

12-2017

# Factors that Affect Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students' Efforts toward Self-Actualization at a Private, Religious College: A Phenomenological Study

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# Factors that Affect Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students' Efforts toward Self-Actualization at a Private, Religious College: A Phenomenological Study

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college students to understand the relationship, if any, between sexual orientation and self-actualization at a private, religious college. Four recent graduates and 14 current students volunteered for semi-structured interviews about their academic and extracurricular experiences at a Roman Catholic college in the greater New York City area. They shared their perceptions of campus climate for GLB students, including homophobia and bias among faculty, staff, and students at the college. Interview data, viewed through the framework of Maslow's theory of self-actualization and Astin's student involvement theory, identified factors that support GLB self-actualization and others that discourage it. Such factors included students' family life before and during college, their levels of outness, and their involvement on campus with an LGBT club and other activities. Findings suggest that GLB students perceive growing support from faculty, including those who belong to religious orders, but more resources and more awareness of GLB issues are needed. Further research on GLB experiences with self-actualization is needed. Studies set in different geographic regions, at schools with other religious affiliations, and in non-educational areas of life (such as youth organizations or sports) would be beneficial.

## **Document Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Doctor of Education (EdD)

## **Department**

Executive Leadership

## **First Supervisor**

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## **Subject Categories**

Education

Factors that Affect Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students' Efforts toward Self-  
Actualization at a Private, Religious College: A Phenomenological Study

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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December 2017

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## **Dedication**

This study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students and their efforts to achieve self-actualization is dedicated in loving memory to Brendan Kelley Dumas. Born with a single ventricle, Brendan showed more heart and more self-actualization in his 22 years than many people who live far longer lives. Brendan was proud to be gay and thrilled to be in college. Though not interviewed for this study because he passed away just as data collection began, Brendan's memory lives on through his remarkable family and countless friends. Self-actualization has often been associated with senior citizens or adults of a certain age; may Brendan's story remind us all that "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become all that one is capable of" is not defined by age or gray hair (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). It comes through a series of courageous choices that lead one toward growth and peace with one's true self (Maslow, 1965). This study is also dedicated to the many women and men, regardless of age or sexual orientation, who knew Brendan and continue to take valuable lessons from his self-actualized life.

I am filled with gratitude and respect for the 18 gay, lesbian, and bisexual volunteers whose stories bravely shaped this study. I sincerely thank my dissertation committee, along with Dr. Adam Rockman (whose study I partially replicated) and the St. John Fisher College faculty, for their guidance. For all their encouragement, I humbly acknowledge with gratitude my family, friends, and colleagues. Most of all, I thank Mark for his loving support and patience.

## **Biographical Sketch**

John Brendan (Jack) Gormley currently serves as Dean of Student and Alumni Services at the MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston, Massachusetts. He enjoyed several prior positions at schools in Washington, D.C., and New York City. Mr. Gormley completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at Rhode Island College in 1997. As an undergraduate he was awarded the Ridgway F. Shinn, Jr. Study Abroad Scholarship to study at London South Bank University and the University College Dublin. He earned a Master of Science in Mental Health degree at Manhattan College in 2012. In 2015, he enrolled in St. John Fisher College for a Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership. Throughout the Ed.D. program, Mr. Gormley included a focus on social justice and equality for the LGBT community in his studies. He was initiated into the SJFC chapter of the Kappa Delta Pi honor society in 2017. Under the direction of Dr. Michael Muffs and Dr. Byron Hargrove, Mr. Gormley completed his dissertation during the fall of 2017 and his Ed.D. degree was conferred the same year.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college students to understand the relationship, if any, between sexual orientation and self-actualization at a private, religious college. Four recent graduates and 14 current students volunteered for semi-structured interviews about their academic and extracurricular experiences at a Roman Catholic college in the greater New York City area. They shared their perceptions of campus climate for GLB students, including homophobia and bias among faculty, staff, and students at the college.

Interview data, viewed through the framework of Maslow's theory of self-actualization and Astin's student involvement theory, identified factors that support GLB self-actualization and others that discourage it. Such factors included students' family life before and during college, their levels of outness, and their involvement on campus with an LGBT club and other activities. Findings suggest that GLB students perceive growing support from faculty, including those who belong to religious orders, but more resources and more awareness of GLB issues are needed.

Further research on GLB experiences with self-actualization is needed. Studies set in different geographic regions, at schools with other religious affiliations, and in non-educational areas of life (such as youth organizations or sports) would be beneficial.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Higher education has been studying factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students' college experiences for many years (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). A critical gap in the literature relates to Maslow's theory of human motivation, specifically in understanding factors that affect GLB students' ability to achieve self-actualization during their college years (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Maslow, 1943; Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). To self-actualize is to reach one's full potential, to make one's true self his or her daily reality, including achieving full use of one's capacities and talents (Crain, 2016; Maslow, 1943, 1965). Research suggests that discrimination, heterosexism, homophobia, and microaggression may affect GLB college students' ability to fully self-actualize (Maslow, 1943; Nadal, 2013; Rockman, 2013). GLB students' perceptions of their college's campus climate, including discrimination, heterosexism, homophobia and microaggression, may hinder their ability to achieve the highest level of self-actualization (Nadal, 2013; Rockman, 2013).

GLB college students' experiences in college and concerns regarding their ability to reach their full potential during college are significant for many reasons. The U.S. Department of Education has determined that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are protected against gender-based discrimination under Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972 (2014), the federal civil rights legislation that bans all forms of gender-based discrimination in schools (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Furthermore, there is a

trend in recent years of more students self-identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during their college years than in past generations (Mehra & Braquet, 2011; Rockman, 2013). These openly gay students, many of whom graduated from high schools that offered support services for gay students, frequently seek similar resources and protections against discrimination from their colleges (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Mehra & Braquet, 2011). For GLB students who choose to enroll at private colleges, additional factors such as institutional mission or campus climate may support or inhibit self-actualization. Several studies indicate a need for further research focused on GLB student experiences at private colleges, including religiously affiliated colleges, to understand how such factors affect GLB students at private colleges (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Messinger, 2009; Rockman, 2013; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014).

This study looked at factors that affect the self-actualization of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a private, religious college in the northeastern United States. Self-actualization referred to Maslow's 1943 definition: the desire of human beings "to become everything that one is capable of" (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). The purposeful research sample included participants who recently graduated from a private Catholic college, using the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Post-secondary Data System (IPEDS) definition of a private college: an educational institution controlled by a private individual or nongovernmental agency, generally funded primarily by other than public moneys, and operated by other than publicly elected or appointed officials. In order to explore GLB students' perceptions of their Catholic college's campus climate (including but not limited to discrimination, heterosexism, homophobia, and microaggression), this study used a theoretical framework centered on Maslow's theory

of self-actualization (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Maslow, 1943, 1965, 1987; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Woodford et al., 2012). According to Rankin et al. (2010), harassment and homophobia, or perceptions thereof, can limit GLB students' ability to achieve what Maslow (1943) referred to as self-actualization.

In addition to Maslow, this study also viewed GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and its effect on their efforts toward self-actualization through the lens of Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement. Student involvement theory focuses on the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that a student applies to his or her college experiences (Astin, 1999). Extracurricular activities exemplify the type of experiences that Astin (1999) studied. Astin's theory added value because it applies to students' overall experiences (rather than to a single experience or subject matter) and helps explain what motivates GLB student behaviors (Astin, 1999; Furner, 2009; Fraser, 2014; Rockman, 2013).

A quotation from Maslow underscores the need for this study. "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization" (Maslow, 1987, p. 93). Appendix A of this paper illustrates the human needs that GLB students must satisfy: food, housing, stability, sense of belonging, loving and being loved, and strong self-esteem, and more. These are challenging for many adults, more so for a relatively young sexual minority who faces potential disapproval from family, friends, and instructors should they decide to proceed toward self-actualization of their true selves as openly gay students (Rockman, 2013). This study looked at the phenomenon of being an openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual college student at a private,

Roman Catholic college in order to understand factors that GLB students perceived as supporting or discouraging their efforts to achieve their full potential and find peace with themselves.

### **Problem Statement**

The ability of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to attain self-actualization on private, religious college campuses is affected by a variety of factors (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Woodford et al., 2012). GLB students tend to experience various challenges during college that can affect their ability to fully self-actualize (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Longerbeam et al., 2007). For instance, Rankin et al. (2010) discuss bullying, decisions about the “coming-out” process, lack of dating opportunities, and lack of acceptance from family and community.

There are three major issues that can discourage or limit self-actualization of GLB college students: anti-gay discrimination, including but not limited to bullying and harassment; homophobic or heterosexist campus climate, including microaggression; and gay students’ perceptions of these first two factors (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Nadal, 2013; Rockman, 2013; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). “Out” or “openly gay” GLB students who attend private colleges may face or perceive additional issues that can limit their efforts to self-actualize; for example, non-secular private college may have anti-gay doctrinal teachings or traditions (Levine & Evans, 1991; Yoakam, 2009).

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has determined that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are protected against gender-based discrimination under Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972 (2014), which prohibits all forms of gender-based discrimination in schools (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Title IX,

therefore, relates to GLB student involvement and self-actualization. Despite Title IX and related legislation, GLB students at private colleges continue to report discrimination and harassment (Nadal, 2013; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Woodford et al. (2012) supported DOE Office of Civil Rights' view that many colleges were often not fully compliant in their efforts to promote and enforce policies that would ensure fair and equitable treatment for all students, regardless of sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

Campus climate can contribute to GLB students' limited self-actualization (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). According to Rockman (2013, p. 2), campus climate refers to the "prevailing attitudes, opinions, principles, and actions of all community members within an institution" of higher education. For this study, campus climate referred to the prevailing attitudes, opinions, principles, and actions of campus community members (i.e., students, faculty, staff, senior administration, and alumni) at a private Catholic college in the northeastern region of the United States.

GLB students' own perceptions of discrimination at their college and their perceptions of their overall campus climate (including homophobia, heterosexism, and microaggression) can affect their self-actualization (Nadal, 2013; Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). Nadal defines microaggressions as minor "indignities" which can signal "hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults" against oppressed groups, perceptions of which can affect one's sense of belonging to a campus community (Nadal, 2008, p.23).

The theory of student involvement suggests that the impact of these perceptions is greater if the students' attitudes discourage them from participating in the life of the college, for example in extracurricular activities and student organizations (Astin, 1999).

Nadal (2013) suggested that GLB students' perceptions of campus climate can be affected by microaggressions. Seemingly insignificant but hurtful comments such as "That's so gay" when heard or overheard by GLB students can have lasting impact on GLB students (Nadal, 2013). Microaggressions are defined as "brief, commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). If an out gay student perceives a high degree of homophobia, discrimination, or microaggression as part of their campus climate, these perceptions may affect his or her sense of belonging to that campus community (Nadal, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively probe the perceptions and attitudes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to examine, through semi-structured interviews the factors that can affect these students' ability to achieve full self-actualization at a private, religious college in the northeastern United States. (See Appendix B for sample questions used with permission from Rockman (2013) as expressly noted in Appendix C.) This study applied the work of Maslow (1943, 1965, 1968, 1987) and Astin (1999) to review and expand upon existing research on the experiences of GLB college students (Longerbeam et al., 2007; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Rockman, 2013; Woodford et al., 2012).

GLB students tend to experience a variety of challenges during college that can affect their involvement in campus activities (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Longerbeam et al., 2007). While some theorists generalize about college student engagement, more

recent research on GLB student experiences tends to focus on unique needs of gays, lesbians, and bisexual students. This trend follows similarly with critical race theorists and others who study discrete experiences of underrepresented or underserved groups of students. (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). For instance, Rankin et al. (2010) discuss bullying, coming-out, lack of dating opportunities, and lack of acceptance from family and community. Like their heterosexual peers, GLB students often turn to extracurricular opportunities for assistance with these and other aspects of their lives. Yoakam (2006) and Longerbeam et al. (2007) suggest the challenges faced by GLB students are similar to those of other minority groups on campus because of the overarching heterosexist, homophobic culture of the United States, and throughout higher education in particular.

Issues that hinder GLB college students' self-actualization can also have a negative impact on retention and graduation rates of GLB students (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Rankin et al., 2010). GLB students appear to face increased risk of dropping out because of their sexual orientation (Rankin et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2012). While discouraging GLB students' self-actualization, such factors as harassment and sexual assault represent violations of Title IX, the U.S. law which prohibits gender-based discrimination. The Department of Education and federal courts have explicitly applied Title IX to the experiences of GLB students (Rankin et al., 2010). Safety and a sense of belonging are relatively low on Maslow's hierarchy of needs; that is, both of these fundamental needs must be met before one can attempt to achieve self-actualization – regardless of sexual orientation (Maslow, 1943). Perhaps progress has been made since Love's 1998 suggestion that all colleges struggle because of the largely homophobic

society in the United States, but if GLB students' basic needs are not being sufficiently met at private colleges, then these private colleges are failing a significant number of students and families (Rankin et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2012).

### **Theoretical Rationale**

In order to probe GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and self-actualization at a private college, this study employed a theoretical framework centered on Maslow's theory of self-actualization (Dugan 2011; Maslow, 1943, 1965; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Woodford et al., 2012). Maslow (1965) referred to self-actualization as an individual's ability to reach his or her full potential by transcending physiological, psychological, and social needs. This study applied the concept of self-actualization, the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to factors such as discrimination, homophobia, and microaggression. According to Rankin et al. (2010) and Rockman (2013), harassment and homophobia, and perceptions thereof, can limit GLB students' ability to reach full self-actualization. In addition to negative effects for GLB students, a campus climate of harassment and homophobia can also hinder the personal development toward self-actualization of heterosexual students (Edwards & Sylaska, 2013).

In addition to Maslow's overarching theoretical basis, this study examined GLB students' experiences through Astin's theory of student involvement (Astin, 1999). Student involvement theory focuses on the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy a student applies toward his or her college experiences (Astin, 1999). The role of student involvement in supporting or limiting openly gay students' ability to achieve self-actualization during college was explored with GLB students and recent graduates. For this study, student involvement in campus life included a variety of

activities outside of academic course work. Examples include participation in extracurricular programs, leadership development trainings, and student organizations (Astin, 1999). Probing GLB students' experiences at a private, Catholic college through the lens of Astin's theory helped reveal these students' perceptions of campus climate (including homophobia, heterosexism, and microaggression, among other factors) and how it has affected their personal efforts toward full self-actualization (Dugan, 2011; Nadal, 2013; Rockman, 2013; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014;). The theory of student involvement was beneficial because it relates to a variety of student experiences rather than a student's experiences within one particular subject matter or activity (Rockman, 2013). Student involvement theory was also helpful in explaining the factors that motivate college student behavior, including GLB students' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions related to self-actualization (Astin, 1999; Fraser, 2014; Furner, 2009; Rockman, 2013).

### **Significance of the Study**

The percentage of Americans who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) has been estimated from 1.6% to 3.8% of the total population (Rankin et al., 2010; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). As these estimates represent approximately five million to 12 million Americans, the lived experiences of the GLB community merit consideration. This study aimed to benefit these millions of students, families, and administrators at private, religious colleges while promoting social justice for countless stakeholders regardless of their individual sexual orientations. A study of this nature added significant value in better understanding the issues that affect GLB students and their families. The significance of the study was also seen in the potential for contributing

to the development and long-term success of self-actualized gay, lesbian, and bisexual students by helping to improve their experiences inside and outside the classrooms of private, religious colleges in the Northeast region of the United States, and beyond (Astin, 1999; Maslow, 1965).

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (GLB) are often discussed as part of the larger gay community also known as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer). Though this study focused on GLB students, some literature to which this study has made reference were based on studies of the LGBTQ experience more broadly (Rankin et al., 2010; Marine, 2011). While focused on GLB issues specifically, this study can promote a greater understanding of overall LGBTQ issues. It also surfaced suggestions for resources needed by GLB students and best practices to help higher education practitioners who work with sexual minorities – individuals who self-identify as any sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression other than heterosexual – to better serve these students (Cegler, 2012; Teman & Lahman, 2010; Woodford et al., 2012).

### **Research Questions**

Student involvement and student attitudes, including those of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, play a significant role in college students' personal development toward full self-actualization (Astin, 1999; Fraser, 2014; Renn, 2007). For example, a sense of belonging to a campus community, manifested in active participation in extracurricular activities, can foster self-confidence, leadership skills, career preparation, and networking (Kezar & Contreras-McGavin, 2011). The lived experiences of out gays and lesbians at a private, Catholic college presented many questions for study related to self-actualization (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Messinger, 2009;

Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007). Out and openly gay referred to those students who are public or unrestricted about their identity as a sexual minority, whether gay, lesbian, or bisexual; an out student, for this study, is open or public about his or her sexual orientation during participation in extracurricular activities and on-campus programming (Levine & Evans, 1991).

The research questions explored in this study were:

1. What factors or experiences support GLB college students' efforts to strive toward self-actualization at a private, religious college (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013; Teman & Lahman, 2010)?

2. What factors or experiences interfere with GLB college students' efforts to strive toward self-actualization at a private, religious college (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Marine, 2011; Rockman, 2013)?

3. What can be discovered about GLB college students' perceptions and attitudes regarding campus climate (including their perceptions of discrimination, homophobia, and microaggression) on a private, religious college campus (Maslow, 1987; Nadal, 2013; Renn, 2007)?

### **Definitions of Terms**

***Bisexual:*** A person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted both to persons of the same sex and the opposite sex (Levine & Evans, 1991).

***Campus Life:*** A general term referring to referring to the overall activities, programs, and services offered with and for students on a college campus (Rockman, 2013).

***Campus Climate:*** The dominant attitudes, opinions, principles, and actions

expressed by or associated with community members at an institution of higher education (Rockman, 2013).

***Catholic College:*** A privately organized college established with an official affiliation or relationship with the Roman Catholic Church; the exact nature of the affiliation, for example including governing control of the college, varies (Love, 1998). For this study, this term refers to a school whose identity has been blinded for publication and to protect participants. It is important to note that there is no religious or faith-based requirement for admission to this college, but all students are required to take a certain number of religious courses regardless of their academic majors. Like many Catholic colleges, the college's faculty includes several individuals who belong to religious orders.

***Closeted:*** A gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person who is not open about his or her sexual identity. Such a person would not be open or public about his or her sexual orientation during participation in extracurricular activities on campus (Wall & Evans, 1991).

***Coming-Out:*** The act of publicly acknowledging oneself as a person who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Rockman, 2013). Significantly, Rockman and others continue to note Wall and Evans' (1991) description of the coming-out process as not only realizing and accepting the fact that he or she is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but also deciding how and when to share this information with others.

***Engagement:*** The act of joining and remaining involved with an extracurricular or co-curricular on-campus activity such as a campus activities board, an intramural sports team, a club, a student chapter of a professional society, or student government – see definition of Student Involvement (Astin, 1999; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie,

2009).

***Extracurricular activities:*** Any short-term or long-term programs or opportunities offered without academic credit or association with a particular course in which college students receive benefits from recreation, training and socialization. A variety of topics and skills, such as self-confidence, time management, and public speaking are available through many extracurricular activities. Such activities often promote ethics, integrity, teamwork, and multicultural inclusion among other values, many of which are pre-determined by the college as developmentally desirable for their students' well-rounded growth. (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Fraser, 2014; Marine, 2011).

***Gay:*** A man who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to another man (Levine & Evans, 1991). Rockman (2013) noted that some college students may not prefer to label themselves as “gay” (or “lesbian” or “bisexual”) but for the operational purposes of this study, “gay” referred to openly gay men. While guarding against phallogentric language or tone, this study also used “gay” to refer occasionally to the larger GLB community. Rockman (2013) noted that “gay” is viewed as a more positive term than “homosexual, which can sometimes be seen as clinical or as a reminder of historical discrimination and oppression.

***Heterosexism:*** Prejudice and antagonism of homosexuals based on the belief that heterosexual human development is normal or natural – as opposed to GLB development (Rockman, 2013).

***Heterosexual:*** An individual who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to a person of the opposite sex (Walls & Evans, 1991).

***Homophobia:*** Irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals and/or homosexuality

(Rockman, 2013).

***Homosexual:*** An individual who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to a person of the same sex (Levine & Evans, 1991).

