

## Heterosexual Ally Identity Development: A Conceptual Model

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*Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students represent a significant population of students who are commonly oppressed on college campuses; therefore, student affairs professionals should learn how to better affect social change on their campuses to support these students. Applying Edwards' (2006) Conceptual Model on Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development to Worthington, Savoy, Dillon & Vernaglia's (2002) Heterosexual Identity Development Model, this paper provides a conceptual model for the ally identity development of heterosexual students.*

Issues of privilege and oppression have a profound impact on society (Bell, 2007). Systems of oppression are damaging for marginalized groups and provide unearned benefits to those with privilege (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007). Marginalized identity groups include those who identify as Black, GLB, and/or having a disability. Privileged social groups include those who identify as White, men, and/or heterosexual. These unearned benefits are not granted as a result of hard work or accomplishment, but instead because of inequitable systems that favor certain social groups over others (Edwards, 2006). Socially constructed systems of oppression not only affect the students that attend colleges and universities, but are perpetuated by the institutions themselves (Kivel, 2002). Therefore, the fight against oppressive systems and the need for support of marginalized student populations are critical tasks for student affairs administrators.

Sexual identity is a form of social identity that commonly suffers from systemic privilege and oppression (Griffin, D'Errico, Harro, & Schiff, 2007). The dominant sexual identity in the

United States is heterosexuality, and this privilege is expressed throughout society in the form of heterosexism (Herek, 2004). Heterosexism is the system of advantage or privilege afforded to heterosexuals in institutional practices, policies, and cultural norms that assume heterosexuality as the only natural sexual identity or expression (Herek, 2004). At colleges and universities, heterosexuals enjoy privileges such as accommodating housing and bathrooms, a welcoming environment in the classroom, residence halls, and social scene, and are rarely in a position where they have to represent their sexual orientation. All of these privileges make non-heterosexuals –in particular GLB students– feel marginalized and discriminated against (Hardiman et al., 2007). Marginalization and discrimination lead to a negative campus climate for GLB students, which can significantly hinder their developmental process (Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). In order to provide a welcoming environment for GLB students and support their identity development student affairs professionals need to be aware of the campus climate and address

it when necessary (Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003).

The importance of understanding the campus climate from the perspective of GLB students is recently significant due to the untimely death of Tyler Clementi, a first year student at Rutgers University, in 2010 (Biemiller, 2010). Clementi, a gay male, was surreptitiously videotaped by his roommate while he was romantically engaged with a male partner (Biemiller, 2010). The videotaping occurred just days before Clementi committed suicide (Biemiller, 2010). At the time of this writing, the alleged perpetrator in the incident, Clementi's roommate Dharun Ravi, has been found guilty of invasion of privacy, bias intimidation, encouraging others to spy, and intimidating Clementi for being gay (Loyd & Curry, 2012). Three of the convictions carry sentences of 5 to 10 years in prison, and Ravi is due to be sentenced in May (Loyd & Curry, 2012). Although student affairs professionals cannot change the behaviors of all students across a campus, effectively educating students can help to improve the campus climate in a meaningful way.

Campus climates are constructed by those who live there (Strange & Banning, 2001), and college campuses are inhabited predominantly by heterosexual students. The lack of awareness of privileged students on college campuses is a perpetual issue that creates unwelcoming campus environments for oppressed social groups (Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998). Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, and Vernaglia (2002) posit that as heterosexuals develop their sexual identity, their attitudes towards GLBs and understanding of dominant/nondominant group relations, privilege, and oppression begin to crystallize. Therefore, if heterosexual students, as a majority student population, were at a place

developmentally where they had a clear, internalized understanding of their own sexual identity and could understand and appreciate others with different sexual identities, then unwelcoming campus climates could be changed into more positive environments for GLB students. Therefore, student affairs professionals should possess an understanding of heterosexual identity development and how conditions can be created to assist the development of these students (Worthington et al., 2002).

Although many heterosexual students lack awareness, some students recognize their privilege and strive to become allies. There is very little literature on social justice ally development in comparison to the large body of research on the victims of oppression (Edwards, 2006). Social justice allies, as defined by Broido (2000), are "members of dominant social groups who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership" (p. 3). Supporting students who are targets of oppression has long been a critical aim of student affairs professionals (Kivel, 2000). In addition to this goal, student affairs professionals also work to create social change by altering the structures in place that perpetuate systems of oppression (Kivel, 2000). Developing social justice allyhood in students is a key component toward creating social change at colleges and universities (Edwards, 2006). By focusing solely on the development and support of students in oppressed social groups, as opposed to the development of allies from students in privileged social groups, student affairs professionals continue to place the burden of oppression on the oppressed (Edwards, 2006).

