# Queer Student Leaders:
# An Exploratory Case Study
# of Identity Development and LGBT
# Student Involvement
# at a Midwestern Research University

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**ABSTRACT.** Using the first phase of a longitudinal study of student leaders of the 2002 Midwest Bi-, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Allies College Conference (MBLGTACC), the authors explore the intersections of involvement in identity-specific leadership activities and development of LGBT/Queer identity. LGBT leadership experiences appear to have contributed substantively to the identity development of these college students. Based on this finding, the authors propose implications for improved educational practice and areas for future research. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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A substantial body of theory and research in higher education supports the premise that involvement in extracurricular activities leads to student development and learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is also evidence that involvement in activities related to a specific element of identity–such as race or gender–supports exploration of identity construction (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). However, it is not known how involvement in campus LGBT-related activities influences the identity development of student participants.

This article is based on data collected from the first phase of a multi-year longitudinal study of student organizers of a regional conference for LGBT college students and their allies. We address the question: What is the relationship between involvement in leadership of a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) student organization and student outcomes related to LGBT identity?

## *RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK*

This study relies on two intersecting bodies of knowledge: college student involvement and development of LGBT students. Our research participants' decision to become involved in the leadership of an activity explicitly related to their sexual orientation and our examination of their sexual identity development represent the intersection of the two research areas.

### *Influence of Campus Involvement on Student Development*

Together with the body of theory and research documenting the relationship between participating in campus activities and the development of leadership skills and abilities, there is limited evidence that such involvement supports exploration of identity racial, sexual, or gender construction. Bieschke, Eberz, and Wilson (2000, p. 29), for example, reviewing published research pertaining to LGBT college students, deemed it "sparse" and, for the most part, "methodologically flawed." Only nine studies directly addressed the LGBT college student and only two of these (D'Augelli, 1994; Rhoads, 1994) focused on involvement in campus life and LGBT identity development. Subsequently, two additional studies (Evans & Broido, 1999; Stevens, 2004) have addressed LGBT identity development in the college context. These four studies suggest that participation in an LGBT campus community promotes resiliency and LGBT identity development. However, these studies pro-

vide educators little guidance in creating curricula, programs, and services that promote learning and development in LGBT students.

### LGBT Identity Development

Beginning in the 1970s, identity development models emerged related to gay identity (and later lesbian identity) and the "coming out" process. These models (e.g., Cass 1979, 1984) suggest that non-heterosexuals move through a series of stages, usually occurring during the teenage years or early twenties. While the number of stages and how they are identified varies, they share a number of common characteristics (Gonsiorek, 1995). There is an initial stage in which some individuals use multiple defense strategies as a means to block recognition of homosexual feelings, a process that requires a high degree of emotional energy. Often, individuals choose to maintain these defensive strategies for an indefinite period of time, greatly minimizing same-gender feelings. Over time, this process of expending energy to deny and constrict feelings has negative consequences for overall functioning and self esteem. Yet, for many individuals, a gradual recognition of same-gender feelings and interest emerges. This development is usually followed by a period of emotional and behavioral experimentation with homosexuality–often accompanied by an increasing sense of normality about same-gender feelings. Some models describe a second crisis after the dissolution of a first relationship when negative feelings about being gay or lesbian re-emerge. As the individual again begins to accept his or her same-gender feelings, a sense of identity as gay or lesbian is successfully integrated and accepted as a positive aspect of the self.

Gonsiorek (1995) asserted that models vary somewhat on the particulars of these later stages. While most scholars describe the coming out process in discrete stages, they often note that it is generally unpredictable, with stops, starts, and backtracking. Widely used in educational research and teaching, these models were based on early studies that used all-male, adult samples and were later applied to lesbians and, more recently, bisexual youth (Blumstein & Schwartz, 2000; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Women may come out and have intimate same-sex experiences somewhat later than men (Brown, 1995), and bisexuals may come to their identities in different ways from those experienced by lesbians and gay men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 2000; Fox, 1995). For example, bisexual identity may emerge from heterosexual or homosexual identity at any point in the lifespan.