***Lesbian:*** A woman who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to another woman (Levine & Evans, 1991).

***Microaggression:*** A "brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23).

***Northeast:*** As the broad geographical backdrop for the greater New York City region which was the setting for this study, this term referred to nine U.S. states: Pennsylvania (PA), New Jersey (NJ), New York (NY), Connecticut (CT), Vermont (VT), Massachusetts (MA), New Hampshire (NH), Rhode Island (RI), and Maine (ME). These nine states comprise the U.S. Census Bureau's Region One, including Division One (New England) of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) and Division Two (the Middle Atlantic States) of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau). The Catholic college research site tends to attract students from across much of this broad region.

***Out:*** A gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person who is open about his or her sexual identity. Such a person is open or public about his or her sexual orientation during participation in extracurricular activities and on-campus programming (Levine & Evans, 1991).

***Private Colleges:*** The U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Educations Data System defines “private institution” as an “educational institution controlled by a private individual(s) or by a nongovernmental agency, usually supported primarily by other than public funds, and operated by other than publicly elected or appointed officials... may be either for-profit or not-for-profit” (IPEDS 2015-16 Data Collection System Glossary). For this study, private college referred to an independently organized institution of post-secondary education (excluding “university”) that offers bachelor degrees and more (Rankin et al., 2010). To be clear, some private colleges are religiously affiliated or have historical ties to a particular faith tradition but a faith tradition or institutional tie to a particular religion (Roman Catholic) is a key element in what defines the private college which hosted this study. The setting of this study was an independently run private college associated with the Roman Catholic Church while the literature review included studies about secular and non-secular private colleges, including but not limited to Catholic colleges and universities.

***Self-actualization:*** Influenced by humanistic psychology, self-actualization refers to the belief that individuals will strive to reach their full potential when their basic physiological needs are met. Self-actualization, considered the high point of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, continues to play a significant role in theory and practice of modern psychology (Crain, 2016; Maslow, 1943; Pearson & Podeschi, 1999; Sommers & Satel, 2006). Humanistic psychology influenced self-actualization by advocating the importance of observing feelings and emotions to better understand oneself and one’s behaviors and relations to others (Crain, 2016). The theory of self-actualization is related to positive psychology, a term also introduced by Maslow (Pearson & Podeschi, 1999).

Positive psychology emphasizes the relationship between happiness and personal growth rather than the search for pathology and mental illness (Crain, 2016; Maslow, 1987).

***Sexual Minority:*** A phrase used to refer to any gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB) man or woman as well as those individuals who self-identify as any sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression other than heterosexual. Note, this study focused exclusively on GLB students but occasionally referred to sexual minorities (usually in reference to other studies whose population or focus varied slightly (Temam & Lahman, 2010; Woodford et al., 2012). (See Appendix D for a descriptive overview of study subjects, which includes various forms of sexual minority identification and expression.)

***Student Involvement:*** The “amount of physical and psychological energy” that a student devotes to his or her college experience and intellectual or academic goals. A “highly involved student” demonstrates a strong dedication and time to studies, spending time on campus, actively engaging in student life (clubs, organizations, and similar activities outside the classroom) and interacts frequently with faculty, staff, fellow students (Astin, 1999, p. 518). For the purposes of this study, student involvement applied Astin’s definition to the involvement (or engagement) of GLB college students at a private, Catholic college located in the greater New York City area.

## **Chapter Summary**

The factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual students’ self-actualization at a private, religious college present significant questions that affect many students and their families (Dugan, 2011; Messinger, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010). If the college years represent one of the more significant experiences in a young adult’s life, selecting the right college is a major decision with many consequences, both positive and negative

(Rankin et al., 2010; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Experiences during college can support or hinder a student's ability to reach their full potential through lifelong development – to attain full self-actualization. It is important, therefore, that GLB students and their families have access to information that will assist in their evaluations of colleges, including assessing campus climate and the availability and quality of resources designed to support out GLB students (Cegler, 2012; Dugan, 2011; Messinger, 2009). Factors such as homophobia and anti-gay discrimination on campus can affect student involvement. The importance of a supportive campus community continues to affect GLB students and their ability to self-actualize throughout the college years and beyond (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Fraser, 2014).

While guarding against bias, this study was delimited to focus on factors that affect self-actualization of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a Catholic college in the greater New York City region. A theoretical framework from Maslow (1943, 1965) and Astin (1999) helped probe the relationship between GLB students' experiences and their abilities to achieve self-actualization. By conducting this study, the doctoral candidate aimed to benefit college students – regardless of sexual orientation – as well as students' families, and the administrators, faculty, and staff of private colleges. Finally, this study included a focus on promoting social justice for the many stakeholders involved in or affected by the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009; Stover, 2015).

The remaining chapters of this study follow the necessary components of a qualitative study of this nature. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature relevant to self-actualization, student involvement theory, the experiences of the LGBTQ community in

American higher education in general and at private, religious colleges in particular.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative research design and methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study. In Chapter 4, the results of this study provide a detailed look at the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of 18 GLB students and recent graduates of the private, religious college studied (a descriptive overview of the participant sample is found in Appendix D). Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings, offers recommendations, and summarizes this study.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

The availability of literature related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' self-actualization process on college campuses has been limited by a number of factors. For private colleges, the availability of such information appeared to be restricted or at times presented with bias. Such restrictions represented challenges from those private colleges with a religious affiliation as part of their institutional mission—some of the private colleges included in this study's research literature review have such affiliation but not all (Love, 1998; Yoakam, 2006). Other private college may also have been reluctant to participate in research or share information related to sexual minorities or other groups, for a variety of reasons (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Lewis, 2009; Messinger, 2009; Teman & Lahman, 2010). The historical lack of acceptance associated with disclosing one's sexual orientation, particularly at the traditional college age (18 to 24 years of age, for the scope of this study), may also have contributed to a lack of available literature (Messinger, 2009; Rockman, 2013). These factors have contributed to the apparent gap in research on GLB student experiences at private colleges; thus, the need to conduct a study of this nature was underscored by the following literature review.

With regard to research on college student's progress toward self-actualization (or lack thereof), literature also appeared to be limited, perhaps owing partly to Maslow's own belief that few individuals attain self-actualization and usually later in life (Maslow, 1943, 1968). That said, Maslow's work has informed other theorists and higher education

practitioners, who have applied aspects of self-actualization to college student development (Astin, 1999; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014; Teman & Lahman, 2010). The purpose of this study was to probe perceptions of out gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to examine the factors that affect these students' efforts to strive toward self-actualization at a private, Catholic college in greater New York City (in the northeastern United States), including synthesis and analysis of existing research.

Research on college student's opportunities for extracurricular programs and activities was also reviewed, as these activities can often play a large role in students' self-actualization efforts (Astin, 1999; Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). There were several primary sources and a variety of viewpoints available on this topic. For example, Kezar and Contreras-McGavin (2011) called for a complete overhaul of American higher education's approaches to developing student leaders. An earlier study published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the professional trade organization of student affairs professionals in the United States, reported on the attitudes of heterosexual student leaders toward their GLB classmates (Horne, Rice, & Israel, 2004).

To review the existing research clearly, this candidate organized literature in four categories. First, this paper looked at research on issues relating to gay, lesbian, and bisexual college student experiences on campus (with a focus on traditional college age students, approximately 18 to 24 years old). Second, issues related to college student engagement in campus life, including Astin's theory of student involvement, were analyzed. Third, this review examined the available literature related to Maslow's theory

of self-actualization. Fourth, this paper surveyed relevant research about homophobia and microaggression on college campuses. This approach reflects the large amount of available scholarship on GLB issues overall, on theories related to self-actualization, and on college student involvement, broadly speaking. There were many existing studies available but only a small few focus discretely on GLB college student engagement and self-actualization (Rockman, 2013). It was important to focus on key contributions that could inform this study. The researcher also recognized that additional reading and analysis was necessary throughout the time during which this study was conducted.

### **Review of Literature on GLB College Student Experiences**

A synthesis of literature on overall gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college student issues (without regard to private or public college status) revealed valuable information on existing literature. Eleven primary sources published between 2005 and 2013 were considered. Of these, eight employed a qualitative approach and three were quantitative. With regard to common themes and concerns, Longerbeam et al. (2007) and Renn (2007) caution against assumptions that all GLB students experience college the same way. Both focus on gay students' perceptions of campus climate, as do Marine (2011) and Messinger (2009). They study how the GLB students consider their sense of belonging to the campus community—how welcomed and safe do gay students, themselves, feel on campus. Rockman (2013) also addresses this in a qualitative dissertation studying GLB students' experiences at community colleges. See Appendix A for how one's sense of belonging fits into Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Edwards and Sylaska (2012) and Rankin et al. (2010) followed a similar approach, though each studied a larger sample – 5,000 respondents across campuses nationwide,

which appeared to be one of the larger studies to date on GLB college student experiences. This was the highest number of participants of all studies reviewed for this paper; however, Rankin et al. (2010) include LGBTQ faculty and staff. Rankin et al. (2010) remain noteworthy for this particular study because the lead author permitted Rockman (2013) to access portions of that study's quantitative survey instrument to develop his qualitative interview questions, and this researcher has partially replicated Rockman's 2013 study, with permission to use Rockman's same interview questions (see Appendix C, copy of email from Rockman granting permission).

Three studies offered extensive inquiries into GLB student experiences vis-a-vis how higher education faculty and staff can better support GLB students, including their coming-out processes. First, Marine (2011), in a special issue of ASHE's Higher Education Report, presents 21<sup>st</sup> century student issues as the still-struggling legacy of the Stonewall riots of 1969, a landmark moment in LGBTQ history in the United States (Marine, 2011; Rankin et al., 2011). Second, Teman and Lahman (2010) conducted an ethnographic study of an LGBTQAQ – adding Allies and Questioning to the traditional LGBTQ population – and addressed the need for more proactive supports for sexual minority students; as the acronym suggests, they stressed support for all students whose age and developmental progress may seem to contribute to a certain level of fluidity with regard to sexuality and gender expression. The third study of this group is from Stewart and Howard-Hamilton (2014), who examined GLB student issues in a chapter dedicated entirely to new approaches for engaging GLB students. This was part of a book focused on theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for engaging diverse populations across higher education (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton (2014).

Three works published in the same year approached GLB issues with greater focus on institutional and community attitudes, rather than on the students' particular concerns. First, Lewis (2009) investigated the extent to which Americans who believe homosexuality is an innate or biological characteristic tend to support gay students' rights in an historical quantitative analysis of 24 surveys conducted at U.S. schools since 1977. Second, Messinger (2009) used mixed methods to examine steps taken at 567 colleges that would appear to either promote support for GLB students or hinder it. Third, Mehra and Braquet (2009) qualitatively explored modern reference library practices to evaluate the effectiveness of services geared toward LGBTQ student researchers. Mehra and Braquet (2011), like Rockman (2013) and others, relate being open about one's sexual orientation on campus (in the relatively small and observable confines of the reference library more specifically) very closely with an individual's efforts toward Maslow's vision of self-actualization. One common finding shared by these three is the suggestion that attitudes toward the gay community appear to be shifting toward more tolerance and inclusion; while each study points out limitations, they also point to progress.

The next set of sources reviewed, three qualitative studies, discuss GLB students at Catholic institutions of higher education, which are shown to face unique challenges vis-a-vis openly gay student experiences. Getz and Kirkley (2006), Love et al. (2005), and Yoakam (2006) suggest the mutual difficulties that gay students and Catholic schools experience are rooted in doctrine and conservative tradition. While Love et al. (2005), along with Getz and Kirkley, can be seen as continuing the work of Love's 1998 study (which is still cited often in GLB scholarship related to Catholic higher education), all three of these works make recommendations for further study. As noted previously, the

research sample for this study included 18 participants from a private college that has an affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church.

Considering more than 30 primary sources cited in this review, it appeared that the majority of the studies about GLB students and other sexual minorities have been written from a transformative worldview. Transformationalists believe that many traditional approaches to research imposed structural laws and theories that failed to account for marginalized individuals or groups. They tend to focus on social justice and oppression, often drawing from critical theory, participatory action research, Marxism, and feminism to study racial minorities, indigenous populations, and the gay community (Creswell, 2013). While several of these works discuss grounded theory directly, several others show influences from queer theory and feminist theory.

As with the preceding synthesis of the literature, it was helpful to begin to analyze the selected sources by starting with an article offering a broad, in-depth look at the overall experiences of gays and lesbians on college campuses in the United States, Rankin et al. (2011). In one of the first large-scale quantitative analyses of GLB issues in higher education, this study surveyed more than 5,000 students, faculty, and staff. Among key findings, Rankin et al. (2010) determined that the gay community remains ostracized in American culture. This study is also significant because Rankin et al. (2010) included intersectionality of sexual orientation with gender and race identity of participants. Like others, including Lewis (2009) and Messinger (2009), Rankin et al. (2010) appear to agree with and expand upon Love (1998) and Love et al. (2005) on the ways in which the larger American society's heterosexist, homophobic patterns of behavior can influence campus climate at private colleges.

With particular attention to non-secular (religiously-affiliated) private colleges, Yoakam (2009) discusses GLB retention as complicated by a balancing act of two long-standing Catholic teachings: that homosexuality is “contrary to natural law” and that Catholics must treat gays with “respect and delicacy.” Yoakam (2009) found that some Catholic institutions have begun to address this doctrinal dichotomy, including a school in the Midwest that began hosting (since 2003) an annual “Lavender Graduation” celebration for gay seniors. According to Yoakam, this event, which is still held each year, is meant to acknowledge the small size of the GLB community and bring this sub-population together in a supportive manner. Yoakam, like Love (1998) and Rankin et al. (2010), suggests further research may be needed to better understand the experiences of GLB students who choose to study at non-secular colleges (Yoakam, 2009).

Love followed up his major study of 1998 with an exploration of spiritual experiences of GLB students in 2005. Partnering with Bock et al., Love included students from 52 private colleges across the country, including Catholic colleges. This study dealt with gay students’ sense of identity, including sexual orientation and acceptance on campus. It probed gay students’ perceptions of how these factors impacted their academic progress and personal development. The threat of losing spiritual identity due to anti-gay discrimination appeared to be related to academic and social challenges faced by gay students. Though Maslow’s theory of self-actualization was not addressed directly, this study concluded that most gay students struggle with issues of faith, identity, and sexuality, which merit further study. It is worth noting that Love’s research appears to remain relevant to the study of gays at private colleges, especially Catholic institutions; his works are still widely cited (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Kezar & Contreras-McGavin,

2011).

In 2006, Getz and Kirkley conducted a qualitative study at a private, Catholic university. That university had recently decided to take a radical new approach to address gay students' needs on campus. Getz and Kirkley interviewed students who participated in the Rainbow Educator program, a new initiative which intentionally included heterosexual students as well as gays in an effort to reduce discrimination and promote safety for all. The majority of participants stated that the Rainbow program had a positive impact on the overall campus climate at the school. Dugan and Yurman (2011) and Renn (2007) share Getz and Kirkley's view that successful programmatic support for GLB students combines thoughtful, engaging inclusion of straight students with carefully designed strategies designed to include and support gays.

While the aforementioned studies offered analysis of the most salient findings of this literature review, other studies also offer valuable insights. This researcher suggests that the emergence of more discrete studies related to out gay students' campus experiences will contribute to a greater understanding of GLB student concerns. For example, a study of GLB students' experiences with relationship violence (Edwards & Sylaska, 2012) represents a new level of progress in efforts to meet the needs of young gay and lesbian adults on (and off) campus. When considered with Longerbeam et al. (2007) and Rankin et al. (2010), these targeted works provide opportunities to better understand a traditionally underrepresented or underserved GLB population. While this study focused on GLB students' experiences on a private, Roman Catholic college campus, it has remained important to note that relationship violence is one of many facets of the college experience and therefore applicable to the factors that affect GLB self-

actualization (Edwards & Sylaska, 2012).

### **Review of Literature on Self-Actualization through Student Involvement**

Astin is widely recognized for the research that led to his development of the theory of student involvement (Furner, 2009; Rockman, 2013). In short, Astin's theory suggests that the more time and energy a student applies toward his or her academic pursuits, the more likely he or she will be to find satisfaction and success (Astin, 1999). In turn, Astin suggests a strong connection between student involvement and graduation and attainment of academic and career-oriented goals. That Astin continues to be cited widely and positively appears to be a credit to the value of student involvement theory. While it is often described as universally applicable, there is little criticism of this theory. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) pointed out the overlap and potential for confusion with other theories, and suggested that involvement theory has not been fully explored with multicultural populations.

This review analyzed four studies of extracurricular student involvement opportunities that lend themselves to discussion of self-actualization of GLB college students at private, religious colleges. Dugan and Komives (2007) published a quantitative national study of approaches to extracurricular student leadership. That same year, 2007, Renn conducted a significant qualitative study of LGBT student leaders; it was most significant for this study because Renn explored LGBT college students' involvement on campus with their LGBT identity – which this study used as a semi-proxy for Maslow's self-actualization, similar to Rockman's (2013) connection between the GLB coming out process and self-actualization. Dugan and Komives and Renn were followed in 2011 by Kezar and Contreras-McGavin, who wrote from a critical theoretical

framework and suggested that higher education was overdue to reexamine who participates in extracurricular activities, including student leadership. This 2011 special report followed up on Kezar and Contreras-McGavin's original study of 2006 and explored reportedly revolutionary theories of leadership, including relationships between and among transformational leadership on campus, cross-cultural leadership on campus, and student involvement in extracurricular campus life such as clubs, organizations, and teams (Kezar and Contreras-McGavin, 2011).

Another set of studies was examined because they focused on student involvement as it relates to colleges' efforts to retain students. Furner (2009) studied satisfaction of sophomore male students who were engaged (to varying degrees and in varying formats) in positional leadership (traditional roles such as student government president, treasurer of the chess club, or chair of the Circle K community service organization). Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) focused on student involvement and motivation as they relate to retention. Stewart and Howard-Hamilton (2014) offered a chapter on best practices toward GLB student engagement in an edited book of theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse students. All three works support Astin (1999), and all three indicate that there is a relationship between student involvement and self-actualization for GLB students. As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study was to look at GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and factors that affect their self-actualization at a private, religious college; Astin's theory that the more energy a student puts into his or her college experience, the more likely he or she will be to succeed—and the perception of success in college can be tied to one's self-actualization (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013).

## **Review of Literature on Homophobia and Microaggression in Higher Education**

The body of research on homophobia (including the related term heterosexism) is so large that this review chose to focus on five works that tie homophobia and microaggression to the college student experience. Horne, Rice, and Israel (2004) measured the attitudes of heterosexual college student leaders to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals on campus. The findings directly support the notion of Nadal (2013), Rockman (2013), and others that various forms of discrimination remain factors to contend with on college campuses. Lewis (2009) found more positive outcomes when looking at attitudes about the root causes of homosexuality; perhaps students, faculty, and staff are more accepting of GLB students when they believe that the GLB students are born into homosexuality rather than when they view orientation as a choice.

Love's 1998 study remains relevant because it examined homophobia and oppression on private religious campuses. It is still cited frequently along with Love's other works. Nadal (2013) has already been mentioned in this paper but it is a seminal work on microaggression. Woodford et al.'s study of 2012 focused on the phenomenon of the oft-heard phrase "That's so gay" and other derogatory language that can affect GLB students.

## **Review of Literature on Maslow's Theory of Self-Actualization**

**Introduction.** Originally published in 1943, the work of American psychologist Maslow on self-actualization has influenced many studies, theories, and practices related to understanding human motivation and behavior (Astin, 1999; Cass, 1979, 1984; Kohlberg, 1974; Rankin et al., 2010). Maslow's theories (1943, 1965, 1968, 1987) have informed research on the development of human beings across all stages of life, including

college students. In particular, Maslow's focus on human needs has served as a foundation for studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students' experiences in American higher education (Cass, 1979; Levine & Evans, 1991; Love, 1998; Rockman, 2013). While not without criticism, Maslow's theories of motivation and the hierarchy of human needs have contributed to modern psychology and counseling for many years (Crain, 2016; Hoffman, 1988; Pearson & Podeschi, 1999; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In the St. John Fisher College (SJFC) tradition of social justice and academic excellence, and aiming to build on past decades of scholarship related to the needs of the gay community, this doctoral candidate chose Maslow's theory of self-actualization to serve as the theoretical framework for this dissertation.

