

## ABSTRACT

COLLINS, DANIEL PHILLIP. Understanding queer youth experiences in central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. (Under the direction of Dr. Jacklyn A. Bruce).

Organizations with inclusive cultures seek to provide welcoming environments for all social identity groups in their programming (Wasserman et al., 2008). The question remains of how to break down participation barriers rooted in exclusionary feelings and experiences. Community programs work in stabilizing the formation of personal and social identity (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). Social change pushes young people to re-examine themselves, reflect, and find their own place (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). Because the bulk of social identity formation takes place during childhood and adolescence, this concept is crucial to making meaning of young queer people's experiences.

In order to understand the needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ young people, hearing youth voices and concerns is essential (Lavender-Stott et al., 2018). Much like LGBTQ+ populations, rural populations are classified and studied as exclusive communities (Bright, 2018). Those who are rural, particularly gender- and sexual-minority adolescents, are unaccepted and marginalized (Kreiss et al., 2017; Paceley, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth remain underrepresented in Appalachian organizations; therefore, targeting programs for LGBTQ+ identities offering a diverse Central Appalachian culture is needed (O'Doherty et al., 2015; Yu, 2017). This study focused on Central Appalachia, which consists of West Virginia and Southwest Virginia, Eastern Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, Southeastern Ohio, and Western North Carolina (The Appalachian Region, 2015; Lavender-Stott et al., 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to attempt to make meaning of perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. This study applied a queer theory lens to collecting and analyzing data on the experiences of queer people

involved in youth-serving organizations in rural Central Appalachia. Findings included the effects that the interactions, relationships, and organizational policies and practices these individuals experienced had on their perceptions of belonging or being othered.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on program leadership, self-identity, and inclusivity policies, procedures, and practices for LGBTQ+ individuals in youth organizations in Central Appalachia. The research objectives used to guide this study focused on the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth from Central Appalachia who were alumni of various youth-serving organizations. Making meaning of LGBTQ+ alumni's experiences of leadership and social identity formation within youth-serving organizations provided a basis for examining organizational interactions with queer youth and understanding how such interactions shape queer youth's feelings of belonging or othering in rural areas, particularly in Central Appalachia.

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Understanding Queer Youth Experiences in Central Appalachian Youth-Serving Organizations

by  
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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my unique participants who braved their own discomforts to give voice to their experiences growing up in Central Appalachia. Without you, this work would not have taken place. I want to also dedicate this work to those queer “hillbillies” from Appalachia that continue to face adversity, isolation, and heartache because of who they are and where they grew up.

The following lyrics are from Rising Appalachia’s song Resilient (2019). The words of this song resonated so much with me while doing this work that I turned to the lyrics more than once while collecting and analyzing data. The song speaks to so many of the ways that Appalachia is changing and how voices are being heard more today than ever.

*I am resilient  
I trust the movement  
I negate the chaos  
Uplift the negative  
I'll show up at the table  
Again and again and again  
I'll close my mouth and learn to listen  
These times are poignant  
The winds have shifted  
It's all we can do  
To stay uplifted  
Pipelines through backyards  
Wolves howling out front  
Yeah I got my crew but truth is what I want  
Realigned and on point  
Power to the peaceful, prayers to the waters  
Women at the center  
All vessels open to give and receive  
Let's see this system brought down to its knees  
I'm made of thunder, I'm made of lightning  
I'm made of dirt, yeah  
Made of the fine things  
My father taught me*

