behavior during his own personal time, and recalls a time where he was confronted by a fellow student government officer who tried to police and shame his sexual behavior. This included how he and his partner define their relationship, and the agreements they made together. He remembered the conversation vividly, and told the peer, "I have done nothing wrong. What I do with my private time, I can do with my private time and that's none of your business." Ben cites other queer men as those who

have been most difficult with these boundaries, and experienced a constant struggle to not have to explain himself to anyone. Some of this attention was veiled in what Ben perceived as false "looking out," and he felt he did not need or want that kind of community in his student government world.

The obsession with elected leaders and their personal lives is not a new concept, nor is it reserved solely in the undergraduate space. Openly (and not so open) gay leaders over time have garnered public attention in myriad of ways. From affairs with men to exposed conversations on gay apps like Scruff and Grindr, even those who are (or were) *not*-out have been outed in different ways while serving in office. For some, this even led to their resignation from office (e.g., most notably, former New Jersey Governor, James E. McGreevey, and former Ohio House of Representatives lawmaker, Wes Goodman).

But the blur between personal life and professional role is not all negative. To (re)claim the space as his own, and to further the visibility associated with his gayness and presidency, Ben made it a point to bring his partner with him to programs and events. He shares:

> I always make it a point to bring him because I'm just like, "Yes this is my partner, he is a man, I am queer, you need to understand that." And so I wish there was more opportunity to bring him out. (Ben)

This is an example of Ben being out on his terms, re-claiming, and exists as a reminder of his outness to those with whom he socializes in the professional sense. While visibility can be complicated, taking ownership of one's visibility, as much as one is able, can also be a pro-claiming. There is confidence within this kind of vulnerability.

But this is not the case for all. Edward and Jack experience frustration with "come out culture," and the expectation that people must, eventually, come out, and then be

visible as out. “It’s exhausting,” Jack shares. “And it’s the cliché, ‘Why don’t straight people have to come out?’” Jack references the movie *Love, Simon*, and a clip of teenagers coming out to their parents as straight, and parents reacting negatively as if the experiences of coming out as straight/gay were reversed (Bowen, Godfrey, Klausner, Shahbazian, & Berlanti, 2018). But what might such a visual reflect? What would be the case if the roles, really, were reversed? What is it about “come out culture” that would be revealing for heterosexual-identifying people? For openly LGBTQ+ people, there is a coming out of hiding that reveals themselves as different from a normative culture. Heterosexual-identifying people are already within society’s boundaries. But does it have to be contentious? Does it have to be this way? For some of the men in this study, their anxiety or fear was far greater than the reaction they received from parents, family, and friends. Jack shares:

> This doesn’t have to be the big thing. It doesn’t have to be a thing. And I think that comes from the frustrations of coming out that everyone experiences. Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to be stressed about it, and cry about it, and worry about how other people are going to act, or look at me, or whatever?

But what is it that Jack is really asking? Jack’s questions mirror Edward’s feelings. For example, while doing research and a presentation on Cass’ (1979) model of gay and lesbian identity development, Edward disclaimed his feelings that “come out culture” was toxic, and a sexuality norm that says gay people have to have a coming out, whereas heterosexual people do not have to announce or have a lifelong process of telling others, “Hey, I’m straight.” Edward questions why this lifelong process was essential to the visibility of LGBTQ+ people. While he aims to be out and proud of this part of his identity, he also feels that the “come out culture” perpetuates marginality and oppression of LGBTQ+ people. This, too, is reflected in Jack’s line of questions. Furthermore, for

some, “come out culture” might also serve as a wedge between a person and one’s family. When struggling to mutter the words of his coming out, Yoshino (2006) shares the story of a conversation he had with his father:

> “He said: ‘You are my son.’
> And I began to sob. Perhaps this is the worst any closet does to us—it prevents us from hearing the words ‘I love you.’” (p. 57)

In the case that one is actively loved and received and embraced for who they are (no matter their sexuality; and while still knowing this response is not exclusive), the social construct of “the closet,” and the expectation of *coming out*, hinders the possibilities of what could be - including a preventing of hearing, “I love you.”

Such an acceptance is also found within the bounds of friendship and the social community established by undergraduate students. For example, Hunter valued the initial *out*ward facing notions of his social life. When he was elected Senator early in his student government career, he was often publicly embraced by his peers. He shares:

> When I go out to the bars or anything, and I go out to the gay bars...everyone will be like, “That’s my Senator.” I thought that was nice to feel that, as if maybe I was making an impact in a certain way, I just didn’t realize it yet. (Hunter)

But for Hunter, the spotlight only shined brighter as he ascended to higher student government roles beyond Senator. He shares, “It’s very odd to me because I felt like I was in the spotlight before, but now I feel like people are really looking at me, and what I’m doing.” He does not like that feeling, and struggles with the tension associated with finding time for himself while also believing people are always watching. On one hand, there is a yearning for the opportunity and the visibility, but on the other hand, there is a resistance to the cost of such visibility. But what does it mean to be looked at, and in this context? Is this an additional layer of being seen (or heard), and visibility as both a leader

and a gay leader? For some, the cost involves internal struggle(s), and personal dissonance of self-perceptions (of gayness and homosexuality).

Internalized homophobia. Even before some realize their homosexuality, there are anti-homosexual attitudes that permeate society (Meyer & Dean, 1998). The self-labeling of homosexual or gay occurs in adolescence for many, and involves a questioning that can cause harmful psychological effects (Meyer & Dean, 1998). As I approached this study, I feared what this questioning could mean as participants shared their personal stories with me, including parts of their self that they questioned or disliked. To assert one having an "internalized homophobia" seemed like an attack. Homophobia of any kind is unacceptable, and I initially feared that I would be framing some of their experiences or perspectives as internally homophobic…that is, until they did so themselves. Both Bradley and Jack wrestled with and named internalized homophobia as a significant part of their journey, and one that continues to plague them today, even years after coming out and being out. I relate to them deeply, and for years had my own internal, homophobic associations with coming to know that I was gay (and then, coming to be, out as gay).

As Bradley reflected on the intersection of his identity and his role(s) in student government, he shares parts of his personal struggle with internalized homophobia. He takes pride in some parts of his being gay, but also talks about times where he "really beat myself over the head for it." Specifically, Bradley is critical of how he appears in public spaces, and has consciously attempted to rid himself of any behavior that would identify him as gay. For example, Bradley was recorded speaking at a Faculty Senate

meeting, and when he watched himself back on the video he "cringed" hearing his voice and seeing "unprofessional posturing and gestures." He journaled about the experience:

> I stood behind the podium with my weight cocked to one side and my leg jutting out to the side. I held my hands together and did a little hand over fist action that confused me, because I don't remember doing it! To me it seemed like really effeminate behavior, which makes me a little uncomfortable. It doesn't bother me to express my sexuality, but in my role I never want to express what could be perceived as weakness. (Bradley)

In Bradley's experiences, effeminate behavior was often perceived as weakness, and is something to which he is sensitive. He has a fear of someone bringing up his sexuality or gender expression in his role as a leader. Christopher shares similar preconceptions about being gay, and asserts that his early and longtime understanding of effeminate behavior was associated with weakness and being weak. Within these thoughts and feelings, an internalized homophobia controls (and controlled) much of their narrative on gay men. Marion (2003) contends, "No one can love himself, and surely not with an unconditional self-love, because every man for himself finds, more original than the alleged self-love, self-hatred in himself" (p. 53). What is it about this self-hatred that is internally centered and inherently homophobic? Do these men hate themselves? Initially I am drawn to respond, "No." But there is something dangerous about an internal espousal of homophobia that can lead to an enacted bias (of self and others). However, there is power in acknowledging one's own internal homophobia. To see and hear such an internal way of being in the world is often taught and ingrained as early as childhood.

Jack shares with me that he had a "mental block" when it came to engaging with (his) outness. As a result, he compartmentalized his position as separate from his identity. He shares, "Even though they are intertwined, I think that comes from a state of that internalized homophobia growing up, and telling yourself that you're not, you know,

you're not or you can't be." Jack finds it to be a compliment when people tell him they are surprised he is gay, or that they 'did not know' at first meeting. He enjoys the surprise element related to his sexuality, that he could pass as *not*-gay, and feels it is a continuous battle against the ingrained homophobia of "growing up in a world where you don't want to be or you can't be." He credits that feeling to having been closed off for many years, and that he was raised hoping that it would not be something people thought about him. However, while Jack struggles with the internalized nature of his own homophobia, he works on adjusting his mentality and embracing self-love and confidence in this part of his identity. For him, it requires a level of unlearning that is taking great time and energy. In Jack's case, this is an unlearning that dates as far back as his childhood.

Christopher believes he is on the other side of this outlook, and has experienced the unlearning of internalized homophobia that once controlled his worldview. For years, Christopher worked to try to correct being gay. As a leader, he was told he was perfect. As a Christian, he was told being gay was an imperfection. The dissonance involved in these two perspectives led Christopher to years of personal physical and emotional self-harm. He shares:

> I underwent major turmoils to try and correct it and because society's image of a perfect individual was one that was attractive, one that wore nice clothes, one that was intelligent, and then one that was straight. And no matter what I did, I couldn't be this one. It just was horrible to try. (Christopher)

It was in accepting his "perfectly imperfect" mantra that he began to embrace the idea that being gay is okay, and that it is okay to be perceived as such. There was (is) no correction needed. This reframing for Christopher also helped him survive some of the challenges that existed at his institution, and the related turmoil(s) that also impacted other participants in different ways.

This place is hard to be gay. To further complicate visibility, Ben's campus is "very straight and very closeted," and "a hard place to be gay," he shares. This led him to mentor first-year and younger students as they questioned their sexuality, and he held great pride in those who had the courage to come out. The difficulty in being gay at an institution is not solely Ben's experience. What is it about a place that makes it hard to be gay? Hunter shares that men will often say odd things to him, such as sexual innuendos. Hunter feels it is typically straight men involved in fraternities, student government, and in power positions on campus who comment on his sexuality in ways that are unwanted and make him uncomfortable. He shares, "They'll be like, 'I think it's cool you're gay.' Yeah, thanks for that." Like Ben's experience with people commenting on his behavior, Hunter also faced consequences in this way, including an assault that happened at an event mixer. Leading up to the assault, he experienced a harassing exchange with another student leader. He reflects:

> We're just talking and chatting, and all of a sudden he's like, "I know you." I'm like, "Oh, how?" He's like, "I see you on campus, you're like that little gay dude." I'm like, "Okay, alright." And he goes, "Not to be gay, but I would fuck you." And I was like, "What… excuse me?" (Hunter)

In this example, Hunter dealt with covert and assumed-to-be-closeted men on campus who freely used harassing and inappropriate language with him because he is gay. There is something about the "Gay Best Friend" stereotype that can be a trapping for some. There is a character and a caricature about the *stereotypical gay* that lead some to believe they can say and do whatever they want in the context of this identity.

When I was pursuing my master's degree at Indiana University, there was a dive-bar just outside of the downtown area called, "Uncle Elizabeth's." Bloomington, Indiana is southern Indiana, and while it is an hour from Indianapolis, it is still very rural, and

surrounded by rural communities. Some patrons would drive several hours to frequent the bar, and on a Friday night, you never quite knew who was going to be there, and what stories they were going to share. It was during that time that I realized the power of a college town, which was at odds with the rural parts of the country with limited access and engagement with LGBTQ+ spaces. I also realized that being gay was also an isolating experience. The closet was sometimes lonely.

The memory of Uncle Elizabeth's reminds me of the sentiment that it can be very hard to be gay at both an institution and in the local, surrounding city. This is also the case for geographic considerations - homophobes are found in both backwoods Oklahoma, and downtown Los Angeles. Like rural parts of the United States for some participants, the institutions themselves could be, at times, places where it was hard to be out as gay based on their geographic location. LGBTQ+ people who live in rural states are less likely to have legal employment protections against discrimination, housing, health care, and public accommodations (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). For the participants in rural parts of the country, this is something of which they are deeply aware. For others, even in more liberal states or larger cities, a tension still lingers. And the work matters most to these men. The work itself is an outward facing response to any criticism, commentary, or celebration of their sexuality. The work itself is their anchor.

The Work Matters Most

Shortly after his term came to a close, a reporter from Jack's school newspaper approached him about writing a feature story about being an openly gay student body president. Jack was with others when he was approached, and one asked, "Why the hell is

that related? Who cares about his sexuality if he did the job well?" Jack faced a tension with the request, and shares:

> I served as the student body president, not the gay student body president. But on the other hand, in today's world, it is a success to be able to serve and be openly gay. … Was I comfortable just talking about being openly gay in a setting like that for everyone to read and judge? That terrible inner-voice was talking to me about how I don't want to be labelled. … This was the juggling of "wait, I am proud of who I am" but "do I really want people to know?" I do think that it's less of not wanting people to know and more about not wanting people to brand me as the "gay president," something wholly irrelevant to what I did in the role.

In his journal, Jack shares his experience with not wanting to be labeled, and the tension that comes with being out and public. For Jack, he just wanted to simply *be*, and for his work to speak for itself. Historically, a student leader (and especially one who headed major student groups) was known as the B.M.O.C., or "big man on campus" (Dungan & Klopf, 1949). How could Jack be the B.M.O.C. with such a label(ing)?

While the work matters most, it is often in conflict with a minimization of being gay, that, 'it is just not that big of a deal,' and a compartmentalization in order to focus deeper and more fully on the work. For example, Jack resists the idea of people voting for him solely because he is gay. He never wants his identity as gay to be at the forefront. Instead, he feels his reputation and work history were strong enough to earn him the role. For Jack, it is about the hard work and success. "The success is there and this is secondary to that," he shares. For Edward, this also involves doing consistent hard work. Minimizing his identities, he shares:

> I'm here to make [a] meaningful, lasting impact. That has shown up for me so many times to where whether I was a Black man or not, whether I was a gay man or not, or whether I was a man or not, didn't matter. It was my work that showed up for me.

While the work matters to Edward, is there a compartmentalizing associated with that mattering? Here, Edward still acknowledges his Blackness and his gayness, but believes he could do the work on campus just as well, if not better, than any of his peers, regardless of their identities. Being out is part of this, however, the work is still at the center. Apple CEO Tim Cook faced a similar centering, and still wanting privacy in his personal life (as gay), shares:

> I've made Apple my life's work, and I will continue to spend virtually all of my waking time focused on being the best CEO I can be. That's what our employees deserve—and our customers, developers, shareholders, and supplier partners deserve it, too.

I wonder, what is it about this deservingness that Cook names as owed to anyone but himself? Or, is this a priority that Cook needs to engage with to display his worth, and that, for him, *it is not that big of a deal*?

Christopher got involved at such a high level in part to prove a point to himself and his family that he is capable of exceptional work. He shares, "Everyone may think this about me, and I may be this, but look at all the shiny things I've done. I'm still capable. I'm still doing this." He has since relieved himself of that pressure, but it was built upon proving his capability. This resonates with me as I found my own experiences with *proving* to be a major part of my *not*-coming or -being out. I achieved great success in college as a way to say, "See this, this matters, don't look at this other thing that I might, possibly, probably, yep I am, surely gay." For some it is to classmates, community members, and peers. For others, this proving is deeply rooted in their parent or family structure. Obama (2016) contends, "It's the son who finds the courage to come out as who he is, and the father whose love for that son overrides everything he's been taught." Beyond *proving* at work, there is something powerful in the overriding that Obama notes.

For a parent to respond outside of any imposed societal norm related to coming out can be a *proving* that supersedes any need to show (for what, for something?).

But what does it mean to "prove" one's work? To show? Is this different from a father showing love to his gay son? To prove is to demonstrate, to test, or to try (Skeat, 1911). *To prove* is to verify, and *to show* is to make to see, to point out, to behold (Skeat, 1911). For some of these men, the "proving" and "showing" went from active and intentional, like Christopher mentions, to passive. Jack also feels he had proven to himself and others that he was willing to do the work, with the acknowledgment that the work takes time. In this same way, Christopher describes himself as the most organized person in student government and the most knowledgeable about the rules and governing documents. "I'm a legislator. I get things done," he shares. Likewise, Hunter anticipates but rejects the idea of his sexuality ever interfering with others' perceptions of his work. He shares:

> If it ever did, I would shut it down immediately. I'd be like, "I do my job great, I do my job flawlessly, I respond to you, I do everything I need to. And if you have a problem with that because of my sexual orientation you think it impacts it in any way, I'm sorry to inform you, it doesn't." (Hunter)

It is not an option for people to challenge or question their work, their product, and the outcomes associated with their leadership. If not explicitly shutting it down, the work itself will. This all is *proving* (I *can* do this; I am doing this; see, watch me do this).

Amidst the work, there is also a minimization of self and personhood that is sacrificed in the name of the work. But can one really separate themselves from the work they do? And if so, what is sacrificed? Almost all of the men talked of the busyness associated with their role in student government, and the sacrificing nature of the work that led to a tension within their personal lives. And still, even with tension, their selves

are deeply rooted in the work. For some, this is working in ways that are "harder" than others, including their peers of different identities and roles. For those with dual and multiple identities, this harder work is often a barrier. And to overcome, the expectations (by self and others) pile up.

Working 2-10x as hard.

> For a lot of people that look like me, we're not allowed to [play up or down our queerness]. And if we are allowed to do that, then our queerness isn't the first thing that pops up. It's our color. And so like, I think it is that palpable gay perspective or like that performative leadership aspect from the administration that they so prefer. (Ben)

Early literature on student governments reveal that "ethnic minority[22]" students were not as represented in mainstream participation of campus governance issues (Lavant & Terrell, 1994). As such, Lavant and Terrell (1994) suggest faculty, administrators, and student affairs practitioners need to provide opportunities for ethnic minority students to assume leadership roles, which increases their involvement and visibility. While there has been some progress since this research, I draw on Yoshino (2006) to open up this concept further, of working hard within the context of race and sexuality:

> This was progress: individuals no longer needed to *be* white, male, straight, Protestant, and able-bodied; they needed to *act* white, male, straight, Protestant, and able-bodied. But it was not equality. The message for an Asian-American closeted gay student was clear: downplay your ethnicity and your orientation. Don't uncover yourself. (p. 22)

There is a performance of Whiteness that is expected of men within this *act*ing, and especially in the leadership context. For Yoshino, in this example, there was a message of covering that is connected to one's existence. While more students with minoritized

[22] The term, "ethnic minority," is used by the authors of this article (p. 60).

identities are involved in student government, questions around their experience(s) still remain. What subscriptions must they make?

For the three participants of color in this study, each share sentiments of having to work harder because of the intersection(s) of their race, their leadership/role, and their sexuality. These men have a rich awareness of the racialized ways "being gay" shows up in the student government context, and Hunter and Edward cite a number between 2-10x that they were told and understood as needed to work in order to keep up or be good enough as their peers. White participants share similar sentiments as compared to their heterosexual peers, including having to be "extra prepared" for meetings, and doing unrecognized work that was not expected of others. While early literature on leadership and student government suggests student leaders have no "racial or social prejudices" (Dungan & Klopf, 1949, p. 10), I wonder what is really at play here. Gadamer's (1960/1975) notions of prejudice aside, what is it about racial and social bias that demands one be more than (something) to succeed? Edward learned this as a child, and was told that he would have to work harder and sometimes "twice as hard to get half as far as [his] White counterparts." Similarly, Hunter recalls a conversation with his father:

> I remember my father telling me, he's like, "You're already, you're a person of color." And I didn't understand what that meant when I was 11. He's like, "You're a person of color… your life is already hard...you used to have to work two times as hard, now you have to work 10 times as hard… because people aren't going to respect you." And I sat there and I told him, I was like, "I will work 10 times as hard as the person next to me."

This work ethic is ingrained in Hunter. It is how he has come to know and embrace his leadership style (despite the overcoming place from which it comes).

For Ben, racial tension exists amongst and amidst other LGBTQ+ people, especially within the leadership realm. For example, despite his successor also

identifying as openly gay, Ben feels that his successor engages with more performative aspects of identity than actual involvement and investment in queer students (or students of color) on campus. Specifically, Ben is aware of how his racial identity impacts and affects his leadership, and recalls even tempering his own voice as a result. He shares that his successor represents much of the demographic of the school: White, affluent, and well-connected. He feels his successor's experience will be much easier because he is White and comes from an upper-class background. Ben struggled leaving his post to a White student, and spent a lot of time "legacy building" on the way out, and specifically for students of color on his campus.

Similarly for Edward, like Ben, there is an internal charge to outperform. Edward shares, "It has become second nature to me to outperform… It's always going to, to me it's always incumbent on me to go the extra mile or to do a little bit more." This includes the feeling of catching up to even be on the same starting point. This makes me think of an old diagram about equality versus equity, and people standing at a fence to watch a baseball game. In the equality example, three people have the same size box to stand on to peer over the fence - however, they are different sized humans, and one's box is not large enough to reach the top of the fence. In the equity example, the one person who does not need a box to look over the fence moves his down to the person who cannot reach, thus creating a more even opportunity to see (beyond the *resources* to see, and starting at a different point). Edward aims to leave no doubt in people's minds that he is capable of getting the job done, no matter which of his identities he believes people might question. But due to his race and sexuality, Edward is starting at a different point than some of his (White, straight) counterparts. Without the extra box, in the diagram example

above, Edward is forced to work in ways that create or garner his own additional box for seeing (and doing, and thus, being).

Within these sentiments, there is a desire and call to do more to show and achieve results. For some, this means being over-qualified as outperforming. Edward connects this desire and reality to toxic masculinity that he is not proud of, but that is fueled by competition, and a desire to be number one or in first place. I wonder, what makes (a) masculinity toxic? Is it competition? Is it a hyper-something? Is it the opposite of femininity, or a resistance to femininity? There are concerns about the ways men are socialized in society and in higher education (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019). For Hunter, this leaves a feeling of guilt. He shares that he is nervous about messing up, and that people may become less confident in his abilities. Hunter reflects:

> If I ruin it, if someone doesn't think I can handle this job because of my background, because I'm low income, because I'm gay, or because I'm Mexican, then do I ruin that for future [students] too? Is that an impact that I'll have? Maybe my intention was to take care of my mental health, take time off, but my impact was like, now they think I'm lazy or I'm this or that. (Hunter)

Hunter places a large amount of pressure on himself, and dwells in the fear of the possible repercussions of not doing well (and the possibility to not do well). In this way, Hunter fears his errors or failures will be a reflection of all others like him: low income, gay, Mexican. I wonder what role gender plays in Hunter's fears. I wonder about the toxicness of masculinity as supported and established by society's expectations of being a man and a certain kind of man (not gay?).

Some wrestle with the contradicting expectations of their peers. Ben shares, "We actually do hard work. We actually study and come prepared to the room, where White straight men have just always kind of…just showed up." Similarly, Sam struggled with

other leaders as well, and feels some of his peers were rewarded for just being "subpar" in their role while he had to outperform to get a, "you did good," or, "you did it." He shares that as a gay person, in comparison to his straight student government colleague, "I have to work three times as hard just to get a pat on the back, whereas the President could sit and do nothing and get praised for it." There is both an envy and resentment here, that if things (being gay) were different (being straight), it would be a lot easier. But I do not think it is an *ease* that these men want or require. It is a sameness, an even playing field, and no inequities to have to struggle through that they desire. To want the work to be less (than 2-10x as) hard does not equal a desire for it to be easy. Christopher makes a similar association, and shares:

> Being able to prove to them, "You know what? It doesn't matter, my sexuality. What matters is the job I'm capable of doing." Everyone else saw that whenever I was elected. It's been one of those things that I've had to get past because I've always ... I can't stand the idea of being inferior or weak… It's still something I struggle with because I probably had to work a little bit harder to get a lot of the positions that I have on campus.

Christopher struggled with his straight peers, and the internal notion of "proving" that continued to be part of his response to the assumptions related to his being out and gay in student government.

And in all of this, the words "capable," "enough," "shoving it away," and "proving" continue to resonate as the men name their work as harder in different ways and for different reasons. These words are more than just a language for and description of feelings. There is an action in these sentiments. These terms carry a physicality that can (re-)produce and (re-)ignite trauma as far back as childhood (i.e., "go, work harder than…"). But it is "enough" that resonates most with me. To be *enough*. According to

whom? Whose metrics? Can enoughness ever be measured? I hold on to these questions as I journey on.

Queering the work. As *queer* is abstract, and *to queer* is to make something different, I revisit Ahmed (2006) as an interpretation of using a queer phenomenology to make different points. Within this queerness, there is an opportunity to look at the work differently than ever before - to *queer* the work of being gay and elected in student government.

Unlike many of the others, much of Sam's visibility is rooted in his queerness. He reflects on his unapologetic outness:

> A lot of people constantly ask me, "Why do you bring up that you're gay so much?" I was like, "Oh, it's not for me…I'm not trying to get attention…" The fact is I don't want to go into every meeting and be like, "Alright, everyone. Hi. I'm gay. Okay, what about you?" I am doing this because I want them to understand…some of these officials that are within student government, that are high up, are gay. That they're making decisions, and that they're going to be here to stay. They're not going to be these people who are sitting in the backgrounds. They're going to be people who are here, they're queer, and get used to it. (Sam)

This philosophy of outness led Sam to be *more out* in spaces like Board of Trustees meetings, and within his representative body. He wanted to "make sure" they saw someone who is gay, and someone who will stand up for what is just. But I question who the "they" is that Sam cites. Is this the Board? Peers? The non-queer ? Sam, himself? Ben found a similar mission, and as his term unfolded, he found his focus to be more deeply on students of color and LGBTQ+ students. He shares, "I want to spend my life fighting alongside the voiceless." But Ben did not feel student government was supportive of a goal such as this, and felt discouraged by the stifling he felt while in office. Like Sam's, "they," I wonder who Ben's, "voiceless," are in his description. His peers? His gay peers?