This study applied Maslow (1943, 1965, 1968, 1987) and Astin (1999) to a study of gay, lesbian, or bisexual students' perceptions and attitudes about campus climate and self-actualization at a private Catholic college located in the greater New York City region of the northeastern United States. According to a Maslow biographer, Maslow stated that the human being is more than "a bag of symptoms," (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). Maslow encouraged a focus on positive attributes—something not historically associated with the treatment of homosexuals in the American education system. Maslow has remained a valuable lens for viewing the lived experiences of GLB young adults (Rankin et al. 2010; Rockman, 2013; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Self-actualization, the humanistic belief that individuals strive to reach their full potential when their basic physiological needs are met, can be applied to the GLB students at a private college with potential benefits for a variety of stakeholders.

Given the percentage of Americans who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or

bisexual—recent estimates range from 1.6% to 3.8% of the population, or approximately five million to 12 million Americans—the need to study the lived experiences of the gay community, in particular GLB college students, has been underscored by this literature review (Rankin et al., 2010; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Utilizing Maslow and other thought leaders, higher education has been studying gay and lesbian students and the factors that affect their college experiences for many years (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Longerbeam et al., 2007; Love, 1998; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Rockman, 2013; Woodford et al., 2012). Research has suggested, however, that there remains a critical gap in understanding with regard to the factors that affect GLB students' attitudes toward and involvement in extracurricular activities during their college years (Nadal 2013; Rankin et al., 2010; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014; Woodford, 2012). Several scholars have indicated a need for further research on GLB students' experiences at private and religious institutions (Kezar & Contreras-McGavin, 2011; Love et al., 2005; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014; Yoakam, 2006). This candidate has applied Maslow's theory of self-actualization to a study probing the attitudes and experiences of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students with regard to factors that support or discourage their self-actualization (through involvement in campus life and other factors) at a private, Roman Catholic college located in the greater New York City area (Astin, 1999; Maslow, 1943). In preparation for the dissertation research (mainly qualitative interviewing), it was important to examine Maslow and his enduring theory of self-actualization.

**Definition of self-actualization theory.** Maslow's theory of self-actualization, which he developed following the work of his influential colleague, Kurt Goldstein

(1939), has been paraphrased and abridged countless times since its publication. Maslow (1943) himself referred to it in part as the desire of human beings “to become everything that one is capable of” (p. 382). Achieving “one’s potentials, capacities and talents” is part of the description found in Crain’s 2016 introduction to Maslow in *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*. Based on Goldstein (1939) and Maslow (1943), Crain states that self-actualizers find motivation predominantly by focusing on their own inner growth, searching for and reaching the potential they associate with their personal mission in life. He goes on to note that those rare individuals who attain self-actualization (meeting the highest need of a human being) demonstrate “a certain independence from their culture” (Crain, 2016, p. 373).

Throughout his career, Maslow provided thorough explanations for each stage of his hierarchy, including self-actualization. When comparing self-actualizers to non-self-actualizers, Maslow stated that adults who self-actualize tend to retain aspects of the creativity and openness often seen in children, so they may be seen as ‘absorbed, spellbound, popeyed, enchanted” (p. 100). With regard to non-self-actualizers, Maslow suggested that they may experience a “feeling of deficiency” – a concept that Stephen Covey (2010) discussed in his “Making Time for Gorillas” article in *On Managing Yourself* from the Harvard Business Review “Must Reads” series (which compiles articles and case studies geared toward high-functioning business leaders—a group that might be considered likely candidates for self-actualization). This deficiency leads many people to resent the success of others around them or to be filled with worrying insecurity that “something is being taken from them” (Covey, 2010, p. 41).

In “Self-Actualization and Beyond,” a paper Maslow presented at a 1965 training

conference for mental health counselors, he discussed self-actualization and described life as a series of choices, stating that an individual who had attained self-actualization would consistently choose things in life that would lead him or her toward personal growth, and avoid the path of easy, safe choices.

**Historic relevance of self-actualization theory to GLB students.** Although the hierarchy of human needs has achieved a degree of recognition in popular culture, Maslow's theory was first published in 1943. This fact is significant to this study for two reasons, the cultural context surrounding its original development and its ongoing use. Maslow developed his theory of motivation, which included self-actualization at the top of his hierarchy of needs, at a time when mainstream United States culture did not acknowledge gays or lesbians and certainly did not support the gay community. In fact, the majority of medical and psychological professionals considered homosexuality as a disorder. Furthermore, many gay and lesbian individuals denied their true feelings and lived lives of sin and shame (Cass, 1979, 1984; Lewis, 2009; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Maslow's theory has been in use for more than a half century; despite limitations or criticisms, it has remained valuable to the study of human motivation and student development. Maslow's work has maintained an enduring influence on generations of researchers studying ways in which to help people reach their full potential and find peace with their true selves (Hoffman, 1988; Rankin et al., 2010).

Maslow's theory of self-actualization (1943) was first presented as one part of a larger theory of motivation, which included the hierarchy of human needs (see Appendix A for a graphic summary). Maslow posited that an individual could only seek higher levels of fulfillment after ensuring that more basic physiological needs had been satisfied.

Then, with each level or stage addressed sufficiently, he or she could move up to address the next set of needs. It is helpful to summarize the hierarchy briefly in order to provide context for self-actualization as the highest achievement. One must bear in mind that Maslow's 1943 theory included a basic level of human needs: securing ample food and drink, avoiding physical illness, and living without overwhelming threat of physical danger. Once the fundamental needs related to safety and personal security are met, a person may then move up to deal with needs associated with love and a sense of belonging (friendship, affection, and inter-connectedness to other human beings). Rockman (2013) notes that Maslow intentionally separated sex, a physiological need, from the love and affection sought out in this stage of the hierarchy. Assuming the set of love-related needs is satisfied, the person's self-esteem and related issues could then be addressed. The final level of human needs according to Maslow's hierarchy, which is particularly relevant to this study, is self-actualization, the process of reaching one's unique potential after fully addressing all lower needs (Maslow, 1943, 1965, 1987).

Maslow's theory of self-actualization (1943) has served as a foundation for other scholars' work related to personal development for more than 50 years. Although it was implicitly developed for use with heterosexual people, it has had valuable applications for gays and lesbians. For example, Cass's (1979) identity synthesis stage offered a clear relationship between an individual's coming-out decision-making and process and his or her path to self-actualization (Rockman, 2013). For this study in particular, Maslow offered insight into how GLB college students at private and religious schools may choose to engage in extracurricular campus activities during their college years – if their other needs, which can be considered relatively basic (housing, food, and safety, for

example) are being met (Maslow, 1943).

**Criticism of and support for self-actualization theory.** The theory of self-actualization has been studied and critiqued repeatedly since Maslow first published in 1943. Maslow himself considered his work to be a complement to that of Sigmund Freud, who has been similarly widely cited and famously attacked by successive generations of scholars. Maslow suggested that Freud focused on the sick aspects of psychology while he (Maslow) then focused on the healthy side (Maslow, 1968). This positive psychology on Maslow's part has come under perhaps the most criticism for reportedly lacking in empirical evidence (Hoffman, 1988; Pearson & Podeschi, 1999; Sommers & Satel, 2006).

Pearson and Podeschi (1999) analyzed individual-society relationships, including the theory of motivation and self-actualization, and found that Maslow's work has been criticized by Marxist and postmodern scholars. Such critics focused on the limited scope of Maslow's work, claiming that it did not apply to cultures outside the west. Another common critique is that Maslow overly concerned himself with individuality without properly studying the role of society and culture (Pearson & Podeschi, 1999). Yalom & Leszcz (2005) partially countered such critiques, applying Maslow and self-actualization to their work on group psychotherapy.

In their 2006 work, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance*, which gained considerable appeal in popular culture, Sommers and Satel criticized Maslow and others for contributing to a decline in self-resiliency among Americans. They suggested that Maslow's work was unscientifically rooted in the social upheaval of the 1960s in America. Ultimately, Sommers and Satel suggested

Maslow was no longer relevant for serious psychology because his theories did not employ sufficient scientific evidence (Sommers & Satel, 2006). It may be helpful to note that Sommers and Satel have also faced criticism, including a backlash to their suggestion that the mental health community exploited the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.

More recently, Rockman (2013) supported Maslow's theory but pointed out that his biographer, Edward Hoffman, described some of Maslow's work as "scientifically unsound" (Rockman, 2013, p. 8). Because it was relevant to his study of GLB community college students, Rockman (2013) also discussed how Maslow's hierarchy treated sex as discrete from feelings of love, with regard to human needs and motivations.

To support the value of Maslow's theory of self-actualization, one can consider the vast number of studies which have applied Maslow's (1943, 1965, 1987) work. In the field of higher education alone, Maslow has influenced Kohlberg (1974), Astin (1999), Renn (2007), Kezar and Contreras-McGavin (2011), Rockman (2013), and many others. Just as Maslow's work on self-actualization had its foundations in Goldstein (1939) and the theory of motivation, each successive researcher has expanded on Maslow. They have kept the focus on human needs and how to offer better understanding of how students develop and reach their potential.

The *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender People* (Rankin et al., 2010) quantitative study, with 5,000 LGBT students, faculty, and staff participants from diverse colleges and universities across the United States, found support for Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Maslow's 1943 belief that a sense of security and well-being are essential to human growth and development remained relevant for the LGBTQ population in 2010 (Rankin et al., 2010). According to Rankin et

al. (2010), “While some have questioned the validity of the hierarchical ordering of human needs, few dispute that feeling safe, being affirmed, and being comfortable with one’s self are linked with a high level of personal or professional performance” (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 1). This study went on to liken the “coming-out” process for gays, lesbians, or bisexuals to the process of attaining self-actualization for such individuals. While this study was designed to examine the experiences of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, it may be helpful to note that the subjects’ relative youth (approximately 19 to 24 years of age, still in college) suggests that their coming out process may be a fairly recent development in these students’ lives (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Rockman, 2013). The data from Rankin et al. (2010) suggested that many benefits to self-actualization for “more out” LGBT students, including higher levels of engagement in enriching educational experiences as well as extracurricular opportunities (Rankin et al., 2010).

In their 2011 *Rethinking the "L" Word in Higher Education: The Revolution of Research on Leadership*, a full-length journal treatment of American college and university approaches to leadership, Kezar and Contreras-McGavin critique many theories and practices, yet they suggest that Maslow and self-actualization still apply in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Renn (2007) supported Maslow’s theory of self-actualization by conducting a qualitative study of mid-western U.S. college students. She credited Maslow’s (1943) for emphasizing the relationship between meeting basic human needs with one’s ability to grow toward intellectual and emotional needs. Renn (2007) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who assume leadership roles in extracurricular campus activities were

more likely to achieve higher levels of self-actualization.

A 2011 study with a sample of subjects in 123 different countries examined the association between the fulfillment of needs and subjective well-being (SWB). Supporting Maslow (1943, 1987), this study found fulfillment of human needs was consistently associated with well-being across the internationally diverse regions studied (Tay & Diener, 2011).

Rockman (2013) also likened GLB students' coming-out to self-actualization and further supported Maslow's (1943, 1965) work. Rockman applied Maslow's work on motivation in a qualitative study of students who came out while studying at community colleges in the greater New York City region. This study's findings included positive and negative outcomes associated with students' efforts to self-actualize; the major hindrance found was a sense of blocked access, "a participant's inability to achieve his or her goals due to the action or inaction of others" (Rockman, 2013, p.125). Rockman's interviews revealed that certain campus resources and opportunities were viewed as unattainable by GLB students – which negatively affected their ability to self-actualize (Rockman, 2013). (Appendix E of this study lists the initial coding from Rockman (2013); those codes were analyzed in this literature review and later contributed to this study, along with newly emergent codes, listed in Appendix F.)

The negative outcomes reported by Rockman (2013) and the importance of reaching one's full potential found in Renn (2007) and Tay and Diener (2011), all of which support Maslow's 1943 through 1987 work, suggest that self-actualization remains relevant and valuable today. This study looked at self-actualization of GLB students as another contribution to works on self-actualization and on the experiences of gay, lesbian,

and bisexual students. As Rockman (2013) found a gap in research on GLB student experiences at community colleges, this study aimed to address a similar gap in the available research on GLB experiences at private, religiously-affiliated colleges.

### **Gaps in the Research Literature**

The factors that affect out gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' involvement and efforts to strive toward self-actualization at private colleges continue to present significant questions that affect many people (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Love et al., 2005; Mehra & Braquet, 2011; Messinger, 2009; Nadal, 2013; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Yoakam, 2006).

Regarding how best to support GLB student development at private colleges, there appear to be more questions than answers in the reviewed literature. Qualitative and quantitative studies have been reviewed, along with mixed methods and action research, but still there appear to be gaps in research which raise questions. Beyond efforts of GLB students to reach self-actualization, this research review has highlighted significant topics related to the development of GLB college students. For instance, it may be that GLB graduation rates are higher at schools that intentionally deliver academic persistence programming that serves heterosexual students and homosexual students together (Getz & Kirkley, 2006). Much research has been published and reviewed, but much more information is still needed.

That Maslow's theory has remained relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century studies contributed to the need for this study—there are still gaps in research. The work of Renn (2007), Rankin et al. (2010), Kezar and Contreras-McGavin (2011), and Rockman (2013) suggest that campus climate and students' perceptions thereof (including homophobia and

microaggression) continue to impact GLB students' experiences and their ability to reach their full potential, but more research is needed. Each generation of researchers who have followed Maslow have offered discretely defined applications of self-actualization theory. Rockman (2013), for example, tended to focus on the acceptance of challenging choices that may lead the self-actualizer to greater fulfillment and happiness (rather than other choices that would have been less stressful) for his research into the coming-out process of LGBT community college students. While remaining in the closet might have been easier or safer for some of Rockman's subjects, the theory of self-actualization requires that they would be self-aware, honest, and intrinsically motivated to opt for the path of being openly gay.

The preceding review of existing literature indicated that more research was needed into the factors that affect self-actualization for current and future generations of gay lesbian, and bisexual students. This study used Maslow's theory to expand on the reviewed research and fill gaps in understanding of GLB students' experiences at a private, Catholic college in the northeastern United States.

### **Chapter Summary**

The perceptions and attitudes of out gay, lesbian, and bisexual students about campus climate and self-actualization at private colleges continue to present significant issues that affect students (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Messinger, 2009; Nadal, 2013; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007). While delimiting to focus on GLB perceptions at a private, Catholic college, this study applied the theoretical framework of Maslow (1943, 1965, 1987) and Astin (1999), as reviewed in this chapter, to better understand the relationship of GLB student experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about

campus climate. Maslow provided the lens through which all this was viewed. A focus on promoting social justice for the many stakeholders involved in or affected by the experiences of GLB Catholic college students was maintained. As long as lesbian, gay, and bisexual students face discrimination on college campuses, there will be questions about how well these students are being served by their chosen institutions (Dugan 2011; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Woodford et al., 2012). This ongoing concern, particularly for religiously affiliated colleges, suggests that self-actualization theory can add value to future research on private colleges, a setting which appears to be underrepresented in existing research.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

To discover qualitatively how gay, lesbian, and bisexual students perceive campus climate and self-actualization at a private college, this study utilized a phenomenological research design. The research probed GLB student attitudes toward and perceptions of campus climate, discrimination, and homophobia by conducting in-depth interviews with current students and recent graduates of a private, Catholic college. This method was found to be appropriate for a study of this nature because of the relative difficulty in accessing the population, and because of the need to give voice to marginalized individuals (Creswell, 2013). The researcher interviewed four alumni and 14 currently enrolled students – all self-identified gay, lesbian, or bisexuals from one private, Catholic college located in the greater New York City area, part of the larger Northeast region of the United States. A letter of introduction was used to identify potential interview subjects. Volunteers were asked to discuss their perceptions of how the campus climate affected them and their efforts to strive toward self-actualization. Interview questions asked participants to share their attitudes toward supportive factors (such as involvement in extracurricular activities, leadership opportunities, experiences with other campus community members) as well as discouraging factors (such as any discrimination, homophobia, or microaggression they may have experienced or perceived as an out GLB student at the college. The sample included male and female students and alumni members who graduated from the College within the past 3 years (since May of 2014,

inclusive). To support the purposeful sample and ensure a sufficient number of participants, use of the snowball sampling technique was approved, meaning that subjects were free to recommend or refer, with guidance from the researcher, additional participants from their own social networks to the study—as a snowball gathers size while rolling down a hill, use of this technique would strengthen and increase this study’s sample size (Creswell, 2013). In the end, two students requested to refer a friend.

This study replicated, with permission (see Appendix C) aspects of Rockman’s 2013 research on the experiences of community college students’ coming-out and their efforts toward self-actualization as openly GLB individuals. Rockman (2013) also employed a theoretical rationale based on Maslow and self-actualization. This study investigated similar issues and explored similar research questions, but with a different population. Rockman (2013) was selected as the anchor study because of its in-depth look at the issues of self-actualization and post-secondary students; its 23 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B) support qualitative interviewing while having the benefit that these questions were closely adapted from a large quantitative study conducted in 2010 (Rockman, 2013). Furthermore, Rockman recommended in his dissertation that replication with other GLB students would add value to the body of knowledge on GLB student experiences. Rockman generously met with this researcher to discuss the replication and reviewed the initial coding of data he received from interviewing urban community college students (see Appendix E for a list of a priori initial codes from Rockman (2013)). This offer of assistance was also significant because Rockman and others offered to assist this study with validation through peer review and inter-coder reliability, to test assumptions made during coding analysis (Creswell, 2013).

## **Research Context**

For a thorough yet manageable qualitative analysis of out GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and its relationship to their self-actualization efforts, this study was conducted within a preapproved setting. All of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual interview subjects were currently enrolled students or recently graduated alumni of a private, Catholic college within the greater New York City region (part of the Northeast region of the United States, defined as nine states located from Pennsylvania to Maine, including New Jersey, New York, and all of the New England states). The New York area and the broader Northeast region are home to many private colleges, many of which have (or had) religious affiliations. The research setting offered this study opportunities to look at GLB student experiences on one faith-based private campus, with potential to offer greater understanding of campus climate and self-actualization for GLB students across New York and the Northeast.

In order to probe out GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and self-actualization on a private Catholic college campus, this study applied the definition from Rankin et al. (2010) for a private college: any independently organized institution of post-secondary education (excluding universities) that offers bachelor degrees; as opposed to public or governmentally run colleges, these may be affiliated with a church or faith group and may be non-profit or for-profit in nature. The purposeful sample included students and graduates from a private college that is secular, not-for-profit, and urban. This study took measures to protect the confidentiality of the setting and participants.

To protect confidentiality of the research site and to help ensure candid responses from subjects, neither the students' names nor the name of the private college were

identified. While all interview subjects were given pseudonyms, participants have been described in the research as belonging to one of the examined sub-groups: gay men, lesbian women, bisexual men, and bisexual women.

### **Research Participants**

Working to arrange approximately 12 in-depth interviews, this study was open to female and male volunteers enrolled at or recently graduated from the private, Catholic college since May of 2014 (inclusive) and who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during their time at the college. (In total, four graduates were interviewed and 14 continuing students.) The researcher demonstrated caution to ensure a diverse sample within the GLB volunteers; that is, no one sub-group (lesbian women, bisexuals, or gay men) was overrepresented within the sample. All participants were legal adults who enrolled at the college while they were within the traditional college ages of 18 to 24 years old (Rankin et al., 2010). To ensure confidentiality throughout all aspects of the study, only the researcher had access to recordings of interviews (and all recordings have been marked to be destroyed 3 years after publication of the study).

To gather a well-rounded data set and address the complexities of GLB students' perceptions and attitudes, this study recruited students and graduates from a variety of academic majors. Before proceeding with an interview, each subject received an informed consent form. In compliance with the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board's requirements, and under direction of his supervisory dissertation committee, the researcher explained the consent form in detail to each subject (including the option to withdraw from the study at any time and without penalty). Volunteers were also informed that the private, Catholic college would never be informed of their

participation in this study – administrators from the private college research site received a copy of the final report which contains no identifiable data on participants. A sample consent form and a letter of introduction to the study appear in Appendix G and Appendix H, respectively.