In addition to studies of sexual identity, there has also been study into gender identity development. The term "gender identity" describes an individual's internal sense of maleness/masculinity or femaleness/femininity. This sense may include an understanding of self as "woman" or "man" or a self-concept in between or outside traditional notions of gender construction (Wilchins, 1997, 2002). The term transgender is often used as an umbrella term to encompass a broad range of gender non-conforming identities, including individuals whose biological sex assignment and/or societal expectations for gender expression are in conflict with the individual's gender identity (Wilchins, 1997, 2002). A sample of terms describing transgender identities includes "transsexuals," "transvestites," male and female "impersonators," drag "kings" and "queens," "male to female or M-F," "female to male or F-M," "cross-dressers," and "gender benders" (Wilchins, 1997, 2002).

Transgender persons may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual (Elkins & King, 1996). While there are a number of distinctions between sexual and gender identities, scholars suggest some overlapping of these identities as well (Wilchins, 2002). An evolving language of these intersecting identities includes terms such as "genderqueer," "translesbian," "boydyke," and "transfag" (Wilchins, 2000). Scholarship on transgender identity development has yet to emerge, though at least one study of transgender identity in college students is underway (Bilodeau, 2003).

Early models of sexual orientation and gender identity development reflect the linearity and stage progression common among psychosocial identity development models (e.g., Erikson, 1968). It is also important to note that the majority of sexual identity development models were created from research involving adults reflecting on their experience (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Recent research indicates that the age of LGBT identification is lower than in the past (Herdt & Boxer, 1996), and the experiences of queer-identified youth have implications for educational policy and practice(Kosciw, 2003). It is no longer necessary to rely solely on models based on LGBT adults.

Studies (Herdt & Boxer, 1996; Kosciw, 2004) focusing on teenagers and sexual orientation indicate that the age of self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is occuring earlier than past studies had found. When considering sexual orientation in adolescents and young adults, it is also important to note that these years are often characterized by sexual experimentation, as well as some confusion about identity (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). A same-sex adolescent sexual experience may not signal a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity and adolescents may identify

as lesbian, gay, or bisexual without ever having had a sexual experience (Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

A number of scholars have criticized the overly Eurocenteric nature of LGBT identity development models (Gonsiorek, 1995). There has been a broader consideration of the ways race and culture interact with the process of sexual identity development and the experience of non-heterosexuality in the United States (e.g., Boykin, 1996; Espin, 1993; Wilson, 1996). What it means to identify as same-gender loving is different across cultural contexts, and the process of identifying as a "dual minority" (sexual and racial or ethnic) calls on additional skills in code switching and environmental scanning.

### *Life Span Identity Approach*

If sexual identification is a complex, fluid, and open-ended process influenced by gender, gender identity, and cultures, then models that isolate the sexual identity development process from the psychosocial context are inadequate to describe the multiple possible sexual identities an individual or a group of individuals may have over a lifetime. D'Augelli's (1994) model of sexual orientation and "life span" identity development offers a useful alternative.

Rooted in a human development perspective, D'Augelli contends identity development occurs within a context–the simulateous development of a person's self-concepts, relationships with family, connections to peer groups, and community. This approach views sexual and affectional feelings as variable over an individual's lifetime, although they may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more fixed at others.

D'Augelli posits six developmental processes in the context of the life span model. These processes may occur simultaneously or more independently:

- Exiting heterosexual identity: involves personal and social recognition that one is non-heterosexual, understanding the nature of one's attractions and labeling them, and defining oneself as non-heterosexual through coming out to others.
- Developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity: involves developing the stability that comes from knowing self in the context of contact with other lesbian-bisexual-gay persons, the process of learning how to be non-heterosexual from lesbian-bisexual-gay persons, and challenging internalized myths about homosexuality.

- Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity: focuses on developing a breadth of people who know the person's sexual orientation and are willing to provide support.
- Becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring: recognizes that family relationships are often disrupted with coming out and examines the possibilities of healing those relationships.
- Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status: involves the creation of meaningful relationships where physical and emotional intimacy is expressed.
- Entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community: focuses on the development of a commitment to political and social action and understanding identity through the process of challenging social barriers.

This model has also been used to understand gender identity development. Bilodeau (2003) used a modified version of the D'Augelli framework in a qualitative study of transgender college student identity development. He found that the coming out experiences of transgender college students aligned closely with the six processes (e.g., exiting a traditionally gendered identity or developing a transgender social identity).