Is Ben, himself, actually the voiceless? And what would it mean to be voice*full*? Was that Ben's overarching goal, to achieve a voice*full*ness within the work?

Christopher displayed a voicefullness, as I understand it, as he endeavored a major coming out moment early in his student government experience. In a speech in front of the representative body, Christopher shared that he is gay. At the time, only his close friends knew about his sexuality. Initially Christopher worried about others' perceptions of his work beyond that point, and questioned if he would still have the same impact as before. But things did not change for him, at least outwardly, and he feels that ultimately people did not care as much about his sexuality as he assumed they might before giving that speech. To queer the work, in this way, is to show others a different way. To queer the work is to (courageously) engage with one's own difference as (still) effective, (still) useful, and (still) needed within the work. Christopher shares:

> I think for a lot of people, my story was…their first experience with a gay person. Like, "Okay, well, he's ... well, everything I was told, and the people I either made fun of, or the people I saw make fun of these people, he is definitely doing pretty well for himself, so maybe they're just like the rest of us."

Christopher's visibility does not solely serve as a light to gay people, but for his peers, too, who might have held preconceived notions of what it means to be gay in society. There is real importance to this kind of visibility and this queering of student government work - to be out and visible, to be gay and doing the work. This ultimately led others to confide in Christopher about their own sexuality, and like Ben and Sam, he became a one-on-one confidant for many on his campus.

Edward hopes for a narrative change regarding marginalization within student government spaces. He hopes to just simply be, and that others, too, can just be (within whatever identity that may be). Edward shares:

> We've heard so much about straight white men and everything that they've done in the course of history, right? So I think it's time to change the narrative. It's time to change the narrative that this is not collectively a majority of who we are anymore. That there are, while openly gay elected student body leaders may be in the minority, that we are here, that our work is powerful, our stories are powerful and we are no less instrumental in the work to affect positive social change on our campuses across the nation.

For Edward, this is a change in the leadership narrative, and specifically about *who* can lead (no longer just a place for straight, White men). He feels strongly that visibility matters for change to occur, but also that the work should speak for itself. Conversely in an active sense, Sam "became so unapologetically gay" because he wanted his being (gay) to be normalized for others, and for him to just simply be assumed and accepted in student government and campus leadership spaces (e.g., Board of Trustees). This came as a result of knowing what it is like to not have a voice, and to not feel seen or valid.

Beyond the Single Story of a Gay Man

In her 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Adichie warns about a singular way of thinking. She asserts, "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete, they make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2009). When working with out, gay undergraduate men in elected student government, it should be acknowledged that their outness is not a reflection of all others' outness, including those who came before them. Just as Armstrong and Brooks' experiences came with great external and political attention, this is not necessarily the case for all who exist as out within the confines of student government, including all those who participated in this study.

Even with the attempts at just being, or just existing, there is still an *in-out* and *push-pull* associated with identity and one's roles in student government. This tugging

sits at the center of the danger that is the single story. This matters. Several years ago, I wrote and produced a video entitled, "I am More" (Goodman, 2014). In this piece, I asked other queer people to share what they are more than, including stereotypes and LGBTQ+ exaggerations. In so many ways, the men in this study could have been participants in that project. The theme of being *more* continues to emerge as the men share that they are themselves, period. Edward states, beautifully:

> There are so many things to my identity that are so salient in my everyday life. That I'm not just only a gay man, I'm not only a Black man, I'm not only a man, I'm not only a son, I'm not only a brother, I'm not only a lover. That there are so many things that have, yes, influenced my walk as a gay man, have influenced my walk as a leader, and I think that it's so interesting to see those things overlap and the intersection of that.

Edward is more than just one singular identity or existence. His being is intersectional, and he is much more than *just* a *gay* man. There is not a single story of Edward, or of his gayness, or of his existence in student government. But what is behind one's being (or achieving) *more*? Here, one is more than preconceptions. One is more than the prejudices (even Gadamer's). One is more than a closet queen, a sad coming out story, and an inspirational "first." One is just, totally, importantly, *more*.

In Sam's case, as someone who was unapologetically out in ways that others did not exemplify, even he felt an internal tension with his gayness. Sam Shares:

> There are certain days where I truly don't feel like I am gay enough, and it is something that I struggle with. Then for student government, I mean no matter what, that's where I really want to make sure that I don't let that get in the way, and I make sure that I am unapologetically gay, because I don't want to let my own personal issues get in the way of me being an ally or me being there for others. And so I kind of just push it to the side and let myself deal with it.

Even with this ultra-visible difference than from some of the others in this study, still, he, too, is more, and they are all more, than just one sole identity or intersecting role. Hunter

shares the hope for a shift in visibility, as he navigates his own perceptions of self within this context:

> Sometimes we're seen as the gay best friend. Sometimes we're seen as the gay best friend that has all the hook up apps or whatever. Or the gay best friend that does YouTube videos, and goes to Coachella. But they are capable of so much more, and not just those stereotypes that people often see.

As noted in Hunter's example, there is quite a danger in asserting a single story of what it means to be an out, gay man (and in undergraduate student government). "When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (Adichie, 2009). If we are to go with the single story of the men previously highlighted in the turning to and exploration of this phenomenon (e.g., Armstrong, Brooks, Sharp, Salinas, Levitt), we might not be able to see the amount of difference involved in the actual lived experience of out, gay undergraduate men in elected student government, via the lens through which I am presenting now.

And still, somewhere within their being(s), as illuminated in chapter two, there is a mask being worn in different ways. Jack thinks about the ease associated with hiding one's identity to achieve success. He shoved it away, and justified that concealing as "for the greater good." Similarly, Edward also shoved for a long time, and replayed stories of youth who had been ostracized by their families as a way to prevent himself from being open about his sexuality. In both of these examples, the internal narrative of being gay is formed and shaped, and sometimes as a detriment to their overall existence. Yoshino (2006) posits, "I recognize the value of assimilation, which is often necessary to fluid social interaction, to peaceful coexistence, and even to the dialogue through which difference is valued" (p. xi). This was also the case for many of these men, as they moved

through that which is *being gay*, and into that which is *being a certain kind of gay*, including the tension with that juxtaposition. And still, they are more.

Their Way of *Being* (*Out*)

> [I] want to be seen as a strong leader, not a strong gay leader, or a strong leader who's gay. I think that, for me, it's something I'm proud of, and it's a part of me, but it doesn't make me the student government leader that I am. (Jack)

> *Be gay*, my world seemed to say. *Be openly gay, if you want. But don't flaunt*. (Yoshino, 2006, p. 17)

While the men were just *being* (as) themselves, there are layers of passing within their being that represent a palatable kind of outness. This is not the rainbow or lavender kind, but instead, a kind of outness that resists some of the explicit elements of outward perceptions of being gay. For some this is rooted in internalized homophobia or years of self-exploration while growing up, and for others it is a means for survival in student government, and in the different ways leadership spaces are and were occupied. In some ways, there is even a rainbow- or lavender-resistance. Like Jack's sentiments above, he is proud of himself as out and gay, but resists being defined by such existence. But what is Jack resisting? If he is out and open, it must be more than the gay identity itself.

A Palatable Kind of Gay

It is not uncommon for people to quantify queerness in elections, just as I have illuminated in the case of Pete Buttigieg (e.g., *Is he gay enough?*). Regarding Buttigieg, what people are actually asking is, *Is a gay person able to do this job?* For some, this question comes as a result of never seeing a gay person do said-job. For others, there is a more acceptable—or palatable—way they view leaders and leadership. It is here, within this palatable standard, that I connect deeper to the experiences of these men who are just *being (out)*, and whose outness is interrupted by others' and society's expectations and

standards of being gay. Like for Buttigieg, it is significant that he is married, Christian, and a veteran. These heteronormative outliers to his sexuality might help people grapple with his gay identity that they may otherwise see as unfavorable. "He's just like us," they might compromise.

Jack aims to mirror Buttigieg's way of existence someday, something he did while running for student body president. He shares:

> [It's like,] "I'm not here to be the gay guy who was elected president. I'm here to be elected and also, I happen to be gay." Great. I think that's the culture that I've almost tried to mirror here, so that people change their mindset about that. That's important to me. (Jack)

I wonder about the (assumed) mindset Jack alludes. Jack believed that some people were even oblivious to Buttigieg being gay. This led me to wonder further about the many LGBTQ+ spaces like Victory Fund and HRC[23] that have very visibly advocated for Buttigieg as one to support - even though it feels, at times, that other candidates are more outwardly gay-supportive than he, outside of simply existing as himself.

Consequently, Hunter and Sam believe Buttigieg has inspired a lot of people, and Sam even experienced a debate with a friend who argued that the United States was not ready for a gay president. Specifically, Sam's friend told him that a gay president would be too polarizing, and that the United States needs "a person more closely to center to run," he journals. In this case, is "more closely to center" for a gay person ever (or even) achievable? If identity is political, what becomes of the center (for gay people; for women; for people of color; for…)? Ben sees a "close center" in Buttigieg. He shares:

> He's an Afghanistan vet who is married and Christian... And with the new president, it's like that's the same thing is you're going to go along with whatever

[23] In different ways, Victory Fund and HRC are companies that work to support equity and inclusion (and justice) for LGBTQ+ people. There are many organizations doing similar work on state and local levels, though these organizations appear to be the most active within the political realm.

> the administration tells you, because there's no need for you to think critically, and you're a very palpable person. Like they're going to shake their heads and smile at you. And will listen to you because you're... You can up-and-down your queerness, whatever you want to. (Ben)

For Ben, leaders like Buttigieg have a choice of *how gay* they want to appear. Jack believes this is why Buttigieg is perceived as a viable candidate. He shares, "Because he's [not flamboyant]. People don't immediately look at him and the stereotypes don't set in right away." Again: married, Christian, veteran(, White). Jack also feels this is a sad reality that he hopes people will move past; however, he believes Buttigieg is "probably the first step" to achieving a gay candidate who is close enough to people's wants that they would be willing to elect them.

This continued exploration of Buttigieg is just a small example of what a palatable description means at the intersection of being elected and being (out as) gay. The use of the term, "palatable," is not discrediting one's outness or gayness. Instead, this description further opens up the possible heteronormative-expected experience(s) as associated with gay men in leadership. It is here, beyond any visibility of Buttigieg, that I further draw on the experiences of the men in this study. But first, what does it mean to be palatable? And for whom is one palatable? Their self? Their constituents? Is it a conscious or learned behavior? Is it a behavior at all? For some, being palatable is not just externally charged, and instead it starts from within.

To *be* palatable. To be palatable is to agree to a taste, or to be acceptable to the mind (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the case of these gay men in elected student government, to be palatable is to be acceptable or an accepted taste. Much like that of being out-adjacent, there is a Buttigieg-type of existing that mirrors the experience of many of these men. They just are (out, gay, themselves), open, but palatable in ways that

allow them to exist in spaces that have otherwise not been held for or occupied by LGBTQ+ people. For example, Ben believes *gay* has always held White, heterocentric identifiers, and notes the shift in individuals getting married, having children, and living in suburban neighborhoods. He reflects, "Are you really challenging any paradigms other than that your wife is now a husband?" As a result, he resists the label of, "gay," and believes it has a different meaning than how he fully identifies.

For all of these men, being gay is an invisible identity, that unless declared or noted, is not known until it is known (or unconcealed, by self or others). This can lead to many advantages, and might allow someone to shapeshift within different spaces. Specifically, for Ben, this means code-switching. He shares:

> I think being both mixed and queer is just like, I've been constantly thinking about how to code-switch, and survive in these spaces for years…But again the queer thing, I knew how to code-switch from that and to play off more straight when I needed to, more gay when I could. And so those skills that I learned transitioned right into [my institution]. (Ben)

Ben code-switched as a way to be more palatable for those advisors and administrators with whom he worked. There is an advantage to code-switching, and Ben engaged with that idea as a way to navigate institutional spaces. Similarly, Hunter is aware of his multiple selves, and carries himself differently when he is with his gay friends, friends of color, or friends of color who are gay. His awareness is due to the predominantly White and heteronormative nature of his institution environment. In thinking about the interchange of his personal and professional spaces, Bradley found himself code-switching between friends and administrators. But why is Bradley more comfortable interacting in certain ways around his friends than when he is in certain professional situations? He shares:

> Sometimes I think I revealed a little bit too much of myself, and in certain situations I don't want to do that...I don't want people to undermine my message or what I'm trying to do based on how I'm standing or the way I'm speaking or what I'm doing with my hands. (Bradley)

In these examples, Bradley's gayness manifests in the physical realm. But his first understanding of what it might mean to be gay came from his father, who he posits, has an antiquated view of what it means to be gay.

> When I talk about applying for a job, or even student government, he'll be like, "Well, you don't want to let people know that you're gay." I'm like, "Why not?" And he's like, "Well, some people might react badly to that." Like, "Well, that's not my problem."

While his dad wants him to be closer to appearing not-gay than gay, Bradley does not consider himself "as outwardly expressive" as others who might present themselves in ways that show their gay identity. Still, he shares that it is not something he shies away from either, though he does understand the benefits of appearing more not-gay than gay.

Bradley also names a "stereotype" of a "professional gay," where someone aims to be the best at everything and is ultra-competitive. Whereas Bradley felt himself identifying as such, it was not until later in life that he started to question if some of that drive is from his own identity as a gay man, and the desire to be on top. But what does it mean to *be professional*? Is 'professional' interchangeable with 'palatable' in this context of gay men in student government (i.e., to be professional is to be palatable; to be professional is to be more not-gay than gay)? Jack was criticized for trying to make his student government "more professional," in that he wanted it to be taken seriously. Hunter masked his relationship with his boyfriend for a long time as an attempt to "keep it very professional." And Bradley remains keenly aware of the attention his role evokes, and believes being professional as a gay man in student government also means being

well-spoken and having "the ability to stand your own." In this case, is "professional," then, a benchmark for leadership that is complicated by one's identity as gay? Furthermore, I wonder, what is the root of such a desire to *be* palatable?

To be palatable, for *them*. If not for their own selves and experiences, at times, being palatable is and was for others, and for spaces they maneuver(ed) through as student government officers. Like Elliott passing in state political spaces as illustrated in my exploration of the phenomenon, the men in this study also experienced transformation in different ways. And this transformation was not always internal, and instead, was as a result of catering to, and being palatable for others.

Like Elliott, Hunter finds himself drawing on a deeper voice. He shares:

> My voice is usually deeper from how I talk. But it gets even deeper whenever I have to lead senate meetings, and have long, three hour meetings on public record. I don't know why I do that, I think it's just a habit I've gone into…I think it was more self-conscious of like people aren't going to respect me if I have a high voice, which I really don't like to carry over now, now that I know that it's a horrible thing to think about. Like people should respect me because I'm a person not because my voice is deep. But it's just sadly a habit I've picked up. (Hunter)

Hunter shares that he picked up this habit in high school while engaged in speech and debate. In similar internal reflection, Bradley discusses this in relation to his Faculty Senate speech. He shares, "I present a little too much of myself in public spaces." The idea that it is bad or distasteful to present "too much of" oneself in public spaces is a product of a system that says one must be palatable (for others) in order to be accepted. Watching himself on video made him uncomfortable, as he realized he is not fully conscious of what he does with his body while speaking. Specifically he was aware of his body and presence and how he shows up physically (e.g., use of hands, standing firmly on two feet, placement of weight). Navigating different spaces, Bradley calls this

"showing face," where he has to present himself in different ways to different audiences (e.g., faculty, administrators, peers). Similarly, Hunter calls this his "straight face," one he enlists when meeting with administrators or advisors who he does not know or with whom he has not yet connected (and about his identities). But what is it about the body that has such an association with one's gayness? Why might the hands or face be a showing that transcend metaphorical understanding? Perhaps, to the earlier point, one's gay identity does, actually, appear in the physical sense.

Owen has friends involved on campus who fight the implications and expectations associated with "straight face," and despite consequences, engage with administrators the same way they approach their peers. He shares:

> I see the ways in which higher-level administrators don't value the work they do simply because of the way that they present themselves in meetings. But they're just coming to the meetings being fully who they are, and not changing their way of speaking or thinking or being, simply to please these people. (Owen)

And even with this authenticity, there is a continued risk of consequence. For example, Christopher resisted being seen or assumed as weak or unknowledgeable, and worked hard to be seen as mean and cold, which he equated as the opposite of what it might mean to be gay and in his role. Christopher's fear of being perceived as gay (and thus, weak) led him to adopt this leadership style, though he worked hard to break that internal stigma. He shares, "I will never allow my sexuality to be something that paints me as inferior or not as good as others."

Ben's experiences were less inward, and more external as a result of interactions with administrators. Ben's predecessors were a queer White man serving as president and a woman of color serving as vice-president, and he received mixed advice on how to engage with administrators. Whereas the past-president said administrators were "open to

anything," the past-vice-president shared a different reality when she and Ben were one-on-one. He shares:

> When we had her transition meeting, specifically when it was me one-on-one with her, she was like, "Listen, they're going to look you in the face, and they're going to smile and nod, and then they're immediately going to turn to [your White vice-president]. It does not matter what your position is, or what title you have, but that's going to happen. So what you can do," she was just like, "You could do one or two things; you can be exactly who you are because you know they're not going to listen to you, or you can be more politicky and really learn how to play him in those space[s]." (Ben)

It was in this "politicky" approach that Ben learned he needed to be something other than a mixed race gay man to be received "well" by administrators. Much like for women in politics, there is a mindfulness of emotions or temperament that holds them to a different standard than their male counterparts. Ben shares that these preliminary experiences were hard for him to navigate, and he watched administrators and Board members "smiling and nodding" at him, but engage more deeply with his (White) vice president. Here, leaders have to be somebody else in order to be received. But is this at the cost of being their true or most authentic self? While the men in this study are and were out in their roles, many journeyed from palatable to out-adjacent, and straddled multiple worlds involving their gayness and their leadership role(s).

Out, with Distance, Out(,-)Adjacent

> The gays I know no longer debate conversion and passing—we categorically oppose conversion, and oppose passing while recognizing the importance of letting individuals come out on their own. We remain riven, however, by questions of covering—how much individuals should assimilate into the mainstream *after* coming out as gay. Should gays 'act straight,' or embrace gender atypicality? Should we be discreet about our sexuality, or 'flaunt' it? (Yoshino, 2006, pp. 76-77)

The question of "acting straight" or discreet, or of flaunting one's sexuality can be examined within the context of *out...mostly*, which is the genesis of being out-adjacent.

While out-adjacent is illuminated in chapter one as part of my turning to this phenomenon, it also appears as a theme that connects the idea of *out...mostly* to many of the experiences of the men in this study. To be out-adjacent moves beyond what it might mean for someone to be palatable, and especially in the context of being out and gay in elected student government.

In practice, Bradley understands the way he code-switches to remain acceptable in different spaces. For example, in his state's system-wide student government, Bradley sees other openly gay people, and felt more comfortable to be more more out. Conversely, he finds himself more "reserved and professional," and aware of being gay, when back on campus and amidst administrators and advisors. Jack operated similarly, and called this "the guessing game" (e.g., "I could totally tell," or "I couldn't tell," as it relates to him being gay). Jack feels a "high" off of being openly gay, but being perceived as not-gay. He acknowledges that straddling this world is something he feels is internally bad, and something he is working on, but he still receives, "Oh, you seem straight," comments as compliments.

Conversely, comments such as these frustrate Sam. He shares that his mother will often say, "I'm so happy that you're straight gay," and, "We don't want you looking like one of those people in the parade. You can be a straight gay." These sentiments upset Sam, as he believes they allow for toxic masculinity to be prevalent at this same intersection of one being, possibly, *too* gay. These sentiments also maintain the closet as a continued binding and benchmark. How far out of the closet—but not too far out—is monitored closely. This may be why the *guessing game* is so interesting to Jack. In a personal narrative, Collins shares:

> The "closet" was comfortable because even if people thought I was gay, if they could not prove it, their words had no power. As long as I pretended to not be gay, I felt I had created a safe space for myself. (Collins & McElmurry, 2014, p. 190)

There is a comfort here that Collins shares. This proving, like the experience of some of these men, held power and stripped others of power. Here, proving's failures created a safe space.

But what is it about an adjacentness that is part of this experience? To be out-adjacent is not without the distance that adjacentness creates. For example, in real estate, a realtor may market a home based on its proximity to something else (great schools, a shopping area, safety, a community pool). But in this adjacentness, there is still a distance from the schools, the shopping area, safety, and even the pool. There is distance and a space between. This in-betweenness as adjacentness can be a reality for these men. And I wonder, is this, instead, a liminal place? Is adjacent, *on the way to*, something? The in-betweenness is perhaps the most relevant connection - to *be* adjacent to *being* out. There is a palatable something found within that distance, a something that is supported and nurtured by being, out(,-)adjacent.

Jack resists the word, "palatable," but believes people still want to elect someone who does not feel so different from them. Jack shares that people can embrace someone who is Black, or a woman, or who is gay, but that they still want them to be those identifiers...within reason. For example, Jack talks about U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren and her leadership style. He shares, "If Elizabeth Warren yells in a hearing versus a man, she's shrill and he's just yelling. And that stuff is obviously frustrating and puts you off." This disappoints Jack. While he feels the country is moving in a positive direction that counters this reality, he still feels this way of thinking is alarmingly present. Such a

mindset also led some to question their identities. For example, expectations such as these led Sam to wonder if he sounded *too gay*, or if he was dressed "straight" because of these implied notions that he can be out, but not *too out*. Sam journals:

> After I heard my voice, I was taken aback. I heard my voice before, but I didn't remember it sounding like that. Once a few minutes went by, I processed why I was so taken aback by my voice. It was out of fear that I was too visibly gay that I could be attacked again.

As a result of these feelings, and realities for many, code-switching prevails (and "it fucking sucks," Sam comments). As a result, other dimensions of identity come into question, and the men in this study experience the out-adjacent nature of their way of being (out) within this elected student government space.

Spiritual dissonance, and *being* Christian. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'" (Isaiah 6:8 New International Version). This passage remains one of the few Bible verses I have memorized. One way participants display an out-adjacent existence is in how they grapple with their religious or spiritual identities. For years, Isaiah 6:8 existed as the genesis of my interpretation of (G)od's calling in my life: *I will go*, I resolved, and wherever that meant, and certainly in non-gay goings. I was raised in a very religious and spiritual space, and I found myself doing things within the church that would supplement for any thought that I might possibly be gay. I led praise and worship in a small youth group band. I taught Sunday School to children. I read the Bible, a lot. I know the world many of these men operate/ed in, and I know how religious teaching creates dissonance - being told one thing from a Biblical perspective and then feeling something that may conflict with that teaching. And from my conversations, I wonder, is being spiritual or

faithful (or *out!*) as (a) Christian to be palatable for people? To be adjacent from a more actualized gay person? Is this the digestible version of being gay?

Many of my participants were raised in a Catholic or Christian church. Several were taught, in different forms and messages, that being gay is a sin, and that it is wrong. For example, Sam grew up in the Catholic church and was told by priests that God hated gay people. Even though he was raised in a diverse community, and had openly out teachers in his school, he internalized the teaching and believed it must be true given the ways he was being mocked and hurt, physically and mentally. Sam felt that he would not be dealing with this type of response from people if being gay was not wrong. Edward was also raised in the church, and experienced service and leadership in that context. And still, Edward goes to church every Sunday, and believes the Lord moves through him. He shares, "I am so very thankful to be a child of God. At the same time, I'm very thankful to go home and talk to my boyfriend every day." I take a breath as I face this juxtaposition, with remembrance of Edward's cultural context (e.g., the South).

My personal religious upbringing, and the many ways religion, faith, and spirituality (intentionally drawing each of those out as separate) came up in my conversations with participants leads me to wonder, *what is it about the Bible, and Christian teaching specifically, that maintains a palatable gay(or queer)ness, even within outness? What is such a teaching adjacent to, or from, and within, such an outness?* Being raised in such a heteronormative space like a military church (the intersection was quite unique), I wondered about my participants and how they might navigate their own intersections (e.g., gay Christians in the South and Midwest). Like Edward, Christopher remains devout in his Christian faith, and despite the challenges he has faced as an openly

gay Christian. As these men are in southern and midwest geographies, I wonder about the role of faith as an additional layer of being out. The Movement Advancement Project (2019) asserts, "Family, faith, and community comprise the core of how many people living in rural places create, nurture, and sustain emotional and social connections to one another" (p. iv). Understanding this system of values makes it easy(ier) to envision a world where Edward, for example, can journey through such a juxtaposition as previously illuminated.

