

ABSTRACT

THESIS: An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of Gay and Lesbian Students

Enrolled in Faith-Based Higher Education

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PAGES: 96

College is a formative stage of identity development for many young adults. This study presents an in-depth analysis of how some young adults who identify as gay or lesbian experience higher education in a faith-based setting. The theoretical framework for the research was founded in the literature of two separate fields: the general experience of college students and homosexual identity formation. Utilizing models created by Chickering (1969), Cass (1984), and D'Augelli (1994), among others, the intent of this study was to discover how an explicitly faith-based college environment impacts the collegiate experiences of students who identify as gay and lesbian.

This study was grounded in qualitative, phenomenological methodology. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. Interviews were completed during the spring semester of 2010. Data analysis was conducted based on steps identified by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), and predominant themes were discovered.

The researcher concluded that a faith-based institutional setting impacts the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students in considerable ways. Students

encountered significant struggles, including identity denial, pressure to conceal sexuality, and frustration regarding school policies. Based on these themes, specific conclusions were drawn regarding students' enrollment decisions, sexual identity formation during the collegiate experience, reconciliation of faith and sexual identity, encouraging supportive networks for gay and lesbian students, and policy development regarding sexual behaviors on campus. Suggestions were presented for administrators, counselors, faculty, staff, and students at faith-based universities.