Because it was developed in an educational setting and presents a useful heuristic for the examination of identity development in sociohistorical context, we have chosen the D'Augelli model as the framework for exploring the nexus of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity development and queer student leadership.

## *METHODS*

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we determined that qualitative case study methods were most appropriate for addressing our research question (Yin, 2002): What is the relationship between involvement in leadership of LGBT student organization and student outcomes related to (a) leadership development and (b) LGBT identity?

### *Research Site*

Data were collected from the student organizers of the 2002 Midwest Bi-, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Allies College Conference. With roots dating back to a conference held in 1991 in Des Moines, the Midwest Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay Transgender and Ally College Conference

(MBLGTACC) is one of the largest of its type in the nation. The conference has a strong history of being predominantly student-led, with teams of students serving in coordinating roles. Institutional staff, usually those connected with LGBT resource centers, provide varying degrees of support and coordination. In 2002, the conference drew approximately 1100 individuals and featured more than 80 workshops and keynote presentations.

### *Participants*

Participants were seven LGBT-identified undergraduate students involved in planning the 2002 MBLGTACC at MSU. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Patton (1990) recommended purposeful sampling for rich cases, and the LGBT student leaders involved in conference planning represent such a sample. To facilitate reading the themes we discuss in the findings section, we present a brief introduction to the seven students.

> *Alix:*[1] A white, female student athlete who identified as transgender and pansexual ("the term 'bisexual' doesn't suffice, because it's one or the other–men or women–and I'm attracted to both"), Alix was a sophomore at time of conference.

> *Ashley*: A white lesbian who had transferred from a community college. This year was her first at MSU and her third year in college.

> *Christopher*: An African American gay male sophomore and a sociology major.

> *Denise*: An African American lesbian in her fourth year. She stayed at MSU for a fifth year to complete a telecommunications degree.

> *Jo*: A white, bisexual woman, who was a junior math major.

> *Mike*: A white gay male journalism major in his fifth year of college.

> *Jordan*: A female international student, transgender identified, and a junior.

### Data Collection

We collected data through individual interviews, supplemented with observations of the conference (as a participating presenter) by Renn and of the planning process and the conference (as staff adviser) by Bilodeau. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that inquired about students' conference experiences, LGBT identity, and leadership. Four of the interviews were conducted by both authors. Additionally, Renn conducted one and Bilodeau two more. Interviews, lasting from 50-90 minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed.

### Data Analyses and Interpretation

For this exploratory study on the intersection of involvement and LGBT identity development, we elected to analyze data guided by D'Augelli's (1994) six identity processes. We compared interview data to the model, refining and elaborating on it as appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Separately, we analyzed one transcript using the six identity processes as primary codes. We concurred substantially and then divided the remaining transcripts for coding.

### Limitations

Generalizations about the applicability of D'Augelli's model to the identity of all LGBT college student leaders are not warranted since this study reports data from seven student interviews attending one institution, and this sample was limited to students involved in a particular leadership activity (the conference planning). These data, however, generally conformed to his model.[2] In addition, the identities of the researchers no doubt affected the data collected, and we do not know the effect of having one interviewer already known to the students (Bilodeau) and one who was new to them (Renn).

## SIX INTERACTIVE PROCESSES AND ADDITIONAL THEMES

This section compares the six processes of D'Augelli's identity development model to the experiences of seven LGBT student leaders. We then present additional themes related to LGBT identity development in the context of the specific student leadership context.

### Process 1: Exiting Heterosexual and/or Traditionally Gendered Identity[3]

Some participants entered MSU already having negotiated the initial process of exiting heterosexual identity, traditionally gendered identity, or both; others first engaged this process after they came to college. Involvement in the MBLGTAC provided opportunities for some students to further the process of exiting heterosexual and/or traditionally gendered identity–personally and publicly. More reticent about disclosing his identity before planning the conference, Mike recalled: "When I did the conference, I was definitely out. And, to literally everybody and their dog for about two years now." And although Ashley said, "Since I've been out to myself I've been pretty much out everywhere," she acknowledged that "it's always uncomfortable the first week of certain classes," before she had come out publicly to peers. Being involved in planning the conference helped Ashley "be more out in a way. More comfortable."