According to a study by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Law in 2011, over eight million Americans identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Gates, 2011). The estimated population of individuals who identify as GLB is 3.5% of the total population, which although a minority is still a significant population. Due to the systemic nature of oppression faced by GLB students on college campuses (Cramer, 2002) and the masses of heterosexual students that have potential to be mobilized as allies with further education (Edwards, 2006), a theory of heterosexual ally identity development (HAID) is necessary to assist student affairs professionals in their efforts to facilitate social change on campus for GLB students.

### Literature Review

The current literature that has helped inform this proposed theory of heterosexual ally identity development spans across sexual identity development, social justice ally identity development, and students' understanding of their ally identity development. Worthington, et.al., (2002) produced the most comprehensive heterosexual identity development model after finding surprisingly limited literature on the topic. His theory not only focuses on psychological processes but also looks at social processes, including the impact that privilege and group affiliation have on the heterosexual development process (Worthington et al., 2002). Worthington et al. (2002) identify six interactive "biopsychosocial influences on heterosexual identity development" (p. 511) including biology; microsocial context; gender norms and socialization; culture; religious orientation; and

systemic homonegativity, sexual prejudice, and privilege. The Worthington et al. (2002) model consists of two parallel, interactive processes: an internal sexual identity process where an individual increasingly accepts and identifies with their "sexual needs, values, sexual orientation and preferences for activities, partner characteristics, and modes of sexual expression" (p. 510), and an external social identity process involving an individual's recognition of their membership in a group "with similar sexual identities... and attitudes towards sexual minorities" (p. 510).

Worthington et al. (2002) also proposes five identity development statuses that the two parallel processes occur within, which draw from James Marcia's (1980) ego identity statuses. Statuses, when viewed from the theorist's lens, are not rigid like stages nor are they progressive or permanent (Worthington et al. 2002). Statuses can be revisited at any time and simply explain how a person is currently dealing with crises, consciously or subconsciously, in a particular point of his or her development (Worthington et al. 2002). The five statuses are *unexplored commitment* (unconscious acceptance of a sexual identity), *active exploration* (careful consideration and exploration that leads to deepening and commitment or diffusion), *diffusion* (no engagement in exploration or commitment resulting from a crisis), *deepening and commitment* (more complex understanding of sexual identity and an awareness of oppression and privilege), and *synthesis* (the development of an overall self-concept) (Worthington et al. 2002). The statuses are nonlinear and movement between statuses is possible based on experiences that could potentially challenge the belief systems of

the individual (Worthington et al. 2002). The achievement of an overall self-concept does not have to result in positive attitudes towards GLBs, with potential attitudes ranging “from condemnation to tolerance to affirmativeness” (Worthington et al. 2002, p. 519).

Much of the current literature on social justice allies explore factors that promote or deter individuals from privileged social groups from becoming allies, but there is little on the development of these individuals as allies (Edwards, 2006). Edwards (2006) provides a conceptual framework on how individuals aspiring to be allies can become “more effective, consistent, and sustainable and how student affairs professionals can encourage this development” (p. 41). Edwards (2006) proposes three statuses for the identity development of aspiring social justice allies, including *aspiring ally for self-interest*, *aspiring ally for altruism*, and *ally for social justice*. The first status, *aspiring ally for self-interest*, describes individuals that are primarily motivated to protect oppressed individuals that are close to them personally, but are unlikely to confront any other kinds of oppression and may even oppress others (Edwards, 2006). The second status, *aspiring ally for altruism*, involves a developing awareness of privilege and guilt-driven ally behavior (Edwards, 2006). Because the ally’s actions are driven by guilt and their passion and anger is directed at other members of privileged social groups, as opposed to the systems in place that perpetuate the oppression, their effectiveness as an ally is still limited (Edwards, 2006). The final status, *ally for social justice*, describes allies that “work with those from oppressed group[s] in collaboration and partnership to end the

system of oppression” (Edwards, 2006, p. 51).