Regarding positionality and the need to safeguard participants, the researcher recognized that being an openly gay man who was employed at private colleges (and high schools) may have had an effect on his ability to personally conduct some of this research. Following IRB and ethics concerns, the researcher discussed positionality with supervisors and guarded against any possible biases throughout this study.

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

In conducting 18 semi-structured interviews and ensuring a satisfactory degree of consistency and value to the research questions, this study based all interviews on a set of 23 questions. These 23 questions, mostly open-ended, came from the 2013 study completed by Rockman (a phenomenological qualitative study that interviewed GLB community college students). The questions used remained trustworthy for a study of private, Catholic college students (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). All questions supported this study's qualitative research questions. The questions and initial coding of responses have been included as Appendix B and Appendix E, respectively, in this study.

Interviews were conducted in person in a conference room provided by staff from the Dean of Students' office (except for those who requested a telephone interview due to logistical scheduling issues). This conference room was on campus and appropriately located to provide quiet, comfortable, and appropriate space for a private interview. Interviews were recorded (audio) and the researcher gained permission of each

interviewee to take minimal handwritten notes during the interview.

The researcher requested that each participant meet with the researcher for one interview sessions. Each interview session required approximately 75 to 90 minutes in length, with short breaks, as requested by the subject. These appointments took place during the fall of the 2017-2018 academic year. Participants were asked to participate in one to two brief follow-up telephone calls – only as needed; all agreed. Such calls were in fact needed to clarify unclear material and offer the researcher an opportunity for member-checking, confirming that interview responses were coded and interpreted correctly.

Interviews were only conducted and included in this research after each subject has agreed to review, discuss, and sign a notice of informed consent, indicating their understanding and cooperation with the details of the study's goals. Informed consent also detailed the potential risks associated with the students' participation in this study and their rights as research subjects, including the right to terminate their participation at any time and without penalty. The consent form stated that voluntary participation in this study was only open to adults (over the age of 18 years), who self-identified as GLB individuals while studying (or having studied, for the alumni) at the research site.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

**Summary of data collection procedures.** Data collection for this qualitative study consisted of two phases: outreach to identify participants followed by semi-structured interviews. The chief outreach tool was a letter of introduction from the researcher. Two administrators from the Catholic college research site agreed to distribute the letter via email to recent alumni and to the leaders of the college's LGBT

student organization. Introducing the research topic, problem statement, and other relevant details of the study, this letter requested that students and recent graduates interested in volunteering or learning more about the study contact the researcher via an impersonal email address (rather than direct contact – for privacy and to allow potential volunteers to determine their interest and suitability for the study with maximal exposure). Contact information for the researcher and for the chair of the supervisory committee was included on an attached informed consent document accompanying the letter of introduction.

Once volunteer participants were identified, the researcher scheduled one 75- to 90-minute interview with each participant. Interviews took place on campus. Using the interview guide from Rockman (2013), interviews commenced while the outreach for participants continued. The researcher provided his own transportation to and from the research site and covered all costs associated with conducting interviews, including providing each volunteer with a \$50 gift card at the outset of their interview.

**Summary of data analysis procedures.** All research interview data and notes, including recordings done with an Apple iPhone recording application, were thoroughly analyzed for relevant themes and patterns (Creswell, 2013; Rockman 2013). A professionally developed and validated transcription service was used in connection with the iPhone. Follow-up questions deemed necessary were asked (after an agreement to do so from each interview subject). Recordings and transcripts have been securely stored and will be destroyed following the approved protocol of 3 years following publication of this study. During the analysis, member checking and peer review were utilized to ensure accuracy and to support qualitative trustworthiness of this study's content and findings.

To triangulate interview data and coding, a focus group of GLB private college graduates was conducted. Interview data was also compared to Rankin et al. (2010), the quantitative study on the state of the LGBTQ community in U.S. higher education and to Rockman's (2013) findings. For triangulation, a focus group was attempted by Rockman (2013) but unavailable due to a shortage of willing participants, a point that supports Rockman's recommendation that more studies are needed to raise awareness of LGBT issues and better understand the experiences of GLB college students, including their ability to attain self-actualization.

### **Chapter Summary**

It is important to note that this study replicated with permission aspects of Rockman's 2013 research on the experiences of community college students' coming-out as GLB and their efforts toward self-actualization. Therefore, the research design methodology used in this study was similar to that study. Along with a theoretical rationale based on Maslow, Rockman (2013) also employed a phenomenological qualitative research design. The semi-structured interview approach, based on questions tested for validity and reliability by Rankin et al. (2010) in their quantitative study, were only slightly modified (inserting "private college" or "Catholic college" in place of "community college"). Planning for a purposeful sample and allowing snowball referrals if needed and only with cautious guidance to protect all prospective volunteers) helped this study to successfully recruit interview participants as well as the focus group participants (for data triangulation). This study investigated issues (campus climate, perceptions of homophobia, for example) similar to Rockman (2013). It also addressed similar research questions. That said, this study probed the attitudes and experiences of a

different population, at a different time period, and across a wider context (including larger geographical setting) – as Rockman recommended (2013).

To complete this study of GLB students' perceptions of campus climate at their private college and the various factors that affect their self-actualization, this study utilized a qualitative research design focused on the phenomenon of being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual student at a private, Catholic college in the New York City vicinity. Data collection was conducted mainly using semi-structured interviews with a sample of female and male students at various points in their college years (with at least one year of post-secondary studies completed) and some alumni input. This design resulted in collecting well-rounded data and appropriately probing the complexities associated with self-actualization and GLB college students, with particular emphasis on the potential impacts of the Roman Catholic college setting.

The research design of this study centered on the value of qualitative research to explore and examine a nuanced topic: the factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students from a private college. While cursory review may suggest that the United States has experienced progress with regard to social justice for the LGBTQ community, gaps in research were evident (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). This study aimed to provide information about GLB student's experiences at private, Catholic colleges, including the participants' perceptions of how their private, religious college experiences have supported them – or failed to support them – in their efforts to achieve their full potential.

This study incorporated research methodologies well suited to a study of an underrepresented or underserved population such as LGBT students (Creswell, 2013;

Rockman, 2013). Along with related benefits, it is also imperative to acknowledge that this study faced limitations. For instance, this researcher had to remain aware of positionality; as a private college administrator and an openly gay man, guarding against bias was important to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. Furthermore, this study, done qualitatively about a relatively small population of students in a New York City area Catholic college, faced an inherently limited degree of transferability to the study of GLB college students' experiences in other regions or at other types of educational settings. These concerns have been acknowledged by the researcher and, in consultation with his supervisory dissertation committee, potential limitations were resolved or minimized to the greatest extent possible.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to probe the perceptions and attitudes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students to examine factors that can affect these students in their efforts to achieve self-actualization at a private college. GLB students' experiences at a private college and their perceptions of their campus life play a significant role in these students' personal development toward self-actualization (Astin, 1999; Fraser, 2014; Renn, 2007). GLB lived experiences at a private and religious college presented many questions for study related to self-actualization (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Messinger, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007). The three research questions were explored qualitatively through semi-structured interviews with 18 volunteer participants from a private Catholic college located in the New York City region. This chapter includes a summary of the data analysis (consisting of descriptive analysis and an examination of the coding, themes, and subthemes identified from the interviewees' responses) and the findings. First, the researcher has reviewed the three research questions posed by this study.

**Research question 1.** *What factors or experiences support GLB college students' efforts to strive toward self-actualization at a private college?* The data gathered from this study's interviews with 18 subjects suggest that multiple factors support GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization. GLB students were likely to report support from their private religious college when two or more factors were present. Factors

included the GLB students' level of outness on and off campus; feeling personally safe; feeling respected by others on campus; positive interactions with faculty, staff, or the religious community on campus; support from a friendly peer group; access to counseling; membership in an LGBT Club and other student organizations; and successful academic progress toward graduation and one's career goals.

**Research question 2.** *What factors or experiences interfere with GLB college students' efforts to strive toward self-actualization at a private college?* An analysis of this study's interview data indicates that there are multiple factors and experiences that can interfere with or hinder GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization. When two or more factors are present, a GLB individual is likely to report interference in their efforts to self-actualize at their private college. Hindering factors included limited outness; feelings of fear for personal safety or a lack of respect; lack of a friendly peer group; and limited extracurricular opportunities or perceptions thereof. Similarly, experiences on campus that can hinder GLB self-actualization include roommate conflicts; negative interactions with faculty, staff, or students (including heterosexist or homophobic language, violence or the threat thereof, bullying, cyberbullying, or discrimination), difficulty establishing GLB-friendly peer group, and unsatisfactory performance toward academic and career goals.

**Research question 3.** *What can be discovered about GLB college students' perceptions and attitudes regarding campus climate (including their perceptions of discrimination, homophobia, and microaggression) on a private college campus?* The interview data collected for this study indicated that GLB students' perceptions of campus climate vary widely at a private religiously affiliated college. That said, these

data also suggested that GLB students have no shortage of perceptions, which they often develop thoughtfully and over a long period of time observing their campus and reflecting on their experiences. Many positive, neutral, and negative perceptions were discovered. Examples of such perceptions include: that members of the religious communities on campus are the most supportive of LGBT rights despite their close connections to official Catholic doctrine; that faculty are by far more accepting of GLB students than heterosexual students are; and that the LGBT Club is tolerated for public relations and tightly restricted in its programming.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

In order to examine the factors that affect self-actualization of bisexual, lesbian, and gay students at a private college, 18 qualitative interviews were conducted. Each interview was recorded (audio only) and then transcribed. Data shared by these 18 self-identified members of the LGBT community at a private college near New York City were analyzed and synthesized to formulate phenomenological findings, essentially a summary of what it is like to be a GLB student enrolled at a private religious college at the time of this research (fall 2017).

While recognizing positionality and guarding against bias of any kind, the researcher who conducted these interviews and analyzed the various data brought more than 15 years of professional experience working in higher education and student development to this study. He also brought almost 20 years of personal experience as an openly gay man. In selecting this research topic and partially replicating Rockman's 2013 study which also related to self-actualization and higher education, the researcher acknowledged that there have been changes in public policy and public opinion regarding

the LGBT community in the United States since 2003 (Rockman, 2013). These factors reinforce the need to study the phenomenon of being gay, bisexual, or lesbian in college. Before presenting the detailed findings related to these 18 GLB students' lived experiences, it is important to understand the backgrounds (racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic identifiers) that each individual brought to this study.

### **Descriptive Overview of Participants**

A participant sample of 18 volunteers was recruited for this study; 14 current students each with at least a year of experience at a Catholic college, and four recently graduated alumni from that college. The pool was diverse in age, ethnic composition, religious affiliation, and socio-economic self-identification. It also comprised a somewhat similar number of lesbian women (three), bisexual women (four), and bisexual men (four), while gay men represented the largest of the sub-groupings (seven). Table 4.1 demonstrates the relationship between GLB sub-group and class standing at the college.

Table 4.1

#### *Participants' Self-Disclosed Sexual Orientation by Class Standing*

Sexual Orientation	SO	JR	SR	AL	TOTAL	%
Bisexual female	-	3	1	-	4	22
Bisexual male	2	-	1	1	4	22
Gay male	1	1	2	3	7	39
Lesbian	-	2	1	-	3	17
Totals ( <i>N</i> = 18)	3	6	5	4	18	100
%	17	33	28	22		100

*Note.* Class standings represented in this table have been abbreviated. SO = sophomore; JR = junior; SR = senior; AL = alumnus.

Participants included six atheist or agnostic individuals; four devout Roman Catholics; three lapsed Catholics; two Christians (one of whom is a former Mormon), one

Eastern Orthodox Catholic; one Jew; and one student who simply identifies as spiritual. Considering that the private college that served as the research site has a long-standing religious affiliation (intentionally blinded in this study in order to preserve confidentiality and promote candor and safety among participants), Table 4.2 summarizes the religious identity self-disclosed by participants. It is clear that the private religious college attracts students from a wide variety of religious backgrounds.

Table 4.2

*Summary of Participants' Self-Disclosed Religious Affiliation\**

Religion	Total Participants (N = 18)	%
Agnostic	3	16
Atheist	3	16
Christian	1	5
Eastern Orthodox	1	5
Jewish**	1	5
Lapsed Catholic	3	16
Former Mormon***	1	5
Roman Catholic**	5	27
Spiritual	1	5
Universalist***	1	5

*Note.* The terms displayed in this table are the exact terms used by participants. \* = five participants indicated that their current affiliation is different from their childhood. \*\* = one participant indicated a “mixed-faith” upbringing: half Jewish, half Catholic. \*\*\* = the same participant.

Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old at the time of their interview.

All academic classes were represented except freshmen. (The letter of introduction and recruiting flyer for this study emphasized that volunteers would be asked to discuss their experiences in college; due to the timing of the data collection process – early in the fall semester – this messaging likely accounts for the absence of first-year students in the sample.) The sample included four alumni, five seniors, six juniors, and three sophomores. Seven participants were transfers into the private religious college

discussed, having come from a variety of other colleges. With regard to gender identity and expression, in total there were seven cisgender female participants, two transgender participants, and nine cismale participants.

Five participants identified as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Latinx (with known family roots in Antigua, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico); nine participants claimed White European background (with known family roots in Greece, Holland, Ireland, and Italy); one participant identified as African American and Black; of the two who preferred to identify as biracial, one also called himself Black; and one participant self-identified as both Arab and Mediterranean.

The socioeconomic status (SES) of the sample also varied. Middle class was the largest group, with 10 participants applying that description to their families and themselves. The rest were equally split with two subjects claiming to be poor, two claiming lower class, two working class, and two rich or wealthy. Note, participants were asked to describe their families' SES in their own words; these are the actual terms that participants used. Table 4.3 provides a summary of all participants' SES.

Table 4.3

*Summary of Participants' Self-Disclosed Socioeconomic Status*

Socio-Economic Status	Total Participants ( <i>N</i> = 18)	%
Poor	2	11.1
Working Class	2	11.1
Lower Class	2	11.1
Middle Class	10	55.5
Upper Middle Class	1	5.6
Rich/Wealthy	1	5.6

For a study of this nature, it is important to note that participants have varying levels of experience at the private college they were asked to discuss. There are also

considerable age differences, which is associated with personal and academic maturity levels (Astin, 1999). Table 4.4 demonstrates the class standing and age of participants.

Table 4.4

*Participants' Class Standing with Age*

College Class Standing	Total Participants ( <i>N</i> = 18)	Ages Class Represented
Freshman	0	N/A
Sophomore	3	19 – 20
Junior	6	19.5 – 21
Senior	5	21 – 23
Graduate School	0	N/A
Alumni	4	24 – 25

*Note.* Two alumni included graduated in spring of 2017 and two in spring of 2016.

Table 4.5 summarizes key identifiers of each participant. A pseudonym has been applied to each participant to shield the actual identities of every volunteer and of the research site (private, Catholic college). No actual names appear in these descriptions. Similarly, some details have been blinded or renamed for added confidentiality. In addition to the preceding overview and Table 4.5, each participant has been described in greater detail in the following section of this chapter. This descriptive summary also appears in Appendix D for quick reference.

Table 4.5

*Summary Description of Study Participants*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Religion/ Faith	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity
Anne	20	Hispanic / Mexican	Roman Catholic	Bisexual	Female
Caroline	20	Latina / South American	Agnostic	Bisexual	Cisfemale
Emilia	23	Mixed Race / Puerto Rican / Irish / Italian	Non- practicing Catholic Christian	Bisexual Queer	Outwardly Female; Closeted Transgender
Francesca	21	Hispanic / Antiguan	Agnostic	Lesbian	Female
Lisa	21	White / European	Roman Catholic	Lesbian, Former Bisexual	Cisfemale
Maria	22	Black / African American	Christian/ Independently Spiritual	Lesbian	Female
Paula	20	White	Atheist	Bisexual	Cisgendered Female
Brad	24	White / Dutch	Half Catholic, Half Jewish	Bisexual male	Cisgender Male
Derrick	20	Hispanic / Mexican / Latino	Former Mormon; now Spiritual Universalist	Bisexual, Demi- Sexual	Transmasculine
Gary	19	White / Irish	Raised Catholic	Fluid Bisexual	Male
Josephus	24	White / Irish	Raised Catholic, now Agnostic	Bisexual ("Bi")	Male
Kevin	19	White	Atheist	Gay	Cismale
Luis	19	Caucasian	Catholic	Gay	Male
Matthew	21	White / Irish American	Atheist, former Christian	Gay	Cisgender Male
Peter	24	Biracial / Italian	Roman Catholic	Gay	Male
Roberto	25	White / Irish / English	Catholic	Gay	Cismale
Stephen	24	White / Greek / Italian	Greek Orthodox	Gay	Male
Taylor	22	Other – Arab / Mediterranean	Spiritual	Homosexual	Cismale

## **Detailed Description of Participants**

***Anne.*** Born in Mexico and now living with her family in New York City, 20-year-old Anne considers herself to be “half and half” – half closeted about her bisexuality and half out. She is out to immediate family, despite their conservative Roman Catholic beliefs and the disappointment she senses from her very traditional father. Anne is a junior in college who has been highly involved on campus, which she views college as something of a safe haven after attending a very strict all-girls Catholic high school. She is out to her sisters and college friends but not open about her sexuality to many faculty instructors. She believes that self-actualization is important, especially for immigrants, women, and the LGBT community whom she sees as too often not at peace with their true selves. Anne is confident that her efforts to achieve self-actualization and live the life she wants continue even when she is more closeted, such as when her parents require her to visit extended family in Mexico. Anne recognizes that she “got off to a slow start” in this private college, but is making up for it thanks to the open-mindedness of most students and their generally “bipartisan” attitudes toward bisexual women and the LGBT community as a whole. Finally, while pleased to attend a Catholic college, Anne expressed gratitude for the diversity of opinions and religious traditions found at the school.

***Brad.*** Brad graduated from college two years ago and still vividly recalls the factors and experiences that colored his time as a gay male on a private, religious campus. He was raised by a Jewish father and a Roman Catholic mother near Washington, D.C. – and called himself “mostly spiritual” for his teen years while trying to honor and obey the teachings of both his parents’ faiths. When his mother died shortly

into his college career, Brad lost much of his faith and stopped actively practicing as a Catholic but does not refer to himself as agnostic or atheistic. Brad attended a large private college on the west coast where he felt overwhelmed and underserved; transferring to this smaller private college convenient to the heart of New York City. Having been out to theater friends in high school, Brad was concerned to hear from friends that engineering faculty would likely be less accepting, perhaps even homophobic – he has been “pleasantly surprised” to find the school’s faculty, staff, and students “totally supportive” and “easy-going about everything except homework and test scores.” With regard to self-actualization, Brad recently turned 24 years old, confident that college life helped him to attain peace with himself as a member of the LGBT community and with the painful losses he has already suffered; at this point, proud alumnus Brad doesn’t pay attention to what others may think of him.

*Caroline.* As a 20-year-old junior and openly bisexual, Caroline is not a member of the college’s LGBT Club. She considers herself a serious student whose courses and part-time job on campus occupy the majority of her time and fulfill her needs for socializing with college friends. In fact, her campus job has allowed her to meet several other GLB students whom she describes as “supportive in every way.” In Caroline’s view, “If you’re straight at this school, you’re the weird one” (which she explains by pointing out that she expected a Catholic college to have no LGBT population, but she was wrong—it is “vibrant and proud” though small in number and somewhat closeted. She believes GLB individuals are pushed into the closet just as much as the LGBT Club is also pressured to keep a low profile by administrators, some faculty, and by straight, homophobic student-leaders. Caroline now gives the school relatively strong praise for

accepting her as a bisexual, along with her friends, but considered leaving the college in her first year due to the outsized influence of two individuals she considers bigoted, a professor and a staff member. Caroline is grateful for Residence Life staff for following up on an incident in which an LGBT friend was being stalked by a drug dealer trying to gain access to a dormitory on campus. As for self-actualization, Caroline views the college as fully supportive of her (“except that one bigoted professor”), especially the clergy and members of the religious order on campus—who “build us all up every chance they get” and make sure we feel at home here.