Christopher avoids rationalizing the Bible, but does resolve the dissonance for himself:

> When people ask me, "Do you think being gay is a sin?" I personally want to say, "No," but the way it's written, it kind of looks like yes. But I can't ... the problem is we have a society that says, "This is the worst of all sins."... And though I do believe it was inspired by God, I believe it was written by men. (Christopher)

Edward has a similar, internal debate. He also notes that the Bible was written by man, and that he trusts God more than he trusts man. Edward reiterates the interpretive reality of scripture, and that he stays faithful to attending church each Sunday. He even has a placard in his office that reads language about trusting God. This visible declaration of his Christianity led me to wonder about the grappling that may continue long after I left his campus. And still, he is proud of who he is, as both gay and as (a) Christian. Edward and Christopher's journeys (and Christopher's whose involves conversion therapy, specifically) bring me back to Yoshino (2006).

> The word "conversion" has mundane usages, as when applied to current or currency. When applied to human beings, however, "conversion" carries its weightier sense—a spiritual transformation of our core, something that happens on the road to Damascus. For me, the question of who will convert, who will be radically transformed, has always been the primal question of civil rights. Who will change? The gay son or the straight parents? The homosexual or the homophobe? Just thinking of such change can change us. (p. 46)

I wonder, is conversion assumed in order to be both Christian and gay, and to be out as such? Is this the gap between the adjacent-out (self) and the whatever-it-is-one-is-adjacently-out-to? While Yoshino (2006) suggests one will (or should) change, the *who* is subject to interpretation. Edward reiterates that Jesus taught him love. And while there is a transforming implied by Yoshino, Edward believes Jesus allows him to be his true self *and* a leader, a servant, and an advocate for students.

Before coming out, Sam's anti-gay feelings led him to dive deeper into religion. His internal struggle made him feel like a horrible human being, a feeling that led him to become "heavily Christian," and to start "shoving the Bible down people's throats." This approach gave Sam an out from leaning deeper into accepting his sexuality, which he was told was a choice. He shares, "I placed way too much emphasis on the church's idea of who I am and that kind of really hurt me a lot." Buttigieg (2019b) shares:

> You may be religious and you may not. But if you are, and you are also queer, and you have come through the other side of a period of wishing that you weren't, then you know that that message, that this idea that there is something wrong with you, is a message that puts you at war, not only with yourself, but your maker. And, speaking only for myself, I can tell you that if me being gay was a choice, it was a choice that was made far, far above my paygrade.

Many of these men came (out) through this wishing period. I came through this wishing period. And there is nothing wrong with us.

These conversations with participants were very intense, and brought up my own feelings of dissonance around religion and spirituality (the wishing period left some scars). In reflection, I was transported back to middle school and high school, being on the front row of worship with my peers, and with my hands in the air, and at times, tears streaming down my face. I was even part of a youth praise and worship group called,

"TRUTH: Teens Reaching Up To Heaven." Similar to some of these men, I resisted for so long, I wished for so long, and I tried countless other ways to fill that adjacent space that was between my sexuality and "God." Sam's journey specifically made me think deeply about passing and masking, and how I conceal(ed) and (un)conceal(ed) within this religious tension…and religious trauma. I wonder about all the times I attempted to use prayer as a response to my gayness, and as a response to this religious tension. This reminds me of my initial grappling with "praying away the gay." In the *Grey's Anatomy* episode, "Invasion," Dr. Callie Torres' father unexpectedly shows up at the hospital where she works, accompanied by their family priest. In an explosive initial scene, Torres questions her father's motives, and screams, "Are you two here to…you think you can pray away the gay. You can't pray away the gay. You can't pray away the gay" (Rhimes, Wilding, & Phelan, 2009)!

Torres' girlfriend, Dr. Arizona Robbins, encourages her to sit down and have a conversation with her father, and to give him room to "be a little shocked" regarding her sexuality (Rhimes, Wilding, & Phelan, 2009). When she and her father sit down (with their priest), Torres asserts, "You should have adjusted by now. I mean, you're supposed to love me, no matter what. That's what a parent does" (Rhimes, Wilding, & Phelan, 2009). But Torres' father was persistent, and the conversation progressed quickly. Torres' father asserts, "I love you with all my heart. But with all that's going on with you now. Look, I'm scared for you. It's an abomination. It's an eternity in hell." He eventually begins to rapidly cite the Bible at her, and Torres replies back with her own Bible verses about love and mercy, and the scene ends with Torres asserting, "Jesus is my savior,

daddy, not you. And Jesus would be ashamed of you for judging me, (H)e would be ashamed of you for turning your back on me," as she storms out of the room.

Her father's visit ends with Robbins approaching Torres' father in the waiting room. She shares with Torres' father that she was named after a battleship, and comes from a family of military veterans. She looks to him and says:

> When my father, Colonel Daniel Robbins of the United States Marine Corps, heard that I was a lesbian, he said he only had one question. I was prepared for, "How fast can you get the hell out of my house?" But instead, it was, "Are you still who I raised you to be?" My father believes in country the way that you believe in God, and my father is not a man who bends, but he bent for me, because I am his daughter. (Rhimes, Wilding, & Phelan, 2009)

The final scene from the episode is in front of the hospital between Torres and her father. It is a tender moment where Torres' father shares that he has to catch her if and when she falls, and his concerns come from a place of care, because he is her father. Here, a parent's love transcends the child's sexuality. While the ending is much more amicable than many other confrontations between queer children and religious parent(s), the sentiment that "you can't pray away the gay" remains something that not only shaped my worldview as a closeted (at the time) gay person, but also as someone who, too, believe(d/s) one truly, cannot, pray away "the gay."

<u>on faith</u>

Have you ever been confused about where life is taking us?
(Assuming we are in this together.)

I had a dream I met a really great pastor.
She was more concerned with my spiritual and emotional wellbeing
than with my theological knowledge.

But I have always struggled to have a place at Christ's table.
Most churches turn us away.
Because our marriage bed is sinful,
Because my commitment to him is apostasy,

> Because I chose to say no to hating who I am.
>
> A guitar plays slowly in the background, squeaking and sliding past all my self hatred.
>
> I want my heart to be as soft and delicate as the dahlias on the altar.
>
> Lord Jesus make us brave.
> Amen. (O'Brien, 2018, p. 80)

Gay, but not *that* (kind of) gay. While spiritual connections are and were a major internal hurdle for some of the men (and in very different ways), their will and/or interest in connecting with the campus LGBTQ+ community became an external barrier, and one that deeply impacted their work. There is a tension between leading in student government and campus-wide spaces, and then queer- or gay-only spaces. For example, Jack shares an immense amount of guilt around not connecting with the LGBTQ+ student organization on his campus. He found himself dissuaded from attending meetings, and even a campus-wide "Lavender Graduation," due to a college experience of not engaging specifically with that community. But he wrestled with guilt, and shares:

> The thought of, oh if I suddenly go this week, how superficial does it look? Or do I go to "Lavender Graduation?" How superficial does that look? What did I do for the community for a few years? ...but I know exactly why I did it. I know exactly why I wasn't connected with them because I didn't want to be seen. It's homophobic in my own way against myself. I didn't want to be seen as just the guy who is the gay president, and that's why he's doing this. (Jack)

Jack resisted being seen. While he feels he will remain an advocate for LGBTQ+ issues in his future political career, he remains cautious of "over-identifying" with the LGBTQ+ community. There were sentiments of an acceptance of himself as gay, but not *too* (or *so*) gay that it hindered his successes. He called this "over-identifying," and resists engaging in that way. Specifically, he resists the LGBTQ+-based group ways of involvement.

Ben and Bradley also did not connect with the LGBTQ+ organizations on their campuses. Ben shares, "It wasn't what I needed." LGBTQ+ groups on Ben's campus are social in nature, and Ben felt he already had that community in different ways. Had they been more activist-based, Ben might have joined in, he shares. Similarly, Bradley chooses not to become involved with the LGBTQ+ student groups on campus, outside of volunteering for events like National Coming Out Day. Ben feels queer students on his campus did a lot of the "heaving lifting" on LGBTQ+ issues, and while not explicit, both he and Jack feel that they, too, did work on behalf of LGBTQ+ students, even if not largely seen or noted in their student government context (e.g., legislation or attendance).

For some, this disconnect also contains a sentiment of not feeling gay enough, or not feeling gay in this way of direct leadership (that would lead someone to lead in this context). This reminds me of Dilley's (2005) work, which draws a distinction between *gay* and *queer* students. Dilley (2005) contends:

> Queer students tended not simply to join campus or community organizations, but instead attempted to subvert or to reinvent the structures of those very institutions. Whereas gay students working for change on a college campus might become involved in the university or college governance, student politics, or campus activities, queer students might form groups to protest many of those very elements of campus life or might plan events that highlighted the social stigmatization they felt in a non-homosexual environment. (p. 66)

Dilley (2005) differentiates *homosexual* and *gay* students from those who identify as *queer*. For queer students, sexuality was an agitator to notions of normality (Dilley, 2005). Gay students in Dilley's (2005) study, and in the context of the men in this study, sought to fit into "accepted" ways of campus involvement, such as student government, organizations, and politics. For some of these men, student government was that way of accepted involvement.

Bradley turned inward while he reflected on this reality for himself. He shares:

> Sometimes I wonder, I go [to the LGBTQ+ center] and I'm like, "They don't think I'm gay enough." That is their niche on campus, and I think they are very welcoming. But at the same time, they're also all very close friends, so you coming in there as a stranger, it's like being gay isn't enough to connect you into that group. So I like doing events with them and stuff like that, but I'm not very close friends with all of them. (Bradley)

Bradley feels a difference between his way of involvement in student government, and the involvement of those in LGBTQ+-based capacities. "Everyone has different sorts of things on campus that they operate in, or their community. And I am outwardly gay in all those areas, but I am not the smiling face when you walk into the LGBTQ center," he shares. Likewise, Jack honors and acknowledges the students on his campus who do this work explicitly, but found himself intentionally not engaging as a result of his sexuality. This created a disconnect between he and the LGBTQ+-involved students, of which he never considered himself a part. By not engaging, Jack fought the assumption that because he is gay, he would automatically advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. But he shares, "I didn't want to be the gay president who's just talking about all the LGBT issues." Almost verbatim, Hunter shares a similar sentiment, and posits, "It's so easy for me to shy away from those issues because I didn't want to be seen as the president who's only focusing on this." For both of these men, there are and were others to do that work, and in that specific out-context.

If not the organizations themselves, the men still maintain/ed connections to the people in the organizations, if not directly leading or engaging with them. For example, most of the men share that they are friends with or have good/relationships with the leaders of these groups. Bradley even considers one of the staff members in his campus LGBTQ+ center a mentor, and Edward is close friends with some of the founders and

members of his institution's Pride organization. And even with these relationships, what is it about the gay space(s) that is *too gay* for these gay men? To *be* gay, but to establish such distance, is the *out...mostly* that many endure. They are...out...mostly.

Not resisting involvement in this way, Sam was an outlier to some of the other men in this study. Initially he found community with the campus Pride group on his campus, but eventually found that his interest in change and his work on campus went beyond the LGBTQ+ group. Due to interpersonal "drama" in the organization, Sam became disenfranchised with the work and institutional response, and decided his voice could transcend beyond those spaces. He ultimately brought this mission with him into student government, and specifically into spaces where diversity and inclusion were not happening thoroughly and authentically. Similarly, Hunter had no experience with the LGBTQ+ organizations on his campus, which he shares is made up mostly of women- and lesbian-identified students. But he does want this connection; it just has not yet presented itself to him. Conversely, Edward feels that his involvement never needed to be within LGBTQ+-based spaces. He finds that he and the students in the LGBTQ+ groups on his campus have an agreement and understanding that he can still advocate for and advance equity for that community without a formal connection. He shares, "It's not an expectation for me to come to the meetings, but it is an expectation for me to advocate for those students. And I do that on a daily basis." While he is not "called" to be more queer or more gay, he does feel called to advance the awareness of what the groups are doing across campus. In these three perspectives, there is a resistance, a desire, and an avoidance at play - all furthering the *out...mostly* experience of these men.

Jack's questioning continued into his journals, and he reflects deeper on his decision to attend or not to attend his campus "Lavender Graduation." He shares:

> When I first saw the advertisements for it, I immediately knew I wasn't going to attend. In no way was that decision made in ill-will. I just immediately jumped to the thought that that ceremony wasn't for me, that I was never, and I apologize to the world for my horrible thoughts, "one of them." … This immediately made me realize that I was othering a whole group of people, not for the fact that they were gay or trans, but for the fact that they weren't my close friends, so naturally I didn't identify with them. (Jack)

This was a massive learning lesson for Jack, something he shares with me that did not quite leave his mind as we conversed. I continue to wonder if, how, and when participants found the queer spaces, the LGBTQ+ student union, or other LGBTQ+ clubs, organizations, or group gatherings. I wondered if these groups ever call(ed) out to the men to be more queer or to be more invested as a leader in those contexts? Or to engage? Or to push through certain legislation? Or to sign on with different representation? Or if they knew there was even a disconnect? And with each of these questions, the tension remained as participants navigated both campus and interpersonal spaces as both gay and not-that-gay, and still, *out...mostly*.

There is Tension in the (Queer) Margins

> Just because someone is a member of a social identity group does not mean that the social identity is salient to that person. For example, I may identify as male, but that doesn't mean that being a man holds any level of importance to me. This research conflates categorical membership with identity salience, potentially masking differences that may exist. Furthermore, these studies typically do not account for considerations associated with one's environmental context… (Dugan, 2017, p. 289)

For some of these men, their gay identity was there, but not as salient as one might assume or believe. When at the intersection of leadership and student government, at times, their gay identities took a back seat. And here, they continue/d to remain in the

margins. For example, Ben navigated a continued self-narrative of feeling like he just could not connect to the mission and purpose of his role. The tension of fitting into a student government mold at his institution remained a constant theme for him. Ben shares, "I am incredibly different from these people for these set of specific reasons. And no one will ever let me forget that." Those reasons are his racial identity and sexuality, and he had a strong awareness of difference and how he is perceived. Ben identifies strongly with his queer identity, and I replay Brimhall-Vargas (2011), who asserts, "Queer vexes. And it certainly vexes me" (p. 340).

The existence one holds as a queer person is subject to the way they arrive(d) at the term and concept. To be queer is to be in the margins. But the margins are not always a positive embrace. The term alone may evoke a response. Brimhall-Vargas (2011) notes:

> It is a term that I have heard in my own past, and I scrutinize it now with the same trepidation one might have when seeking to pick up broken glass. Queer is sharp, cutting both ways, for that careless someone who chooses to handle it without the right approach. Even the sound of queer elicits a tone of opposition as illustrated by that horrible elementary schoolyard game called "Smear the Queer." (p. 340)

In this childhood game, there is a physicality that involves chasing the person perceived to be different (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011). A chasing such as this illuminates the desire to be not(-the-)queer. The resistance to being the smeared queer in this example is certainly something to ponder, and it is here that I wonder deeper about the resistance to the margins of a queer existence. Hunter did significant advocacy work for the LGBTQ+ community within housing/residence life. However, he resists such an identity in student government. While Hunter helped design a policy to create an LGBTQ+-based living-learning community on campus, this was work he did not feel he could or would do in the student government context. "Indeed, queer vexes" (Brimhall-Vargas, 2011, p. 340).

Some of this tension in the margins also resides in the personal lives of these men. For example, Christopher journals about an experience that happened shortly after our first conversation, where he had to turn down a major career opportunity because of the geographic location of the position. The job was an ideal opportunity, but the location placement was one that contained strict laws and policies about homosexuality. There was an expectation in this context that being palatable and gay was not merely enough… to be more not-gay than gay was not merely enough… to be *out...mostly* was not merely enough. One must be, in fact, not-gay, to breathe in certain opportunities, much like the one Christopher declined. And still, he juggled the decision.

> Part of me wants to [go] just so I can prove that this will not be something that will hinder me. But I know that my family and friends will always be in fear for me… and I too would always be afraid. (Christopher)

Christopher knew this could be dangerous and did not accept the job. Similarly, Edward is aware of the ways his identity and his professional role(s) might conflict, and avoids that intersection as much as possible. He shares that his private life is not something he is public about, and does not "walk around campus waving a Pride flag." Edward acknowledges that students will discriminate against him for that, and so he finds ways to advocate for students on his own—professional—terms.

Throughout middle school and high school, Christopher was told that gay people would never accomplish great things, and would never have wealth or success. He took that as a challenge, and sought to prove that he was capable of those things. This led him to run for state and national offices, and to hold positions where he could feel, "I am basically gay, but look at me. I'm above you. I can do all these...just the same amount of things that you do, but better." But Sam assumes there to be more openly gay men in

positions like he and Christopher's other than president, and specifically because he believes there is an expectation that those achieving such roles need to do so by being straight-acting or that "straight gay" type identified by his mother (to be palatable and gay, to be more not gay than gay, to be *out...mostly*). He questions if people are ready for openly flamboyant gay men who are unapologetically out and gay in their role. For some, great work remained in these tensions...but not all. And so, these men embraced a spirit of advocacy associated with their identity and their role(s). While not advocating for LGBTQ+ students/organizations explicitly, they were advocates on campus, doing advocacy work, and for many, unapologetically so.

"Chief Advocacy Officer"

When I was student government president, I conducted a major student organization assessment. At the time, I did not realize I was actually doing research, and that I was drawing out students' experiences between the institution and their organizations. When I finished, I presented the top university administrators with bound copies of the results, and even extracted some of the highlights for them to pay close attention to. It was in this capacity that I was doing advocacy work, and while I did not understand at the time, I have since discovered that student government is especially connected to advocacy work. I did not realize that I was also the lead student advocate to and for my peers. This 'aha' moment occurred to me while talking with Jack, who called himself the "Chief Advocacy Officer" of his institution. And Jack was not alone. Each of the men talked about advocacy in different ways as associated with their identity as gay and/or their role and work in student government.

To do work in this way, Ben draws on the phrase, "A rising tide lifts all boats." While the phrase is associated[24] with U.S. President John F. Kennedy (and is not immune to criticism), Ben finds the concept to be deeply related to his efforts as an advocate doing student-centered work. Ben comments that it is important to act as an advocate for students' voice(s), and Owen finds that his role involves elevating the voices of people who still struggle to get to the very table(s) he occupies as student government vice-president. Within this elevation, there is a commitment to doing work *for* students, and being able to say, *I'm willing to fight for you, I'm willing to go to administrators or to others and say that this population or issue matters, or that a specific issue on campus needs to be addressed.* I am brought back to notions of *voicelessness*, and questions of whose voice is less. Is *this* the genesis of advocacy, to be that voice for the (voice)less? Advocacy is tied to representation. They were and are *being* on-behalf of students: as both advocates and representatives.

Re(-)presentation Matters

What does it mean to represent? To represent whom? Represent. The prefix, 're-,' means again, or commonly (Skeat, 1911). Represent. "To bring before again, exhibit" (Skeat, 1911, p. 443). To commonly bring before. See 'present.' Present, to give, to place before, hold out, offer a gift (Skeat, 1911). Presentiment. "A fore-feeling; to feel beforehand, before, to feel" (Skeat, 1911, p. 409). To commonly bring before an offer, a gift. See 'sense.' Sense, of sensus, feeling; "to feel, perceive" (p. 475). Representation. There is a distinction between representation and *re*-presentation, one that exists within the realm of visibility, as previously explored. Levin (1989) contends:

[24] Kennedy's speechwriter came across the slogan through the New England Council, a regional chamber of commerce, and adopted and applied it in economic contexts (Sorensen, 2008).

> We are sometimes so defensive, so threatened or vulnerable, that we encounter people and things, and enter into situations, in a way that defers or postpones any genuine experience, any 'real' encounter. (We could consider 'representation' to be the re-presenting of what presents itself; the prefix would then signify a deferment by repetition, presumably more on our preferred terms.) (p. 19)

Levin helps to open this up further. In some ways, Levin associates this (kind of) re(-) presenting as a choice, and one that mirrors the men and any defensiveness, threat, or vulnerability they might face. Within his work with students, Edward shares, "Their opinions ought to be heard and as their voice, as the representative, it's encumbered upon me to ensure that their thoughts and ideals are being adequately represented to our administration." Here, Edward is representing the students and re-presenting their opinions and voice. Edward appears to be in touch with the voiceless. He shares:

> At the end of the day, I'm not the voice of the Black students. I'm not the voice of the gay students. I'm the voice of the students, period. And so I think it's been interesting in the context of, yes, being an elected gay Black student leader, how do I move across those spaces, how do I move through those spaces, has been something that I've always thought about. (Edward)

As Edward thinks about this type of representation, it transcends beyond his identities as Black and gay. But does this type of representation—or visibility—come with responsibility? Are gay men in student government at the forefront of representation? Who are they representing? In Edward's description, then, are the voiceless simply those not in the elected roles? Are the voicefull the elected ones? And on behalf of whom are they a (or the) voice? It is in this framing that I separate the idea of re-presentation from representation. By adding the hyphen, I connect deeper to the meaning of the prefix, 're,' as again, or commonly (Skeat, 1911). In this example, I move from representation as a fixed perspective, and re-presenting as a presentation, again…and again. Gay men are representing *and* re-presenting themselves *and* others. They are visible, but with work,

and time, and habit. Within this visibility, they are also able to represent peers and causes freely, both within the bounds of re(-)presentation as advocacy.

Visibility initially mattered a lot to Ben, but as he became more aware of higher education politics at large, he realizes it was more about representation. He shares, "[My institution is] the prototypical, 'Oh, look, there's five people of color and someone in a wheelchair in this brochure.' And then you come here and you're like, 'Oh, they don't go here. Those are people that we've never seen before.'" Seeing people like him went beyond other gay people, and into the realm of every individual with oppressed and marginalized identities. And still, he was their voice. This also matters to Hunter, who shares that the previous student body presidents at his institution were not representative of him (e.g., they came from money, were predominantly White, and out of touch with the students they intended to serve). Hunter is aware of the reach that his role could have, specifically to students who may not be as involved in ways that have typically attracted individuals to student government (e.g., students in fraternities/sororities and those in clubs and organizations at large): the *voiceless*.

But there is a politicking that is involved in representative advocacy that might require one to maneuver or change based on how or if they are seen (i.e., as palatable, or…), and how and whom they are representing (i.e., people like them, people who have historically been left out, administrator appeasement). Bradley leaned toward transparency, and advocated in front of his peers to appear more personal and open, as advocacy often occurs behind-the-scenes in student government. For others, this includes *who* specifically it is they are representing. For Edward, and others, the question of representation is also a question of representing even those who are not like them, as the

men thought deeply about and further contextualized their understanding of the voiceless, and of "the student body" at large.

Representing every student…even in opposition. As Ben engages with the notion of "a rising tide lifts all boats," he did so as a way to do student-focused work. He shares, "If I do this for this one specific group, I'm doing it for every specific group. I mean, every alliance or organization or identity that feels like they haven't been heard by the administration." For Ben, advocacy was also intertwined with leadership equity. For the men in this study, advocacy and representation went beyond a select group of students, and encompassed the student body as a whole. Seminal literature on leaders in student government posit that students respect the stance on issues by those at the helm (Dungan & Klopf, 1949). It is also assumed that leaders in this context approach campus problems and issues "with objectivity and a willingness to learn" (Dungan & Klopf, 1949, p. 10). Edward shares, "I love being able to advocate for students in spaces they may not know exist. I love being the voice of students in rooms where the ivory tower is the norm." For Bradley, this includes being a recognizable face to students, staff, and administrators on campus. Within the "ivory tower," however, there is a set of historical norms that may make this a difficult task for elected leaders.

Recognition is not always a seamless experience. At times, advocacy and representation include administrators, close colleagues, and even students and student groups who may not be in agreement with their identity or overall objective. Some felt this tension directly. Bradley shares that his role is sometimes about advocating for students in ways for which a leader does not always feel advocated (e.g., him being gay). Bradley views himself as an advocate for *all* students, even ones with viewpoints or

group membership that promote a negative view of he or his sexuality. These students, too, are voiceless (at times, and often despite being voicefull within any varying privileged identities they may possess). Bradley makes a conscious effort to look past any conflicting feelings, and shares, "There are times when members of the LGBT community are given a cold shoulder, but I can't give a cold shoulder to other students who need my help." This selfless approach is rooted in responsibility and advocacy for Bradley. Similarly, Sam acknowledges that his student government was not a queer-accepting space, but that he felt an obligation to make it more inclusive and more diverse, despite the organization's history (and arguably, the institution's history). Sam's student government is largely made up of fraternity/sorority students, a membership he does not possess. Furthermore, the fraternity that dominated many of the senior roles in student government is known for being "the most homophobic, racist, discriminatory fraternity on campus," Sam shares. According to early literature, the ideal system of representation in a democratic community has long been complicated (Dungan & Klopf, 1949). Still, Sam worked with those individuals, despite conflicting feelings and views.

Owen was initially most nervous about holding students who disagreed with him accountable, and felt insecure about the possibility that they would make hurtful comments about him being gay. But being in opposition does not always mean exclusively disagreeing. Several students who Owen oversees hold different views as he, which often push him outside of his comfort zone. For example, one student in particular is associated with an ultra-conservative group on campus. Having pronoun information in his email signature, Owen received a lengthy email from this student about pronouns and

his use of them in email and meetings. At first, Owen was nervous to open the email, but was eventually pleasantly surprised that the individual was supportive of pronoun usage.