Broido (2000) conducted a study that examines how students understood their development as they became social justice allies during their undergraduate years. After conducting open-ended interviews with six white, heterosexual participants, the data was coded to develop five critical factors to inform student affairs professionals of ways to assist their students in becoming allies (Broido, 2000). The five factors include precollege egalitarian values, gaining information about social justice issues, engagement in meaning-making processes, developing confidence, and the presentation of opportunities to act as social justice allies (Broido, 2000). Broido (2000) outlines various strategies that student affairs professionals could utilize to help students develop as allies, including helping students develop self-confidence, making information accessible about ways students can be allies on campus, encouraging perspective-taking, and engaging students in discussion on social justice issues.

### **Significance and Application**

Worthington et al. (2002) produced the most comprehensive theory of heterosexual identity development model to set the framework for the heterosexual ally identity development model. The Worthington et al. (2002) model needs to be further developed for student affairs professionals that want to facilitate social change on campus. Reaching the synthesis status in this model does not have to result in positive change. A student’s self concept as a heterosexual could mean that one has embraced one’s privilege and is secure in

the belief that homosexuality is negative. This is not a status that student affairs professionals should be aiming toward in order to help students develop and to create a welcoming campus environment for GLB students.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2008) points out the importance of creating welcoming environments for all students by stating that student affairs professionals “must create and nurture environments that are welcoming to and bring together persons of diverse backgrounds” (p. 9). Edwards’ (2006) Conceptual Model on Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development aims toward social change that Worthington et al.’s (2002) model lacks, and the statuses presented are also critical to the framework of the heterosexual ally identity development model. Because the Edwards (2006) model focuses on general social justice ally identity development, combining it with heterosexual identity development adds specificity to the heterosexual ally identity development model. Broido (2000) describes critical factors in the development of social justice allies during a student’s undergraduate years, and this literature is significant because these factors affect development and can assist student affairs professionals as they try to create social change on their campus by creating allies.

### **Theory of Heterosexual Ally Identity Development (HAID)**

Using the Worthington et al. (2002) Heterosexual Identity Development Model, Edwards’ (2006) Conceptual Model on Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development, and the critical factors listed by Broido (2000),

HAID theory combines aspects of all three to produce a new theory of how heterosexual students develop an ally identity towards the GLB community (see Figure 1). Similar to the models of Worthington et al. (2002) and Fassinger (1998), HAID theory recognizes two parallel, interactive processes at work: an *individual heterosexual ally identity* process and a *group membership identity* process. The individual heterosexual ally identity process involves the acknowledgment and acceptance of one’s privilege as a heterosexual, an understanding of why that privilege exists, and how it has been used to oppress members of the GLB community. The group membership identity process involves the recognition of oneself as a member of a group of individuals with similar ally identities and approaches toward assisting members of the GLB community (e.g. activists, petitioners, raising awareness, directing efforts towards the local community).

HAID theory uses statuses to show the progression of development. Statuses were chosen for many of the same reasons addressed in the discussion of the Worthington et al. (2002) and Edwards (2006) models. Stages would neither accurately represent the complexity in the developmental processes of different heterosexual allies, nor would they reflect the dissonance that new conflicts can create and how these conflicts affect the developmental process. Worthington et al. (2002) states that “stagewise [sic] theory...inadequately accounts for cycling or recycling through critical conflicts and issues” (p. 502). Statuses can be revisited and are not progressive and are more able to accurately reflect the potential difficulties encountered as a student develops a heterosexual ally identity towards GLBs in a college environment

filled with systemic oppression and opportunity for crises. The proposed model of HAID includes five statuses: *unexplored commitment, aspiring ally to GLBs for self-interest, diffusion, aspiring ally to GLBs for altruism, and ally for GLB social justice.*

The first status, unexplored commitment, explains that students who are still defined by what others have told them will mirror “microsocial (e.g., familial) and macrosocial (e.g., societal) mandates” (Worthington et al., 2002, p. 515). People with signs of unexplored commitment in the individual

heterosexual ally identity process have not done any individual exploration about privilege or ally-ship and do not see themselves as allies. Due to this lack of exploration, they may be consciously or subconsciously oppressing members of the GLB community. This strongly mirrors the individual identity process of Worthington et al.’s (2002) model. The group membership identity process for unexamined commitment also parallels the Worthington et al. (2002) model. As part of the group membership identity process, students reflect the heteronormative societal values around