Christopher attributed some of his exiting heterosexuality process directly to involvement with the conference planners. One of the co-chairs of the conference inspired him to use an LGBT leadership role to counter feelings of depression related to concealing a non-heterosexual identity. Christopher told us, "Like I said, the people you meet can really help you come out." Coming out provided a release from Christopher's anxiety and depression:

> I think it's very important to come out like this, I mean when you're ready, because you really can get some peace of mind. And you can actually do some things besides worry about being gay. Because I was like just sitting there and being down and worrying about everything. To me coming out was like, "Okay, I can stop worrying about it." That's what it's like when you come out.

D'Augelli's (1994, p. 325) conflation of "personal and social recognition that one's sexual orientation is not heterosexual" into Process 1, and the very close connection of these recognitions with Process 2 (personal LGBT identity status) and Process 3 (LGBT social status), makes it difficult to designate examples like Christopher's solely as Process 1, yet they illustrate the ways in which participation in the conference contributed to this developmental process.

### Process 2: Developing a Personal LGBT Identity Status

Before, during, and after MBLGTACC, the students interviewed were learning "how to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, with these constructs

defined by their proximal community of lesbians, gay men, or bisexual people" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325). Planning and attending the conference provided specific opportunities. Jo found the leadership experience empowering:

> I didn't realize the lasting impact that the conference would have on this campus and on the individuals who planned it, and the participants. I didn't realize I guess because that was the first conference like that that I'd ever attended. I didn't realize how empowering it would be, to be involved with it. So I think the whole experience surpassed my expectations of what I thought I'd get out of it. I kind of thought it would be something that I planned and helped out with, and just one more job on the list of things that I do, but I really think that I got a lot out of it personally.

Jo's sexual identity status is inextricably linked to her identity as a queer activist:

> I don't think I would be as out as I am if it wasn't for activism. Because when you're an activist, you're forced out of the closet by the fact that your face is on the front page of a newspaper. There's no one on this campus who reads the [campus paper] who doesn't know who I am and about my involvement with the Alliance [of LGBT Students].

   Not out as broadly as Jo, Denise and Christopher also described the ways in which the conference transformed their identities. Messages Denise received at the conference about identity, community, and pride percolated over the summer:

> [W]hen I was there it was like, you're totally out because everybody there is feeling the same. They're on the same wavelength in a certain respect. It was like with the rainbow colors everywhere . . .
>
>    After the conference, I think, I really felt like carrying on after the conference ended into how I acted. With me, my personal situation, it didn't carry on directly after, but I kept those kinds of things in mind and it just kind of sat there through the summer. I'm out. I've got this [rainbow flag] on my bag and I'm just out fully. Everybody knows. It's a great feeling, and I believe the conference was doing that . . . Seeing all those people is like a glimmer of hope. Oh, my gosh! There's so many of us out there and you just don't know. I think indirectly and directly it helped me to get to the point where I am today.

Christopher's involvement in the conference leadership meant that he had to interact with staff members on campus whom he did not know and who did not know anything about his sexual identity. One meeting was a watershed moment. Christopher had been involved in planning concerts on campus and brought his production experience to the entertainment subcommittee. The subcommittee met with administrators to discuss details of contracts, technical needs, and so forth.

> We were trying to come up with all the information. And they invited me and [name] and a couple of other people were there. It was like a really big step because I kind of got to see how everything worked inside. Obviously I was there because I was gay, so it was like, well it was a big step. And that was for the conference . . . That was a pretty big step. I wasn't really nervous before going there, but I think it's been a bunch of small little steps that have led to being more comfortable.

As a result of being in a meeting where "obviously" he was there because he was gay, Christopher became more comfortable with his gay identity. Through his involvement with other student leaders, he also found role models for being an out gay black man: "I mean really when you're around people and you associate with people who are where you want to be it changes you."

Though Christopher, Denise, and Jo were at very different places in their personal sexual identities, participation in the conference influenced their identity development process. As in each illustration, the interaction between Process 2 (individual identity) and Process 3 (social identity) was evident.

### Process 3: Developing an LGBT Social Identity

Although D'Augelli observes that a social identity might include being part of networks of people who do *not* support queer identity, in relationship to the MBLGTACC, students described mainly supportive, positive relationships.