For Hunter, some opposition comes from the nature of his state's politics. Located in a state with diverse political ideologies, Hunter's institution often hosts political candidates from all parties. He was told early on, "So like, if Donald Trump comes, you better go shake Donald Trump's hand like you would shake any other person's hand." The expectation to be "unbiased" is one that reverberates through these men's experiences, and in Hunter's case, he struggles with the pressure to be a representative of *all*, including students or supporters of Trump. However, Hunter shares that he would probably still shake hands with Trump if that time came, but frames it as sacrificing himself "for the students." As I sat with Hunter's response, I replayed my own decision-making style as a student body president, and if I would have taken a similar stance. Politicians from Oklahoma share many Trump-like philosophies, and at times, I shared space with them (I was also closeted and a conservative by obligation, and have clearly come a long way).

Several of the men also share experiences *in comparison* to their straight counterparts. For example, Hunter's institution was known for mis-gendering people through pronoun identification. Many people approached Hunter to call for a solution to this issue, one he believed needed to be addressed (and one he was eager to address). However, he could not help but feel a tension, and believes that past presidents would not have had this same engagement on a topic such as this. Sam experienced several struggles with his student body president specifically, a straight man who did not value diversity and inclusion in the same way as he did. Sam shares:

> It just frustrates me because as someone who has come so far from where they were, where they have been fighting for themselves to now being able to fight for others at all of these meetings, and stand up to Board of Trustees members, stand up to vice-presidents, and stand up to department chairs, and be like, "No. You all need to get your shit together, because the students are not safe."

There is courage in this confrontation (and visibility, and outness, and representation). Sam struggled with his president's competence, and even as their term(s) came to an end, Sam's leadership was questioned in ways that he believes would not have been the case had he not been gay and the president been straight. Sam believes he was held to a different standard than his straight (White) counterpart, who he believes was doing a mediocre job and getting significant recognition. Jack, too, shares that he is stronger than the straight male leaders on his campus because of what he had been through as a gay man. Advocacy knows no bounds, and for many of these men, it is this work in opposition that remains difficult, but necessary.

***Passive advocacy*: Visible others, and others' visibility.** Between student government advisors, campus administrators, and a variety of pop culture movies, books, and out leaders, visibility was noted and (differently) valued by the men. Furthermore, to do this work, these men moved from an active advocacy to a passive advocacy. But what is *passive advocacy*? What does it mean to be passive-anything? Is passive the direct opposite of active? Can one be *in*active and still advocating? Can one be passively advocating for and with, something (anything)? In this context of *passive advocacy*, visibility of self and others allows the passive advocacy to come more closely to form. In this way, visibility is of both self and others, and remains in a re(-)presentative state.

Ben recalls his most trusted advisors in student affairs tended to be women and queer men. He appreciates those with these identities as most supportive of him and his

identities. Peers' visibility also resonates with the men. For example, Christopher is proud of his institution for electing two women to serve in the highest roles the following year of his time in office. And Edward exemplifies excitement over the large presence of Black students across the country achieving top spaces and top roles in student government. He shares, "I think that we can build a coalition of student leaders, of Black student leaders across the nation, to say that, 'Hey, we're here.' … We're doing something right." Furthermore, Edward is intensely aware of the diversity of his own cabinet, and how essential it is for the next school year to have a diverse group of students leading alongside him. He and his peers were intentional about putting together a cabinet of leaders who would meet the needs of the student body. He aimed to create a cabinet that replicated the students he served. Early notions of leadership imply a collaborative spirit of leadership. Dungan and Klopf (1949) posit, "Just as two minds are better than one so are twenty minds better than two" (p. 7). Seminal texts such as these suggest student government provides a means for students to organize and participate in the functions of the institution. Engagement can directly impact their social, economic, physical, and intellectual well-being. Seventy years later, this seems to still hold up.

Within passive advocacy, the visibility of others is and was important. When Sam was a freshman in high school, he saw several senior gay men involved in choir who were "unapologetically themselves," which is when he started to question a lot of his own openness and resistance to be out as gay. Their visibility and outness helped him realize that he, too, could be out and gay and accepted. Early on, Hunter had openly LGBTQ+ people in his life modeling an active *out* and happy life. For example, one of his former leadership advisors identifies as a lesbian, and she facilitated one of his first interactions

with leadership. She showed him the intersection of leadership and being openly oneself during high school, and motivated him to adopt respect, kindness, and honor as core values. Similarly, Sam had openly gay and lesbian teachers growing up, individuals who were just simply themselves, and out. Jack found gay role models in an older couple in their 60s, two men who were once married to women and came out later in life. These are all elements of *seeing* that help the men with *being*.

At times, passive advocacy in this way is also complicated. Owen challenges early media conventions of LGBTQ+ representation. He shares:

> It was the very limited trope of like, their parents weren't accepting, and this constant rebellion kind of thing. So that was the only sort of image that was sold to me. When you're 12, that's kind of dangerous because that's what you expect. (Owen)

Similarly, growing up in a rural part of the United States, Christopher was disenfranchised by the openly gay actors and characters on television that promoted a "great life." He shares, "That's easy for you to say. You have untold amounts of money and fame and things like that, and you live in California, and I live in [another state]." It was when he read the book and saw the movie, "Boy Erased," that Christopher felt compelled by the story and the visibility of such a story.

The visibility (including times when lacking) of others is also a consistent component of the experience. For example, Owen struggled with an administrator who is gay but not open or involved with the queer community on campus. Owen perceives the administrator's behavior as passing, and in order to exist in upper-level administrative spaces that are predominately straight, White, cisgender, and male. He shares:

> I think it's difficult because so much of what they say they want is an open dialogue. And it's hard to feel like you're coming to the table being fully who you are. And you're getting this facade both in the way that they present their identity

> and the information they're giving to you in terms of the questions you're asking. So I feel like it just points to this further kind of mistrust that we feel. (Owen)

Owen felt frustrated by this individual's lack of visibility. Conversely, in his last election, Jack and another gay White man ran against two queer women students of color. There were four LGBTQ+ candidates running; however, Jack felt a tension with his ticket being two *White* gay men, and especially as the queer women of color focused their campaign on LGBTQ+ communities and social justice issues. Being elected with a woman from the other ticket forced Jack to think differently about both visibility and the way he engages with representation of self and others. As a passive advocate, Jack re-connects differently as a result of this new colleague who taught him what it means to re(-)present as a chief advocacy officer.

When Owen was elected to his student government, he joined a team entirely made up of female-identifying students. Before being officially sworn in, the group presented to the Board of Trustees, and one Board member asked, "What is the dynamic like with an all-female Board?" Owen was frustrated because he felt the Board member would not have asked that question if it was an all-male board. He shares, "Based on their follow up questions, they were getting at, how are you able to get things done... because women talk a lot, and fight a lot." Here, passive advocacy involved a visibility that was noticed by others. Similarly, not all gay people are out for the best interest of their fellow gay person. For example, Sam reflected on an experience he had following a Board of Trustees meeting, where a Trustee approached him to share that he, too, is gay. He shares, "He's like, 'Hi, I graduated from [institution], and I am actually gay.' I was like, 'Oh my God, we've got one on the Board.' I was just like, 'Are you going to talk?'" Sam felt frustrated that this particular Trustee was not advocating in the way that he had hoped

he would, but understood that his particular career industry might not allow for someone as open and unapologetic as he.

Visibility is part of existing as a passive advocate - one just is, continuing to be oneself. Additionally, this kind of visibility is inherent. Christopher talked about the will to be out, and the way it inspired others to be comfortable in their own identities. He wanted people to feel, "[Christopher] has done it, and if [Christopher] can do it, I can do it." These sentiments serve as the beginning and end point of passive advocacy - that if someone else can do it (even if just by merely existing), *so, too, can I*.

To *Be an Advocate*: Standing Up/Standing "Out"

While passive advocacy is a way by which these men have engaged their constituents, I wonder if advocacy must be *active* in order to be *effective*. Is there a publicness associated with this form of advocating? Must one be *public* to be active? To stand up for something, must one be publicly standing? And what does it mean to stand up for something? Is it to stand out? To stand *out*? Edward knows there are other gay students on campus like him. He believes as an advocate, he can connect with these students in ways that cisgender, straight administrators cannot. He shares, "It just increases the validity of my being at the table. It's something that I take value in." Ben also takes value in having a voice in this way. For example, as president, Ben was not able to produce legislation, and did not have speaking rights within his representative body. He shares, "My heavy lifting is bringing in these people who are the student voices and can back up the bills that have their best interest in mind." Identifying as more than just gay, these men are leaders and individuals with acumen and agency to stand up and *out* in different capacities, even if not with legislative privileges.

For many, standing up and standing out continues to mean giving others a voice. Jack shares that it is important to help people feel like they have a voice, even if they are not involved in the decision-making process. Similarly, Edward finds himself in constant advocacy for all students on campus. He shares that it is easier for him to advocate for Black students and gay students because he shares that identity, but also that his reach goes beyond those populations. He shares:

> When I show up at tables, that's always my lens, that's always my approach, it's always my vantage point of how do I fiercely advocate for students at the [institution], whether they be White, gay, Black, Latinx, homosexual, disabled, dyslexic, in any way. (Edward)

Edward consistently reminds himself that he is a representative of every student. Every student, in different ways, experiences a voicelessness that calls for a voicefull representation. From theoretical to practical, and in an attempt to inform his representative body of different social issues, Sam took time to highlight multiple social justice topics, organizations, and causes as both re(-)presentation and advocacy. As a White ally to students of color, Sam believed he needed to start with Black Lives Matter as a way to show that he was not afraid to stand up (and out) for all students. He reflects on that experience, and shares:

> They were like, "What the fuck is going on?" But immediately I saw the people in the back that were Black and African-American, their entire demeanor was like, "What's he gonna say?" Then people who visibly looked Caucasian were just like... They looked scared. ...Once I finished, I saw people's demeanor change. I saw some people get a little upset because this doesn't align with what they believe in. I was like, "I don't care. You're going to learn." (Sam)

Sam was comfortable with others' discomfort, including those who did not agree with him adding this to his position and responsibilities as Speaker. In a later Board meeting, Sam had a similar experience regarding transgender advocacy, which occurred around the

same time Trump and Pence announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military. Wearing a "Protect Trans Lives" pin, Sam addressed the Board and his peers about why it was important to protect transgender people at that time (and always).

While not fully engaged with the LGBTQ+ student organizations on campus, Edward did advocate for funding as a way to fill the need and gap(s) of these groups, from sexual and dating violence causes on campus, prevention and survivor organizations, and other ways to advance equity and justice among his peers. He shares:

> I'm more than just gay. I'm more than just Black. I'm more than just a man. And so, yes, I have been strategic in advocating for LBGTQI+ places and spaces, and advocacy groups, and student groups on campus, for them to feel safe, for them to feel brave, and for them to be able to say, "I believe in the [institution], I belong at the [institution], and I truly have become an [institution mascot] through and through." (Edward)

To make his campus space one that is safe for people to feel brave and comfortable, Edward stood up and out, as both a visible advocate and ally.

Difficult conversations, necessary confrontations. The work of advocacy is not easy, and especially amidst varying campus issues. For many of these men, difficult conversations and confrontations became necessary to their work, and just simply part of the job. For example, Owen has spent significant time addressing layers of gender equity within his academic program, and took on (a very resistant) faculty across campus. In this work, Owen finds himself at the center of advocacy, and has brought multiple issues to light. Despite bouncing around (or being bounced, sometimes not by choice), Owen has made this a centerpiece to his vice-presidency, as the students he represents are calling for change in this area. He shares, "A lot of faculty have been resistant. But I don't really care. At the end of the day, it's like, you teach at an institution that values this, so either you get on board, or you get out." With this mindset, Owen works against an, *It is how*

we have always done it, counterargument. And still, he persists through the difficult, necessary conversations.

In one experience, Owen got into an argument with an academic Dean about safety on campus, one who did not believe equity was a safety issue in their division. Owen shares that his campus has a well-documented history of sexual harassment and assault, and he spends a lot of time thinking about how to make faculty care about something when they do not believe it is an issue. He shares, "I've spoken to students who feel sexualized by faculty members, and feel unsafe on this campus," and in his office there is a running narrative about how many days can pass without a student coming in and saying that a teacher or faculty member did something problematic. "It doesn't usually go past four days," he shares.

Several men share that advisors and administrators on their campus did not always have students' best interests at heart, and they spent and spend significant time navigating this tension. This includes the departure of trusted advisors who left the institution during their experience. For Sam, advocacy has meant unapologetically standing up to advisors and even Board members. Additionally, Owen shares his frustration about a key advisor to his student government, who left her job with very short notice due to political decisions made at the level above her. When Owen and his team addressed their administrators about the loss of a trusted supporter, they were met with vague answers and empty promises. As a student affairs practitioner, I wonder about this vagueness that Owen names. When have I been complicit in such an act in my own practice? Ben was also unapologetic in his approach to conflict with administrators, and was unafraid to be loud, and even angry as needed. "There's also an inherent streak of a

shit-starter in me," he shares. He resolves these feelings with his identity as a student, and also as a representative of the student body. Having stern conversations with administrators was a norm, and Ben views this as a form of community engagement, and part of his job that he took seriously. But I wonder about what repercussions exist with regard to advocacy - for Owen and Ben to be unapologetic, and at what cost?

Edward views some of this work as active agitating, and that, like Ben, it means sometimes having to get "a little loud." He shares:

> Sometimes it means that you won't listen to me. And if you won't hear my voice in a meeting across from you, that means that I'm going to utilize college students to enact positive social change because this is something I'm passionate about, and I was elected to do this job and I'm not going anywhere. (Edward)

This utilizing that Edward mentions is part of mobilizing students to be part of that visibility and re(-)presentation. In some ways, conflict inspired Hunter to run for student government. He watched individuals who he believed were out of touch with student needs be in conversations and meet with administrators in different ways than he would engage. "We don't work for the University, we work for the students," he shares. Watching past student leaders backtrack on what their peers wanted, and fold to administrators in times where Hunter was (and is) willing to advocate for them, showed him that his position in student government was one worth achieving.

It is also in this passive resistance that student advocacy moves to possible sentiments of student activism. Here, the students have to stand up and out to not only be seen, but also as a way of re(-)presenting within the context of their institution, their leadership, and the leadership of the students they serve. In different ways, the men in this study were standing up to administrators, for students, and engaging in ways that resembled activism behavior. I again draw on Cook (2014), who shares:

> I don't consider myself an activist, but I realize how much I've benefited from the sacrifice of others. So if hearing that the CEO of Apple is gay can help someone struggling to come to terms with who he or she is, or bring comfort to anyone who feels alone, or inspire people to insist on their equality, then it's worth the trade-off with my own privacy.

Here, Cook illuminates the possible need for a publicness as associated with this kind of advocacy-activist approach. But being public is not alone an active action. Furthermore, while many of the men engaged in activist behavior, and identified themselves as such ("activist/s"), I am hesitant to thematize them in this way. Ben illuminates some of his thoughts on this possibility, and asserts, "Our struggle has always been political and active, and we shouldn't be assimilist." This approach guided Ben's style of leadership, and he was constantly aware of the trap of "White assimilation." Here, Ben finds himself caught in-between the world of an expected assimilation in student government (to be palatable, perhaps?), at odds with himself as queer, and the limitation he faces to be radical and open; to truly stand up and *out* as an advocate (and activist) for students.

Collector(s) of stories. At times, standing up and out also means the ability to tell and receive stories, and to elevate stories to spaces where they have been historically, unknowingly or intentionally, missing or absent. Ben refers to his role as a collector of stories to present to administrators. But this work is challenging, he shares, because one cannot force people to give up their stories. Administrators' lack of data on students frustrated Ben, and he found himself often asking LGBTQ+ people, "What is your worst experience that you're willing to share at least, about being queer on campus?" He feels stories especially matter in the context of LGBTQ+ students. Ben shares:

> We don't keep a record of people who identify as LGBTQ, so you don't even know the student population. And again, I think with it being a more affluent campus, a big thing I also hear is that students can't come out to their parents because then they're cut off, and that's hard to be not only 1,500 miles away from

> your family, but just know that if you were yourself, and you did come out, they could possibly cut you off, and so it can be rough here.

To Ben, elevating these stories is essential for the campus to understand the need beyond what any number is or is not revealing about students. But he is right, that such a number is not known. There is no "gay database" or "queer registry." Ben also feels that his being a queer, gay man does not mean he understands, or can tell, the experiences of all LGBTQ+ people. Miller (1971b) posits:

> Each homosexual must, of course, come out at his own time and in his own way, but homosexuals, the older as well as the younger, the ones in Brooks Brothers suits as well as those in black turtleneck sweaters have, I think, an obligation to declare themselves whenever they decently can. (p. 62)

It is the declaration of one's own journey (story) that is theirs alone to share.

When bringing his gay identity into student government, specifically, Ben was conscious to invite a colleague from the LGBTQ+ student organization on campus, an individual who has more of an activist-mindset, and more room to be an activist than Ben's position allowed. He resists what he calls being "the flagbearer for the queer community," because it feels disingenuous and overly political. He shares:

> There's different stories, about like trans stories, non-binary stories here on campus, there's certain stories about the experiences of like lesbians and women loving women who are on campus, and there's different experiences for men of color as well as White men on this campus, and so to claim because I have this one identifier, it feels so problematic. (Ben)

Ben reiterates that there is not one single story of being a gay man. But, still, stories matter, and the collection of stories matter. Christopher also shares his experiences with stories, as students have come to him with their own perspectives that have otherwise not been heard or elevated. One student in particular left Christopher feeling somewhat

helpless. The student married a woman his freshman year, but knew that he was, possibly, gay. Christopher recalls telling the student:

> I know this is going to hurt to tell you this, but it's not going away. And I'm not saying that to try and be mean, or anything like that, but from personal experience and all the things that I did to try and correct myself, so to speak, it's not going away. And you're so young now. It's obviously going to suck being divorced at such an early age, but it's not going away. I think the longer you wait, it's going to be harder.

This was one of the hardest things Christopher had to do in relation to others' experiences with sexuality. But Christopher found himself as a role model and confidant to many on campus who were looking to him for direction, and he worked with those men to receive, tell, and inspire them to tell their stories. Similarly, Sam centered stories as part of bringing issues forward to his representative body. He made space for any student and organization to speak, and advocated for groups that had previously not been recognized or given space. Stories matter in real time because the issues themselves are real.

The issues at play. Within the stories, issues are revealed that force leaders to make a decision - to advocate, and how? For these men, it was never a matter of *not* advocating, it was simply about how and when, and advocacy to and for whom? For Bradley, student success through affordability and equity remains a key consideration. For example, Bradley and his team play a large role in the student fee allocation process, and he feels a responsibility to represent students in that space, to combat issues like athletics spending, and beyond. He wants students to feel that their money is being allocated and used responsibly and equitably to meet their needs. Similarly, part of Jack's experience was spent advocating for more campus space and resources. Learning that his campus counseling center had nearly 100 people on a waitlist for psychological services, Jack met with the director of the counseling center and the university president to bring

forward data and student perspectives. He eventually got the wait number down to zero after a significant amount of advocacy and attention.

Christopher found that his work in this way was more personal. As part of his role, he unveiled legislation for increased suicide prevention trainings on campus for students, staff, and faculty. He even partnered with another institution in his state to denounce the stigma related to mental health and counseling. It was during this time that he came out publicly as gay, and related his identity to the legislation and topic being discussed. Christopher's personal experiences were a launch point to do this kind of work, revealing that advocacy is personal for many. Prior to that moment, he recalls that many people might think, "Christopher could never experience something like this," when in reality, mental health struggles and suicide ideation were a major part of his experience as a student and as a gay person. Christopher has since worked with federal and state legislators to help author legislation regarding improving mental health.

Campus issues, and incidents involving diversity and inclusion. Within the realm of advocacy, different layers of diversity and inclusion intersect with the work of student government. Some of the work also reveals significant issues on campus that called for the men to engage in this work as advocates in a response-manner. Edward views himself as a social justice advocate and advocate for people. Part of this perspective involves drawing on his own experiences as a Black gay man who is aware of his mental health needs; and to say, "If it's happening to me, it's happening to others." The work is unpredictable, and the call to do the work can appear at any time. Even in the final weeks of his presidency, Jack dealt with several major campus controversies, all revolving around diversity and inclusion issues that garnered public attention. Issues such

as these are present in institutions across the United States. For example, in 2019, a Black student at American University was forcibly removed from her residence hall by police, and students protested to speak out about the racial climate on campus (Johnson, 2019). Also in 2019, two University of Memphis students reported attending a fraternity party, and were called "faggots" and threatened with violence (Smith, 2019). And with regard to the elections themselves, students in the 2019 student government elections at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh faced homophobia and racism on social media (Shastri, 2019). On Snapchat, one student wrote an endorsement for two White candidates, and urged students not to vote for their opponents, writing, "UWO Vote for these guys today unless you want a lesbian or a hmong to win" (Shastri, 2019). Incidents such as these are a further call to rise up as advocates within their communities.

Ben believes diversity and inclusion initiatives are a bit easier for him to fight for with administrators, and many other men found themselves in this same positioning. For example, Owen ended his previous term continuing to fight with faculty about visibility and the representation of visiting faculty on his campus. He shares:

> Last year, we brought in 13 [visiting faculty], and only three of them were women. So pushing for more of an equal balance between people of various gender identities. I mean, we've never had a trans person create work for our school, which is not because they are people that are underqualified. (Owen)

With similar attention to representation, Bradley also experienced pushing back related to advocacy efforts in his work. When members were appointed to his state system's Board of Trustees, the individuals were unveiled to all be White men with no intellectual diversity. As a result, Bradley led the student government to rally together to petition the nominations. This caused the state to change their appointments. While they did not change the racial makeup of the nominees, they did add women to the Board as a result.

But not all change was as fast-acting as Bradley experienced. Ben shares an experience in his representative body following a lengthy conversation about the allocation of student funds. He recalls:

> A Muslim woman who wore the hijab came in and asked for the same level of funding [as a White student whose group was awarded money for a similar program]. Then it became a very tenuous conversation about like, "We don't have the money to support this." And then she left with no funding at all. (Ben)

Race and racial issues were a large focus of Ben's experiences on campus, and in his final weeks as president, he felt a freedom to be more open with his peers in the representative body, as well as administrators. Campus crises and issues of diversity and inclusion are not new to higher education; however, they certainly continue to be a calling to engage as leaders, and amidst other issues.

They are Called to this Work

The idea of this work as advocacy led me to wonder what it means to *do* advocacy, to *be* an advocate, and to *advocate* within the realm of leadership. Etymologically, advocate is found under vocal and vocable as uttering sound, voice, a term or word, or to speak (Skeat, 1911). Advocate is from the Latin *advocatus*, meaning, "an advocate, one 'called upon' to plead" (Skeat, 1911, p. 548). To plead for what, is to be determined by each leader. But the calling, however, is the genesis of the ability to even *do* advocacy (both active *and* passive). Like Hunter who influenced the younger generation of those in his student government, there was a calling to advocate and an advocacy that led to the calling for the next generation of leaders. Advocacy in theory and practice is built on a system of *voicefull-* and *voicelessness*.

While advocacy can be a radical act for some, it might also be a call for a more palatable expectation of openly gay men in elected student government. Ben remains weary of politics, and the historical movement of people to "the center." He shares:

> A lot of times what's at the center is compromised and for a lot of the communities that I come from, compromise is violence. So I've had kind of a complicated relationship with that. ...But then again I have to live up to my own motto of like, "You're in the space, you're in the room, you should be an advocate for the people you represent." (Ben)

Getting to "the room" allows these men to be advocates, and to do advocacy work. But what is it about these men that even starts the calling-in of and to lead(ership)? And what is it about the history of change that conflicts with this idea of "the center?" Where is "the center?" Is Pete Buttigieg there? I am drawn back to the first known openly gay student body president, Jack Baker. According to his partner, Baker had no intention of being "a token" in his run, and his platform involved student and minority student rights, student involvement in policy decision-making, and securing student membership to Board of Regents committees (McConnell & Baker, 2016). Baker was anything but "center." McConnell shares:

> With Jack in the running, there was a lot more at stake in this student election than a typical campus race. If he became president of the University of Minnesota's student body, Jack would make history. Never before had a university in the United States—or anywhere else, for that matter—elected an openly gay student. (McConnell & Baker, 2016, p. 107)

Baker and his partner received national attention around marriage equality, but it was in the context of this study that Baker caught my eye. McConnell reflects:

> In 1971, very few people were openly gay the way that Jack Baker was. Because his name and face had been splashed all over the media, millions of people identified him as a gay man. If the students voted him in, they would be sending a clear and revolutionary message: it was okay to be gay. (McConnell & Baker, 2016, p. 108)

Baker was an advocate for equal rights for women and Black students on and off campus, and "if [he] was going to devote his energies to the race, he meant to use it as a forum to promote meaningful change" (McConnell & Baker, 2016, p. 109). The clear and revolutionary message in this case (and in the 1970s!) is an initial example that displays gay men's ability to be elected as out and gay (and as the leaders themselves). They are advocates, and if desired, can be far, far as they want, from "the center." Baker's election made national news far beyond the reach of his university (McConnell & Baker, 2016). For Baker, it seems this was always something that was bigger than him. And as such, the landscape of out people in student government is better because of him.