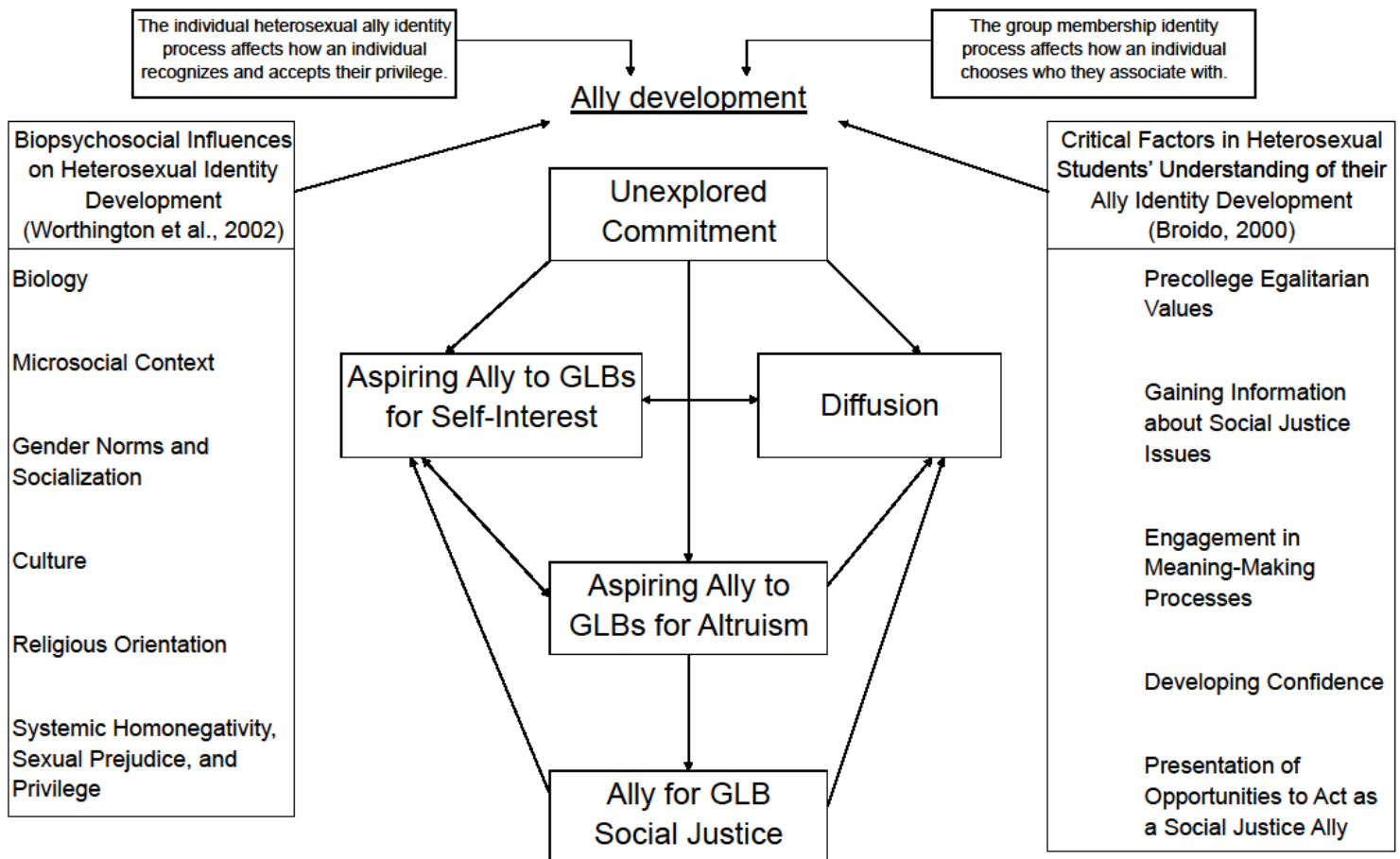


Figure 1. Proposed model of heterosexual ally identity development

them and are likely to be heavily influenced by heterosexism. These students are also unlikely to assume that GLBs are present in their immediate social circles. Movement out of unexplored commitment, as the arrows in Figure 1 suggest, is permanent in the sense that an individual cannot go back to that state of naïve commitment, as Worthington et al.'s (2002) theory also states.