New on campus, Ashley joined the conference committee, in part, "for fun, to get to know other people on campus." She simply said, "It was nice to not have to explain myself or identify myself or feel uncomfortable or wonder who's going to judge or anything in that regards."

In contrast, involvement with this planning committee was an important step in Jordan's evolution as an LGBT campus leader and an impor-

tant moment in the development of her queer social identity. During her first two years, Jordan was involved in LGBT residence hall caucuses. Her third year, however, found her in a different residential area and a new residential caucus, "which was a lot more active. It has a lot of membership. That got me a lot more riled up." It was here that she met Alix, the caucus president, and "developed a very, very close friendship with her. I started getting more involved because she was."

Jordan also engaged with the international student community as a member of Same Gender Loving SOCIAL (*S*tudents *o*f *C*olor, *I*nternationals, and *AL*lies). She explained:

> [B]ecause I had bad experiences at home, I tried to detach myself a lot from the whole international student identity . . . I think it was when SOCIAL was created that I started to be like, "Oh, yeah, I am an international student as well as LBGT, so I might be an addition to that from now on."

Jordan viewed SOCIAL as an important part of her network of support on campus. It was also important to Denise and Christopher, as they negotiated intersecting identities as LGBT people of color on campus. Consequently, the trio made special efforts to include students of color and international student issues in the MBLGTACC program through speakers, entertainment, workshops, and caucuses. The creation of space within the conference for a supportive social network for queer students of color and international students was a point of pride for several committee members interviewed, no matter what their racial, ethnic, or national background.

Alix, who identified as transgender and pansexual, faced difficulties when she came out to her first-year roommate. In response to Alix's rainbow poster, the roommate posted Nazi slogans in their room and outed Alix to the homophobic intercollegiate athletic team on which Alix played. Alix came out to her Resident Mentor (akin to a Resident Advisor) and found supportive social spaces on campus. She remembered her mentor:

> We actually both came out to each other at the same time. Well, she's bisexual. So she was a big help. I came out to her and she told me about [the residence hall LGBT caucus]. And she was planning on going. Because I was kind of upset that my team wasn't real supportive, I went there very much for the support aspect. I didn't need to be counseled necessarily, I was okay with myself being

queer, but I just needed to be in an environment where there were a lot of other queer people and we could just talk about whatever. So I guess talking to my mentor and being uncomfortable with my team my freshman year was kind of my first step into getting involved.

Chairing the residential caucus led to involvement with the Alliance and then with the MBLGTACC planning group, which, in turn expanded Alix's social network and visibility on campus. Not only was Process 3 fairly interactive with 1 and 2, but it was also closely linked to Process 6 (entering an LGBT community).

### Process 3: Becoming an LGBT Offspring

"Parental relationships are often temporarily disrupted with the disclosure of sexual orientation" claims D'Augelli (1994, p. 326). Disclosure of transgender identity has a similar impact (Bilodeau, 2003).

Since our interview protocol focused on campus life and, particularly, the MBLGTACC experience, participants did not fully discuss family relationships. Three students commented on family, which provided a context for understanding our participants' leadership activities in their lives as young queer adults. For example, Christopher said:

> This year I actually came out to my mom, about a month ago . . . She took it pretty well. She said, "I still love you. You're still my son." So we can pretty much talk about it. So that was a good thing, too. If you can tell yourself, "Okay, my mom is accepting of it," who gives a damn what anybody else thinks?

### Process 4: Developing a LGBT Intimacy Status

Forming intimate relationships, as D'Augelli (1994, p. 327) underscores, is challenging given the "invisibility of lesbian and gay couples in our cultural imagery," "the view that gay men are solitary and cannot form relationships of any duration because of sexual excesses," and the unavailability to gays and lesbians of "social and cultural apparatuses for heterosexual bonding" (p. 327). Interestingly, the participants did not explicitly refer to these challenges. They did, however, face relationship issues while planning and running the conference.