Bigger Than Them, Better Because of Them

> Since we are social beings, processes of self-development are never only psychological, for they always take place in lives whose dimensions are also social and cultural. (Levin, 1989, p. 2)

When I got to college in 2004, a then-peer/now-mentor, Dr. Lane Graves Perry III said to me, "Become part of something bigger than you, but better because of you." At the time, this became my mantra of student involvement (and later, self-development). I approached service and leadership as something that was bigger than me, and as something I believed I was called to do. Eventually, I saw the impact and influence of my work, and realized that I could also make something(s) better as a result of my participation, effort, and passion. Now several years later, and as I conversed with the men in this study, I realize they, too, engage(d) in this way - becoming part of something bigger than them (student government) but better because of them (contributions via their leadership, their skills...their identity!).

But what is it about student government, or leadership more broadly, that is "bigger" than someone? And what about this is social and cultural in nature, as Levin contends? In college, I understood this concept as follows: Student government was a system and way of involvement that was organizationally and intellectually bigger than me. Student government was a community. At the same time, pockets of gay men *did* exist on my campus, and found community within the spaces they occupied in-community, together. As a result of my participation, engagement, and contributions within the structure of student government, it was, in turn, better because of me (and my participation, engagement, and contribution/s). I made a difference. For openly gay men in this context, they, too, make a difference, and in spaces that are both socially and culturally intertwined. But like many of my participants, it was never about me. This bigger/better idea was more than philosophical. It was a *calling*, and something that pulled me into both leadership and student government.

Called to Leadership, Called to Student Government

> Most real student leaders have "come up through." They have experienced leadership at all levels, and have worked on committees, in clubs, and have shown leadership in the classroom. The experiences they seek are not just experiences but opportunities. (Dungan & Klopf, 1949, p. 12)

It was as if the authors were writing about the(se) very men who participated in this study. However, knowing the time (1949) and the culture and climate for any queer identity, they were not presumably talking about the men in this study. So, what is it about their identities that disqualifies them, even as they hold the experience and leadership? To be involved in student government is second to involvement in leading and leadership more broadly. Within both contexts there is a call to lead(ership). Each man described a sort of "calling" to leadership or their role(s) in student government,

calling that transcends any spiritual or religious connotation that might otherwise be understood as *a calling*. As I previously reflected on my association with Isaiah 6:8 (hearing the voice; responding to the voice), my own interpretation of "a (the?) call" in this leadership context is one that contains a tugging at one's interests, passions, causes, or desires to make something (anything!) better. "The call" for these men is deeply woven through their personal experiences with leadership and leading, their institutional context, and their existence as being gay (on each of their campuses). But what does it mean to *be called*, and to also *respond* to the call? And why might one respond or not respond to such a call(ing)? Levin (1989) posits, "We are called into question by our listening; we are tested by what we hear; we can be accused by what we do not hear" (p. 137). To hear the call is also to listen. So what is it about *these* men and *this* call?

While some of the men in this study knew they wanted to run for student government at their undergraduate institution, for others, it fell in their lap and their involvement was as a result of an on-campus calling. For example, Jack's calling involved people asking him what it was about campus that he wanted to change. Being only in the second week of his first year when he received this question, Jack did know that he wanted to help people. This helping mentality was core to his motivation to run. Additionally, Bradley asserts that decisions in student government have consequences, and ones that affect a large amount of people. The desire to have a voice in those decisions is part of what drew him to student government. There is a listening associated with Bradley's draw. Listening is a practice of the self and a question of character (Levin, 1989). As such, I wonder, what of hearing the call is also rooted in unconcealment, and the unmasking of one's self as gay?

For most of these men, higher education was only part of their student government journey. For some, student government started as early as elementary school, and most of them experienced elections and leading—some even out as gay—at significant levels in high school student government[25]. Some even took on state-wide responsibilities related to their student government roles in high school. Their existences involved various calling(s), ways they were pulled in, as both leaders, and out men.

A different path than high school student council. As I was preparing for my 10-year high school reunion in 2004, I came across a scrapbook from the early 2000s. On one page was an identification card that pictured me and two of my friends, and a caption that read, "STUDENT COUNCIL ROCKS!" Needless to say, I was in deep, and as far back as high school. One of the first glimpses of elections outside of my own experience appeared in an episode of *Saved by the Bell*, when Zack Morris and Jessie Spano ran against each other for student body president (Bobrick, Colleary, Tramer, Tenowich, & Shimokawa, 1989). In the episode, "The Election," Zack only had desires to run for president after learning that the winner is excused from school for a week to go on a trip to Washington, D.C. (Bobrick et al., 1989). But Zack had no desire to be president, and notes, "Being president is a waste of time. It's like being a lifeguard for a birdbath" (Bobrick et al., 1989). When he was tricked by the principal to believe the trip was not happening, Zack tried to throw the election by arguing for tripling homework, among other unpopular ideas (Bobrick et al., 1989). Zack beat Jessie by one vote, and realizing the presidency would have meant a lot to his friend, Zack came clean about his intentions

[25] When referencing high school student council or student government, I use the terms "council" and "government" as interchangeable, as the semantics of this involvement differed across participants, yet served a similar purpose and definition.

to run, and told Jessie he would step down the next morning (Bobrick et al., 1989). Both Zack and Jessie talked polls with their campaign team, and Zack even faced a smear campaign that suggested he was the principal's son (Bobrick et al., 1989). This early snapshot of student body elections simulated a common narrative of elections that mirrored that of the larger United States context.

More recently, in the show *The Politician*, a young high school student, Payton Hobart, has dreams of being president of the United States, and runs for student body president of his high school (Murphy, Falchuk, Brennan, Martin Woodall, Platt, & Paltrow, 2019). The show chronicles a fast-paced glimpse of several high school teenagers running for office, and mirrors the often-ugly national landscape of politics in the United States. While the stories of high school elections have changed over the past thirty years, and certainly span beyond these examples, there are many elements of high school student government that further illuminate the transcending nature of the(ir) experiences from high school student council to college student government. It is more than just dances and event planning, something Jessie illuminates in one of her speeches for student body president (promising to address unhealthy food in the vending machines, among other issues), and something Payton displays when he approaches his school board regarding the use of plastic straws.

Long before high school, Edward's first election occurred in the fourth grade when he was elected president of his class for his elementary school's city government simulation. At the same time of this election, Barack Obama was running for President of the United States. Edward cites this experience as his first "taste" of advocacy, government, and public service. He cites this time as his first experience with leadership.

The relevance of being Black and running at the same time as Barack Obama was not lost on Edward. He shares:

> Someone that looks like me running for President at the same time that I was president of the fourth grade was an astronomically important factor in me saying that I *am* a leader, I *can* do this. In the fourth grade, I told myself I'm going to be President of the United States one day. (Edward, with emphasis)

While Edward has since reconsidered a future as the President of the United States, his call occurred as early as fourth grade - to both leadership and student governance. But can one be *called* in elementary school? Can one, at that developmental age, actually know how to lead, or even be able to define leadership? I was on a family vacation in 2019, and as my three-year old nephew was showing his mother his toy cars, he said to her, "And this one is the leader," and held up one of his cars. This led me to wonder about how early leadership appears. If a three-year old can understand *leader*, might the child, too, understand leader*ship*? Perhaps, in this case, Edward's fourth grade self was, actually, fully capable and ready to lead.

When Hunter got to high school, he watched the student council president deliver a speech at an incoming student orientation session. He recalls telling his father, "I want to do that one day." His father responded with sentiments about working hard to achieve such a role, and Hunter was initially discouraged. He did not see himself in that president. He did not feel popular, or attractive, or athletic in the way that the president exemplified, and he recalls not having the cheerleader or popular vote when approaching his first high school election. Initially he thought the student council kids were "so weird" at his high school; however, when Hunter got involved, "something in me bloomed," he shares. He saw the students planning events and he wanted to be part of that experience. He connected with the cross-country and track students, and the glee club members and

theater kids. He reflects, “So the lives that I impacted were the lives that usually were never heard. So I think that’s what inspired me, just like, I give people a platform, and I want to continue to do this.” As Hunter illustrates, no longer are the pretty, popular, footballers the only ones at the helm of student council. This concept has evolved in many ways, and is reflected in the examples gleaned from *Saved by the Bell* and *The Politician*. Jessie and Payton were not particularly the most popular students at their school, but they were the most go-getting, in that they had drive, passion, and believed in something bigger than themselves (and that they could make that something better).

While Bradley did not ascend to the presidency in high school, he experienced a change of pace from high school student government to his work in college. “It was very different,” he shares. “In high school it was like, ‘Oh, you planned the senior dance,’” which was also reflected in Hunter’s experience with high school student council. In some ways, it was also reflected in my own experience with high school student council. Hunter found his high school student council to be more than just programs and events, though he acknowledged the stigma associated with his role. People often placed him in a bubble as a gay man in student council “that would paint the posters,” or “walk around in tutu’s and...play with all the girls.” He saw his role as more than this, and learned how to run meetings, be assertive when needed, and push past any assumptions made about (gay) men in student government. Here, he was prepared to be a policy and change-maker, and getting to college allowed him to do that kind of work beyond poster-painting and dance-planning. Has high school student council changed? Are the days of popular kids in tutus doing dance-planning behind us? If high school student council is a platform for governance in higher education, what, then, can be said about those who lead, and those

who get to lead? Furthermore, what can be said about those who are openly out in their various sexualities? In *The Politician*, Payton was sexually fluid, something that did not seem to matter in the context of his election and electability. On the contrary, Zack was a "ladies man," known on the series for having high social capital. The picture of a high school student council leader, from Zack to Payton, has evolved over the thirty year span.

There are a lot of gay people in...student government (!?). Much like my own turning related to student affairs specifically, many of the men in this study reference the amount of visible gay men in student government. Surprisingly, they feel as though there is a large amount who are serving in this way. The amount of men who emailed me to participate in this study affirmed some of these beliefs. I anticipated this might be the case as the men shared more about the makeup of their campus student government, (some of) those who came before them, and the scope of national and conference visibility of gay men in student government.

While some were the "first" in their role(s) on their campus, several were one of many LGBTQ+ people serving in student government. Humphreys (1972) contends:

> Involvement in the gay subculture is the second most common means for homosexuals to ease the burden of censure to which they are subjected. There they find the facilities and training needed for making sexual liaisons, support from those who experience the same discrimination, and a system of norms and values that help provide meaning and justification for stigmatized behavior patterns. (p. 140)

In this case, what does it mean to move from involvement in gay subculture to a more conventional space like student government? While some started in or engaged with the LGBTQ+ groups prior to or during (with a limited scope, as previously noted), there is something about moving beyond this space, but still remembering this space, that is essential to name and embrace.

Nearly all of the people in Jack's cabinet identify as LGBTQ+ in some way, and Bradley identifies a large number of gay men leading student governments across his state. Bradley wonders why there are so many gay people involved in student government, and first started to question this phenomenon after seeing many gay men involved in his state's association of student governments. Within his questioning, Bradley appreciates the visibility of other gay men in this way, and believes he can express himself in the statewide association environment without judgment about his sexuality. Similarly, Owen learned about the number of gay men in student government from his advisor, who joked with him that he might find the love of his life at a student government conference they were attending. He shares, "She'll be like, '[There will] be so many gays at this SGA conference.' And she wasn't wrong." Initially I am drawn to wonder, *why(?)*. Why are there so many gay men in student government? Is it geographic (though, the distribution of the men and their dispersed locations may dispel that idea)? Is it generational? Or is it because gay men leading in this way are striving for more (something bigger than, but better because…)? Bradley asks, what makes gay men well-suited for, or want to do this kind of work? Initially, he contends there is a connection to the barriers gay men face. But as barriers decrease and visibility increases, I wonder about the (re-)presentation that one *is* a leader, that one *can* lead, and that one *will* lead successfully, all as part of the visibility and the call to lead in this way specifically.

At Owen's institution, where there are many gay men visible on campus, he notes that in the most recent election, nearly every man running for student government identifies as gay. So what is it about the volume of gay men in student government that relates to visibility? Perhaps, is there some connection to the local, state, and national

elected leaders whose queer identities are more present than ever (e.g., Park, Polis, even Buttigieg)? Or, perhaps, is there a connection to the volume of gay people (more visibly, at least) in general, in society? With these additional questions, I cannot help but recall Hoey's (1950) report introduced in chapter two. There is irony in one of the assumptions made in the report:

> Eminent psychiatrists have informed the subcommittee that the homosexual is likely to seek his own kind because the pressures of society are such that he feels uncomfortable unless he is with his own kind. Due to this situation the homosexual tends to surround himself with other homosexuals, not only in his social, but in his business life. Under these circumstances if a homosexual attains a position in Government where he can influence the hiring of personnel, it is almost inevitable that he will attempt to place other homosexuals in Government jobs. (U.S. Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments & Hoey, 1950, p. 4)

This sentiment seems to resonate now more than it did seventy years ago. Ben served as president following a long line of openly queer student government presidents at his institution. This was a norm on his campus, and even his successor identifies as gay. But their attraction to do this work was about the role, not each other.

But for Ben, many of the (past-)presidents from his institution are White, and aside from a note of the volume of gay people in student government, Ben was particularly surprised by the amount of women and students of color serving student government across the country. This was tension for Ben at his institution at this very intersection - there were visible queer people, but still, lacking representation and visibility of people of color. He journals about this as he embraces the presence of gay men in student government, and struggles with the Whiteness of such outness. Ben draws on a 1984 interview with James Baldwin to guide much of his thinking on this topic:

> I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. The anomaly of their sexuality

> puts them in danger, unexpectedly. Their reaction seems to me in direct proportion to the sense of feeling cheated of the advantages which accrue to white people in a white society. (Baldwin, as cited in Goldstein, 1984)

The danger White people face (unexpectedly) is something Ben always expected (in student government). Ben knows his sexuality and his race do not afford him the same advantages as his White peers in society. But within his queerness, Ben found reprieve in the increasing number of other out people in student government. Ben believes queer identities will always be political, and that the reason queer people can take up such spaces in student government is because people fought for them to achieve in this way. Ben shares, "For so long people have told me that, 'You can't do something.' So now I'm like, 'Oh I can do whatever I want, you don't need permission to do anything.'" Ben believes the fight must continue, and that the fight must include transgender people and non-binary people. It is within the privilege of being gay (within the lGbtq+ community) that Ben understands his privilege. Notably, Ben says this fight is also about asserting ourselves as queer people in spaces we have not otherwise been afforded; or places where queer people have typically been solely filling the role of follower(s).

Leading Through Identity

> Being labeled as "queer," "fag," "gay," and the like is common for young men who use gestures that are considered effeminate by our societal standards. The stereotype of the limp wrist is a powerful reminder of how much may be communicated through a simple gesture. I wonder how many gay men still remember with sick horror a school yard bully calling attention to someone and then making the "limp wrist" gesture – telling all within viewing distance that a labeling is taking place. (Eddy, 2008, pp. 58-59)

What labeling is taking place by identifying as openly gay, *and* being elected to student government? Is the limp-wrist-stereotype a figment of the past, or is this label still a present stereotype that dominates the perception of men in this role? Dugan (2017)

contends that social location informs how people understand, experience, and enact leadership. Furthermore, the way people might understand the prototypes of leadership are defined by norms associated with Whiteness, masculinity, and other factors (Dugan, 2017). In this case, if masculinity is associated with leadership, the limp-wrist-stereotype may still remain a dominant narrative. However, this is not resisted by all. Hunter believes (our) sexuality shapes who people become. He shares, "You can't ignore it, and you can't brush it aside." There are nuances to coming out that exist at the intersection of leading and utilizing trauma, history, and (our) stories, to *do* leadership. Hunter shares:

> That is an aspect for a lot of people who do come out of the closet and has shaped them to be the leader they are. A lot of gay men who are in leadership positions have become the type of leaders they are because of the experiences they faced when coming out of the closet.

Hunter's point may be the very answer to Bradley's initial questioning of *why(?)* associated with the many gay men in student government. The ability to overcome something—to be resilient—is a remarkable feat. As such, identity and sexuality cannot be ignored in the leadership process. To deny this is insulting (Dugan, 2017). The way social location informs leadership for these men is certainly part of their positioning, a positioning that goes beyond the actual positions (titles) themselves. But Ben juggles an uneasiness related to the word "leader" in this context of identities. He feels his upbringing in a "colored household" created an expectation that he do things because it is the right thing to do. When he reflects on student government as a uniquely queer space, he wonders about who gets to be queer and who gets to lead in that space. He shares:

> We've been street walkers, and street kids, and prostitutes, and trans women, and trans men, who have fought tooth and nail for our right to even be here. And so, it's always been kind of insulting to me because you're not then pushing back on the same institution that is giving you power. (Ben)

Here, Ben questions the lack of a "radical" queer approach to leadership when one identifies as gay, especially given the historical and cultural context associated with LGBTQ+ people and histories. "They're not radical. They're not doing the change that needs to be done," he shares. So while identity can and does intersect with leadership, Ben questions if student government spaces can be a true location for leadership and identity in this way. I, too, wonder about the possibilities. Is this the conundrum of Buttigieg and *enough*ness? Is this why there are significantly less queer and transgender people of color in leadership roles (and at the highest levels)? "Nothing is more common to the American political experience than watching things change quickly, for better and for worse" (Buttigieg, 2019b).

Jack reflects on identity and oppression at the intersection of *doing* leadership. He cites growing up knowing one might identify as LGBTQ+ in some way and the related oppression as a calling to engage in leadership and leading behaviors. In part, this is what led Sam to leadership early on at his institution. When he got to his campus, he immediately joined the LGBTQ+ organization and desired to be on the frontlines of student activism and engagement. Doing leadership in this way was a response to understanding oppression, as well as his own experiences with marginalization. Jack believes leadership from LGBTQ+ people will continue to become more present, especially as it becomes more safe and acceptable to speak out and be out in this way.

Understanding leadership and identity was multilayered for Edward. He shares that growing up in the South and the "Bible Belt," and in a societal context where people who look like him have not always had the same rights as "fair-skinned folk," he learned a lot about the work that needs to be done in the world. He also feels that his geographic

location and race help him to see the work ahead and shape his value system that intertwines leadership and social justice. But Edward is quick to name the privilege(s) associated with him being a man, even as being gay and Black in the South. He shares, "I think that there are privileges that I have been able to reap the benefits of because I am a man in this position." In this way, it is imperative to reiterate this study is about openly gay *men*. Their gender is important to distinguish as they hold this identity alongside being gay. Edwards, Foste, and Taylor (2019) posit, "Accounting for our own identities can guard against the potential of essentializing all men as experiencing gender in similar ways" (p. 60). As such, it is important to note that gender appears (and does not appear) differently for these men. And still, with such a privileged identity, there is tension as they endeavor through the margins with regard to their sexuality.

And Still, There is Tension in the Margins

It is not uncommon to hear a panelist from any major news network comment on the idea of "identity politics" as associated with elections, legislation (and legislat*ing*), and this is certainly something associated with the culture of both identity *and* politics in the United States. In the 1960s, political movements on behalf of African Americans and women became more visible than ever (Nicholson, 2008). Some began calling their movement, "Black Power" (instead of "civil rights"), "Women's Liberation" (instead of "women's rights"), and "Gay Liberation" (instead of "gay rights") as a way to focus more explicitly on issues of identity (Nicholson, 2008). This explicitness is described as "identity politics" (Nicholson, 2008). However, it is problematic to reduce individuals to one axis of identity, which might also wash out other differences (Carlson, 1998).

Narrowing people down to a specific subtype (e.g., "Black," "gay," "woman") might reinforce the otherness associated with marginalized groups (Carlson, 1998).

Ben faced the critique that his work is "all identity politics," which frustrates him. He shares, "The idea of having diversity in elected spaces is incredibly important, because you're having perspectives that are different than your own." But while this is a value, he struggles to accept that thought as all encompassing. "I don't believe that someone's demographic qualifies them for a position, but it's certainly a consideration," Ben shares. Likewise, Cook (2014) notes that social progress is understanding that people are not defined solely by one identity. "I'm an engineer, an uncle, a nature lover, a fitness nut, a son of the South, a sports fanatic, and many other things" (Cook, 2014). Humans carry a multiplicity of identities, and the men in this study resonated with the idea that they are gay, *and*...

Student Government is Political

"Politics is performance," Ben shares. He believes there is a connection between politics and performance, and that "queer people are great at performing." Furthermore, Ben and others found student government, in general, to be very political. For visible LGBTQ+ people, there is a performative nature of student government that Ben believes makes them more likely to be successful in this capacity. "It's like reclaiming a certain efficacy, a certain right that was supposed to be given to you," Ben shares. To *perform* and *reclaim* in this way is to take (back) a space that one feels should rightfully be accessible. But what does it mean to *be political*? Furthermore, what does it mean for *student government* to be political? For Ben, serving as president felt political because he did not have speaking privileges and did not do legislative work. But he never felt like he

was *doing politics*, despite student government being very political. In the absence of legislative work, Ben met frequently with administrators, and advised his representative body against doing politics in a United States/partisan style. He recalls his notes to student leaders, and asserts, "Politics have a structure, they have an institution, they have ways of engaging with the constituency. And you guys are kind of representing us all now in a very probably unequal space." Ben did not like bringing politics into student government because he believes all representatives of the students should advocate for the community, and be invested in the realities of the campus.

Bradley shares that he has to be strategic to get things done at his institution, and this means understanding the multiple layers associated between students and administrators. Edward calls this "a microcosm of the macrocosm of society," and that student government can be understood very similarly as the system of government in the United States. Edward compares his student government experience to governance at the national level. He believes there is a difference, but that he sees many similarities to how that national perspective translates to college campuses. Issues are being taken up on college campuses across the country, and it is common for campus influence(s) to have major local and state impact. This may be why there is often an investment in student elections (e.g., Turning Point[26]).

The differences and similarities involve the many issues plaguing communities across the United States (including in higher education). For example, Hunter dealt with several incidents of free speech at his institution, including issues faced by Jewish

[26] Turning Point is a non-profit organization founded in 2012. The organization's mission is to build a conservative grassroots network of high school and college students, and has a presence on over 1,500 campuses in the United States (Turning Point USA, 2019).

students and swastikas, and issues faced by Black students and "the N-word." The political nature of higher education in the United States has led student governments to take up a wide array of local, state, and national issues. One way to do so is to vote *in-support* or *in-opposition* of something. For example, in a resolution that declared blackface is intentionally hurtful and blatantly racist, the student government at the University of Oklahoma passed a resolution condemning blackface on campus (Fife, 2019). Next, the student government at Trinity University became a more recent organization to recommend Chik-fil-A be removed from their campus dining options. The student government voted unanimously, and students cited the millions of dollars donated by Chik-fil-A to anti-LGBTQ+ organizations (Derrig, 2019). Such a resolution is not uncommon. A simple google search of "Chik-fil-A" and "SGA vote" reveals many other institution's student governments have made similar recommendations over the past several years. Regarding the issue of an armed police presence, the student government at Suffolk University voted 23-11 in 2019 to recommend to their Board that the university arm officers in the campus police department (Enos & Arel, 2019).

With regard to the Israli-Palistenian conflict, the student government at the University of Maryland voted 25-9 (with two abstentions) to reject a bill that would have urged campus administrators to divest from companies that, sponsors and supporters of the bill say, fund human rights violations in Palestinian territories (Ebner, 2019). Conversely, New York University's student government voted to pass a similar resolution (35 for, 14 against, and 14 abstentions), one that specifically urged the university to cut ties with Lockheed Martin, General Electric, and Caterpillar Inc. (Pilgreen, 2018). Sponsors of the resolution called this the "Resolution on the Human

Rights of Palestinians" (Pilgreen, 2018). It is not uncommon for a student government to take on international issues. For example, in 2019, the student government at the University of Massachusetts Amherst voted unanimously to declare a climate emergency, a vote that coincided with campus and worldwide climate strikes (Cardoza, 2019). From dining options to major historical issues, the support-oppose dichotomy remains wide.

Outside of student government, leadership more broadly, is politics. When Jack tells people he wants to go into politics in the future, he is often met with responses rooted in a critique of such a political and cynical system. "What if you become a liar and a cheat," some ask. A future in politics does scare him, but this is what he wants to change, and wants to be honest within that change. Edward sees some of this play out in the larger political landscape related to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. He asks, "How many days are we going to talk about the White man who works for Donald Trump, calling out Pete Buttigieg? Like, okay, it happened. Move on. Let's talk about the policy that Kamala [Harris] and Elizabeth [Warren] are posing." Edward is frustrated by the current administration, and by the excluding focus that dominates the leadership narratives of those running for office.

Within the political realities of both leadership and student involvement, I reconnect to Ben and his sentiments around privilege(s) and oppression in the context of gay (White) men in student government. Ben journals:

> What better way to scorn the world for your missing privilege than to write the world's policy? What better way to tell the world that you have a right to exist and be present in its processes than to be at the center of its bureaucracy.

Just as student government is political, so are the very identities that make up the leaders themselves. Ben journals that gay White men have a unique positioning in student

government, one that makes the political nature of this existence a granting of privileges they might have otherwise lost. But Ben cannot help but remember the institutional positioning, and believes institutions have never had the best interests of marginalized communities. The politics of the work are a politics of the self. For many, this is a deeper calling, one that calls these men to serve.