The second status, aspiring ally to GLBs for self-interest, focuses on students whose primary motivation for acting as an ally to GLBs is to protect and support for those they care. As part of the individual heterosexual ally identity process for this status, based on Edwards' (2006) first status, individuals begin to understand privilege and oppression, but have a limited view of both that precludes them from being an effective ally. Students in this status are actively exploring their heterosexual identity and may even have a basic understanding of privilege. These individuals still see the world as a good place and feel that only bad people commit acts of discrimination. The group membership identity process starts to enter the consciousness of aspiring allies to GLBs for self-interest, as it does in the active exploration status of Worthington et al.'s (2002) theory. Individuals may start to question the justice of a privileged status (Worthington et al., 2002) which means that they may begin to understand that there is a difference in the benefits they receive versus oppressed social groups. Aspiring allies to GLBs for self-interest are limited in their understanding because they do not yet understand the systemic nature of oppression or even ways in which they are perpetuating the system of oppression towards GLBs (Edwards, 2006). Due to this, their group

membership identity will not shift tremendously.

The third status, diffusion, is typically a result of conflict. Marcia (1980) described diffusion as a lack of exploration or commitment. The kinds of conflict an aspiring ally to GLBs could face are numerous, but one example is coming in contact with an individual or group of individuals that challenge the aspiring ally's positive beliefs about the GLB community. This challenge could cause the aspiring ally to start questioning his or her allyhood and drive him or her into diffusion. Students in this status are "likely to experience a lack of self-understanding or awareness" (Worthington et al., 2002, p. 518). With this in mind, individual heterosexual ally identity and group membership identity are both in flux as this student tries to reconcile the confusion that has resulted from the crisis he or she experienced. An aspiring ally that has moved into diffusion may be questioning his or her own beliefs about GLBs and whether or not he or she still wants to be an ally to GLBs. A student may tend to reject social conformity in this status (Worthington et al., 2002) which could lead to intentional or unintentional oppression of members in the GLB. Due to the lack of intentionality associated with the diffusion status, students could respond in any number of ways. Although individuals can enter diffusion from any status, individuals with a more solid identity foundation tend to be less susceptible to diffusion (Worthington et al., 2002). Due to the inherent confusion and lack of identity in this status, the only way to move out of diffusion is to actively explore heterosexual ally identity in the aspiring ally to GLBs for self-interest status, where the student can re-conceptualize their role as an ally to GLBs.

The fourth status, aspiring ally to GLBs for altruism, describes individuals who have moved beyond their self-interest to focus on helping all members of the GLB community, not just the GLBs they know. The individual heterosexual ally identity process for this status is modeled after Edwards' (2006) second status, and includes a heightened awareness of issues related to privilege and oppression, as well as feelings of guilt and anger toward other heterosexuals. Individuals in this status have a hard time admitting their own oppressive behaviors and see themselves as "an exceptional member of the dominant group" (Edwards, 2006, p. 50). The group membership identity process for this status, also formed during the second status of Edwards' (2006) theory, is characterized by students dealing with their guilt by distancing themselves from other heterosexuals they see as responsible for oppressing members of the GLB community. Individuals in this status may seek other GLBs for affirmation and to support of their allyship, but in doing so continue to place the burden of oppression squarely on others' shoulders. Aspiring allies to GLBs for altruism have an understanding of the system of oppression, but may be misguided in their efforts to end oppression by solely focusing on other heterosexuals and not the system itself. Individuals in this status will also start to formulate specific ways that they feel comfortable being an ally to GLBs, such as activism, one-on-one conversations, protesting, etc. This is similar to the group identity process in Worthington et al.'s (2002) fourth status.

The fifth and final status, ally for GLB social justice, influenced by Edwards' (2006) third status, describes people who now have a more holistic understanding

of what it means to be an ally to the GLB community as a heterosexual. Movement from the fourth to the fifth status requires a change in an individual understanding of how he or she can act as an ally to the GLB community, switching from an individual approach to a collaborative approach with GLBs (Edwards, 2006). At this status the individual identity and group membership identity merge into one, similar to the synthesis status in Worthington et al.'s (2002) theory, and heterosexual allies have congruence between their self-concept and their actions. Individuals in this status also recognize that the system of oppression negatively affects both the dominant group and the oppressed group, although the harm is not equal (Edwards, 2006). These allies now hold themselves accountable for their own unacknowledged oppressive socialization (Harro, 2000). Allies in this status also begin to see the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression and realize that seeking to address just heterosexism is not enough.