Instead of reflecting D'Augelli's concerns about a lack of role models for long-term same-gender relationships, Ashley, for instance, fo-

cused on the same issues any undergraduate leader in a relationship with a non-student might face:

> It's hard to juggle. It's been fun because my partner Kate has been more involved with activism now, and she was involved a little bit with the conference. But it's difficult because it still is, just trying to find time to do everything, and my commitment to the relationship and spending time with her is definitely difficult. And it's also difficult to be a student and not have people understand why I don't go out and party until 2 am every weekend, and why I didn't want to stay at the conference center during the conference because that would have been the only time for me to spend time with Kate all week.

Ashley effectively integrated Kate into the conference, creating a shared experience of activism in the queer community.

Asked to describe a challenging experience related to the conference, Denise described a different experience with "LGBT intimacy status" and queer campus leadership:

> What's kind of hard is that because you're dealing with the same people, you're working with the same people. And personal relationships get intertwined with professional relationships. I had issues with that last year. That makes things hard in terms of going to the conference and it's just like, "I'm not with . . ." That makes things difficult because we're just a small community. People recycle people, if you will, and you know what I mean, because you don't have too many choices there. So, that made it hard personally for me.

Whereas Ashley involved her non-student partner with the conference, Denise found the community of student conference leaders too small to withstand the pressure of dealing with a woman with whom she had been involved She described the small community as one in which relationships (and the people in them) got "recycled," such that the "personal relationships got intertwined with the professional relationships" in uncomfortable ways. D'Augelli (1994, p. 327) does not address this issue in his identity development processes, yet one might make the case that these students are reacting in ways that reflect "the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms" which

results from the "lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people."

### *Process 6: Entering an LGBT Community*

Although some students described off-campus LGBT communities, we focused on their campus experiences relating to "the development of commitments to political and social action" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 327). Conference involvement contributed significantly to participants' progress in this identity process–and, progress in Process 6 contributed to development in the first three processes

During the planning and implementing phases of the conference, Ashley, a new transfer student, was a complainant in a case to the campus Anti-Discrimination Judicial Board (ADJB) involving the denial of equitable housing benefits to her same-sex domestic partner. The ADJB process, which she found "exciting, very disturbing, exhausting, empowering, but also discouraging," reinforced her personal lesbian identity (Process 1) as did, in a different way, her participation with a group of other LGBT-identified people on the conference committee (Processes 2 and 6), which was an important source of support and resiliency.

> It was nice because with the [ADJB process] I had to work so hard to prove something. But with the conference it was nice, because everybody there was on the same level . . . I was strong with people that were like-minded and similar interests and issues. I mean, you could really see progress being made and the direct involvement with the community and just direct activism.

Ashley's conference participation also helped her connect with and create a space within the LGBT community on campus:

> The first couple Alliance meetings I felt really like an outsider, because I felt like, since I was a transfer student, I felt like everybody else had already known each other and connected and worked with each other. But after the conference I didn't feel that at all–and during the conference, too.

Involvement with the conference clearly contributed to Ashley's progress in this identity development process.

For Jordan, sexual and gender identity development processes and her student leadership development were also tightly linked, each contributing to the other:

> I started identifying to myself as a lesbian when I was about ten or twelve. But I kept that pretty much to myself until coming to college. Then I came out as bi at first, then later on I came out as lesbian a couple years later when I felt a lot more comfortable telling people. Then last year, I came out as transgender . . . I guess, since coming out as trans, I've been a lot more comfortable doing a lot of things that I normally wouldn't be. I guess it comes with a lot of people's same experiences with coming out. They just become more bold . . . The more comfortable I was in talking about my various identities, the more comfortable I felt talking on leadership . . . I think as my coming out process evolved, I started getting more involved with actual leadership. Then, this year, I was elected to External Vice-Chair of the Alliance.

Alix was deeply involved in conference planning and then became the chair of the campus-wide Alliance of LGBT Students. Her commitment to activism and social justice was evident in her interview; she appeared not only to want to "enter" a queer community (in D'Augelli's terminology), but to build it, to sustain it, and to challenge it to be more inclusive.

> Now we're going to start working on gender identity, inclusion, and anti-discrimination policy, and domestic partnership benefits for students . . . And also I see my role this year as coalition building with a lot of other groups, making sure the LGBT community is inclusive of persons with multiple identities and oppressions.

Alix credits her commitment to queer activism and her involvement in the queer community with changing and perhaps even saving her life.