***Derrick.*** As the only openly transgender participant in this study, Derrick identifies himself as a transmasculine bisexual. He also uses the term “demisexual,” meaning that he does not experience sexual attraction unless he forms a strong emotional connection with an individual regardless of the other person’s sexual gender or sex identity. Now 20 years old, Derrick transferred into a private Catholic college one year ago after growing up in Central America where he attended a strict Catholic high school and a public university (both of which, according to Derrick, misgendered him as a female even after Derrick began coming out). Derrick reports that he is still misgendered frequently by his private college faculty, classmates, friends – even his family; despite pledges of support for his “true gender identity,” Derrick believes his slight physical appearance leads to association with things female. The Pulse nightclub fire in Orlando, Florida, encouraged Derrick to “find his voice as a Latino Queer and join the fight” to help LGBTQ people. Derrick is “110% out” in his orientation and his identity, noting that both support the high level of progress he has made toward self-actualization.

**Emilia.** At 23 years old and eager to graduate from college, Emilia identifies as an out bisexual queer who revealed that she plans to transition to life as a male after college (only the third time she has come out about this – she wanted that fact to be included in the study’s findings and requested to be considered female for the purposes of this study as that is how she has experienced life at a private Catholic college). Emilia is “proud to be half Irish, a quarter Puerto Rican, and a quarter Italian.” Though her family is middle class, Emilia considers herself to be largely independent, which makes her a “broke college student.” Her family is also very traditional, conservative Roman Catholics while Emilia finds her faith and spirituality by focusing on Liberation Theology. She believes that college has supported her and other bisexual women very well – more so than her family at home and her relatives in Puerto Rico. For Emilia, self-actualization has been bolstered not only by her private college but also by the two years she spent studying at a community college before her family would allow her to live on a college campus and earn a bachelor’s degree. Emilia stated that she occupies an interesting niche at her college and in life overall, one that both benefits her and upsets her: she has been repeatedly told that she “passes for White and for straight.” Thus, she feels an added obligation to come out and to support the LGBTQ community.

**Francesca.** A cisgender lesbian who was born in Antigua and moved to New Jersey before starting high school, Francesca identifies as an agnostic, unspiritual person for whom LGBT issues have been “only one part of my struggle.” She came out to family and friends early before starting middle school and has been almost completely out ever since. She credits her private college with a very helpful counseling center but stated that she did not seek counseling for anything related to her sexual orientation. Francesca

comes from a middle-class family whom she believes have supported her thoroughly (though her father was reluctant at first). She notes that many of her experiences may reflect the experiences of bisexual women more than lesbians, because she originally came out as bisexual and only admitted to herself and others that she was mistaken, she is only attracted to women. That said, she has witnessed and been aware of many cases of anti-LGBT bullying, cyberbullying, and discrimination since moving to the United States. Francesca expressed passionate confidence that every member of the LGBTQ community should come out – “it’s the only way to end all the bias and hate.” As for her private college, Francesca could not be sure if her self-actualization as a lesbian has been supported or not but she sees her overall development and progress toward her “full potential, not just LGBT,” strongly supported by college, especially her LGBT friends.

**Gary.** As a 19-year old sophomore, Gary is one of the younger participants in this study, with fewer experiences on campus at his private college. He stated that being a fluid bisexual has made it difficult for him to become involved and to make friends. He considers himself “very opinionated and a quick study of how people treat me and treat each other.” He shared that he has interests and hobbies that may not be popular among college students or even among the LGBT community, and he finds his fellow students closed-minded and unaccepting of his unique interests. Growing up in a strict, middle class, Irish-American family on Long Island, Gary developed a love for European and U.S. history and a desire to serve in the military; he is less out to the people he has gotten to know through these interests for fear that they will judge him and mistreat him if they see him only as a fluid bisexual. Gary is comfortable in a 3-month relationship with a man. At this point, he does not believe that he has availed himself of sufficient

opportunities on campus to determine whether or not his private Catholic college supports his self-actualization efforts. Her remains hopeful, though, stating that he is still early in his college career and in his life as a whole.

**Josephus.** Josephus is now a 24-year old senior who transferred to his private Catholic college almost two years ago. He grew up in a politically liberal, religiously conservative Irish Catholic family. He has expanded his outness since enrolling at his current college, despite his family's preference that such things as being gay or bisexual should not be discussed. His family is working class and do not embrace or encourage mental health counseling. Josephus believes he probably suffers from depression and possibly post-traumatic stress disorder. He disclosed that he was once sexually assaulted by a female student (not a close friend but a friendly classmate) while they were both drinking heavily at a party; embarrassed and confused, Josephus did not report the incident and gradually ended all contact with the woman. Josephus stated that the college probably would have helped him if he reported it but he didn't want to get the police involved and he wasn't sure he had done enough to stop the attack. As a result, he is now eager to see LGBT examples and scenarios explicitly included in the Title IX awareness and protection trainings that the college offers. Josephus was reluctant to discuss his own self-actualization but did state that the College has helped him "tremendously" to love himself more than he used to and to realize that life is too short to "pretend to be something you're not – even if people misunderstand you or hate you for being bisexual." Josephus credits several of the religious leaders (sisters, brothers, and priests) he has met on campus for encouraging him to be more out and more honest.

**Kevin.** With a tattoo that represents LGBT pride somewhat strategically located to be low-key, 19-year old junior Kevin began his interview by stating; “I don’t take all this gay and lesbian stuff too seriously. I’m pretty relaxed about it so I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to help you.” He is a White, middle class, cisgender gay male who chose to attend a private college because of its moderate size. He has always considered himself an atheist, so the college’s religious identity is not important to him, he went to a religiously affiliated high school on Long Island also (where he earned college credits). Now that he is enmeshed in campus life, Kevin explained that he feels an extra obligation to serve as a role model for other gay students – he is “99.9% out no matter where I go or who’s judging me” – because he only recently began to notice how small and unrecognized the campus’s LGBT community is. Noting that he has many years of schooling and professional development ahead of him, Kevin believes that his outness and his relaxed way of living as stress-free as possible help him strive toward self-actualization as a gay man and in his career plans. Kevin emphasized personal responsibility for “how we choose to live our lives” as the most important factor in LGBT self-actualization, rather than the role of the private college experience; he was the only participant to state this. (Perhaps Kevin had more valuable insights to share than he knew.)

**Lisa.** Working and volunteering in several of the college’s offices that serve students’ non-academic development, Lisa feels she is well aware of how important sexual orientation and LGBT-related issues are to college students. She is a junior, 21 years old, and from a Roman Catholic, middle class family. Lisa proudly refers to herself as a feminist and a liberal; she spoke at length about global LGBT issues and more local

diversity-related concerns and “identity politics” that she sees her campus embracing. Lisa calls herself “highly extroverted – which helped me come out on Long Island and stay out without getting bullied or anything.” Lisa’s courses have introduced the concept of self-actualization and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to her so she spoke more freely and with more detail than many other participants. While she considers her outness quite relevant to and supportive of her efforts to self-actualize, her family’s reluctance to support LGBT equality has slowed her down and “stifled” her from attaining her full potential up to this point in time. On campus, Lisa is very complimentary of the college’s efforts to support her as an open lesbian despite the Catholic Church’s “more conservative teachings and biases outside the college.” She sees faculty and senior administration as very supportive of self-actualization for all students, wishes there could be more “blatant” outreach to include LGBT students in the school’s services, and believes that progress is being made for her and her friends “week by week.”

**Luis.** An openly gay sophomore with a boyfriend who is now a junior at the same college, Luis calls himself Catholic but quickly notes that he is “not big on religion of any kind.” He chose this particular private college for academic reasons and “learned to ignore” some aspects of its religious traditions. He adds that he is glad that his friends, some of whom are quite religious and conflicted about their sexual orientation, have “excellent role models” in the school’s religious leaders. While he is “about 75% out but I don’t advertise it, especially near my dad,” Luis expressed that he feels more respected on campus than anywhere else in his life. Luis believes strongly that the minor limits to his outness do not significantly hinder his efforts toward self-actualization. What does hinder his progress and makes him “feel less than” is when he hears the term “fag” used

frequently by straight male peers at his college. He is afraid that the Catholic identity of the college grants tacit approval for such slurs to be used, and has never reported them to college officials. “It’s just like in the classroom, there are just going to be things I have to teach myself and learn no matter what.” He does not consider himself a loner but said that attitudes of his classmates make him less likely to join clubs and activities on campus, including the LGBT Club.

***Maria.*** Maria is a senior who transferred to a private Catholic college from Oklahoma 3 years ago. Now 22, she wanted to be near New York City and her extended family in hopes that she would find more open-mindedness among a larger African American population here. She also disclosed feeling bad that staying in Oklahoma would mean being more affected by perhaps inheriting the mental health issues her mother struggles with (but seeks only intermittent care, only partly because of their low-income socioeconomic status). Maria believes that her own self-esteem and confidence have grown thanks to the faculty, staff, and student body of her “new—it’s still new to me” private college. She is extroverted in general and enthusiastic about discussing LGBT issues and self-actualization. As a “lifelong Christian” and very open lesbian, she expressed gratitude repeatedly for God and for the women who helped her relocate to New York. This was, she felt, her only option after being hospitalized for depression during high school and struggling to build relationships with peers. College life is more supportive, Maria stated, but some “immature boys say they want to be my friend, and then expect me to be a porn star . . . like I’m the only lesbian they know so they absolutely must tell me about their sick fantasies.” Maria said she does not expect life to be easy, but she will self-actualize. Though she not in the LGBT club, she is “thrilled”

with various ways the college has supported her with self-actualization, with social life on campus, and with other needs.

**Matthew.** As a very active leader of the college's recently reinvigorated LGBT Club, Matthew approaches his gay sexual orientation as only part of his identity, and not necessarily the primary identifier. He is also 21 years of age and a senior eager to graduate and launch a career. Having grown up in a Christian family, he is now atheist. He is proud to be Irish American and believes his family is middle class. Matthew considers himself "virtually as out as out could be" – he has even had LGBT roommates and multiple relationships that ended for the same various reasons that break up heterosexual relationships during high school and college. Matthew has works as a Resident Assistant (RA), a key student leadership position in Residence Life with a wide variety of responsibilities. He described his shock and discomfort after learning that students and his fellow RAs generally referred to him as "the gay RA," not just as the best person to contact if there was an issue or question related to the LGBT community but also as if that was the way to recognize him among a large staff. He felt somewhat belittled and suddenly more aware than ever before that the LGBT community at his private Catholic college was small and restricted. "We're too quiet. We let the school boast about our existence like it's SO progressive, and then we let them marginalize us and silence us left and right." Matthew continued to serve as an RA but quickly and intently began to focus his energies on improving campus climate through more diverse means and through engaging activities beyond the dorms.

He believes there are many positive and negative factors on campus that affect his self-actualization; on balance, he says he is further along toward full potential because of the college.

**Paula.** Paula is a junior, age 20, who identifies her family background as White lower middle class. She is a cisgender bisexual and an atheist. She lives near campus and works part-time for the college while studying full time. She is very active in several student organizations including the LGBT Club. Paula sets ambitious goals for her clubs and she is an avid fundraiser. She expressed concern that some donors to her fundraising at the college would “probably feel less connected if I were out and in their faces about being bisexual,” but surmises it would not be enough to reduce their likelihood to donate or participate in the fundraiser. This is the only occasion when Paula limits her outness in New York City. Back home in Pennsylvania, Paula is not very out to her family. She has been “outed” by well-meaning friends on and near campus, and she sees this as helpful – eliminating the need for her to make announcements about her personal life and identity. Paula’s perceptions of campus climate include frustration that the gay male population of the college mistreats women, especially bisexual women, and that bisexual women are often pigeonholed as promiscuous. Ultimately, Paula is confident the college has been supportive of her self-actualization as a bisexual female student.

**Peter.** Now an alumnus who came to the college as a transfer student, Peter is a 24-year old gay man (formerly self-identified as bisexual). He is “officially Catholic but lapsed for a few years now” though he refers to himself as “very thoughtful, generous, and spiritual.” Peter’s upper middle class Italian American family is spread out across suburbs of the greater New York City region. Peter has been 99.9% out since high school

and explained that he likes to hold onto that small opportunity to closet himself if his safety is ever in danger, though he is quick to point out that he always felt safe and respected in college and still does. Peter enthusiastically shared that his social media accounts have become a big part of his life as a gay man, and they are full of posts promoting LGBT pride, social justice and respect for all, and his family, whose support started slowly (mostly because he was still in a Catholic high school) but has grown significantly. Peter expressed a strong desire to self-actualize and predicted that other areas of his life (career, finances, lack of interesting hobbies, might hold him back more than his sexual orientation or level of outness back in college would. Looking back, he is grateful for faculty and religious at the college who allowed him to be himself even if it was “very different from how they advertised themselves as a Catholic school.”

**Roberto.** Recent alumnus Roberto, an out gay male of 25 years, “struggled” with his college years. A mix of mental health and academic issues at his first college led him to transfer from one private Catholic college near New York City to another private Catholic college, also in greater New York. Roberto did not want to study far away from his close-knit middle class Irish and English family in Connecticut, even after some of his family tried for many to push him back into the closet. His family was slightly more supportive of Roberto after students at his first college outed him, destroyed his laptop computer and other belongings in his dorm room, and tried to asphyxiate him while he slept. The college moved him to a new room but refused to investigate what Roberto felt was an audacious attack on his life – “they even left a note calling me a ‘fag’ and saying I got what I deserved.” Roberto transferred out as soon as possible without losing the fewest academic credits and tuition money possible. As for his second college, Roberto

praises their acknowledgment and support of him and other LBGT students. He felt the faculty, especially those who belong to a religious order, welcomed and strengthened his intellectual curiosity as well as his desire to live as an openly gay man. He is grateful for his help with self-actualization and wonders why no one ever referred to this concept outside one of his psychology courses.

**Stephen.** Stephen, a 24-year old alumnus with particularly fond memories of his college years, comes from a rich family, what he calls a very strict, old-fashioned Eastern Orthodox home in Pennsylvania. He was already out of the closet as gay before he finished high school. He “never cared what anyone thought, and never heard anything negative” during high school or college. When asked if he may be minimizing or forgetting any negative interactions, either directly involving him or indirectly involving other LGBT individuals he knew, Stephen took his time but still recalled only positive memories. He explained: “I hung out with people who built me up, I would have had no time for anyone who might have questioned me or cut me down for being gay.” He did, however, recount that his parents took considerable time to move from disappointment and concern (for his safety and happiness) to support. During and since college, Stephen has been completely out in all facets of his life. He believes his exceedingly successful efforts to self-actualize began before college and continued through his service as a Resident Assistant and through very powerful role models, including members of a religious order who showed him that spirituality and loving God were not incompatible with being “gay and fabulous.”

**Taylor.** The only participant who prefers to be known as homosexual (exclusively), Taylor is a 21-year old senior. He lives on campus and works several part-

time jobs, including running a small creative consulting firm which he founded. He is a former Resident Assistant and remains active in the LGBT Club and several other student organizations. Spiritual but not religious, Taylor describes his family as socioeconomically lower class and his race as Arab and Mediterranean. He has been in Catholic schools his entire life, and enthusiastically refers to himself as a “pioneer” for many different aspects of diversity: “I’ve always been seen as and felt very much like I’m breaking the standard, living without fear of someone else’s rules.” He came out during high school, and came out almost immediately upon his arrival for freshman year of college, after which “Everything changed in 24 hours – lost friends, gained friends, even scared a few kids.” Taylor loves his college’s location near the heart of New York City but is concerned that the city is “a jungle for LGBT kids” and the school “does nothing to prepare them for what they’ll experience” there. Going on to disclose that he and several of his friends have been sexually and physically violated in gay bars, Taylor believes it is the duty of all members of the LGBT community (at the college and everywhere) to look out for each other and make sure we’re not mistreating young people the way we were mistreated.” Despite the off-campus difficulties and on-campus roommate conflicts he experienced personally, and the overall lack of awareness of the LGBT community on campus, Taylor believes the school has supported his own self-actualization: “Yes, we’ve started and we all have a ways to go.”

### **Cross Analysis of Interview Data**

Upon completion of all 18 interviews, the researcher cross-referenced all data. The researcher determined that there were seven major themes and 22 subthemes. All of these were developed from a priori and emergent coding. As this is a replication study,

111 a priori codes were predetermined by the study being partially replicated (Rockman, 2013). A list of these initial codes appears in Appendix E. Emergent codes were then derived from the various interview responses. These emergent codes are listed in Appendix F. Codes from both groups were used in this analysis. This process culminated in the themes and subthemes being presented in this report to summarize the lived experiences of the 18 participants, and essentially use their data points to describe the phenomenon of what it is like to be a GLB student at a private, religious college in the greater New York City area in 2017.

Each of the seven major themes and 22 subthemes has been supported and explained through detailed excerpts of the personal accounts gathered during the interview process. Table 4.6 demonstrates the frequency with which these themes and subthemes were discussed by interview participants. The contents of Table 4.6 are discussed in further detail in Chapter 5; in short, these subthemes represent major factors that affect GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization at a private religious college, according to the 18 subjects interviewed.

Table 4.6

*Qualitative Themes and Subthemes with Frequency in Participant Interviews*

Theme	Subtheme	% of Participants Who Discussed Subtheme
Comfort Level with Outness	1. Home life	100
	2. Safety on campus	89
	3. Approval and disapproval	56
Positive Experiences on Campus Support Student Involvement	4. Trusted peer group	100
	5. LGBT student club	72
	6. Encouragement from faculty and religious	61
	7. Campus employment	39
Negative Experiences on Campus Discourage Student Involvement	8. Less accepting students' conduct	44
	9. Homophobia and heterosexism	100
Positive Experiences Encourage Self-Actualization	10. Success in academic and career goals	83
	11. LGBT student club leadership	94
	12. Leadership roles	56
	13. Counseling center	44
Negative Experiences Support Self-Actualization	14. Support from religious communities	61
	15. Motivation to persist, overcome	22
Negative Experiences Hinder Self-Actualization	16. Social media can turn negatives into positives	61
	17. Criticism from LGBT peers	28
Perceptions of Campus Climate Vary	18. Being outed to family, fear thereof	56
	19. Sexual assault, relationship violence	33
	20. Overall progress toward LGBT equality	83
	21. More needed – numbers, awareness, resources	100
	22. Uneven acceptance of L, G, B, and T	28

Of the 18 participants, only one described his level of outness in minimal terms. Nearly every participant brought up being out or the act of coming out – including when and how they first did it, as well as how often they find themselves having to continually do it – without being asked by the researcher. In fact, questions about outness are not

found in the first six questions from Rockman (2013) but many students and all four alumni broached this topic in the first few minutes of their interview.

Those participants who were out for longer periods of time and to larger extents were eager to ensure that the researcher noted their details. “Can you believe that? I came out to everyone when I was only 12 years old!” implored Francesca, a 21-year old lesbian. In fact, Francesca passionately encourages all of her LGBT peers to come out to their families as soon as possible, almost as if it is a panacea for any or all issues they may be experiencing.

Students who came out more recently or have been coming out in stages to various groups of people in their lives, both on campus and off, were similarly excited to share details of this rite of passage. For example, when the interview discussion seemed to convey that Gary, the aforementioned minimalist, viewed intentional “coming out” as a thing of the past, he was careful to correct that impression. He, like many participants, believes that outness is inextricably linked to LGBT trust, happiness, pride, and ultimately self-actualization; when Gary finds himself wondering whom to trust on campus with his true identity as a fluid bisexual, he asks himself “Would this person would use this information to hurt me or to be a better friend to me? The answer hasn’t been really clear so I’ve held off a lot.”

According to several participants, outness on campus can open doors to new friendships, new “adopted families,” and even new job opportunities – all of which were tied to experiences that support subthemes 4, 7, and 21. Caroline, for instance, described how outness helped build relationships with new co-workers, which led to learning her new job faster and better than she expected to:

It was totally unexpected. I get this part-time job and it suddenly feels like every student worker there is gay or bi. It was like I asked for a new job and ended up with a whole new life. We hit it off right away and they when I came out, they sent me a congratulations card and flowers. If I'm having a bad day I just have to think of them or text one of them and I'm back on track. It's weird. It's almost like the school knew what I needed and helped me get it. And that's just my job, but it's like that a lot for me. I think it's like that for everyone but you have to come out first. No one can help you if you're keeping secrets. That's not healthy.

For transmasculine Derrick, outness on is slightly different but no less significant. He explained that he has to continually come out on two fronts: bisexual or demisexual and transgender. He noted some frustration in how he handles this:

Most of my friends and acquaintances are really good about remembering I like guys and girls but they don't seem to remember much more than that. When they misgender me, I don't think it's on purpose or to be nasty but it gives me another opportunity to come out.