*That I'm a speck of dust and this world  
Was made for me so let's go and try our luck  
I've got my roots down down down down down deep  
I've got my roots down down down down down deep  
I've got my roots down down down deep  
I've got my roots down down down deep  
So what are we doing here  
What has been done  
What are you gonna do about it  
When the world comes undone  
My voice feels tiny  
And I'm sure so does yours  
Put us all together we'll make a mighty roar  
I am resilient  
I trust the movement  
I negate the chaos  
Uplift the negative  
I'll show up at the table again and again and again  
I'll close my mouth and learn to listen...*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Daniel Phillip Collins was born in raised in Saltville, VA. As a 2000 graduate of Northwood High School, Daniel graduated in the top 10% of his high school class of 56. Growing up in a small town in Central Appalachia, his career interests stemmed from education to athletic training. While navigating the wilds of college, Daniel graduated from Emory & Henry College in 2005 in Health & Physical Education (Pre K-12) in hopes of becoming a teacher and coach. While finishing his bachelor's degree, Daniel took the opportunity to become a Hokie at Virginia Tech to study Career & Technical Education – focusing on Extension Education. He had been a 4-H member for many years but never considered a career as a 4-H Agent. While attending Virginia Tech, Daniel worked at the Southwest Virginia 4-H Educational Center in Abingdon, VA as an Educational Programming Assistant. Upon graduating from Virginia Tech with his MS degree, he found himself wanting to move away from the traditional classroom.

After applying in several states, he was offered a job in Grayson County, VA, as the 4-H Youth Development Agent. Spending 5 years in Grayson County was the best thing Daniel could ask for in developing a program. Daniel was an outsider in Grayson County (even though he grew up about an hour west of the county), but he soon found his home in the Twin County area. His programming took him to new heights, and he earned several honors while working with his coworkers to “make the best better.” Daniel got the opportunity to move to Smyth County as the 4-H Agent in the spring of 2012 and spent two and a half years developing 4-H programming throughout the communities. His return home garnered more than just being closer to family and friends; it made him realize that the world was much more extensive. To be more successful in living his actual life, he decided to leave the Appalachian Mountains - a place he called him for

over 30 years. In spring 2015, Daniel was offered a job in Sampson County, NC, as the 4-H Youth Development Agent and would spend almost three years redeveloping the club and programs for 4-H members. Daniel left Sampson County to work in the North Carolina 4-H State Office with Dr. Shannon McCollum. While working with Shannon, Daniel learned more about the ins and outs of state-wide 4-H programming as he worked with the 4-H Awards programs and as the NC 4-H International Exchange Program Coordinator.

Daniel wanted to receive his doctoral degree before 40 but had moved away from the hopes of pursuing this dream. Spring of 2017 saw Daniel meeting his eventual committee chair and graduate assistant advisor, Dr. Jackie Bruce. Dr. Bruce took Daniel into her “island of misfits” and helped him become a better researcher, thinker, and scholar. Daniel has published several publications and won a few awards, including the Founding Mother’s Award winner for the Association of Leadership Educators under Dr. Bruce’s leadership. Dr. Bruce was instrumental in bringing Daniel out of his comfort zone and allowing him to pursue his doctoral degree while working as a teaching and research assistant in the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences at NC State.

Currently, Daniel is the State Extension Specialist for the 4-H Camping, STEM, and Performing Arts programs in Knoxville at the University of Tennessee. His current role has given him many opportunities to see the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion work and continue his “learn by doing” approach to youth development.



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This dissertation would not have happened without a few key groups of individuals in my life. I am thankful for God's blessing and opportunities throughout this entire process. Without His strength and direction, I would never have completed this process through the hardships and self-doubt I had about myself.

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- Dr. Bruce - I know I have repeated this time and time, but you amaze me. The fact that you could look at me and tell me what I needed to hear at that exact moment will forever bewilder me. Your wisdom, support, and tough love were exactly what I needed in my life. I appreciate the opportunities you gave me, the support you continue to show, and the drive you instilled in me to succeed. You are one in a million, and I am grateful for this experience and the wild ride this has been with you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2007, I was offered a job working at a 4-H youth development program in a socially isolated, Central Appalachian county in Virginia. Though this would be my first professional position, and though I knew I wanted a career in 4-H youth development, I hesitated to accept the offer because I was familiar with the limitations that this geographic location presented. I felt uncertain about the social demographics, education levels, rural policy and practice, and youth and volunteer wants and needs that I would encounter. I consulted trusted friends, including the state program's leader, my 4-H agent, and some district-wide volunteers, about my reservations. They challenged me to "bloom where I was planted" and to make a difference in the lives of the young people and adults in the county. They gave me hope, excitement, and direction, and I accepted the job.