The Servant Leader, and a Call to Serve

My early understandings of servant leadership were learned in church, as my religious education told me Jesus Christ was the ultimate (and first?) servant leader. "He died on the cross to forgive us of our sins" *What is a better way to serve, than this?* "HE DIED FOR US(!)." My alma mater even has classes entitled, "Jesus as Leader" (LEAD 3552), and "Servant Leadership in Action" (LEAD 3461). Specifically in LEAD 3552, students are expected to "critically examine leadership strategies of Jesus" (University of Central Oklahoma Undergraduate Catalog, 2019-2020, p. 362). There is something interesting about a class fully dedicated to the leadership (style) of Jesus. Furthermore, there is something powerful about a state school hosting a course in this way. But a centering on Jesus is limited, and some may respond or believe, "...he didn't die for *me*..." Edward shares that he "answered the call to service." Ben's leadership is shaped by community, and doing good in and for the community(ies) where one resides. His grandparents were heavily invested in their community, and as he watched their investment and influence, their approach filtered through the rest of his family. He shares, "You have this investment to the community because these are the people who you live with." For Ben, serving the community is doing work *in* and *with* those around him. In part, this is where Ben struggles with the process of leadership, and seeing himself as a

leader. Because community is at the center of Ben's leadership (and serve to-), he views his/the work as an expectation, and shares, "'I'm just doing things because it's important to do them." This "importance" also sits at the center of the bigger-better philosophy.

Bradley prioritizes service in his work, which often leads him to take on things he does not want to take on, but believes he needs to take on. Bradley connects this to integrity and being a man of his word. Similarly, Edward believes leadership is the call to serve, which is rooted in both visibility and representation. He shares, "[I] won't be remembered by all the things that I did, but how well I left it for others, and how I prepared others." Despite being passionate about student government, advocacy, and representing students, Edward declares he is not doing student affairs for himself. He is passionate about leaving his institution better than he found it, and serve all those who need him along the way.

> I can say that I'm the voice of the students and they're a group of students on this campus that are being marginalized so it's my responsibility as a servant and as a leader, and as their elected representative, to act upon advancing equity for them, and those students on campus. (Edward)

This is not about Edward, it is about his constituents. The *voiceless*(?). For Hunter, this means leaving student government and his institution better than he found it. With a mission to empower communities and people, Hunter wants others to lead even better than he does. In this approach, I am drawn to the "campsite philosophy," in which campers should leave a campsite better than they found it.

There is something personal about this work, and a sacrifice is involved in the servant's approach. Jack shares that he gets "a high" off of helping other people, and doing something with tangible effects that helped others. At times, this comes at a cost. Jack recalls growing up and being convinced that he would marry a woman and have

children, and have to pass in this way to be successful. Relatedly, Edward often told his friends he would never be married or in a relationship, and that he would forever be "the single uncle" in his family. But he fell in love, and now having a boyfriend, Edward sees a different future for himself, one where he does not have to hide or mask his identities in order to serve the greater good. Similarly, Jack now sees himself as getting married one day, and having children and a supportive husband. While he is still nervous about going into politics, especially with these indicators as having a potential impact on his future, he acknowledges that he has come a long way since feeling the need to sacrifice himself and his happiness to be a successful public official.

But within this call to serve (as servants, as leaders, as gay men serving in such a capacity), there is a desire to just want things to be better. For many, the call, and the *better* associated with that which is brought forward by these men, sits at the heart of their experience.

I am Here Because Things Should (and Could) Be Better

> So, it was kind of that moment where I was like, maybe I should take this one step further, because I was just sitting in his office, and he's like, "Do you have anything else that you want to talk about?" And I was like, "Actually, I do," and I just read off a list of all these things that I thought were problems, or things that we could change. And then when he didn't do anything, I went to the [Dean]... I was like, maybe I should run for student government, and then I did. (Owen)

The men in this study became leaders at their institutions because of the future they envision/ed for their campuses, a vision fueled by both a desire to make a change, and/or a frustration that change(s) had yet to occur. Owen tried to make a difference as a student and community member, but when he was faced with no movement from administrators, he took this as a call to action that was rooted in his belief that things should—and could—be better. Similarly, Christopher had a setback his first semester of

college when he was not admitted to a prestigious leadership society for first year students. This motivated him to run, and shifted his perspective on leadership roles and opportunities. Both he and the student body president were not admitted to the leadership society, and they used that as a way to motivate others to see past similar rejection(s).

Ben and Owen both found this desire to make change in academic contexts. While taking leadership studies courses, Ben became more vocal as he struggled with some of the content that was leaving out leadership perspectives of marginalized populations. Ultimately this motivated him to run for student government as a representative, and to eventually lead a diversity committee in student government. Next, Owen spent time with his peers in his courses and discovered that other students felt similarly frustrated with some of the ways his program executed the academic curriculum. Believing things could be better, Owen became a department representative to elevate and address issues on behalf of his peers.

Sam's frustration came from what he saw in the previous student government administration(s). He recalls, "I was like, 'I'm done. I'm fed up. We can run this university 10 times better than the current administration, and we actually give a damn. So let's do it.' Then we were told we couldn't run." Due to policy issues, and specifically not serving previously as a student government executive, Sam did not meet the qualifications to run for president. To resolve this issue, and still frustrated, Sam ran for Speaker of the Representative Body, and won. He shares:

> There's a trend with me, with student government, that it's always the last year that I'm in a place that I become a part of it. And I don't know why that is. I think it's partly because I get too fed up and I'm just like, "They're the governing body I need to be a part of. If you can't beat them, join them." So that's what I usually do. That's my usual M.O. (Sam)

Much like Owen, Sam saw student government as a more solidified and impactful way to address his frustrations. Similarly, while Hunter always knew he would be in student government, he, too, was called to run by frustrations occurring on campus. In part, Hunter wanted to let administrators know there are leaders that look and sound like him, and that they needed to pay attention to that.

Wisconsin's U.S. Senator, and lesbian, Tammy Baldwin is among those who understand the feeling of being disenfranchised because of the past. As the first out LGBTQ+ U.S. Representative (1999-2013) and first out LGBTQ+ U.S. Senator (2012 to present), Baldwin ran for office to build a more inclusive place for herself and those around her. In a historic speech at the Washington, D.C. Millennium March for Equality in 2000, Baldwin speaks about her early experiences as out and elected. She contends:

> Why do I march? I march to challenge the naysayers, the [cynics], the keepers of the status quo. And I march for a promising and inspiring and incredible new generation of activists, so that they might replace their fear with courage, their isolation with belonging, and their anger with hope. (Baldwin, 2000)

Baldwin's belief, even in 2000, that things should be better was intertwined with her assertions that things could be better. She reflects on her experiences with being out in her state's legislature, and her journey as out all the way to Congress. And as was the sentiment then, still now, things should be better.

Jack's desire for change was not fueled by negative frustrations or feelings of being left behind, and instead, are more holistic. Initially Jack wanted to fix the issues on his campus, to make things better. This desire remains today, and is part of why Jack sees himself again running for office someday. He shares:

> I know there's a lot of other people out there, like me, who want to do the same thing and if there's enough of us, which I know there are, we can fix it. I'm much

> more of an optimist in that sense. I hate when people say to me, "Well, it's never going to get fixed." It's like, well, it takes people to fix it. (Jack)

While future dreaming is part of their call to leadership, so is the reflection of the past. Both Jack and Ben struggle with their predecessors and the work that could have (and should have) been done on behalf of students (and change). Jack frames this as "being dragged down by the past." He recalls previous student government administrations not focusing on the deep issues involving people and their campus experiences. At one point in his presidency, Jack met with several transgender students who were upset about something happening on campus. He recalls, "I was like, 'I want to help you. Tell me what you need and I'm going to see if I can help.' The immediate reaction is, "[Student government has] said that in the past and they've never done anything.'" For some, like Jack in this case, knowing that things could and should be better also involves navigating the reality that people (constituents) are disenfranchised because of the past. This is a necessary barrier to break through.

They ran, and run, and lead, and led, and again, for many, things still should and could be better. There is something freezing about this reality. I wonder, what does it mean to give up one's college experience to serve under such circumstances? While often rewarding, what is at stake when the rewards are not fully reaped? What are these men giving up within this leadership? What are these men giving up within such a belief that things should (and could) be better? In her historic speech, Baldwin (2000) states:

> I can remember coming to this city, this historic pace, these steps, in January of 1999, only this time, I climbed these steps to take the oath of office. And as I climbed those steps, I remembered all who have marched and mobilized and who have helped pave the way for my election. You are with me every time I pass through those doors. And now, and now with open eyes, I am experiencing this march.

As things can be better because of these men, and those who had the courage to march and the capacity to *continue* marching, it all still feels so much bigger. There is responsibility in this bigness. There is a future here, a very queer future, and one that is ripe with opportunity.

The Path and a Clearing

In May 2019, I sat down at a coffee shop, as I did over and over, to write and rewrite, over and over. One morning in particular I was wearing an old t-shirt with the shape of the state of Oklahoma on it, and on the inside it read, "home sweet HOMA." My ritual remained the same most weekends while working on this dissertation: be one of the first at the coffee shop, work on the dissertation as long as I could, feel the coffee rush through my body. Rinse, wash, repeat. This particular day, a man walked in and sat at the table next to me. We were the only people in the top-deck area of my go-to coffee shop. His friend joined him, and pointed at me and said, "Are you from Oklahoma?" I said yes, remembering I was wearing my home state like a uniform, and he pointed to his friend and said, "So is he." The guy next to me was wearing a shirt that read, "O K L A." He was from Tulsa, here on a trip to help open a new church in the area. Moments after our introduction, he began to read his Bible, and for a majority of the time he was seated next to me. I worked diligently on my dissertation—this dissertation—about gay men in student government, including my own formative years growing up in Oklahoma, with church and religious dissonance to boot. But I am free to write my dissertation. I am free to be out and open about myself and to elevate my participants' outness into this dissertation space. This freedom matters.

> The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the

> more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am "in myself" through the others. (Levinas, 1998, p. 112)

And like Levinas' others, I, too, am myself through these others - the men whose lived experiences make up this study. These men are not just gay, or solely representative of a student government "identity." They are whole humans, individuals who matter, and are so very enough.

These men led me to wonder, and to dream. *To be free,* is such a complicated hope. Whereas one might be free in one aspect or area of their life, there are others that make this freedom one-dimensional (even with the reality that we/they are multi-dimensional, multi-layered beings). Baldwin (2000) states:

> If you dream of a world in which you can put your partner's picture on your desk, then put his picture on the desk and you will live in such a world. And if you dream of a world in which you can hold your lover's hand when walking down the street, then hold her hand, and you will live in such a world. And if you dream of a world where there are more openly gay elected officials, then run for office and you will live in such a world. And if you dream- and if you dream of a world in which you can take your partner to the office party, even if that office is the U.S. House of Representatives, then you've got to take her there. And I do. And now I live in such a world.

I am filled with emotions as I replay Baldwin's historic speech over and over. And it is this line, this exclamation, that moves me to believe that these dreams are more wide-reaching than I imagine(d). To live in this world, Baldwin's world, is aspirational and, I believe, achievable. These men are achieving in this similar way, twenty years later.

To continue such a phenomenological process, I next journey into insights that are gleaned from the men themselves, including ways this phenomenon intersects with a (re)new(ed) worldview. Van Manen's (1997) six research activities conclude by considering the parts and whole. While each of these parts of the process are unique and

"parts of" the whole, it is the "whole" here that I will last endeavor to explore. Here, I move toward sentiments of justice. Levinas (1998) contends:

> But everything shows itself for justice. Being's essence, and consciousness before being and after having been, signify. Neither realism nor idealism, twin brothers, have the birth-right. It is justice signified by signification, by the-one-for-the-other that requires phenomenality, that is, the equivalence or simultaneity between consciousness acceding to being and being open to consciousness. (p. 163)

Such an openness, and such a consciousness, are both needed and centered within the phenomenological explication of insights. The themes themselves bring us to that point, but they are not the end. Onward, through the insightful path. Onward, through insights. On, we go, into a further explication of (their) being(s).

CHAPTER 6
ON BEING (OUT, HOMOSEXUAL, OPEN/LY, GAY, LIBERATED, LEADING) UNAPOLOGETIC

On Being

> An intense facet of phenomenology is the strength that lies in the possibilities of the impossible. When one chooses to "do" hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a knowing that while many questions shall be answered, they will undoubtedly be coupled with infinite possibilities for further questioning once inquiry is "complete." (Mobley, 2018, p. 105)

> It took me a long time to do it, but now that I have, I realize how stifling the air has been all these years. I may not be freer, but I'm a lot more comfortable, a lot less cramped. (Miller, 1971b, p. 64)

Gay men in student government? And *openly* gay men, nonetheless? What was once presumably impossible is now the genesis of this study: being out as homosexual, being open as gay, being liberated, and being a leader. While the questions continue, the possibilities remain infinite. Since coming out of the closet, (the) freedoms, too, continue. These men are unapologetic. *Yellow door, blue door, door with flower details, doors with imprints, cracked doors, multi-colored doors, thousands of doors, thousands of rows*. No one knows why or how homosexuality happens, "assuming *it* happens in any one way. Or any thousand ways" (Miller, 1971a, p. 9). Much like the closet doors from *Monsters, Inc*., the closets (and doors) themselves hold significance to those who exit their captive place. So, too, are the doors of the(se) gay men, those who gave their time and energy to this study, to reveal what was behind their door(s), and in their closet(s).

On Being Out

Dilley (2005) posits that the late 1960s and early 1970s contained a redefinition of the duality of sexuality. "*Gay* replaced the term *homosexual*, both politically and ideologically. No longer was hiding one's sexual feelings the option of choice for gay

men" (Dilley, 2005, p. 64). Deep within my own (re)definitions of sexuality, I, too, moved from *homosexual* to *gay*, while also (pro/re)claiming an identity that was held captive by the closet for quite some time. As Ahmed (2006) notes, "The closet provides a way of staying in" (p. 175). *Being out* is an integral part of my existence, and one I imagine would have been salient had I not *stayed in* while in college.

For the participants in this study, *being out* is part of their existence. Being gay is who they are, as part of the outness that society places on and expects from a gay person once they discover and announce who they are more broadly. While *coming out* implies a departure from something (the closet? pain? religious captivity? outdated knowledge?), *being out* relates to these men *just so happening to be gay*. To be gay is to just *be* (out, as gay, and openly so). These men engaged in leadership in a post-out way, and were (s)elected and accepted by their community of peers in ways that allowed them to just simply be (out as gay, openly themselves).

On being out, post-*coming out*. It is imperative that I reconsider "coming out" as a final destination. Much like reframing from asking when one "came out" to when one "realized one was gay," I must understand and interpret coming out as *one* (often continuous) part of a person's independent definition of their sexuality journey. This is a process, and one that does not have a clear ending. In the poem, "Coming Out," Platizky (1998) describes such a process:

> When I was invisible from Me
> The face in the mirror smiled back
> In recognition of a son's face, for a child's choice.
>
> When I became visible to Me
> The face in the mirror stared back
> Like a stranger through a darkened window.

> When I became visible to Me but invisible to the World
> The face in the mirror knew me but paled
> Afraid it would never be held or smiled at again.
>
> When I became visible to Me and the World,
> The face in many men's eyes
> Looked back
> And I, the son of the father,
> No longer stared alone at my own reflection. (p. 345)

While it seems an ending is achievable, Platizky's description of coming out actually illuminates the beginning of something (one's life, perhaps?). To move from *invisible from Me* to *Visible to Me and the World*, one must see the stranger in the darkened window, and one must understand that the reflection will never again be the same. Here, there is a rebirth, a renewal of identity. To *be seen* by the world, as the person one knows is true, is the crux of just simply being.

Within the realm of *coming out*, I must also consider that *being out* is just as important, if not more important. And this is not an easy task. Crisp (1968) associates this idea with light and dark. "I became accustomed to the dark," Crisp (1968) shares (p. 2). In this case, was *coming out* the dim space between the (dark) pre-out and (light) post-out place? Like Christopher describing his own pre- and post-out experiences as cold to warm and dark to light, there are parallels to the light that many see in their post-out place. Like Platizky describes the darkened window as one begins to see one's true self, is the light, then, the visibility of self and the world? Is there always light in a post-out place? Or is it merely less-dark than the pre-out place?

Participants assert that *coming out* was part of their process (like seeing themselves in the mirror, and being seen by the World). Initially, Christopher feared being seen as a "creature" by the people of his town. He was terrified of who they might

envision, and whether or not it would match who he sees (or saw, in "the mirror"). Others used social media as a portal to be seen, one that would allow them to be seen, but not immediately see the seeing that others were experiencing. These pathways allowed the men to be out on their own terms, and to come out with full intention of being out. *Being out* was an end goal; a goal that was not fully an end, but a beginning. A beginning such as this is a new life, a (re)new(ed), and more accurate, existence.

In the new life that is created in the post-out place, re-definitions of oneself are continuous and unexpected. Being out often means concealing as a form of time- and self-protection. For example, as I got into an Uber to meet Ben, the driver said very confidently to me, "You getting away from the wife and kids?" I replied, "No," and sat nervously thinking, *I am not doing this today. I do not need to come out to you. It is not happening today*. In a you-are-always-coming-out reality, a new life such as this contains new pains, and new vulnerabilities. In this new life, getting to say, "No," to the Uber driver is part of such a redefinition. Perhaps, this is saying, "Yes," to the self.

A new life such as one found in a post-out existence also transcends Biblical teachings. This was the case for Christopher and Edward, as they both (re)defined their religious and (S)piritual beliefs in their post-out place. Sedgwick (1990) posits:

> The passage of time, the bestowal of thought and necessary political struggle since the turn of the century have only spread and deepened the long crisis of modern sexual definition, dramatizing, often violently, the internal incoherence and mutual contradiction of each of the forms of discursive and institutional "common sense" on this subject inherited from the architects of our present culture. (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1)

No longer are outside architects in control of the post-out narrative. No longer are the(se) political struggles rooted in a crisis defined by the (W)orld. Now, these men move past their *coming out*, and experience a *being out* that is theirs alone. Furthermore, these men

were (s)elected in a post-out existence. To participate in this study, these men must have been out at the time of their election, and (s)elected into their role. This is an important component, as their lived experience contains this very (s)election as the foundation of their post-out place that grounded them in elected student government.

On being (s)elected. More than being *elected*, these men were *s*elected. They were chosen. These men were *(s)elected* in ways that gay men historically have not been chosen. In this case, a (s)election is a high form of support - to receive one vote, one affirmation that they should—and could—lead their community (their student body). When writing about elections, I cannot leave out the (s) that makes such a process intentional and active. To (s)elect a gay man is more than casting a vote. To (s)elect a gay man is to denote that he is qualified to receive such a vote, a vote toward doing the job of leadership, a vote to lead.

To be (s)elected to a representative role is a feat. It is why Buttigieg notes a 'wait and see' delay regarding readiness for an openly gay U.S. President. We will, in fact, have to wait and see how votes are cast. Will he be (s)elected? Will people vote in affirmation of his ideas, philosophies, and existence as open and gay? The men in this study experienced such affirmations. They felt the *election* as a *selection* by their peers. Even for those who ran unopposed in their elections, the absence of an opponent is also a form of (s)election. Perhaps the community viewed these men as more than capable. Perhaps the community viewed these men as best suited for the position. Perhaps the community viewed these men as leaders. Perhaps, they were enough.

(S)Elections are important, and have positive and negative consequences. When someone casts their vote for someone, they are placing support *in favor* of an idea. In

many ways, this is a values statement - we cast our votes for the topics we value. In turn, this is an explicit form of displaying values alignment. But is being (s)elected also being accepted? Beyond being (s)elected in this context, what does it mean to *be accepted*? To be accepted in the context of elections is to be seen as who one is, and for those seeing to be okay with such a vision. But this is not always easy, and at times, additional elements are required for one to exist in such a (new) being.

Buttigieg shares part of his story in a Victory Fund brunch, and opens up about his experience coming out, finding his husband, and grappling with his sexuality struggles that controlled him for so long.

> Back then I would have believed that you could either be gay or you could be married, but not both, not where I lived. That if you were gay, you could either be out, or you could run for office, but not both. That in our country, you could live with a same-sex spouse, or you could serve in the military, but not both. (Buttigieg, 2019b)

For Buttigieg, limitations were placed on how one is accepted, and if one could ever be 'this' *and* 'that' to achieve a certain view from society. To be accepted is to embrace a duality associated with identity: that one can be masculine and still be gay, that one can be feminine and also gay, that one can be out *and* run for office, and that one can be out *and* serve in the military (and so on). Initially, I wonder, does Buttigieg represent a form of sexual and social conservatism, specifically within the bounds of a *homo*normative reality? Was he (s)elected due to his ability to assimilate to heteronormative standards? Is this a "politics of following the straight line," that Ahmed (2006) describes related to assimilation (p. 173)? Notions of homonormativity, in this case, would "straighten up queer effects by following the lines that are given as the accumulation of 'points'" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 173). But what type of division is established within this play on

language (e.g., to "straighten up")? Does this, then, create an *us* against *them* mentality within the gay (and greater LGBTQ+) community? In this questioning, am I asserting an enoughness (or *not*-enough-ness) on Buttigieg's gayness? If our way of being in the world is *ours* alone, what possibilities, then, am I stripping from Buttigieg and his quest to be (s)elected as the first openly gay U.S. President?

> We can certainly consider that when queer bodies do "join" the family table, then the table does not stay in place. Queer bodies are out of place in certain family gatherings, which is what produces, in the first place, a queer effect. The table might even become wonky. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 174)

While part of my turning to this phenomenon involves being a not-out president (at the table), in 2017, I became an out-president when I was elected (in my queer body) to serve as President of the Graduate Student Government at the University of Maryland. Some of what kept me from coming out in undergraduate student government was rooted in a wonky, internally homophobic and heteronormative idea that held me captive. The idea that I did not need to give anyone a reason to think I was any less of a leader is a similar tension faced by my participants, a tension they work(ed) to move past as undergraduates, and a tension that required an additional decade for me to overcome.

I often think about all I could have done for my undergraduate institution had I been open about my sexuality. I spend a lot of time thinking about courage, and how it was (and often is) at odds with safety. I think a lot about my undergraduate institution, the very place I served as not-out, and the reality that such a place now has an openly lesbian university president. In 2019, Patti Neuhold-Ravikumar became the first female president of the University of Central Oklahoma, and the first openly LGBTQ+ university president in the state of Oklahoma (Morris, 2019). While acceptance may take time (e.g., to *be accepted*), from the outside, Neuhold-Ravikumar seems to be, at least,

well-received by faculty, students, staff, and community members. Is this, then, the benchmark for acceptance - that people just *are*, much like the specific out people who occupy such positions? Neuhold-Ravikumar shares:

> I am the sum of all of my experiences, and through the experience that I have had, forms who I am and how I think and how I interact with other people… This gives people a chance to be seen, to be recognized for their capacity for leadership rather than the labels that they're assigned. (Morris, 2019)

Being (s)elected as openly gay is not the same as being accepted. And still, there is something about higher education and student affairs that mirrors that which is illuminated by Neuhold-Ravikumar - a recognition of leadership rather than a label, and a chance to be seen through the sum of one's experiences. Much like the history-making exemplified by Neuhold-Ravikumar's existence, the histories of LGBTQ+ people more broadly must be preserved, and more importantly, must be accurate.

On being historically accurate. Years before Armstrong and Brooks, Jack Baker endured a multi-year student government presidency at the University of Minnesota (Anderson, 1972). Baker is not only the first known openly gay student body president, he is also his institution's first person to be elected to a second term as president in 1971 and 1972 (Anderson, 1972). In many ways, this is a liberating insight. However, during his second election, Baker dealt with smear campaigns, was labeled a "queer" and "Communist," and received prank calls and letters (Dawson, 1972). Baker defended himself and highlighted examples of when he spoke out about suspended basketball players, abortion reform, the peace coalition, and orphans in Bangladesh (Anderson, 1972). But Baker contended, "When I speak out for the 4,000 gay students on campus I am accused of using the office" (Anderson, 1972, p. 2B). To comment on Baker's achievement is to also name the dissonance associated with his (s)election.

But why does this matter? This matters because there is great learning in knowing and acknowledging the past. To *be* openly gay in the 1970s is one thing, but to be openly gay *and* elected (twice) is a remarkable achievement that should be noted as historically relevant. These are histories called for by participants. While some were making history on their own campuses, the greater context of gay politics is also one that is worth getting right. For example, before Harvey Milk, José Sarria, a server at the notorious Black Cat gay bar in San Francisco, California, became the first known openly gay person *to run* for public office in the United States (Miller, 2006). Sarria ran for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and while he was defeated, polled more than 6,000 votes (Miller, 2006). Very few people know his name, and Milk captures great attention regarding the "firsts" associated with his possible elections. In his attempts to be "unbossed[27] and unbought," perhaps Milk was unmoved by the election of other queer people, outside of his own geographic context. Here, the possibilities exist(ed) much greater than I (or he?) ever knew. While his impact is significant, and his inspiration lingers into a new century, Milk was not the first LGBTQ+ person to achieve such leadership. This includes Baker. It also includes women, across the United States from Milk, who, too, were unbossed and unbought as openly lesbian elected leaders.