Outness is also tied to self-actualization through academic success and career preparation for Kevin. Though younger than most juniors, he is "extremely out because it's extremely important" to him. He knows that he wants a career in healthcare so he is looking at many more years of education and training; he is confident that if he were less out his grades would suffer just as much as his relationships and extracurricular involvement would (which supports subthemes 1, 3, and 10). "Being totally out is my way of letting people know that I'm ok with who I am, my family and my boyfriend are ok with it, and I don't need anyone's permission to live my life the way I think is right."

Alumnus Brad spoke of his outness in college helping him succeed after graduation. His family's "50/50 split" between Jewish and Catholic often left him confused and feeling unsure of where he belonged in his family (subtheme 1). He explained that his Jewish relations were more accepting than his Catholic relations but he interacted with both sides of his extended family less and less as he grew up. Once he was out and had out friends, Brad gained confidence and a feeling of trust in these friends (subtheme 4). Noting that his hometown of Washington, D.C., could be cold and unfriendly, especially when government offices were closed on weekends (when he could take time off from campus and classes) he had to build up his own comfort level, which he did by inviting GLB peers and eventually romantic interests to join him on weekend trips to DC. In time, Brad brought a newfound confidence and sense of security back to campus with him and then into his professional life (subthemes 2 and 10). A transfer student from a larger public institution, Brad described his anticipation that he would have to be less out – "but never going back in the closet" – at a smaller college and a Catholic college, but said he has been "rather pleasantly surprised how everyone treats me the same" when he mentions his boyfriend on campus, including in some class discussions "when it's relevant." Table 4.7 demonstrates the four levels of outness disclosed by participants, along with several examples of relevant quotes to describe their chosen level.

Table 4.7

*Participants' Level of Outness by GLB Sub-Group*

Level	Total Participants (Self-Described)	Related Quotations
Not out at all	1 fluid bisexual male	I actually feel pretty safe here, but not safe enough to come out. I hope that changes soon. (Gary, age 19)
Somewhat out at college; Closeted at home	3 bisexual females 1 gay male	Home would be too hard. My parents would hear 'bi' and worry, and judge me. . . , assume I'm promiscuous, which I'm not. (Paula, age 20)
Mostly out everywhere	1 bisexual male 2 gay males 1 lesbian	Everyone at this school needs to come out to their parents. That's the problem, not the Catholic Church – at least not at this school, they're really caring and relaxed here. (Francesca, age 21)
Totally out everywhere	1 bisexual female 2 bisexual males 4 gay males 2 lesbians	I don't scream it from the hills but I want everyone to know, because I've been told I'm a role model here for a lot of young guys, and even some older ones too. (Taylor, age 22)

**Finding 1: Family life, including outness at home, can have more positive and more negative effects on GLB students' efforts to achieve self-actualization than campus life experiences.** This study set at a private, religiously affiliated college did not aim to set up or encourage a comparison between outness at home and outness on campus. That said, every participant discussed home life (100% on subtheme 1) and the extent to which they are or are not satisfied with their outness to a group of friends (100% on subtheme 4). More than half of the 18 participants expressed concern for students whose families were not supportive of LGBT issues, or for their peers who had not yet

come out to parents, siblings, or extended family (subtheme 18 which was described more as a threat than a realistic fear).

For example, sophomore Luis would love to introduce his boyfriend to his mother but he holds off from doing so because he has never been able to successfully discuss being gay with his father. “I used to be fine with just being gay at school, I’m never home anyway. But now that I have a serious boyfriend, it’s kind of different.” Luis was slightly reluctant to discuss his overall relationship with his father, then opened up:

Let’s just say I’m glad I live at school. I couldn’t take him much longer and I think he knew it. I don’t advertise my sexuality or anything else about what I do but my dad’s always trying to tell me what to do and when to come home and everything. It’s like he looks at me and still sees a little boy.

Lisa’s interview responses about her family life were similarly less than positive. As someone who proudly calls herself a feminist in addition to a lesbian, she is out and proud everywhere except home with her parents. She said that even though several years have gone by since she came out, they continue to call her a sinner and refuse to speak of LGBT-related issues with her. Lisa has been “ordered [by her parents] not to bring any gays or lesbians to *their* house.” When Lisa points out to her family that she is completely accepted and supported – even held up as a role model – at her Catholic college (subthemes 3 and 6, 11, and 12) her parents dismiss her claims. Lisa expressed sadness for her “stifled” family life but also added that she hopes her parents do not visit campus (subtheme 18).

Maria’s family life interferes with her self-actualization but for different reasons. Maria and her mother have experienced mental health crises during Maria’s childhood in

Oklahoma, which led Maria to seek out a more accepting, more positive place to live. She now marvels at the welcome and support (including a counselor who embraces Maria's "swelling LGBT pride" – subthemes 3, 6, and 13) she has received at her new school and wishes that her entire family could see her and share in the success she has found in and out of the classroom (subtheme 10).

Maria is aware, though she prefers not to dwell on it, that many of her extended relations disapprove of her sexual orientation and believe it is "the root cause of all the difficulties I had to go through and face down back in high school" and to a lesser extent at her first college (before transferring and relocating to the greater New York City area). Thus, she works hard to keep her school life and her school friends separate from her family life. Table 4.8 demonstrates several examples of subthemes that support this finding.

**Finding 2: Positive and negative experiences on campus support GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization.** Several interviews for this study revealed that GLB students can take motivation and support for their self-actualization and other goals from pleasant things on campus as well as from the unpleasant. Josephus, for example, learned through a sexual assault that he "needed take control of my life and make sure that everyone knows where I stand, that I'm not someone to be pushed around (subthemes 2, 15, and 19). Though he opted not to report the sexual violence and it took time to end the completely separate himself from the aggressor, a "mostly straight" female, Josephus looks back on this incident as one of the leading factors in why he can consider himself doing well on his "journey" to self-actualization and one of the reasons he does so much volunteer work helping teenagers and other members of the LGBT

Table 4.8

*Examples of Family Life Interfering GLB Students' Efforts toward Self-Actualization*

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quotation
Comfort Level with Outness	Home Life	Peter: Home is truly depressing. My parents would keep me secret if they could – and they do try. Nobody wants a gay grandson, they tell me. They were so scared I'd move home after college that they called to ask if alumni could live in the dorms.
Comfort Level with Outness	Safety on Campus	Caroline: My parents don't like dorming. They say colleges are not safe, they're dirty, there are too many distractions. I actually feel safer on campus than I do back home, with all their prejudiced ideas and their rules like I'm still ten. School is safer for me. Between my LGBT friends at work and some other bi friends, they support me like a family.
Comfort Level with Outness	Approval and Disapproval	Derrick: I'm sure it's not easy having a transgender kid or a bi kid. I never asked for permission to come out. I never wanted their approval. That's not true, I really wanted it for a long time, but I had to face the facts, I'm not getting it.

community (subthemes 15 and 21). Josephus does not like to call himself a victim of sexual violence, rather he prefers to remind people that he also has had “so many blessings at this school and in my whole life” –including several mentor relationships he has enjoyed with members of the religious communities represented on campus – both women and men (subthemes 6 and 14).

While explaining that she often “passes for White and straight,” Emilia explained that she, too, takes “positive energy and momentum from nasty remarks people make before they have any idea” who she is or how she identifies herself. For instance, Emilia recently began to consider herself a “closeted trans” individual, so women and men have made comments about the trans community, about restrooms and trans celebrities on

television or social media that she has seen and heard. They also make derogatory or dismissive comments about men (straight and gay) in general that have affected Emilia. Rather than getting depressed or hurt, Emilia explained that she thinks “the grown-up thing to do, perhaps the self-actualized thing to do is to find inspiration from their ignorance, turn it around and use it to make myself a better person, and maybe even make them better, too, somehow” (subthemes 8, 9, 15, and 16).

If Roberto’s dorm room were not attacked in a homophobic, anti-gay effort to asphyxiate Roberto while he slept (“they tried to kill me” – subthemes 2, 8, and 9), he might never have transferred to the private Catholic college from which he graduated and which he considers to have turned his life around (subtheme 15). Roberto described it as

Almost like hitting rock bottom. I had gotten so used to being lonely and afraid of the guys who figured out I was gay, I told my parents I would try to stick it out there. They knew I hated it but they didn’t know if we could afford anyplace else. And [it] was supposed to be a great school – it’s Catholic and they have nice new dorms and stuff, but that was a whole new page for me. I don’t know what was worse – that some ignorant jerks tried to kill me and ruined my laptop, or that the supposedly Catholic school basically ignored it. They said ‘it would be hard to investigate.’ So that was about the time I realized that if I wanted to be safe and secure and not go crazy with stress, I was gonna have to find a new school, and preferably someplace where I could make some gay friends and start getting on with my life. I didn’t know to call it ‘self-actualizing’ but that’s what I started trying to do as soon as I got here. I had to get counseling, I had to basically start over with a new major. I was really lucky with the way I got treated here –

obviously, I never told anyone about what happened in my old dorm, but I did start coming out to people again and getting involved. Now I can just barely look back on it and talk about it without crying (subthemes 2, 4, 8, 9, and 15).

Table 4.9 demonstrates other examples to support this finding.

**Finding 3: There are positive and negative campus experiences that affect GLB students' perceptions of campus climate.** Like their heterosexual counterparts, GLB college students observe their campus life and develop opinions about what they experience. Campus climate refers to the overall attitudes present at a school, in this case the overall attitudes toward the LGBT community. This study probed the perceptions that GLB students about campus climate at a private college that also happens to be run in association with the Catholic Church. This characteristic presented an additional layer of possible marginalization or oppression of the GLB students. Upon completing the interviews and data analysis, though, the researcher found that the students' myriad perceptions are informed by positive experiences at the college as well as negative experiences. This finding is supported by a wide variety of examples; a few have been selected as appropriately representative.

Table 4.9

*Examples of Positive & Negative Campus Experiences Supporting Self-Actualization*

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quotation
Positive	Success in Academic and Career Goals	Kevin: Religion classes are mandatory here even if you're not Catholic. I was worried about my GPA. So I took an Old Testament class and did well. I came out to the teacher. When we read what the Bible supposedly says about gays, half the class expected me to blow up or something, but I kept it together. That class was a lot of hard work. It really helped build up my confidence. I wasn't looking forward to being the gay atheist at a Catholic school. I think they see me as smart and hard-working, and nice. That's more important here, I think.
Positive	Counseling	Luis: My new boyfriend invited me to Pride this year. I've never been. It shouldn't be a big deal, right? I go to the city a lot, but Pride is different. So, I went to see the counselor I had met with before and asked her about it. I was afraid it would be a freak show or I wouldn't fit in. The counselor suggested I decide for myself and keep an open mind. So I went, and we had the best time! The parade was amazing. I felt like I was part of something. I'm glad I didn't let anxiety hold me back.
Negative	Motivation to Persist Overcome	Anne: I've been lucky that I don't hear much stuff the way some of my LGBT friends do. There are a lot of guys here who fetishize bi women and try to make us out to be promiscuous. We are not like that. Anyway, it got me so upset that I went to the school's counselors for my anger. I'm glad I did. I'm not gonna let those guys hurt me and my friend. I wish I got counseling a long time ago. It was chill, and they're more accepting than I expected.
Negative	Social Media Can Turn Negatives to Positives	Lisa: So one of my friends was being bullied but we didn't want to admit there was a bully in college. We thought we could handle it. But it got worse, so we reported it to the dean's office, and actually they took care of it really fast. My friend had to move to a new dorm and that was frustrating, so we ended up posting about it. It made us all feel better for a while. That was the first time I remember being tested against a bully. I had to help my friend and I didn't care if anyone thought I was just helping because we're both bi. My Facebook friends all commented and like it, and that made me feel, like, good, like I'm growing up.

*Positive experiences and campus climate.* Matthew's experience as a Resident Assistant has been a very positive and enjoyable time that greatly influences his perceptions of campus climate (not only for GLB students but for all who live on campus and visit friends there). Mathew has seen the "home away from home" side of campus life, and is grateful for the opportunity he and other RAs have been given to lead the community. He pointed out that residents prefer to be guided by fellow students rather than professional staff, "It's our home, and to me, the climate there is respectful and largely accepting of everyone." Matthew went on to say that the climate he observes across the entire college is similarly respectful but less welcoming of commuter students and the LGBT community. "We're such a small number of people here that we are sometimes overlooked. We've got to get to the point where everyone sees us and hears us and listens to our concerns" (subthemes 7, 9, 11, and 20).

Anne cited her positive experiences with several offices at the college as the keys to her views of campus climate. Noting the Catholic faith's role in developing policies and procedures for students as well as faculty and staff, this bisexual junior said that she has been impressed by the open-mindedness and acceptance found "everywhere" (subthemes 3, 6, 13, and 20). For examples she points to the Multicultural Center which she says embraces LGBT students and provides them a home (though other participants offered opposing views and insisted that an actual home is needed for the LGBT club – something that commonly varies from campus to campus depending on the size of the club and the availability of office space for student organizations, but is less likely to be found on a religiously affiliated campus), the Campus Ministry and Social Action office, and the Counseling Center. In all three, Anne is grateful that she does not see or hear staff

members using doctrinal teachings to limit or discourage GLB student activism (subthemes 20 and 21). Anne says that she feels safe, respected, and able to be herself at the college. Anne perceives that most of her friends, gay and straight alike, agree with her assessment; cross-referencing of interview data certainly suggests that some of the 18 participants would agree.

*Negative experiences and campus climate.* Taylor, a senior eager to graduate but still very much an active member of the campus community and the LGBT sub-community at the college, prefers to be upbeat and enthusiastic but he shared some examples of negative experiences that influence his view of campus climate. Taylor came out to his residence hall neighbors early in his freshman year – “and everything changed in 24 hours” (subthemes 2, 3, 8, 9, and 21), meaning that he lost friends, lost a degree of feeling safe, and lost opportunities to a homophobic and heterosexist majority. A series of unfortunate roommate issues (including with an LGBT roommate and others) actually resulted in this proud gay man being labeled as “a homophobe by the residence life staff who took no time or effort to get to know him and serve his actual needs (subthemes 8, 9, 17, 21, and 22). Most significantly, Taylor disclosed that he was twice the victim of sexual assault when the limited number of GLB peers on campus led him to visit gay bars and clubs in Manhattan – venturing out alone, far from his campus with no guidance from Residence Life staff or RAs because Taylor’s past negative interactions with this office led him to believe they were homophobic and inconsiderate (subthemes 2, 4, 9, 19, and 21). While these negative experiences and outcomes shaped Taylor’s perceptions of campus climate for gay men like him, they also motivated him to apply for an RA position, to get involved with Safe Zone trainings on LGBTQ safety and dignity, and to

become a more outspoken member of the LGBT club and other positional leadership posts on campus (subthemes 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 15, and 21).

Roberto's example of an attack on his dorm room in which anti-gay peers sought to asphyxiate him is perhaps the most negative example of a campus experience that would have an influence on Roberto's and others' attitudes and perceptions around campus climate.

There were many examples shared during interviews, and many have been included in the descriptive details about each participant earlier in this chapter. Interestingly, the term "fag" (or "the f-word," as many participants call it) was raised as an indicator of anti-gay campus climate by several participants. Interestingly, four participants stated that they have never heard that word or any other slur used on campus. In this regard, it appears reasonable to find that GLB students have the same ability for "selective hearing" as their straight counterparts.

With influence from both positive and negative experiences on campus, GLB students perceive mixed levels of support for their self-actualization and overall success in college from students, faculty, and staff. That is, many participants perceive that the faculty are "more open-minded and more accepting of LGBT equality" than the students (subthemes 6, 14, and 22) to use a quotation from Caroline. Similarly, Anne and others expressed frustration that some facilities-related staff from several different departments "have been known to make derogatory comments to students and about other students with impunity – including political references that were obviously mean, racist, and anti-women and gay men (subthemes 9 and 21). Anne shared that she and her friends have joked about filming such situations for posting on social media "so they learn their

lesson,” but they all agreed it would not move past joking that they intended to “make each other feel better” after such negative interactions – Anne also noted that such a video could harm closeted or partially GLB involved and would “give a bad reputation to the school which it really does not deserve – except those few bad apples” (subthemes 16, 18, and 20). Table 4.10 demonstrates examples of positive and negative on-campus experiences that affect GLB students’ perceptions of campus climate at their private Catholic college.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological qualitative study was undertaken with a theoretical foundation grounded in Maslow’s (1943) theory of self-actualization and Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement. The purpose was to probe gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students about their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of life at a private college. In partial replication of Rockman’s 2013 study of community college students’ self-actualization, interviews with 18 diverse GLB individuals from a private college were conducted. A range of positive, neutral, and negative experiences and views about private college life and campus climate were examined. Interviews were then followed by a thorough process of data analysis involving almost 150 initial codes. From there, seven major themes and 22 subthemes have been identified. Together with qualitative examples taken directly from the participants’ quotations, these themes support three findings. The three findings are demonstrated in Table 4.11.

Table 4.10

*Examples of Positive & Negative Experiences Leading to Perceptions of Campus Climate*

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quotation
Positive	Overall Progress toward LGBT Equality	Maria: No place is perfect. This place is accepting. One of my professors stopped me be just before the 2016 election and suggested that I join the political science club because she could see I was passionate.
	More Needed – Numbers, Awareness, Resources	Maria: I told her that if I don’t have time for the LGBT club, I could hardly join any other club. She thanked me for an honest answer. Then she offered to mentor me because she wants to see more women of color and more LGBT leaders on campus. It made me feel good. Wanted. That’s as perfect as it gets.
Negative	Overall Progress LGBT Equality	Matthew: When I got here the LGBT Club was toward defunct. I was told, ‘Good luck getting that going, it’s been quiet for a long time.’ I found some allies and some out friends and we worked really hard.
	More Needed – Numbers, Awareness, Resources	Matthew: It worked but it was an uphill battle. That guy who said “good luck’ wasn’t just being nasty. He was accurate – and nasty. We still aren’t really in open house and can’t do anything ‘too gay.’ They monitor us more closely than others. It’s not fair.
Positive from a Negative	More Needed – Numbers, Awareness, Resources	Taylor: Sexual assault happens a lot here, gay and straight, on and off campus. And queer domestic violence used to be ignored, like we didn’t exist. So we spoke up and brought Safe Zone trainings back. That felt really good. We won’t be swept under the rug. This is our school, too, and we want to be safe.
Negative	Uneven Acceptance of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals	Anne: I can protect myself. It’s worse for gay guys.
		Paula: This place is bi-neutral. They forget we’re we’re here.
		Gary: I hear ‘fag’ a lot. No derogatory term should be ok.
		Josephus: The [religious order] love everyone equally pretty much. Do students? I’m not so sure.

Table 4.11

*Summary of Research Findings*

Finding	Description
1	Family life, including outness at home, can have more positive and more negative effects on GLB students' efforts to achieve self-actualization than campus life experiences at a private, religiously affiliated college.
2	Positive and negative experiences on campus support GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization.
3	There are positive and negative campus experiences that affect GLB students' perceptions of campus climate.

The purposeful sample of this study was located at a private college in the greater New York City region. This college also had a strong Roman Catholic affiliation – evidenced by various clergy teaching and working on campus, an active campus ministry offering, and many students who cite its Catholic identity as a factor when deciding to enroll there. This strong, high-profile identity led to deeper questions about acceptance and self-actualization for GLB students at this particular college. The findings, as generously and candidly shared by the participants, have been summarized in this Chapter 4.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a private religious college to determine what factors of campus life support or hinder these students' efforts toward self-actualization. Maslow's (1943, 1965) work on motivation and self-actualization was the primary theoretical foundation for this study. A secondary theoretical perspective based on Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement helped probe whether or not these subjects believe that their chosen college encourages their self-actualization. The GLB subjects' perceptions of and attitudes toward their campus life were explored.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' self-actualization at a private college present significant questions that affect many students and their families (Dugan, 2011; Messinger, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010). If the college years represent one of the more significant experiences in a young adult's life, selecting the right college is a major decision with many consequences, both positive and negative (Rankin et al., 2010; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014). Experiences during college can support or hinder a student's ability to reach her or his full potential through lifelong development – to attain self-actualization. It is important, therefore, that GLB students and their families have access to information that will assist in their evaluations of colleges, including assessing campus climate and the availability and quality of resources designed to support out GLB students (Cegler, 2012; Dugan, 2011; Messinger,

2009). Factors such as homophobia and anti-gay discrimination on campus can affect student involvement. The importance of a supportive campus community continues to affect GLB students and their ability to self-actualize throughout the college years and beyond (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Fraser, 2014).