The fifth status is not meant to be seen as an end point, which is why arrows in the HAID model show that movement from this status is possible. The experience and knowledge gained from going through the second status, aspiring ally to GLBs for self-interest, is important to a fully synthesized understanding of ally identity, as it is in the Worthington et al. (2002) model. Any individual that initially moved through the second status and went directly from unexplored commitment to aspiring ally to GLBs for altruism could revert back to the second status at some point in the developmental process. Serious dissonance could also cause an ally for GLB social justice to move into diffusion. Due to the complexity involved in the sexual identity



process (Worthington et al., 2002), and the social justice ally identity development process (Edwards, 2006), it would be difficult for college students to reach this status during their undergraduate education. This complexity also makes the movement from status to status in the model complicated.

Due to the multifaceted nature of the heterosexual identity development process and the social justice ally identity development process, the heterosexual ally identity development process is also complex. Worthington et al. (2002) hypothesized that movement can occur from less developed statuses to more developed statuses and vice versa due to the difficulty of merging an individual identity with a group identity as well as balancing the effects of the six environmental factors. The HAID model shows similar movement and insinuates that becoming a reliable ally to GLBs requires consistent, progressive work that does not end. Attaining the ally for GLB social justice status does not mean that the individual has finished developing, but instead suggests that the individual has a highly complex understanding of their identity that they can continue to work on. This idea relates to the initial point of allyhood, which is to be a collaborator with oppressed social groups to fight against oppression, both individual and systemic. Wise (2005) validates the continuous nature to fight oppression by stating that “there is no such place called ‘justice,’ if by that we envision a finish line, or a point at which the battle is won and the need to continue the struggle over with” (p. 153). This is not meant to suggest that the struggle is futile, but rather that there is always room for improvement and a reason to continue.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Both of the theoretical models used to frame HAID theory, Worthington et al. (2002) and Edwards (2006), are recent models that have not been thoroughly tested to support their validity. Worthington and his colleagues continue to work to validate their heterosexual identity development theory, as they have produced two instruments to test its validity: the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes for Heterosexuals instrument (Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005) and the Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment instrument (Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008). Without concrete validation it is difficult to assess whether or not the hypothesized movement through the statuses is a realistic representation of how an individual would develop their heterosexual identity.

The layering of multiple identities which complicates heterosexual identity, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc., as well as the salience of these identities may also need to be accounted for in a different way. An ally, by definition, is part of a dominant social group (Broido, 2000), so the heterosexual ally identity development of a black female, with multiple oppressed identities, may be different than the process for a white male. Broido’s (2000) study that produced the critical factors in heterosexual students’ understanding of their ally identity development used in the HAID theory involved three white men and three white women, so further research is needed to validate whether these factors would change for non-white heterosexuals.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Student Affairs Practice**

HAID theory, like many student development theories, is not meant to be used prescriptively by student affairs professionals. Instead HAID theory can be a device for professionals as they work to develop heterosexual allies to the GLB community on their campuses. By having a keen understanding of the five critical factors outlined by Broido (2000) student affairs professionals have the capacity to be intentional about creating opportunities for heterosexuals to experience growth. This starts with providing information and creating awareness about the GLB community. GLBs are not discussed enough in K-12 schooling (Hurtado et al., 1998) so early and consistent exposure is important to educate heterosexual students of a sexual orientation different from their own. In addition, student affairs professionals should expose heterosexual students to ideas of privilege and oppression related to sexual orientation. This challenge is critical to building competent allies and to help students move through the initial statuses of the HAID model. If students demonstrate growth and show willingness to learn more, student affairs professionals should be intentional in providing resources for aspiring allies to develop skills, opportunities for them to

act as allies, and time to reflect and make meaning of their experiences. Workshops or programs on bystander intervention or social justice initiatives could provide the confidence students need to start standing up for GLB students on their campus. Bystander intervention programs are meant to empower students to stand up for others when they recognize signs of problems, and how to handle the difficult conversations that can result from confronting someone (Hoover, 2012). Equipping aspiring allies with the skills to challenge their peers and stand up for GLB students could help to make them more effective allies.

### **Conclusion**

Studies have shown that campus climate for GLB students is hostile and filled with harassment (Lipka, 2010; Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001), and after the tragic suicide of Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University (Biemiller, 2010) it is clear that oppression exists. Although campus climate is a reflection of an institution's mission (Renn & Patton, 2011), it never tells the whole story (Hurtado, 1992). Students play a major role in constructing the campus climate and by developing allies to the GLB community in some of our heterosexual students, student affairs professionals can gain more partners in the fight against systemic oppression.

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