On being women. Beyond Baker in his student government context, the women themselves are documented as the "firsts" associated with local and state politics. Though Milk utilized "first" language, prior to his election, Kathleen "Kathy" Kozachenko of the Human Rights Party, and senior at the University of Michigan, was elected to the Second

[27] The term, "unbossed and unbought," comes from Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's first congressional campaign (Chisholm, 1970/2010). Chisholm is the first Black woman to serve as a U.S. Congresswoman, and the first Black woman to have made a bid for the presidency (Chisholm, 1970/2010).

Ward of the Ann Arbor City Council in 1974 (Harris, 1974; "Meet the Candidate," 1974). Alongside her party, Kozachenko called for people's right to live full, productive, and creative lives, and noted, "Oppressive sex roles and attitudes which brand homosexuals as sick and perverted must be attacked" ("Meet The Candidate," 1974, p. 14). In a press conference, Kozachenko noted that she did not expect the council to be sympathetic to gay people, and is on record as saying, "These people don't have an ounce of understanding of what it's like living powerless" (Hoffman, 1974, p. 7). There was a fearlessness to Kozachenko's approach to leadership, and she brought forward a platform that seemed anything but accepted or embraced as a norm at the time.

Also in 1974, a community activist from Boston, Massachusetts named Elaine Noble was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Noble is the first openly (gay or) lesbian state legislator in the United States (Miller, 2006). Noble was joined during that time by Karen Clark in the Minnesota House of Representatives, and "easily won a second term" (Miller, 2006, p. 385). While a struggle certainly existed, the achievability of such roles contains a history that is not known to many.

But I wonder why Kozachenko and Noble's names and successes are largely left out of the conversation about LGBTQ+ leadership. Is it because of their gender? Is it the lack of mesmerizing speeches? Is it because they did not have the same longevity as someone like Tammy Baldwin (who, arguably, also does not have the same notoriety as Milk, despite two U.S. Senate s/elections)? Furthermore, what is it about Kozachenko's status as a college student that is also relevant to this study? Here, there is power in the engagement of college students that reinforces an eagerness and willingness to be at the helm. Here, there is a reminder that college students have the capability and capacity to

lead. Here, Kozachenko defied the odds, and there is an importance to uplifting her story as deeply necessary to the insights with which this study illuminates.

While my turning to this phenomenon involves the rainbow- and lavender-like waves of the newest millennium, our history of being out and being elected (and therefore, being open) still contains dissonance. For some, it was difficult to be a district representative first and gay representative second (Miller, 2006). And Noble eventually lost her political footing (Miller, 2006). Part of my discovery of these women comes from the deep exploration I endured through the reading/writing and re-writing process. What I had always been told about Milk and those who marched the loudest is not the whole story, nor is it an end to the story. There is no end to this story, and 2020 will bring more LGBTQ+ leadership victories. But whose names will be most known? Whose identities will be most elevated? Whose speeches will garner the most attention?

I will never be able to fully name or know what it means to be a woman, nor a woman in (s)elected office. However, this history shows that women were and are dynamic, and broke ground for LGBTQ+ people years before the men themselves. And so, I come back to the depth associated with the very humans who occupy these roles and who take up political space. They are so much more than their identities, though, their identities make them so much more within their leadership. In turn, like the men in this study, their (s)elections are bigger than them, but very much better because of them.

On being just, *simply*, me (us, them). I use the term "simply" as a way to not minimize the *just being*, but instead, as a way to name that it is—and should be—*just simple*. Election, selection, acceptance, and historical acknowledgment are all concepts and actions that are, in essence, just simple. To envision a world where gay people are

out and open is no longer a radical concept. Arguably, it has not been a radical concept for quite some time. In Whitman's (1860/2019), "IX," he writes:

> I dreamed in a dream of a city where all the men
> were like brothers,
> O I saw them tenderly love each other—I often
> saw them, in numbers, walking hand in
> hand;
> I dreamed that was the city of robust friends—
> Nothing was greater there than the quality
> of manly love—it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of
> that city, and in all their looks and words.—

Whether platonic or sexual interpretations apply, there is something very homo-supportive of a dream where two men "tenderly love each other" and are (publicly) "walking hand in hand." If such dreams existed in 1860 (and presumably much earlier than that), why, then, is this concept still strikingly difficult for people to grasp: gay people, being openly gay, and being *simply* themselves as gay? (Gasp!)

To be, *simply*, me (or us, or them), the "simple" in this context might also provide permission to be unbound by LGBTQ+ expectations on a college campus. Like the tension between participants and queer communities and organizations, to be simply themselves is to operate in whatever corner of the campus one feels comfortable and confident. In the case of the men in this study, a non-traditional leadership in a traditional realm was their place of impact. Such a place is equally as important as the queer spaces taken up by LGBTQ+ leaders and students. This outness matters, too, despite possible tension between being out *enough*, out-*ish*, and out-*adjacent*. A/ny simple *outness* is valued and valuable. Any simple outness is enough.

Part of just simply being also includes an interrogation of the comparison trap that, as it did for me, dominates the story of what it often means to be gay. One either

is, or one is not. And for those who are, there is a fear and juxtaposition to their outness (their gayness) that serves as a conflict. Miller (1971a) posits:

> I have never infected anybody, and it's too late for the head people to do anything about me now. Gay is good. Gay is proud. Well, yes, I suppose. If I had been given a choice (but who is?), I would prefer to have been straight. But then, would I rather not have been me? (p. 9)

While some may see "straight" as the counter to their being gay, this is often at the cost of not being themselves. *Would I rather not have been me?* Similarly, Buttigieg (2019b) reflects on his younger self and declares that he would have done anything to not be gay. These feelings launched in him what he described as a type of war. "If you had offered me a pill to make me straight, I would have swallowed it before you had time to give me a sip of water. It was a hard thing to think about" (Buttigieg, 2019b). Here, Buttigieg illuminates some of the struggle that occurs when one begins to realize one's existence is not like the others. For the men in this study, feelings such as Buttigieg's are a mere reflection of the past. The unapologetic nature of *being gay* now takes hold.

Perhaps this is the very place where their gay bodies are *lived* in student government. Perhaps it is in a simple reaction to outness that may normalize an out person. Perhaps, here, there is something radical and powerful about just simply being (out, gay, in student government). Perhaps this is a calling that supports leadership in a very queer, very out way. Perhaps the unconcealing is merely a small fraction of the whole. Perhaps this is a permission to be unapologetic, unapologetically gay, and authentically as such. Flush the pills down the toilet. The future is promising.

(On Being) Unapologetic(ally Gay)

> The question then becomes not so much what is a queer orientation, but how we are oriented toward queer moments when objects slip. Do we retain our hold of these objects by bringing them back "in line"? Or do we let them go,

> allowing them to acquire new shapes and directions? A queer phenomenology might involve an orientation toward what slips, which allows what slips to pass through, in the unknowable length of its duration. (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 171-172)

To be gay is one thing, but what does it mean to be *unapologetically* gay? What does it mean to be unapologetic about anything? Is one's gayness something to be apologetic about? And what does it mean to "slip?" *Apology* is a defense, or speech made in defense (Skeat, 1911), and to be *apologetic* is to express such an apology to another. Adding the negative prefix, "un," to express the reversal of an action (Skeat, 1911), *unapologetic* then negates the need for defense. If this is what it means to be *un*apologetic, is *apologetic* the existence that can be found in the palatable nature of assimilating to hetero- or homonormative ideals? The question of orientation, as Ahmed illuminates, allows for a new direction when something "slips" "out of line." As a result, it is in this out-of-line-ness that allows for an unapologetic existence.

Without defense, one is equipped to be oneself, *unapologetically*. For example, I engage with phenomenology with an unapologetic spirit. I am more than a student doing phenomenology as a methodology. I am a gay man whose lens contains a lavender filter that informs my student affairs scholarship and higher education practice. Early in my writing, I made apologies for lacking an education in philosophy. However, I was challenged to consider that one does not need to be a philosopher to do this work, and I embraced an unapologetic perspective that has helped me more authentically do this work. As a result, this final chapter contains more than a series of insights related to what I have learned from participants. These insights illuminate an unapologetic learning that can help others move forward as we better understand what it might mean to live and work among and alongside this phenomenon. This is action-sensitive work. At the core,

this is a *queering* of phenomenology, student government, and leadership. To *be* unapologetically gay, at this juncture, is to do—and queer—this work without apology.

On Queering Phenomenology

> Queer is a term that can and should be redeployed, fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways, even if those ways are resisting what could, and some would argue already has, become a 'queer orthodoxy.' (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 9)
>
> I also love remembering that I can queer any supposed border separating theory from practice. To theorise *is* a social practice. Like any other practice, theory has effects – whether that be to challenge or to contribute to relationships of domination (or, as often is the case, both simultaneously). (Heckert, 2010, p. 50)

I present Browne and Nash (2010) and Heckert (2010) to juxtapose the possibilities that exist within a phenomenological queering such as this. To redeploy and fuck with the term, "queer," is to resist that which is taught about, against, and away from the very queers who transgress. Furthermore, to resist the "border" between theory and practice is to queer the teaching and learning pedagogies that employ a theory-to-practice expectation (one that often prevails in higher education and student affairs). To approach phenomenology in this (queer) way, I suspend previously-learned predispositions that dominated much of my methodological and inquiry-based education.

This dissertation began by exploring the student affairs elements of lived experiences of openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government. I depart with a new vision of phenomenology, one made possible by a necessary queering needed in this work and this field. Mobley (2018) contends, "No research methodology, either qualitative or quantitative, or research paradigm provides "perfect" entry into research. But, as scholars we are provided the privilege to choose our research journeys" (p. 95). Choice, in this way, offers space for redeploying,

fucking with, and transgressing. And while initially I wanted to believe I chose this journey, it has become clear that this journey chose me.

I began by wondering what it meant to come out, what it meant to be out, and what the functionality of student government had to do with such outing(s). To queer phenomenology at this juncture moves beyond the queering that was done in chapter three. Here, I am queering phenomenology at the intersection of higher education and student affairs. But I am left with more questions than answers. Is *queering* phenomenology a decolonizing of phenomenology that renders the methodology more capable with progressive possibility? McNeil-Seymour (2014) asserts, "Our colonized imagination limits our abilities to imagine ourselves and 'others'" (p. 141). What does it mean to imagine ourselves and 'others' in this context? What makes our imagination colonized, and how might a queer epistemology change how knowledge is moved between belief and opinion? Is there value in this kind of thinking? Is this a radical act? Is any kind of *queering* a radical act?

(The) Existentials, and the liminal place. To queer phenomenology in this way, I come back to van Manen's (1997) four existentials. I do so with a lens of liminality and the spirit of my participants. Liminal is defined as in-between, or transitional (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is a middle place, and an intermediate state or phase (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Higher education, more broadly, is an in-between zone for many. As the themes have been rendered, I turn back to van Manen's (1997) existential themes that penetrate the lifeworld of all human beings. For the men in this study, they came from a high school place, and are going to a post-graduation space. Higher education, including

student government, positions them *on the way*. They are anything but stagnant. They are anything but finished. Perhaps *these* are the homosexuals on the path.

To consider such a liminal place at the intersection of the four existentials, I come back to my early understandings of phenomenology that help inform this work. Van Manen (1997) suggests, "A phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary or even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31). I introduce phenomenology with this assertion, and it is fitting that I close with the same guiding sentiment. A new chapter renders a new interpretation. While the experiences may evolve or appear in a different form, the existentials themselves help to create a way of further exploring them phenomenologically. And so, I land here, at *lived space, lived body, lived time,* and *lived relationship to other* to offer additional insights.

Lived space. It is within the cultural and social conventions associated with space that enable a queering of phenomenology. Such conventions give a spatial experience a certain qualitative dimension (van Manen, 1997). How might queer spaces be necessary, as well as the necessity *to queer* spaces? What is lived space in the context of that which can be learned in student government, student affairs, and higher education more broadly? Initially, I am drawn back to Jack's experiences with space, and the very cultural and social conventions that convinced him some spaces were not *for* him.

> I've always felt uncomfortable in those rooms. I feel like I shouldn't be there or I'm looked down upon because of the past … I think it's easy to roll your eyes and be like, "Well, he's only here for the optics or for the picture," or whatever it is. I can see it that way, too. (Jack)

To be asked, *what are you doing here (?!)*, can be explicitly declared or interpersonally internalized. For Jack, much of his reaction appears internalized. LGBTQ+ spaces are *for* Jack. And as he makes apologies, there is still an unapologetic future that Jack desires.

Queering phenomenology through the lens of lived space also points to notions of being *in* community. Like not being *that* (or that *kind of*) gay, there is space reserved that is *for* some and *not for* others. For some of the men in this study, to be insular to their student government community, or their non-LGBTQ+-centered organizations and friends, may limit the way they see their queerness in whole. This includes the very spaces where their queerness is or is not embraced and accepted, even if such a space is explicitly *for* them (e.g., an LGBTQ+ center or organization). There is visibility in a queer (lived) space, and within a queer community. Sam sees such a visibility in his future, and identifies an ideal work environment as one where he is "very visible on campus." Maintaining the belief that there are a lot of gay people in student affairs, community may be more possible for Sam than for Jack and his future in politics.

But I wonder, whose space is whose, and who belongs to which spaces? Furthermore, what does this mean in the context of LGBTQ+ centers and LGBTQ+ identities? Regardless of how he shows up in his identity, is a gay identity enough to grant admission into such a space (such a gathering)? Outside of the LGBTQ+ student community, are "identity politics" a hindrance or a necessary relevance to who belongs where? Is it grouping by affinity or identity that allows place to complement space? Or does place become a disruption to *lived space*? Ahmed (2006) asserts, "This is how phenomenology offers a queer angle—by bringing objects to life in their 'loss' of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place" (p. 165). This queer angle,

moving from in-place to (a) loss-of-place, is a necessary complement to the queering of phenomenology that is done through the lens of a lived space.

Lived body. Because our body is the first meeting when interacting with others in the world (van Manen, 1997), I remain curious about our (gay) physical and (gay) bodily presence that continues to reveal and conceal. Further, I wonder how (a) lived body takes up space in a phenomenological study, one that examines the essence of the very humans and their lived experiences with which I aimed to research and illuminate.

When the reboot for *Queer Eye*[28] appeared on Netflix, I experienced a flood of emotions and resistance. Identifying as queer, I wondered, *Who are these individuals? What stories are they telling? Are they representing* me? I also wondered about my resistance to a show of this kind. Some of my resistance came from the massive following of heterosexual people that the show garnered. It was weekly that a (heterosexual) friend or colleague would come to me and ask, "Have you seen the new *Queer Eye*?" Often taking up queer space, this question was not abnormal to receive. However, I could not help but wonder if the question was a form of targeted storytelling - that, because I am gay, I *must* be a fan and watcher of *Queer Eye*. My queer (gay) body suggested to others that I, too, was a queer eye for their consultation.

I also wonder about the racialized nature of a gay body that might accompany and/or complicate such an understanding of the themes themselves at the intersection of the very men whose racialized gay bodies are present in this study. Ben journals about his liberatory approach to leadership, and remembers those who came before him, queer people of color, as critical to forward movement. He writes:

[28] The original show aired in the early-2000s and was entitled, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

> In a very unique American experience, institutions have been used to be violent entities to sexual, racial, and gender minorities. To be at the control of this realm is to reclaim the power that has been taken away from you. But it also just furthers systems that already hurt people of color and women. Very rarely are gay white men flag bears for social movements that do not center them. The gay rights movement was started by Queers of Color, the liberation of all people have been started by those who have the least to lose. (Ben)

I wonder about the performance of Whiteness, and my own White identity. To be out as gay, and also White, cisgender, and able-bodied, is a privilege that I am not always aware of when I think about my own leadership, involvement, and student affairs practice.

But what does such an understanding mean in the context of this study? First, my body as a gay body is not the first impression when someone meets or interacts with me. Conversely, for men of color, it is their race that is initially seen by others. Ben, Edward, and Hunter all note this reality. Their gay bodies do not exist in isolation within this study, or within their existence. Scholars and practitioners in higher education and student affairs must be aware of this intersection when writing, researching, and engaging with the students themselves. Ahmed (2006) states, "Not all queers can be 'out' in their deviation. For queers of other colors, being 'out' already means something different, given that what is 'out and about' is orientated around whiteness" (p. 175). While "deviation" is an illustration of the past, there is something important about this intersection of sexuality and race that reconnects to the palatable nature of out-experiences in student government. For example, Owen understands that he has additional privileges as a White, cisgender man, and that people listen to him more than some of his peers who do not share majoritized identities (e.g., being White). Living in a body such as this, Owen, and others, often take stock of their privileges, and make

decisions based on advocacy, re(-)presentation, and visibility that ultimately remain part of their personal and professional existence(s).

"LGBTQ+" is not *one* identity. This is a conglomerate of bodies and beings (and perspectives and lived experiences). Gay men, such as those in this study and including those in this student government space, are more than the sassy gay friend, the shopping BFF, the over-compensator, the musical theater buff, and the stylish queer eye. *And* they can be these things, too. These lived (gay) bodies are the men's themselves. Just as they simply are (out, open, gay, themselves), so too are their bodies that remain the physical occupants of the spaces and places they visit. They can be *that kind* of, and *that*, and *not that*, and -adjacent to, and all with their own agency to be their own kind of gay.

Lived time. A study such as this reveals the subjective possibility that through lived time, our way of being in the world transcends any limitations regulated by a clock or calendar (van Manen, 1997). Visibility and representation are further illuminated through lived time, and here we can understand living life in reflection as well as any hopes or expectations ahead (van Manen, 1997). The era of Jack Baker, Kathy Kozachenko, and Elaine Noble is a staple of the past, and new stories and narratives are driving the future of what might be possible for LGBTQ+ people in elected politics.

I come back to stories as a way to re(-)turn to the politics of such an outness in public office, and to illuminate the subjectivities associated with lived time. In Ottawa, Canada, Jim Watson came out as gay in 2019, which he shares was "40 years in the making" (Watson, 2019). Watson spent decades of elected office in the closet, and the only time his sexuality ever came up was in 2003 during an all-candidates meeting, when a homophobic activist stood up and asked Watson if he was gay (Watson, 2019). Before

he could answer, his opponent, Marlene Rivier, snapped at the questioner for the inappropriate question, and Watson (2019) shared, "To this day, I'm not sure how I would have answered that question." Watson was not like other closeted politicians, some known for their bigoted views and votes against LGBTQ+ issues and people. This narrative matters because an emerging, openly gay identity is not primarily reserved for new (youthful) generations who are (pro/re)claiming their out-identity. Furthermore, time is subjective, and there is not an expiring clock to denote the time when one must, or should, or would (or could!) come out.

As lived time progresses, so does the way identity intersects with positional leadership. All identities do not operate singularly in a vacuum. We are not *only* this *or* that. In the previous example, Watson voted in favor of a motion on same-sex marriage, and was the first Ottawa mayor to march in the Pride Parade during his first term (Watson, 2019). Not out in these two experiences, Watson was living his own out-adjacent reality as a not-out LGBTQ+ ally. Lived time, in Watson's case, illuminates a past life as not-out, and a future life living as out, and as his most authentic self (an openly gay man).

Re(-)turning to the existentials, I also envision *lived time* and *lived space* as phenomenologically intertwined (van Manen, 2019). When looking at a clock, van Manen (2019) shares that we do not exclusively see the physical parts, but rather, we see time itself. He goes on:

> Or perhaps better we are seen by time. As we look at the clock, we are being looked at in return. But, this is a particular manifestation of time. An enigmatic realization of the nature of time. While working at my desk, I may not have been aware at all of the time. But as I glanced at the clock, I immediately experienced my temporal predicament. Instead of registering the exact time, I saw how little time I had left to complete my work. The spatial configuration of the hands on the

> face of the clock immediately converted spatial distance into temporal distance. (van Manen, 2019, p. 16)

To illuminate themes alongside the grounding of (our lived) existentials, we must be open to the multiplicity that allows for insights to be gleaned as renderings of the themes themselves. For example, Jack talks about running for office in the future, and that his mother has a fear of possible repercussions that may come as a result of his outness and gayness. It is *lived time* that may ease or complicate Jack's future outness, and it is his *lived body* that leaves his mother feeling helpless about his future political body.

But what exists in the future is yet to be known. While the men in this study and the student government entities they traverse(d) have evolved over time, the future of such environments will only be known by way of the future (gay) bodies who occupy those (gay) spaces. Much like the many men who currently occupy these spaces ("there are a lot of gay people in student government…"), lived time in the future might reveal "a lot of [insert minoritized identity here] people in student government…"

Lived relationship to other. Lived other moves from a theoretical understanding of a person and shifts based on how we interact with them in interpersonal, current spaces (van Manen, 1997). I am most moved by a lived relationship to others that is reflected in parents and parenting. In a 1967 speech, Nichols (2010) asks, "Look at the agonized face of a parent as he or she learns for the first time the 'dreadful' secret of an offspring" (p. 54). Such a secret provokes fear in some parents (Miller, 1971a), and remains a sensitive sharing that may ignite disbelief, dismay, revulsion, rejection, and anger in loved ones (Nichols, 1967/2010). When Bradley came out to his mother, she shared she was fearful of older men taking advantage of him. He reflects, "That was disturbing to me, because I was like, 'Gay men aren't predators.' But I learned to deal with that." Over time,

Bradley's process became about growth and self-acceptance. Similarly, Christopher learned to forgive his parents for forcing him into conversion therapy, and felt affirmed when even his grandmother shared with him her belief that gay people are born this way.

In the advice column *Dear Sugar*, an individual writes, "My parents know I'm gay but they don't acknowledge it. They believe I've repented and found Jesus" (Strayed, 2012, p. 31). Sugar responds, "You mustn't live with people who wish to annihilate you. Even if you love them. Even if they are your mom and dad. You're an adult now" (Strayed, 2012, p. 32). For some, this is an anthem. For some, this is liberation. For some, this is absolutely terrifying. While the men in this study have relatively supportive and stable relationships with their biological family (or select "parents"), over time, their lived relationship to other has evolved. As such, religious dissonance at the intersection of a relationship with *family* continues to take form even outside of a *pray the gay away* philosophy. *Chosen family* is a real lived relationship to other, one that many adopt.

Coming out and *being out* are deeply connected to a lived relationship to other. Sedgwick (1990) contends, "Even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (pp. 67-68). While coming out of the closet still matters, so does the very relationships that hinder or advance such a departure. And relationships are complicated. People are complicated. Like Edward and his mother who choose to not talk about his sexuality, there is a prevailing love in their relationship that still leaves Edward feeling supported, despite a disagreement on who he is attracted to. Edward shares, "I can't push that on her. It's who I am, and she still loves me." But what is it that Edward would be pushing onto

his mother? Coming out or being out do not mean one has to break all ties with family who do not approve, accept, or even understand.

In her response to the aforementioned writer, Sugar continues:

> There is a middle path, but it goes in only one direction: toward the light. Your light. The one that goes *blink, blink, blink* inside your chest when you know what you're doing is right. Listen to it. Trust it. Let it make you stronger than you are. (Strayed, 2012, p. 33)

The *blink, blink, blink* inside my own chest is what ultimately led me to come out, and what ultimately allowed me to be out. A parent's choice to reject their child is alone their decision. No amount of religion, geography, or political dissonance can change the truth of someone's identity. It can, however, change how they live in that truth. Sugar responds, "Love based on conditions such as those set forth by your parents is ugly, skimpy, diseased love. Yes, diseased. And it's a kind of love that will kill you if you let it" (Strayed, 2012, p. 34). As a result of love based on conditions, lived relationship to other can and does become a lived relationship to chosen family. Not all have the agree-to-disagree mentality as Edward and his mother, or the forgiveness and growth displayed by Bradley, Christopher, and their families. Accepting a reality such as this may be the first step toward the light. *blink, blink, blink*

Blink, blink, blink. The *blink, blink, blink* inside one's chest, the one that Strayed (2012) writes about, is the same *blink, blink, blink* that calls me to queer phenomenology as a methodology. This same *blink, blink, blink* is a light that reminds me there is also darkness associated with a study and topic such as this. But how does one answer all the questions about gay men in elected student government? How does one ask all the necessary questions? While the darkness may render one unable to see, it is the *blink, blink, blink* that leads me back to the hope—the light in the distance—that denotes the

right path. No longer a problem of veering off the (already) paved path, it is this new path, guided by the light, that remains a helpful North Star. The insightful path. (Gasp!) There are (elected) (and accepted) homosexuals on this path. To queer phenomenology, we must follow such a beacon. *blink, blink, blink*

To queer phenomenology is to disrupt the harm in outdated notions of accepting a (our) (queer) *lived space, lived body, lived time,* and *lived relationship to other*.