> There was a point in my freshman year, my first semester . . . I was just not feeling welcome on the team at all. I got kicked out of practice because I showed up late, and everyone was really angry at me, and I didn't feel included because I was out . . . My roommate hated me. She didn't stay in our room. I just felt very ostracized. And I was kind of sitting at home one day, and I realized that if I didn't ever show up again, that if something had happened to

me, I didn't think anyone would care. So I was suicidal for a couple of months. And that was really hard for me–that was a hard time in my life.

I didn't really realize it was linked to my sexuality at first. But, when I made the decision to become an activist, when I made the decision that this is what I actually wanted to do with my life, that actually saved my life. It was committing to that; it was realizing that I can do something to help other people with this. That changed the way I looked at myself, and that was a way to get myself through things when I didn't really think other people liked me, I didn't like myself. I thought that I could serve a role, a larger role. That was a big turning point too.

## *Summary*

These few examples (reflective of many more from our exploratory study) illustrate the ways and degree in which D'Augelli's (1994) interactive processes manifested themselves through the experiences of seven LGBT campus leaders. These processes were triggered by specific aspects of the student leadership experience, operating more or less as D'Augelli proposed: as independent but interrelated processes of sexual identity development. Rather than understanding the development of sexual identity as a discrete set of stages through which a person ineluctably moves in a linear manner, the processes of the participants' identity development were iteratively related. Of equal significance is the role played by the conference in fostering these processes–and contributing to the resilience of these young people.

## *Additional Themes*

While coding primarily for evidence of D'Augelli's six processes, other related themes emerged. Several of them bear brief noting.

First, the two students of color (Denise and Christopher) and the one international student (Jordan) described powerful experiences within their cultural communities of figuring out what it meant to have a non-heterosexual identity. The student organization SOCIAL was an important location of these experiences, but they also occurred through interactions with predominantly white and domestic student groups, such as student government and performing arts groups, and among students of color. Denise spoke as a representative of the LGBT commu-

nity at a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event, the first time she came out in the context of the African American student community. She said, "For me to go in front of them and speak out that was great and I got great feedback on that and I felt so good after that."

Second, the two transgender students (Alix and Jordan) underwent parallel processes of sexual orientation identity development and gender identity development. Although we are not inclined to apply D'Augelli's model indiscriminately to gender identity development, there are similarities between the two processes (Bilodeau, 2003). For example, Process 1 could be translated to address "exiting a binary gender identity system," Process 2 could become "developing a personal transgender identity," and so on. Indeed, we found evidence in the data that these processes were occurring for Alix and Jordan in the campus context. Jordan described her evolving sense of self from bisexual to lesbian to transgender as a parallel process to her leadership development: "I was sort of coming out as a leader."

We also identified specific interactions among D'Augelli's processes. If the "community" described in Process 6 is defined as a specific queer campus community, for example, then intimate relationships between community members (Process 5) and the establishment of social identity (Process 3) could strongly affect how one enters this community–more strongly than might be the case in a less bounded queer community such those that exist off campus or in larger cities. Denise's experience dating another student leader illustrates the intersection of intimacy and identity in larger social contexts.

The fourth theme is the role of student communities existing outside of institutional structures. Ashley remarked that she transferred to MSU from a campus that had a notable queer infrastructure but lacked an accessible student community. A number of students commented on the importance of peer culture in how comfortable they felt in established LGBT student organizations on campus and informal queer networks. For instance, peer relationships in work and residence hall settings facilitated Denise's and Christopher's entry to LGBT campus groups. Other students accessed the formal LGBT campus structures–including the MBLGTAC planning group–through informal peer culture and friendship groups.


## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As one current and one former campus administrator with responsibility for overseeing LGBT campus issues, we are especially interested

in the ways our research may intersect with student affairs professional practice. Although scholars and practitioners have pointed to the need to improve student development practice in the area of LGBT concerns (e.g., Croteau & Lark, 1995; Fassinger, 1998), there is little evidence that student affairs professionals have adequate attitudes, knowledge, or skills to do so (Talbot, 1996; Talbot & Kocarek, 1997). In part, this lack represents a gap in the preparation of new student affairs professionals through graduate programs (Talbot & Kocarek, 1997), but it also derives from a dearth of research on LGBT students, their identities, and the processes leading to identity development (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson 2000).