While guarding against bias, this study was carefully delimited to focus on factors that affect self-actualization of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The theoretical framework from Maslow (1943, 1965) and Astin (1999) helped look at the relationship between GLB students' experiences and their abilities to achieve self-actualization. By conducting this study, the doctoral candidate aimed to benefit college students – regardless of sexual orientation – as well as students' families, and the administrators, faculty, and staff of private, religiously affiliated colleges. Finally, this study included a focus on promoting social justice for the many stakeholders involved in or affected by the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students (Stover, 2015; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Various data were collected for analysis from semi-structured interviews with a 14 GLB students currently enrolled at a private Catholic college in the greater New York City region and four recent graduates from that college. The purposeful sample was comprised of lesbian women, bisexual women, gay men, and bisexual men. These subjects represented every class level from sophomore to graduate school and alumni. First-year students were intentionally excluded due to timing; that is, they would not have spent sufficient time in college to gather relevant experiences by the time when research interviews were conducted (interestingly, no freshmen students inquired about the study, so it was not necessary to decline anyone due to length of time spent in college). This

sample also included a range of academic majors and a range of geographic and socio-economic diversity. Participants came to the New York City area college from Long Island, New Jersey, New England, and other parts of New York.

To review the existing research on GLB students and self-actualization, this candidate organized literature in four categories. First, research on issues relating to gay, lesbian, and bisexual college student experiences on campus (with a focus on traditional college age students, approximately 18 to 24 years old) was conducted. Second, issues related to college student engagement in campus life, including Astin's theory of student involvement, were analyzed. The third category of research examined the available literature related to Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Finally, the fourth category reviewed relevant research about campus climate, including homophobia and microaggression, on college campuses.

The approach of the literature review, as seen in Chapter 2, reflected the large amount of available scholarship on GLB issues overall, on theories related to self-actualization, and on college student involvement, broadly speaking. There were many existing studies found but only a small few focus discretely on GLB college student engagement and self-actualization (Rockman, 2013). Fewer still focus on private or religiously affiliated colleges. It was important to focus on key contributions that, when taken together, informed this study and reinforced the need to address gaps in existing research.

This study was undertaken to partially replicate aspects of Rockman's 2013 research on the experiences of community college students' coming-out as GLB and their efforts toward self-actualization. Therefore, the research design methodology bore

similarities to that study. Along with a theoretical rationale based on Maslow, Rockman (2013) employed a phenomenological qualitative research design. The semi-structured interview approach, based on questions tested for validity and reliability by Rankin et al. (2010) in their quantitative study, that have been only slightly modified, replacing the term “community college” with “private college” with permission of Rockman. This study investigated issues (campus climate, perceptions of homophobia, for example) similar to Rockman (2013). It also addressed similar research questions. That said, this study probed the attitudes and experiences of a different population, at a different period of time, and a different academic setting – as recommended by Rockman (2013).

This study used a qualitative research design focused on the phenomenon of being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual student at a private Catholic college in the Northeast United States. Data collection was conducted mainly using semi-structured interviews with a sample of female and male students at various points in their college years. This design collected well-rounded data to appropriately explore the complexities associated with self-actualization and with GLB college students’ experiences, with particular emphasis on the potential impacts of the private, religiously affiliated college setting.

The research design of this study, detailed in Chapter 3, centered on the value of qualitative research to explore and examine a nuanced topic, the factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students from a private college. While cursory review may suggest that the United States has experienced progress with regard to social justice for the LGBTQ community, gaps in research remain (Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). This study aimed to provide information about GLB student’s experiences at a private college associated with the Roman Catholic Church, including the students’ perceptions

of how their college experiences support them – or fail to support them – in their efforts to achieve their full potential.

To help current and future GLB students who choose to enroll at private, religious colleges and universities as well as the faculty, staff, and administration of these colleges, this chapter includes a summary of findings found in Chapter 4 related to the study's purpose, along with a discussion of the study's implications (for research and practice), the limitations of this study, and several recommendations that flow from this study's findings. Because this study partially replicated the work of Rockman (2013) with a somewhat similar population (GLB students from community colleges located across New York City), this discussion also includes a review of how this researchers' findings compare with Rockman's.

The purposeful sample for this study consisted of students and recent alumni (listed with pseudonyms and descriptive summary in Appendix D) from a private college in the greater New York City region. This particular private college also had a strong religious affiliation, with men and women of various religious orders serving on campus; this led to deeper questions about acceptance and self-actualization for GLB students at this college. The findings, developed by coding and analyzing themes and subthemes from interviews with 18 volunteer participants, were summarized in Chapter 4.

The most common subthemes found by interviewing subjects were home life, a trusted peer group, homophobia and heterosexism on campus, and more LGBT needed (including more openly gay students, faculty, and staff; more awareness of the community among heterosexuals on campus; and more resources to support the needs of

GLB students). In fact, 100% of subjects in this study raised these four factors when discussing their experiences at and perceptions of their private Catholic college.

There was vast agreement that the subtheme of home life could be both a positive and a negative factor in participants' self-actualization. Specifically, GLB interviewees expressed that the extent to which students' nuclear families supported their GLB outness, affects college life. This study found that students who expressed greater outness at home more likely to feel supported in their self-actualization at college, but those who were considered themselves out at home and school expressed concern for their GLB peers who were not out to family.

This study also found that developing a trusted peer group was a common subtheme among subjects. Regarding this subtheme, there was widespread agreement among participants that this factor could be positive and negative. The presence of a trusted GLB peer group would support self-actualization and any GLB student who failed to establish such a group would be hindered both with involvement in campus life and with self-actualization. Finding GLB peers, preferably openly gay, among the student body and developing tight-knit friendships with these peers were significant keys to GLB participants' perceiving their campus climate as accepting and supportive. Several subjects noted that their trusted peer group of GLB friends began in high school and continued as they enrolled at different colleges (via telephone and social media). Nearly all participants expressed that they would benefit from a larger group of trusted GLB peers, lamenting the size of the LGBT community at their college. While subjects' responses included negative and positive aspects of the trusted peer group subtheme, this study found it to clearly be a priority for many GLB students.

This study also explored homophobia, the irrational fear or hatred of the LGBT community, and heterosexism, a term closely related to homophobia which refers to pro-heterosexual prejudice against sexual minorities (Rockman, 2013). This subtheme was discussed as a factor on campus and in society as a whole. There was little consensus among participants about homophobia and heterosexism. Some perceived institutionally sanctioned heterosexism and homophobia. Others explained that they could point to very few examples of homophobia on their campus. Interestingly, several interview subjects admitted that they anticipated a high degree of anti-gay sentiment at a private, religious college but were surprised and relieved to find as much acceptance and support as they had found at this school. Though participants offered largely positive impressions of the student body's attitudes toward the LGBT community, several participants indicated faculty instructors were the most likely to be understanding and supportive of GLB students, followed by staff in certain departments (counseling, residence life, and the multicultural center), and then followed by straight students – a distant third according to several participants.

The fourth and final subtheme on which 100% of participants spoke was the need for “more” of the positive factors that support GLB students' success at the private, Catholic college. That is, every one of the 18 participants would prefer to see a larger, more open LGBT community on campus – especially more GLB students, increased awareness of their existence at the school and their unique interests and needs as students (in the classroom and in extracurricular campus life), and more of the concrete resource which they perceive as currently lacking. There was a widespread sense among participants that the school “means well,” as one current student stated, but has not taken

the necessary steps to identify, implement and fund services that would proactively encourage GLB students to get more involved on campus and to address their developmental needs as GLB young adults.

### **Implications of Findings**

There were four major implications identified upon careful review of the findings from this study; they are presented here.

**Implication 1: This study’s findings represent a necessary contribution to the existing body of research on LGBT students’ experiences in higher education.** It has been noted in prior chapters that very little literature is available to help understand gay, lesbian, and bisexual students’ lived experiences at private colleges, not to mention religiously-affiliated colleges. This study has built on the seminal work of Love (1998), Love et al. (2005), Renn (2007, 2010), and Rankin et al. (2010) as well as Getz and Kirkley (2006) and Rockman (2013) to probe GLB students’ attitudes and perceptions about their overall experiences specifically at a private, Catholic college near New York City in 2017. The timing of this research is important, as Rockman (2013) noted, because of the changing attitudes and increased levels of acceptance of the LGBT community across the past fifteen years in the United States, including LGBT marriage equality in all 50 states now the law of the land. Rockman (2013) and others suggest that broader acceptance appears to have grown nationally, but there remains a gap in the literature at the college level to support this contention or better understand the changes. The gap is especially apparent regarding studies of GLB students at private, religious colleges and universities in particular—which this study aimed to fill. In this regard, the implications of the current study support the findings of Rockman (2013).

**Implication 2: The level of GLB students' outness prior to and during their college years affects these students' efforts to achieve self-actualization at private Catholic colleges.** Participants in this study who described greater outness (for example, since high school or even middle school, or being “mostly out” to their family and friends), were more likely to perceive positive campus climate and to discuss their college experiences in positive terms. On the contrary, participants who described themselves as less out on campus described their college experiences as generally less positive and less supportive of their self-actualization. The experiences of Josephus summarize this implication: he believes that attending a private Catholic college helped him learn to love himself, to strive toward his full potential – including embracing his true sexual orientation – for the first time in his life, and to enjoy college, viewing it as a necessary building block toward his desired career. When Josephus looks back on the time when he was less out (including denying his true sexuality – even to himself and all others – during freshman and sophomore years of college), he now realizes that he would not have been ready to work on self-actualization regardless of how much his campus life promoted such a goal.

**Implication 3: College life is only one aspect, of many, that merits study in the life of GLB young adults, especially with regard to their self-actualization.** The current study did not explore the role of family and home life in participants' level of outness or their efforts toward self-actualization. That is, the researcher chiefly focused instead on three research questions which were designed to gather data on subjects' attitudes and perceptions of their Catholic college experiences, the campus community, and overall climate at school, rather than the subjects' family life. This study also did not

probe participants' personal relationships (romantic lives) despite several mentions of the lack of dating options for GLB students on campus and the impact of social media on LGBT romantic life. Similarly, this researcher did not probe subjects on the effects of their sexual orientation on their work life, though many subjects reported working part-time jobs on and off campus.

While many subjects made reference to their spirituality and their faith as a major determinant of why they chose to attend a Catholic college, the discreet scope of this study did not allow for complete exploration of how religion, faith, and spirituality affect self-actualization. Indeed, this study indicates that college life and on-campus activities reflect only one of many aspects of how and why GLB students progress toward self-actualization.

**Implication 4: Despite doctrinal teachings and traditions that are often viewed as contrary to the LGBT community, religious leaders on campus tend to play an outsized role in encourage GLB students' efforts toward self-actualization and involvement on campus.** A majority of participants cited their relationships with lay religious (non-ordained members of several religious communities – including deacons, sisters, and brothers) as well as ordained priests as a source of encouragement for their personal growth toward self-actualization. This group of participants who highlighted the religious leaders' positive impact included as many atheist or agnostic students as it did practicing Catholics. It also included lapsed Catholics, two of whom expressed a wish that global church leaders be more like the leaders at the college – “accepting of everyone, not at all judgmental” and “relaxed without watering anything down,” to quote these participants directly.

The religious sisters who work and teach on campus were held in high regard by several volunteers in this study, including three students (one male, two female) who doubted that they would expressly come out to a nun but admired them nonetheless. A student who refused to limit his outness when interacting with a religious sister who taught one of his required classes described her as “a real model for self-actualization, actually – she knew what was important to her and she would never concern herself with what anyone else but god thought of her.”

Not one of the subjects who praised the role of religious on campus could recall a time when they were questioned or criticized by a priest, brother, or sister, or anyone in authority, for his or her identity as a GLB student. While one student discussed a few tense moments in a class about the Old Testament, even he indicated that the instructor was respectful of him – while fellow students seemed concerned that he might feel uncomfortable or lash out due to anti-gay course content. The religious leaders reportedly encourage GLB students to get involved in clubs, including the LGBT club, and to stand up for their themselves. According to several interviewees, the religious use humor, humility, and community service to set an example for all students to follow, regardless of sexual orientation, and they embrace all students who respond to their efforts to build up the campus community.

These four implications, along with the key findings and most commonly cited subthemes, provided a basis for recommendations this researcher would like to submit, to be explored later in this chapter.

## **Limitations**

There were two limitations to this study: the potential for researcher bias and the lack of generalizability of a qualitative study.

**Possible researcher bias.** This researcher worked diligently to remain aware of his positionality as an openly gay man and a college administrator throughout the research. It is possible, however, that his own biases may have had an effect on the data collection and data analysis processes. That is, the long-standing role of sexual orientation in his own identity coupled with the vast amount of time and energy he has spent reviewing existing literature on the LGBTQ community in higher education, along with related topics, may have contributed to implicit bias during the eighteen interviews or later with the analytical processing of codes, themes, and subthemes. Feedback from the focus group (conducted for validation and trustworthiness) and the researcher's ongoing efforts to avoid such bias, under the direction of supervising faculty, indicate that this limitation was managed as much as possible for a study of this nature.

**Lack of generalizability.** A major value of qualitative research is its ability to explore complex topics to understand more than might be gained from quantitative analysis, such as the nuanced experiences of a small or marginalized group of people. This qualitative study was therefore limited by these parameters. It was conducted to explore sensitive topics with a relatively small sample (14 GLB college students and four recent GLB graduates) and during a relatively small amount of time. Therefore, the findings of this study are applicable to understanding broader populations in similar settings but they are not intended to be universally transferrable. For instance, this study was conducted with GLB students and recent graduates of a private, religiously affiliated

college in the greater New York City region – the lived experiences described herein may not translate wholly or in part to the lived experiences of GLB students in other parts of the United States or abroad. Rather, this study can serve as a basis for further exploration of related research questions.

The research design of this study and its findings may be helpful as a benchmark for other studies, including but not limited to studies of GLB students, of other sexual minorities, and for studies related to the campus climate of Catholic colleges and universities. There is also value for research on self-actualization of other groups of students; the GLB sample may represent a dynamic found in other marginalized groups.

### **Recommendations**

It is clear that gaps remain in the available research about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in various higher education settings; therefore, several recommendations emanate from this study. These findings suggest that all institutions of higher education must embark on greater consideration of the experiences of and the feedback (provided here and elsewhere) from underrepresented minorities, including but not limited to members of the LGBTQ community. Colleges and universities pay significant attention to student satisfaction and student learning outcomes; so, there is likely to be ready access to data that could further inform the faculty, staff, and administration about the lived realities of sexual minorities on their campuses.

Additional research into GLB students' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of their college years is recommended based on the subthemes identified in this study. Given the significance of a student's level of outness with his or her family prior to and during the college years, more study is needed with primary emphasis on the relationship

between the home life of GLB young adults and their efforts toward achieving self-actualization.

Further study into the role of LGBT clubs or student organizations on college campuses would also be beneficial, at all types of institutions not just private or religious colleges. It may be particularly valuable to examine the lived experiences of students at schools that have provided their LGBT club with a physical “center” (office space, event space, a concretely visible location for their gathering) versus those schools (like the research site of this study) that have not established such a space. In addition to the physical location as a resource, future studies may wish to probe the role of faculty advisors to the LGBT club, as well as the clubs’ relationships with student government, with other clubs, and with college administrations; these relationships (or lack thereof) can influence GLB students’ and their straight peers’ perceptions of campus climate – including what type of language and conduct is considered acceptable or unacceptable at the school.

As participants in this study and in Rockman’s (2013) study indicated, LGBT clubs can support self-actualization by supporting development of trusted peer groups. They also increase students’ sense of belonging to the school community. Future researchers may wish to study the relationship between LGBT student organizations and student retention, or student graduation rates, or the affinity to the college among LGBT alumni following their graduation.

## **Conclusion**

Higher education and various researchers have been studying factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students’ college experiences for many years

(Longerbeam et al., 2007; Rankin et al., 2010). A critical gap in the literature relates to Maslow's theory of human motivation, specifically in understanding GLB students' ability to strive toward and achieve self-actualization during their college years (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Maslow, 1943; Rankin et al., 2010; Rockman, 2013). To self-actualize is to reach one's full potential, to make one's true self his or her daily reality, including achieving full use of one's capacities and talents (Crain, 2016; Maslow, 1943, 1965). Research suggests that discrimination, heterosexism, and homophobia affect GLB college students' efforts toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Rockman, 2013). GLB students' perceptions of their college's campus climate, including discrimination, heterosexism, homophobia and microaggression, may encourage or hinder their ability to achieve self-actualization (Nadal, 2013; Rockman, 2013).

There has been a trend in recent years of more students self-identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during their college years than in past generations (Mehra & Braquet, 2011; Rockman, 2013). These openly gay students, many of whom graduated from high schools that offered support services and extracurricular student organizations for LGBT students, frequently seek similar resources and protections against discrimination from the colleges where they opt to enroll (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Mehra & Braquet, 2011). For GLB students who choose to enroll at private, religious colleges, additional factors such as institutional mission or campus climate may support or inhibit self-actualization.

This study looked at factors that affect efforts toward self-actualization in gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a private, Roman Catholic college in the greater New York City region. Self-actualization referred to Maslow's 1943 definition: the desire of human beings "to become everything that one is capable of" (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). The

research sample included participants who currently study at the college and several who recently graduated from the college.

In order to explore GLB students' perceptions of their private college's campus climate (including but not limited to discrimination, heterosexism, and homophobia), this study used a theoretical framework centered on Maslow's theory of self-actualization (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Maslow, 1943, 1965, 1987; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2007; Woodford et al., 2012). According to Rankin et al. (2010), harassment and homophobia, or perceptions thereof, can limit GLB students' ability to achieve what Maslow (1943) referred to as self-actualization.

In addition to Maslow, this study also viewed GLB students' perceptions of campus climate and its effect on their efforts toward self-actualization through the lens of Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement, which focuses on the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that a student applies to his or her college experiences (Astin, 1999). Extracurricular activities exemplify the type of experiences that Astin (1999) studied. Astin's theory added value because it applies to students' overall experiences (rather than to a single experience or subject matter) and helps explain what motivates GLB student behaviors (Astin, 1999; Furner, 2009; Fraser, 2014; Rockman, 2013).

Maslow's words underscore the significance of this study: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization" (Maslow, 1987, p. 93). Self-actualization, like all the human needs on Maslow's hierarchy (see Appendix A) is challenging for many adults even as they approach old

age, more so for a relatively young sexual minority who faces potential disapproval from family, friends, and instructors should they decide to proceed toward self-actualization of their true selves as openly lesbian, bisexual, or gay students (Rockman, 2013).

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual college student at a private, religious college, to better understand factors that GLB students perceive as supporting or discouraging their efforts to achieve their full potential and find peace with themselves. The findings suggest a considerable amount of positive experiences on campus and ample supportive factors for self-actualization; they also indicate many negative experiences and significant concern for factors that discourage self-actualization. More research is needed to fully understand GLB college students' lived experiences – at Catholic colleges in particular. Likewise, more support is needed from private, religious colleges and from GLB students' families to provide safe environments where *all* students can grow, learn, and thrive with opportunities for involvement and self-actualization – regardless of their sexual orientation – as evidenced by the findings of this study.