> It is the living human corporeality, as a possibility of pain, a sensibility which of itself is the susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin. In its skin it is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability (Levinas, 1998, p. 51)

I am drawn back to notions of (un)concealment, as illuminated in chapter three. What is it about being unconcealed and uncovered that lends to vulnerability? Can we queer phenomenology without vulnerability? As Levinas (1998) contends, there is a physical possibility associated with such an existence. Here, living in one's human (gay) body leaves one in a vulnerable space. To queer phenomenology, we must uncover such an existence, and embrace vulnerability as (a positive) part of the light that guides us to that place, and the light that keeps us protected in that place. *blink, blink, blink*

To queer phenomenology is to disrupt previously held ideals about student government, and to place openly gay men in the context of leadership that has previously been reserved for their heterosexual counterparts. Time has shown this functionality of higher education as a political place. To queer phenomenology is to disrupt colonized narratives about one's personal history, and the collective history of and for LGBTQ+ people. This is also a disruption to the very (1) closet from which (2) one comes (3) and is, out. Such a reconnection to our sexuality—our sexual *orientation*—contains a *blink, blink, blink* that is filled with hope.

It is here that our response enlists a queering of self and others within the context of phenomenology.

> If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray. (Ahmed, 2006, p 178)

It is here that such a future is a queering in and of itself - to change directions, to find other paths, to lack a common ground. It is here where exiting the closet means not only seeking personal light, but lighting the way for others. It is here where (my queer) joy sits. In my chest. In the light. *blink, blink, blink*

On Queering Student Government

> For too many years, gay people have generally not taken any active part in the government. For many years, many gay people, feeling disenfranchised, have given up hope for a better tomorrow. Hope that all will be right. Hope that the system does in fact work.
>
> With that kind of background, many gay people and their energies are not put into use in the democratic society that we have.
>
> We have learned from the past that once any group of people who are excluded from the system are brought into it, they not only dispel the fears and myths about them, but also add greatly to the general welfare of the society. (Milk, 1978/2013b, p. 198)

It is perhaps this final sentence from Harvey Milk's historic speech that resonates most with this study. To "dispel fears and myths about them," gay men and their involvement in student government can (and does) add greatly to society. And still, to be active in this way, is a queering of the student government space that has historically been marginalizing and exclusive. To queer student government is to think of student government as a liberated place. Being gay in student government is part of such a liberation. I wonder, then, is the queer student (government leader) a liberated student?

Or is such a queering about the space itself? Can one (gay individual) exist without the other (a queered student government)?

Such a liberation of oneself and one's environment is subject to experience. My turning to this phenomenon contained the story of Chris Armstrong, a former student body president who was attacked based on his being out and being elected to student government. Armstrong was accused of sexual promiscuity, seducing and influencing, hosting a gay orgy on campus, and attempting to recruit students to "join the homosexual 'lifestyle'" (Stewart & Payne, 2010). Similarly, and 40 years prior, one of Jack Baker's opponents, Steve Smith, used Baker's homosexuality as a campaign issue, and ran on the "Embarrassed Generation" party (Anderson, 1972). Smith complained that Baker disgraced the university. It is in these two examples where a queering of student government is most possible.

"Satan's representative of the student assembly." As part of his attack, Shirvell protested outside of Armstrong's house and called him "Satan's representative of the student assembly" (Stewart & Payne, 2010). But how does one receive such a role - to *be* Satan's representative? And if Satan *did* have a representative to or of one's student assembly, what role would that person serve? What is it about Armstrong that grants him such a role? Is it the alleged influencing? The orgy? Or, is it that Armstrong is gay? Is being gay an automatic association with membership in Satan's…assembly? Or does the student assembly itself hold a neutral place from where one represents…*Satan*? And what does this mean for those men in this study who remain(ed) faith-filled and upheld by religious ideals (e.g., Edward and Christopher)? Are they, too, representing Satan?

To queer student government is to reject the prototype of leadership that expects one to be male, cisgender, White, straight, Christian, able-bodied, and *not gay* (and most certainly *not-out*). Just as Milk asserts regarding myths associated with those who are gay, individuals with such an identity need to be brought into the system from which they are traditionally excluded. This inclusion is a queering of student government - to bring any individual into the mix whose identities do not fully align with those whom space has been typically reserved. It seems this, too, includes Satan's representative.

But this deviation from the norm is in part what happens just off the anticipated path that has been unpredictably complicated and queer. Because what is missing from my turning to and exploration of the phenomenon are the dozens of histories about passing-as-straight gay men who were outed while serving in public office - many whom were outed alongside criminal acts and inexcusable behavior. But for those who were just simply being, I come back to Ahmed's association with that which slips out of line. Presumably Satan's representative is anything but *in* line. To be *out* of line is then, perhaps, the very "'radical,' homosexual agenda" that lends to inclusion. Here, a new path is forged, a new student assembly. Here, they are not Satan's representatives, and instead, a representation of a new way of thinking - inclusive of new bodies and (re)new(ed) perspectives of thinking.

"...electing a filthy queer as president." Receiving similar harassment, Baker also persevered through hateful viewpoints. His opponent, Smith, commented in an interview, "Once again it appears less than 10 percent of the student body is going to disgrace the entire student body by electing a filthy queer as president of [student government]" (Anderson, 1972, p. 2B). Amidst the criticism during his second election

was a claim that Baker used the position as a platform for gay activities. This is not far from arguments later made by Shirvell in 2010. And I wonder, *so what?* Perhaps such a platform queers the very student government space that no longer remains *in* line.

Bradley shares, "If you get more people involved in the democratic process, you get a democracy that looks more representative of the people who are participating." Bradley('s queer body) takes up space as a representative to the student assembly - as openly gay, this happens whether he wants it to or not. Aside from sexuality, even the gender and race breakdown in U.S. national elected politics illuminate a disconnect from those elected and those being represented. As an example, it is estimated that around 50% of the U.S. population is female (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and yet there are only 25 women-identified U.S. Senators, making up exactly 25% of the Senate (United States Senate, n.d.). But to queer student government is to envision the platform as a place to do work with and for marginalized communities - including LGBTQ+ students and spaces. Not all elected with such an identity have that mission (e.g., not all of those 25 women will support the rights of or advance access for other women; not all queer people will advocate for LGBTQ+ rights). Furthermore, not all must be queer or LGBTQ+-identified to also value and do this work. There, too, can be allies on this path.

If politics are inherently about identity, might the whole system, then, be a politics of identity? If a gay identity is political in nature (e.g., the rights of such a population are literally voted on by elected officials), are politics, then, necessitated by identity? Electing the "filthy queer" is beyond "identity politics." When someone's being is political, the right to be in such a space should not only be granted, but expected. No amount of religion (or faith), geography, or bias-prejudice should interfere. The "filthy

queer," in this case and how I imagine Smith intended back in 1972, reflects the threat and fear of leadership from those *out* of line and outside of the norm.

On (queer)ing leadership. Leadership is not solely defined by our actions and involvement. Rather, leadership can also be what others give to us, and what others want or need or demand from us - what others think we might be capable of doing. We give a lot to others in the leadership realm, and in the (s)election of leadership, have to trust that they trust us. Thus, a mask is born, "I'm gay but not that gay. I'm queer but not that queer. I can do this. You can trust me." I am perfect, and still, I am so totally imperfect.

In his notorious "hope speech," Harvey Milk opens with a joke of gay-recruitment. He infamously states, "My name is Harvey Milk and I'm here to recruit you" (Milk, 1978/2010, p. 65). But more than recruitment to any gay "agenda," I receive such an invitation as a recruitment to run for office, and to do so as *openly* gay. This is an act of hope, Buttigieg (2019b) notes. "Candidates who often made a difference, whether they won or not, just by being on that ballot, made a difference before the first vote was cast" (Buttigieg, 2019b). To run at all is a queering of leadership.

Leadership as community organizing. In student government, community organizing can show up in the form of activism and advocacy for various populations and peoples. For example, when I served as president of the graduate student assembly, I watched as over 100+ graduate students testified for collective bargaining in the Maryland House and Senate committee. With backing from the university's student-run newspaper, *The Diamondback* Editorial Board (2018) wrote, "Behind each story of workplace abuse is an institution that neglected to protect its employees." This led many students to ask, "Do graduate students matter?" It took the labor and courage from not

only the graduate student government but also work in tandem with the advocacy group, Fearless Student Employees - together, as community organizers, leading for change.

But what is it about community organizing that queers leadership? In some ways, this type of leadership is about calling out the otherwise non-queer elements of campus or community events. For example, during her term, Kozachenko brought forward resolutions to address the treatment of gay people by police (Hoffman, 1974). She is cited as saying, "Many cases of harassment are not even reported to the police… Many gay people feel there's no point in going to the police. They don't need to be treated like shit twice" (Hoffman, 1974, p. 6). It takes a lot of courage to confront police behavior, and to confront behavior with regard to a certain identity group (and especially in the 1970s). Addressing this intersection is a queering associated with community organizing.

Queering leadership is also a nod to community (both identity-salient communities and the communities one is serving). Such leadership does not require being at the helm. Owen shares:

> I don't always think that the person in the highest seat of power necessarily holds the most ability to affect change. I think at a certain point, you become so high up that it's more so organizational things that you're overseeing and less on the ground work, which is the work that I kind of value.

Owen sees the difference in who does work and where. Here, Owen feels like he is actually making change on the frontlines, opposed to meeting with those people who are assumed to make change (e.g., campus administrators). He shares, "I definitely see myself as a community organizer, or kind of rallying people in that sense, because I find that super gratifying and fulfilling." Owen's view and approach to leadership is by doing the work. This allows him more freedom and capacity to do so in an advocating manner.

Even here, there is a queering within such a rallying, in that organizing people toward a cause is deeply ingrained in the queering that can be done in leadership.

"***New" leadership, on display.*** As I sought after leadership experiences and organizational and institutional positions, I did not inherit or become heir to any role. The "trait approach" to leadership that deems someone a good leader (Northouse, 2017), or a historically outdated monarchy-style form of leadership, are not in effect in student government. In leadership more broadly, such styles appear much less explicit, and exist in passive ways. And still, leaders are on display whether they are openly gay or not. To be on display is to be more than visible or representative, and instead, it is to be displayed in one's most authentic identities - for gay men, this is in whatever form their gayness appears. However, such a leadership is not necessarily "new."

In an interview, Kozachenko states, "The two candidates are young women, not middle-aged businessmen. Those who sit on the city's thrones hope that this election will exterminate the third party pest so that they can resume a profitable, uninterrupted lifestyle" ("Meet The Candidate," 1974, p. 14). This type of courage is necessary as leadership in this queer, diverse way continues to be challenged (even 40 years later). Perhaps this section could have been titled, "…the third party pest." Perhaps such a pest is a necessary disruption to the typical path followed (at the time) in city politics.

However, I wonder what it means for me, a gay man, to center Harvey Milk in chapter one, and to now call for a queering of leadership. Is centering a White, gay man really all that queer? To be fair, Milk is a major part of my personal turning to this phenomenon. And still, to queer leadership in this way may mean even a disruption to my

own perspectives and (White, gay, male) lens on the matter. Perhaps such a queering is to not center gay men at all (especially in a study with more White men than not).

Here, the leadership is not "new" at all. Here, queer leadership is that "third party pest" that Kozachenko mentions during her run. Ahmed (2006) contends:

> If phenomenologists were simply to "look at" the object that they face, then they would be erasing the "signs" of history. They would apprehend the object as simply there, as given in its sensuous certainty rather than as "having got here," an arrival that is at once the way in which objects are binding and how they assume social form. (p. 41)

To look at the object of openly LGBTQ+ people in elected student government—and leadership at large—is limited by the current landscape. Furthermore, how we "got here" is on the shoulders of Kozachenko and others, stories often left behind. Signs of LGBTQ+ history often privilege the (White) gay men, and "new" in this way may point to more diverse perspectives that include transgender folx, people of color, queer people with disabilities, and international bodies.

But the scope of my study *does* center gay men, and such a "limitation" of this narrow view is acknowledged as I take time and space within this study to illuminate those who were actually the first: the early radical queers who experienced a less famous-outcome as a result of their leadership and mark-making. If queering leadership, with remembrance to the traditional, historical(ly outdated), and early prototypes of leadership, this study is also an act of redefining visibility in the context of elected leadership in higher education. To consider *being out* as salient for participants, I must think about the "end point" that this holds - to simply *be* (out, period). Milk (1978/2010) states, "For invisible, we remain in limbo—a myth, a person with no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends who are straight, no important positions in employment" (p. 69). To

be is to acknowledge the others associated with out people's existence(s). They, too, are essential to future progress. They, too, amplify the cause. They, too, are on this path.

Re(-)turning to stories, to questions. While their stories are part of my turning and re(-)turning to this phenomenon, I am left with more questions than answers. As I queer student government, I am left with questions about the future research and additional explorations of this (out-)adjacent-phenomenon. For example, what is the lived experience of openly gay men in student government at HBCUs or Hispanic Serving Institutions? Christian-affiliated institutions? Single-gender colleges and universities? Furthermore, what additional narratives have emerged about the stories and explicit experiences of such individuals in student government? What might 2020 bring that has otherwise been left out of this dissertation? Furthermore, how do experiences differ across identity and geography? Institution type? Beyond gay men, what is the experience of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students in elected student government? While these questions are largely explored in their own contexts, it is with the lens of student government and through phenomenology that they can be explored deeper and more lived. The re(-)turn creates an endless array of possibilities.

I also come back to fraternities, athletics, and military training programs, as previously explored, that can serve as heteronormative counterparts to this study of gay men. For example, Dilley (2005) shares the experiences of Juan, a closeted undergraduate student in the mid-1980s, who joined a fraternity, and later realized that he joined the fraternity to prove to himself that he was not gay. Juan suggests, "My being a fraternity member would alleviate anyone's doubts, if they thought I was gay" (Dilley, 2005, p. 69). The same can be said about masking and passing in student government. But did

Juan's (gay) body ever really belong in a fraternity context? Or was his interest in such a space the pathway related to the assimilation of fitting into a hetero-supportive space in a gay body? What, now 30 years later, is the experience of openly gay undergraduate men involved in fraternities? What path(s) exist for them?

Early literature contends that student government is successful when students have satisfactory relationships with faculty and administrators (Peterson, 1943). To queer student government is to value such relationships, but to also represent students even if such a representation is at odds with administrator directives. It means *being radical* - to be openly gay, to express identity even in opposition of body and mission, to have support as Satan's representative, to have support as a filthy queer, and to have support as the city pest. Ahmed (2006) describes *queer* as both a sexual and political orientation. Gay and lesbian people have their ways of "keeping things straight" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 172), and to disrupt such a thinking—a straightness—in student government is not only courageous, but also lends to future belonging and hope for future disruptions to come.

Courage, Belonging, and Hope

> Why did I march? I was 25 years old, just one year into my first term in elective office. I was out. I was at a point in my life where I had just realized that I did not have to choose between being honest about who I am, and pursuing the career of my dreams. I could do both. And at that moment of decision, I was at once terrified and freed. So I marched, to replace fear with courage, to replace isolation with belonging, to replace anger with hope. (Baldwin, 2000)

To conclude with sentiments from Tammy Baldwin's historic speech feels necessary. Perhaps she is the epitome of "making it" for LGBTQ+ elected leaders. To not only channel courage, belonging, and hope, we must also acknowledge the fear, isolation, and anger as associated with a fete such as being openly gay and elected to public office. But why march? Is *this* the "'radical,' homosexual agenda?" Is *this* the public

re(-)presentation that lends to visibility and *being seen*? Such a declaration is necessary at this intersection of personal and professional livelihood.

After publishing a groundbreaking, outing piece for *The New York Times*, Miller (1971b) shares, "Lots of people write to say how courageous I had been in doing the piece. Well, maybe, but, as you can see, my heroism came after every conceivable attempt to be something less than that, anything less than that" (p. 53). As I envision the *essence* of a phenomenon such as openly gay undergraduate men involved in elected student government, I am struck by the "anything less than" that Miller writes about. This is the genesis of the(ir) call to student government, leadership, outness, the work, and (just simply) the commitment to something bigger than them but better because of them. To be the opposite of this "less than" that Miller names, allows for a "bigger than" that is found in Perry's sentiments.

Now, many years later, away from both my undergraduate experience and my own start to a coming out process, I call for a shift from *coming out* to *coming to*. But coming *to* what? In the case of this study, these men were out, and still, had to come *to* something - student government, leadership, and elected office. In this way, coming out is still relevant and still matters. But it is more than the literal movement out of "the closet," and instead, it is the movement toward something to which one's outness is authentically actualized. While I thought my generation of homosexuals were the last to have traumatic coming out processes, deep down, I knew this was not the case. These types of processes still exist. Being gay—the mere existence of being gay—is an outness in and of itself. *Coming to* something is the choice that determines *how*, *where,* and *when* one's outness manifests.

Being gay has never been a choice. But as an, for the most part, invisible identity, the choice is *how*, *where,* and *when* to declare such an outness. An identity such as one's sexuality is different from their religion, which also, for the most part, can remain an invisible identity. Religious subscription is a choice. And as Strayed (2012) contends, "We are all entitled to our opinions and religious beliefs, but we are not entitled to make shit up and then use the shit we made up to oppress other people" (p. 33). Identity should never be a weapon, nor should it ever be weaponized against someone (e.g., Christopher surviving conversion therapy, Hunter having to work 10x as hard, Bradley and Jack wrestling with internalized homophobia, and more).

But what is not made up is the mass of gay men who claim student government as an organizational home. Because, there are a lot of them—*us*—in student government, who carry this dual identity. And for those who are *not-out, not-yet-out, never-out,* and *out-adjacent*, their existence is just as necessary as we envision a future of courage, belonging, and hope. *blink, blink, blink*. Because in higher education, there are a lot of them—*us*—in student affairs, who carry an understanding how to support students with such identities and involvement. Because in society, there are a lot of them—*us*—in neighborhoods and communities, whose courage can be a role modeling for those without such examples. *blink, blink, blink*

I come back to Perry's quote of becoming part of something that is bigger than me (us) but better because of me (us). Elections matter. Elections of queer people and openly LGBTQ+ people matter. Elections of people who are representative of more than the majority matter. The existence of openly gay men in elected student government is an act of being: *they just are*. And in that *just being*, they exemplify the courage, belonging,

and hope needed to survive and thrive. Here, the opportunities are limitless. Endless.

Onward, through the unpredictable, yet beautifully queer, path.

> And we must give people the chance to judge us by our leaders and legislators. A gay person in office can set a tone, can command respect not only from the larger community, but from the young people in our community who need both examples and hope. (Milk, 1978/2010, p. 69)
>
> I've found one overriding thing about my personal election, it's the fact that if a gay person can be elected, it's a green light. And you and you and you, you have to give people hope. Thank you very much. (Milk, 1978/2010, p. 70)

APPENDIX A

IRB Application

- Recruitment/Advertisement Materials -

Invitation to Participants
(post via Facebook page and email via student government association organization listservs)

Are you involved in undergraduate student government on your campus? Are you an undergraduate man who identifies as openly gay? If so, please participate in this study, which will consist of interviews with undergraduate men who identify as openly gay, and involved in elected undergraduate student government.

"The Lived Experience of Openly Gay Undergraduate Men Involved in Elected Student Government"

Participants must have been elected to serve in a leadership capacity within the last year, and currently in a position in their institution's student government/association. Participants must be male-identified, and identify as "out" on their campus, meaning they openly identify as gay. Participants must be adults age 18 and older and enrolled as an undergraduate student at a U.S. institution for postsecondary education.

To participate, please email Michael Anthony Goodman, doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, at researchgoodman@gmail.com. This project is supervised by Dr. Francine Hultgren, who can also be contacted with any questions at fh@umd.edu. This study will take place over a six week period. By participating in this study, you commit to two 90-120-minute audio-recorded interviews in-person and via Skype or FaceTime, and you will be asked to participate in an optional WebEx or Zoom focus group that will take 90-120 minutes. Additionally, you will be asked to maintain a leadership journal, which will include five entries.

Please note: This dissertation research study has been approved according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. This study is completely voluntary, and the data collected will only be utilized for research purposes and no identifiable information will be disclosed. There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. For participating in this research project, participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card. In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others.

APPENDIX B

IRB Application

- Participant Screening Survey/Demographic Questionnaire -

If you wish to participate in this study, please answer the questions below. You do not have to answer every question if you do not feel comfortable doing so; this will help to better understand your experience through the lens of your identities, and will allow for a more diverse sample.

*Check here to confirm you identify as MALE: _____

*Check here to confirm you identify as GAY: _____

*Check here to confirm you were *out* at the time of election: _____

*Check here to confirm you are currently serving in elected student government: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____ Age: _____

Marital or Relationship Status: _____

What is your geographic region? _____
(e.g., Northeast, South, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, West, Southwest)

Student Government Position Title: _____

How long have you served in your student government position? _____

Institution Type: _____ Year in School: _____

Undergraduate Major: _____

Undergraduate Minor: _____

**required questions*

APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board
1204 Marie Mount Hall ● 7814 Regents Drive ● College Park, MD 20742 ● 301-405-4212 ● irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	The Lived Experience of Openly Gay Undergraduate Men Involved in Elected Student Government
Purpose of the Study	This dissertation research is being conducted by **Mr. Michael Anthony Goodman** under the supervision of Dr. Francine Hultgren at the University of Maryland, College Park. You are invited to participate in this research project because you self-identify as openly gay and male, and have been elected to an undergraduate student government role. The purpose of this research project is to understand better the lived experience of openly gay undergraduate men in undergraduate student government.
Procedures	If you agree to participate in this study, there will be one 90-120-minute preliminary interview in-person, followed by one 90-120-minute interview via Skype or FaceTime. You will also have the option to do a 90-120-minute focus group with other participants (via Zoom or WebEx). The interviews and focus group will include questions about your experiences at the intersection of being gay and being involved in student government. With your permission, the interviews and focus group will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to maintain a leadership journal, which should include five entries over a six-week period.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There is little to no risk for participating in this study. You may experience some discomfort in sharing personal stories during the interview, but may choose to stop the interview at any time with no penalty.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include an added awareness of the experience(s) of openly gay men in undergraduate student government. It is ideal that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of this context.
Confidentiality	Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data files in a password-protected folder that is only accessible by the PI. All data will be de-identified, and will not include your name or institution. All audio-recorded files will be destroyed within six months of transcription. If a report or article is written about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if required to do so by law.

Compensation	You will receive a $25 gift card via email for your participation. You will be responsible for any taxes assessed on the compensation.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator: **Michael Anthony Goodman** University of Maryland, 3214 Benjamin Building 3942 Campus Dr, College Park, MD 20742 mgood@terpmail.umd.edu // 1-405-630-0902
Participant Rights	If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678 For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.
Signature and Date	**NAME OF PARTICIPANT** **[Please Print]**
Signature and Date	**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**
	DATE

APPENDIX D

IRB Application

- Semi-Structured Conversation Guide -

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, there is not a set of questions that the researcher brings with them into their interviews. Instead, the researcher will bring a few points or ideas to get the conversation(s) started. Potential openings for conversation include the following (for both individual interviews and focus groups):

- Tell me about your coming out process.
- What was the experience like telling friends? Family?
- What were some of your more formative experiences with leadership?
- Why did you choose to get involved in student government at your institution?
- What was the process of being in/running a campaign like for you?
- How/Did being gay or your outness ever play a role? How/How not?
- What have been some of the challenges as an openly gay man in student government?
- What have been some of the positives about being out and in student government?
- What did you get out of this experience? (focus group, specifically)

After the first interview, I will draw on parts of the conversation to inform future interview(s)/questions and the focus group conversation.

APPENDIX E

IRB Application

- Semi-Structured Conversation Guide -

As a follow up to the first interview, the following conversation guide (and points) will be used for the second round interview and the focus group conversation.

Second-Round Interview

- Let's talk more about some of your experiences with legislation within your role.
    - How has being gay informed voting, decision-making, etc.?
- How does your social life look alongside your "professional" life?
    - At what points does the professional become personal?
- What have been some of your experiences with the public-ness of being out? For example, have you had any issues or experiences with the school newspaper, or having to out yourself (even if already out) within a speech or something like that?
- What is your relationship like with your family?
- What is next for you? Future goals?
- How do you engage with the current political climate?
    - How does being gay inform that engagement?
- Overall, have you felt supported at your school? In your role? As gay?

Focus Group Conversation

- What was it like to participate in this study?
- Overall, how did it feel to process through your time as an out, gay leader?
    - Did anything new come up for you, that you don't often think about?
- Did anything come through for you in your journals that you did not necessarily get a chance to talk about in the interviews?
- If you were the researcher, what questions would you ask of each other?
- Any final thoughts as we wrap up? Or things you did not get to say or name in this process that you wish you had?

APPENDIX F

Participant Demographic Information

	Self-Identified Demographic Information			
Participant Pseudonym	Year	Race/Ethnicity	Geographic Region	Role/Title
Ben	Senior	Mixed Race	West	President
Bradley*	Junior	White/non-Hispanic	Southeast	Speaker of the Representative Body**
Christopher*	Senior	White	Midwest	Speaker of the Representative Body**
Edward*	Junior	Black/African-American	South	Vice-President
Hunter	Junior	Hispanic/Latinx	Northwest	Speaker of the Representative Body**
Jack	Senior	Caucasian	West	President
Owen	Sophomore	White	Northeast***	Vice-President
Sam	Senior	White/Caucasian	Southeast	Speaker of the Representative Body**

**Participant asked researcher to select pseudonym*
***Researcher renamed role/title due to position-type, and to not reveal specific identifying information about participant*
****Participant identified as an international student*

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