There are promising practices underway in several student affairs functional areas: Career counselors have created a "mentoring web" to provide guidance and role models to LGBT students (Van Puymbroeck, 2001); residence halls at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst provide interest housing for LGBT-identified students (Herbst & Malaney, 1999); and over 90 institutions have LGBT campus resource centers providing programs and services (Ritchie & Banning, 2001). Still, few of these efforts have been evaluated to determine their efficacy in promoting student learning and development; none have been subject to research for the purpose of examining how the program or service influences the social context of LGBT identity development or the development of resiliency.

What might be learned from the experiences of the seven LGBT leaders in the first phase of our longitudinal study that might lead to improved educational practice? What additional research is needed in this area?

Understanding how elements in the campus leadership context promote or inhibit identity development processes could provide empirical support for creating leadership and involvement opportunities that maximize developmental outcomes. Sanlo (2002), for instance, has offered UCLA's "LGBT Student Leader Roundtable" as an example of an effective merging of LGBT identity development theory (she used Cass, 1979) and student leadership development practice. Empirical testing of this model, and others like it in practice across the nation, would provide needed support for continuation and improvement.

Second, we concur with Rhoads (1997, p. 517) that "a variety of developmental stage models have suggested that 'identity pride' (often discussed as 'immersion') stages are not an end point, but instead represent a lower level of identity development" and join him in asking

> If racial minorities and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have sig-
> nificant cultural barriers to overcome throughout society, what good
> does it do to situate passion toward group identification as a stage to
> work through on their way to a calmer, more synthesized identity?

Our data indicate that the D'Augelli model, with its emphasis on inter-
active processes rather than developmental stages, generally captures
the diverse experiences of student leaders who identify in a variety of
ways as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. To paint this highly
engaging and engaged group of students as less than fully developed (as
Cass' model, among others, would) seems a disservice. Is it useful for
student affairs professionals to understand student activists (LGBT or
any others) as underdeveloped?

We also question the assumption of many student affairs profession-
als that LGBT student organizations provide services (such as counsel-
ing and programs) that help those students who receive the services or
attend the programs develop identity. Rather, we propose conceiving
*student leadership itself* as a way to develop identity. While LGBT stu-
dent leaders are sometimes included in leadership development pro-
grams on campus, and while the benefits to identity development of
group members are often acknowledged, this exploratory study sug-
gests a different approach: making the LGBT identity development of
student leaders a *central* purpose.

As one of us has argued elsewhere (Renn, 2003), identity-based
spaces on campus, whether for women or students of color or LGBT
students, are critical spaces of identity formation and sources of resil-
iency. Certainly the experiences of Alix (with the homophobic room-
mate and team) and Ashley (with the ADJB complaint) echo this
finding; participation as a student leader in an identity-based setting
connected them to critical social supports and enabled them to persist in
other campus endeavors, including academics, work, and athletics.

Finally, though foundational studies of LGBT youth focused on risk
factors associated with sexual identity, scholars have recently turned to
the study of resiliency in queer youth (Russell, 2005). Educational pro-
grams (e.g., residence halls, career services) and interventions (partici-
pation in LGBT student leadership) can be seen as developmental
assets, one of the key contributors to resiliency. LGBT-supportive peer
interactions and advisor-student relationships create a context for posi-
tive development. Students in our exploratory study demonstrated the
potential for campus involvement to promote resiliency, and we plan to
follow this thread in future studies of LGBT student leadership.

## NOTES

1. At the time we collected the data presented in this article Jordan and Alix, transgender identified students, chose to use the pronoun "she." Later, both students began to use "he" to more clearly reflect their gender identities. Alix has also selected a new first name.

2. We decided to limit our analysis and interpretation for this article primarily to using D'Augelli's six processes of identity development. Elsewhere (Renn & Bilodeau, 2003) we report our analyses of the data for themes related to leadership development.

3. We use a modified version of the D'Augelli model to be inclusive of transgender students, changing lesbian-gay-bisexual to the designation "LGBT." We are aware of the important distinctions between sexual orientation and gender identities, as well as emerging research that has utilized the D'Augelli framework as a lens for understanding transgender student experiences (Bilodeau, 2003). For the most part, quotes in this section describe sexual orientation, except when we refer specifically to gender identity.

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