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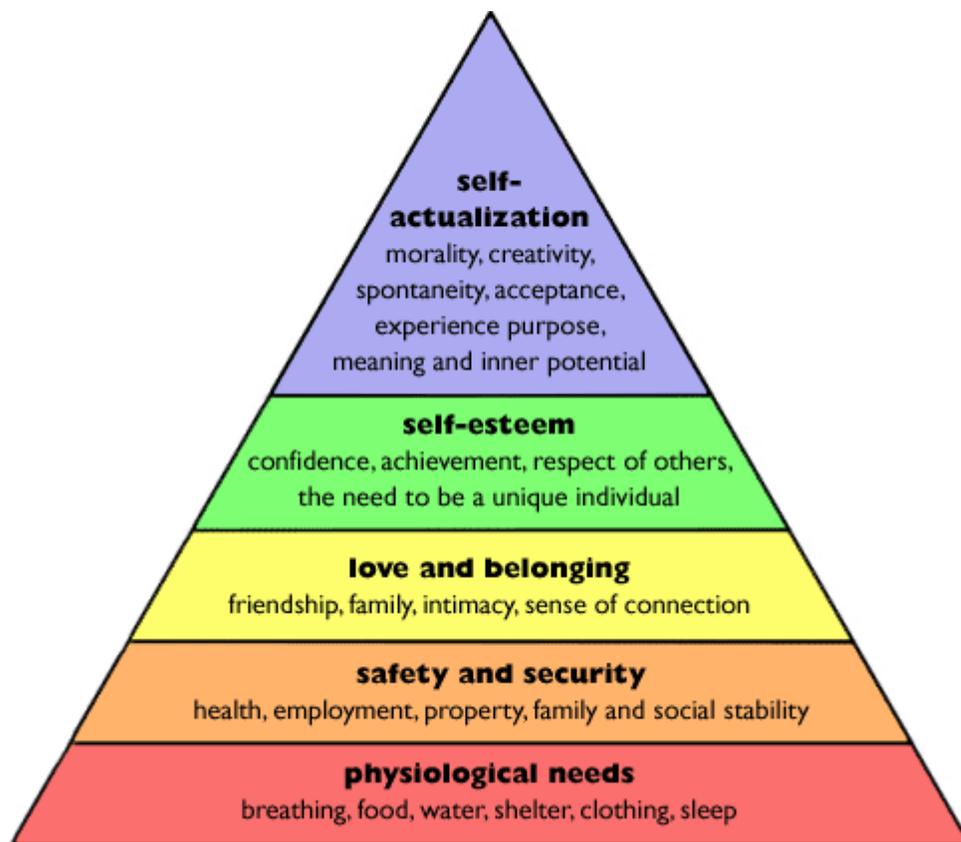
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## Appendix A

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

A graphic representation of Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of human needs, below, depicts fundamental needs such as food and breath at the base of a pyramid. Self-actualization, shown as the top or highest need on the hierarchy, is above safety, love, and self-esteem. It is attained by few people (Maslow, 1943, 1965, 1968, 1987).



Source: <http://www.researchhistory.org/2012/06/16/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/>

## Appendix B

### Approved Data Collection Instrument: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

This study replicated with written permission (see Appendix C) use of the following interview questions from Rockman's (2013) study of GLB students' self-actualization at community colleges across New York City. Rockman developed these questions for qualitative interviews by adapting quantitative survey questions from Rankin et al. (2010) – tested for validity and reliability for that large quantitative study.

1. Tell me about yourself please (age, sexual orientation/attraction/identity, gender identity, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, living situation, marital status, children, religion, employment status, etc.).
2. What interested you about this study?
  - a. What made you want to participate in this study?
3. What does it mean to you to be a GLB student at a private college?
  - a. Do you anticipate this might differ from being a GLB student at another college or university?
    - i. If so, how?
4. Has your identity as a GLB student affected your role as a private college student?
  - a. If so, how?
5. Has your identity as a GLB student not affected your role as a private college student?
  - a. If so, how?
6. Describe your college's campus climate, or overall attitude toward GLB students.

- a. What have been your experiences on campus that lead you to feeling this way about the climate on your campus?
- b. What have you heard others say and feel about your college's campus climate toward GLB students?
  - i. From whom did you hear this?
- c. Have you ever considered leaving your college due to the climate for GLB students?
  - i. If so, why did you stay?
7. "Outness" refers to one's disclosure and visible comfort with their identification as GLB to others. How would you describe your level of "outness" on campus?
  - a. Why do you describe your level of "outness" in this way?
8. What does being "out" on campus mean to you?
  - a. What factors influence when you come out to others or not?
9. Studies show that GLB students experience harassment and discrimination at higher rates than non-GLB students. Please describe any harassment or discrimination you experienced on your college campus.
  - a. What were the circumstances surrounding this harassment or discrimination?
  - b. Where did this happen?
  - c. In that moment, did anyone speak up to challenge the harassment or discrimination?
  - d. Did you formally or informally report the harassment or discrimination to anyone? If so, to whom?
  - e. What was the outcome of the report?
10. How many GLB people do you know on campus, and how many are out? (No names please.)

- a. Why do you think they choose to be out or not out?
- b. How do you think are they treated on campus? By students? By faculty? By staff?
- 11. How safe do you feel as a GLB student on campus?
- 12. How respected do you feel as a GLB student on campus?
- 13. Do you know of any GLB faculty or administrators on campus? (No names please.)
  - a. If so, are you out to them?
  - b. Have you used them for support and/or guidance?
- 14. What specific factors or characteristics of your college affect how out you are on campus?
  - a. Describe any on-campus factors or characteristics that support you in being out.
  - b. Describe any on-campus factors or characteristics that inhibit you from being more out.
- 15. Self-actualization is often described as a person's ability to achieve his or her full potential (Maslow, 1987). With this in mind, how does your current level of "outness" on your campus relate to your level of self-actualization?
  - a. If your level of "outness" on campus were to change (if you decide to be more or less out), how do you think this would affect your level of self-actualization?
- 16. Describe a time when you felt fully who you are, valued and respected in your life, and you were able to reach your full potential.
  - a. How often do you feel this way on campus?
  - b. When do you feel this way on campus?
  - c. What factors contribute to you feeling this way on campus?
- 17. Are there campus offices or programs that positively affect you as GLB student?

- a. How do they contribute to your self-actualization as a GLB student?
18. Are there campus offices or programs that negatively affect you as GLB student?
- a. How do they contribute to your self-actualization as a GLB student?
19. What can faculty, staff, and administrators at your college do to better meet your needs and expectations as a GLB student?
20. If you could change anything on campus to improve your experiences as a GLB student, what, if anything, would you change?
21. What else may be going on in your life as a GLB student on your campus?
22. Is there any additional information you would like to share that might be useful to this study?
23. Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix C

### Permission to Use Rockman (2013) Interview Questions

Jack:

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding this request. It is my honor to grant you permission to use my semi-structured interview questions as published in Appendix D of my 2013 study. Please note that the interview questions may not be altered in any way without my prior written consent. Also, please be sure to appropriately cite your use of my interview questions both in the body of your dissertation and in the References section. Finally, I would definitely appreciate receiving a copy of your completed study.

Best of luck as you complete your study, Jack!

Sincerely,

Adam L. Rockman, Ed.D.

Dear Dr. Rockman:

Hello, I hope you're doing well. While it has been some time since you and I spoke about my dissertation plan to partially replicate your 2013 study, I am pleased to say that my plans are still on track. Having completed my coursework, I continue to plan to interview gay, lesbian, and bisexual students from a private, religious college in the greater New York City area; like you, I will focus on Maslow's theory of self-actualization with this population.

With your permission, I'd like to use the same set of questions you used in your 2013 study to guide my interviews (qualitative data collection). Would you be supportive of this approach? Please let me know. If you agree, I'd like to include the questions and a copy of your reply to this email request in my appendices.

Finally, would you mind if I sent you a copy of the study when it is complete?

I am very grateful to have found your study and for meeting with you last year. I am honored to continue your work by replicating aspects of your dissertation. Thank you in advance for your consideration. Please let me know if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Jack

John B. (Jack) Gormley

St. John Fisher College Ed.D. - Executive Leadership

## Appendix D

### Summary Description of Study Participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age at Interview	Race/ Ethnicity	Religion/ Faith	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity
Anne	20	Hispanic / Mexican	Roman Catholic	Bisexual	Female
Caroline	20	Latina / South American	Agnostic	Bisexual	Cisfemale
Emilia	23	Mixed Race / Puerto Rican / Irish /Italian	Non-practicing Catholic Christian	Bisexual Queer	Outwardly Female; Closet Transgender
Francesca	21	Hispanic / Antiguan	Agnostic	Lesbian	Female
Lisa	21	White / European	Roman Catholic	Lesbian, Former Bisexual	Cisfemale
Maria	22	Black / African American	Christian/ Independently Spiritual	Lesbian	Female
Paula	20	White	Atheist	Bisexual	Cisgender Female
Brad	24	White / Dutch	Half Catholic, Half Jewish	Bisexual male	Cisgender Male
Derrick	20	Hispanic / Mexican, Latino	Former Mormon, now Spiritual Universalist	Bisexual, Demisexual	Transmasculine
Gary	19	White / Irish	Raised Catholic	Fluid Bisexual	Male
Josephus	24	White / Irish	Raised Catholic, now Agnostic	Bisexual (“Bi”)	Male
Kevin	19	White	Atheist	Gay	Cismale
Luis	19	Caucasian	Catholic	Gay	Male
Matthew	21	White / Irish American	Atheist, former Christian	Gay	Cisgender Male
Peter	24	Biracial / Italian	Roman Catholic	Gay	Male
Roberto	25	White / Irish / English	Catholic	Gay	Cismale
Stephen	25	White / Greek / Italian	Greek Orthodox	Gay	Male
Taylor	22	Other – Arab / Mediterranean	Spiritual	Homosexual	Cismale

## Appendix E

Initial A Priori Codes (Rockman, 2013)

Academic success

Activism for GLB individuals

Avoid acting gay

Being gay is a non-issue

Being gay is part of identity

Bisexual label not entirely accurate

Born in Dominican Republic

Born in Mexico

Came out in college

Came out in high school

Came to US as a child

Catholic

Comes out depending on support of family

Comes out depending on support of friends

Comfortable being out

Coming out was easy

Coming out was difficult

Coming out makes you more comfortable with yourself

Community acceptance

Complicated life at home

Conservative parents/family

Criticism from family

Developed integrated identity

Does not talk about sexual orientation identity

Does not want to be seen as gay first

Doesn't trust others

Duty to be out

Duty to help other GLB students

Encouraged to be involved in GLB group

Enjoys new role as a leader

Experienced discrimination

Experienced harassment

Experienced heterosexism

Experienced homophobia

Family not supportive

Family supportive

Family worries about safety

Feeling accepted

Feeling alone

Feeling marginalized

Feeling safe

Feeling unsafe

GLB identity is integral to whole identity

GLB student group – available

GLB student group– involved

GLB student group– leadership role

GLB student group– not involved

GLB student group not activist enough

GLB student group not political enough

GLB student group too social

Grew up in very religious household

Grew up in a Black community

Grew up in a Caribbean community

Home life negative

Home life positive

Identifies as Bisexual

Identifies as gay

Identifies as homosexual

Identifies as lesbian

Identity affects relationships with others

Important to be proud of sexual orientation

Increased involvement in GLB club

Increased involvement on campus

Involved in GLB issues in high school

Involved in GLB issues more than other issues

Involved in other issues more than GLB

Lives with non-related others

More comfortable around GLB people

Multiple identities– GLB and woman  
Multiple identities– GLB and minority  
Not active in GLB group but attends programs  
Not experienced discrimination  
Not involved in GLB group  
Not out to family  
Not out to parents  
Others assume GLB identity  
Out in every area of life  
Out only selectively  
Out to everyone  
Out to everyone but does not announce it  
Passing as straight  
Peer groups  
Raised Catholic  
Relationship with family members  
Relationship with parents  
Role model for other GLB  
Safe zone involvement  
Safe zone needed  
Safety off campus  
Safety on campus  
Seeks support and guidance from counselors

Seeks support and guidance from faculty/staff

Seeks support and guidance from peers

Self-actualization affected by others

Self-actualization high

Self-actualization low

Self-actualization tied to academic achievement

Self-actualization tied to level of outness

Self-confidence

Sexual orientation fully integrated

Sexual orientation not fully integrated

Sexual orientation is just part of who you are

Social responsibility to being out

Spiritual but not religious

Supportive faculty

Supportive peers

Training for college faculty/staff

Trust in family members

Trust in others

Trust in peers

Welcomed into GLB group

Would like to be more involved in GLB issues

## **Appendix F**

### Initial Emergent Codes Identified from Participant Interviews in this Study

Campus Employment

Counseling/Counseling Center

Demisexual

Feeling safe – but not enough to come out

Ignorance

Lapsed Catholic

LGBT Family/New Family/Campus Family

Middle Class

Neutral Campus Climate

Pansexual

Roommate

School Counselor

Suitemate

Trans/Transgender

Transmasculine

## Appendix G

### Sample Informed Consent Form

#### St. John Fisher College INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Factors that Affect Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students' Efforts toward Self-Actualization at a Private, Religious College: A Phenomenological Study

Name of researcher: John B. ("Jack") Gormley

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Michael Muffs      Phone for further information: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Purpose of study: This study will look at the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students at a private, religious college. This research seeks to examine what on-campus experiences of GLB students may support or hinder their ability to achieve self-actualization (meaning to reach one's full potential and find peace with one's true self, according to the psychologist Abraham Maslow).

Place of study: Interviews will be conducted at locations convenient to participants, in meeting rooms on or near the campus of a private college in the greater New York City region of the United States.

Length of participation: one in-person interview per subject, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, to be conducted in the summer or early fall of 2017.

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

There may be a risk that participants feel uncomfortable or may experience a degree of emotional distress when answering some of the interview questions, but this risk is believed to be minimal. This research is not designed to help you personally, but your participation may help future generations of college students, as well as faculty, staff, and administrators at private colleges to better understand and assist GLB students.

Information about supportive services are included with this document. All participants will receive a \$50 gift card at the start of their interview.

Methods for protecting confidentiality/privacy: Your confidentiality is of utmost importance. This research involves making digital recordings of the interviews to provide a complete record of our interview discussion. To help protect confidentiality, your interview recordings, transcripts, and related documents will be coded with a pseudonym (your actual identity will never be disclosed). These documents will be kept separate from the personal information collected on this informed consent form. Only the researcher will be able to link the research materials to a specific person.

The consent forms will be kept in an unmarked file in a locked file cabinet which only the researcher can access. All digital audio recordings and the related transcripts will be kept on a locked and password-protected computer inside the researcher's private home, and will not include any identifying personal information. Only the researcher will have access to recordings which will be destroyed in December of 2020. Your real name and identity will never be used in any published work based on this research. Your information may be shared with appropriate representatives of your college or governmental authorities ONLY if you or someone else is in danger, or if we are required to do so by law.

**Your rights:** As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

_____	_____	_____
Print name (Participant)	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Print name (Researcher)	Signature	Date

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact xxxxxxxxxx at [irb@sjfc.edu](mailto:irb@sjfc.edu).

## Appendix H

### Sample Letter of Introduction to Potential Participants

My name is Jack Gormley and I would like to invite you to participate in an interview as part of my doctoral dissertation research project. I have worked at several private colleges in the Washington, DC area and in New York for more than 10 years. I am currently a student affairs administrator at a private college in Boston, Massachusetts. I have also lived as an openly gay man for approximately 20 years. I am now a candidate for a doctoral degree (Ed.D.) in the St. John Fisher College Executive Leadership program.

The dissertation research study I have chosen is a qualitative exploration of the factors that affect gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college students' efforts to achieve self-actualization at private, religious colleges. In other words, I will look at what experiences on a private college campus may support or may hinder the ability of GLB students to reach their full potential. This is what the psychologist Abraham Maslow referred to as "self-actualization." The term also refers to finding peace with your true self and making full use of your talents and abilities. I hope you will agree this is a valuable topic for bisexual, lesbian, and gay students and recent college graduates.

The purpose of this study will be to better understand the experiences of GLB students at private, religious colleges. Interview topics will probe students' perceptions of their school life, including their opportunities for extracurricular involvement as gay members of the college community. This study aims to benefit GLB students, alumni, and their families as well as college administrators and faculty.

I would truly appreciate your input into this study – as a GLB student or recent graduate of a private college, you have significant information to share. Please consider volunteering for an interview.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask for one interview, a time commitment of about 75 to 90 minutes. The interview would consist of open-ended questions about your experiences as a GLB private college student. Your identity and your interview responses would be guarded with utmost confidentiality. Your name and the name of your college would never be shared or published in any way. The information we discuss about your experiences and your attitudes would be combined with other participants' information to describe what it is like to be a lesbian, gay, or bisexual student at an unnamed private, religious college in the greater New York City area – where there are many such schools. As a token of my thanks, I will give each interview participant a \$50 gift card at the time of his/her interview.

If you voluntarily opt to be interviewed for this study, you will be asked to sign an Informed Consent document. The consent form is for your protection. It is required by St. John Fisher College and I will explain it to you. We will schedule the interview at a date, time, and location convenient for you. I can send you sample questions in advance of an interview if you'd like.

Please know that I recognize that discussing sexual orientation and identity can be a sensitive matter. I respect your privacy whether you choose to participate in this study or not. Participants' names and identities will remain confidential. As the researcher, I am the only person who will know participants' names but I will use pseudonyms and protective language to ensure personally identifying information will never be associated with individual participants. You can also opt for a telephone or Skype interview rather than face-to-face, if you prefer.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and not obligatory in any way. If you choose to participate, you may then choose to end your participation at any time (and without penalty). You can also decline to answer any questions during the interview. Your decision to participate or not participate will have no effect on your status at your college. In fact, your college will only know of your participation if you choose to share that information with them.

This study is fully approved by the St. John Fisher College's institutional review board (IRB). I can provide you with proof of approval upon request. **If you have questions or wish to express your interest in participating in this study, please contact me via email at xxxxxxxx@xxx.edu.**

If you decide to email to ask questions or express interest in the study, you will receive more information by email reply, and a link to a very brief survey (questions listed below) designed to help you decide if you would like to be interviewed. If you are interested in participating (after you've reviewed the information in the email, including the informed consent documents, and taken the quick survey, you will be asked to provide your contact information. You will only be contacted if you request to be interviewed and if you provide an email or telephone number. For your protection, I will not ask your name unless or until you confirm your voluntary participation in the study, and then we will schedule an interview at your convenience.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. I look forward to hearing from you soon. Please feel free to email me with any questions you may have about the study.

Sincerely,  
John B. ("Jack") Gormley  
St. John Fisher College (Rochester, NY)

### Questions to Help Guide Potential Participants

These questions are provided only to help potential volunteers consider whether or not they wish to participate in an interview. Answers to these questions will not be collected or analyzed in any way. If you decide to be interviewed (about an hour time commitment), please email xxxx@xxx.xxx

Note, you can participate in an interview without providing your actual name. Also, your college will NOT be informed of your participation in this confidential study unless you decide to notify them.

1. Are you currently enrolled in a private, religious college (a college or university that is not organized or run by a state or local government, and has an affiliation with a religious group or church)?

2. Have you recently graduated from a private college (in about the last three years)?

3. Please select the answer that best describes how you prefer to self-identify your sexual orientation:

Gay/Homosexual	Lesbian	Bisexual or Pansexual
Straight/Heterosexual	Other	Prefer not to say

4. How comfortable would you feel discussing your college experiences in a private, confidential interview? (Interview topics may include academic issues; extra-curricular activities, clubs/organizations, sports, dorming, living off campus, and other aspects of your time in college – you decide what to share.)

Very comfortable  
Comfortable  
Somewhat comfortable  
Not sure  
Somewhat uncomfortable  
Uncomfortable  
Very uncomfortable

5. How comfortable would you feel discussing (in a private, confidential interview) how your sexual orientation may affect (or have affected) your experiences during college?

Very comfortable  
Comfortable  
Somewhat comfortable  
Not sure  
Somewhat uncomfortable  
Uncomfortable  
Very uncomfortable

6. Would you be willing to discuss your perceptions—if any—of homophobia at the college you attend or attended?

- Yes, willing
- Mostly willing
- Not sure
- Mostly unwilling
- No, not willing

7. Would you like to be interviewed as part of this study? Note, your identity and the identity of your college will NOT be revealed – please read the attached Informed Consent with additional details.

If you decide to answer yes, you will be contacted by the researcher leading this study. If no, you will have no further contact. Please indicate your reply by selecting an option from the following list and providing your preferred contact information:

- Yes, please call me at \_\_\_\_\_
- Yes, please text message me at \_\_\_\_\_
- Yes, please email me at \_\_\_\_\_
- Not sure – I’ll think about it some more.
- No, do not contact me. (No reply needed)