I arrived to find the program in disarray. I began implementing the programs with which I had experienced success as a 4-H member. One day, a teen member told me, "You don't listen to us. You do what you *think* we want and not what we *need*." I felt shocked and confused at this revelation, so I stepped back. In order to make improvements, I would need to first build relationships, and that required on-the-job learning and listening to what my teens said. The result was amazing conversations with youth, teachers, parents, county officials, and other stakeholders as I discovered their desire for and needs from a county 4-H program.

In group conversations in the 4-H program, many youth talked about their identities and their struggles in find a place where they felt they belonged. I noticed that no one specifically mentioned their being gay, queer, or transgender. I did not find the silence on these topics surprising; as a young person, I struggled to disclose myself as gay because of my family's values and religious beliefs. In the area I grew up in, the predominant religion is fundamentalism

and is accompanied by a history of crimes against those considered “different.” The same was true for the area surrounding the 4-H program I now worked in, and I did not feel comfortable sharing my identity as a gay man for fear of being “outed” and losing my job. My sense of being othered found its way into my professional life. I did not fully understand the need for program openness, belonging, and inclusivity until I lost a gay teen participant to suicide. Unfortunately, I did not realize the importance of having an individual to trust, even within an ostensibly welcoming environment, until this tragedy. Although I did not have a close relationship with this adolescent, they shared having a gay identity during group interactions. This incident inspired me to bring more inclusive practices into the youth program I was leading. I wanted to find a way for rural, queer young people to feel less alone and isolated through focused efforts to foster belonging and eliminate instances of othering.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This section provides a broad conceptual overview of the relevance of social identities, belonging, othering, and leadership to youth organizations. Through concept mapping (Davies, 2011), I created visual relationships for the central concepts in my research. The link among social identities, such as between Appalachian and LGBTQ+, provides insight into how individuals who identify with these social identities may perceive their interactions with adults and peers based on their experiences with youth-serving organizations. Individuals’ organizational experiences take shape according to the climate and culture of organizations and depend on how much an organization focuses on positive youth development and on how important skill development and social interaction were for participants.

## *Social Identities*

Social identity is the psychological source critical to a person's well-being (Haslam et al., 2021). Because it provides a sense of psychological connection, social identity facilitates building trust and support with other group members, and it enhances self-esteem, feelings of control and agency, and a sense of purpose, direction, and meaning. Community programs are a means of breaking down social and identity development barriers (Barber et al., 2001). Within them, there is an emphasis on positioning and stabilizing the formation of personal and social identity (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). For sexual minority youth (i.e., those identifying as LGBTQ+), establishing identity is a complicated process, as they must develop a positive sense of self within heteronormative settings.

Social changes cause young people to re-examine themselves, reflect on who they want to be, and find their places in society (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). The relevance to identity formation stands where young people start their explorations at younger ages and begin "identifying" with varied formations. Because social identities were a central focus of this study, literature specific to rural youth, Appalachian, and LGBTQ+ identities are presented below.

**LGBTQ+ identities.** Sexual orientation and gender expressions are essential aspects of a young person's individuality (LGBT – Youth, n.d.) and are a fundamental part of the development of one's identity. Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ young people experience challenges because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Studies have focused on LGBTQ+ youth topics, such as sexual minority identity development, meanings of labels, sexual orientation fluidity, gendered differences, and racial and ethnic disparities (Wright & Perry, 2006). According to Wagaman (2016b), more research is needed into the development and

relevance of identity amongst LGBTQ+ young people. Calzo et al. (2011) posited that due to sexual-orientation identity development in American society, modern sexual-minority young people self-identify as LGBTQ+ earlier than their counterparts in previous generations. Despite younger coming out processes, concerns among LGBTQ+ youth continue to include high levels of anxiety, feelings of social and familial rejection, and fear for personal safety at home, school, and in social circles and communities (Nutt, 2018). Croteau et al. (2008) identified the need for professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth populations to complete competency training in social issues, cultural perspectives, and queer literature in order to address the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and understand LGBTQ+ issues.

Because some study participants identify as queer, it is important to define just what is meant by queer as opposed to lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans. *Queer* is a broad category that encompasses both non-normative sexualities and gender performances. It includes individuals who identify as not straight and as gender non-conforming or gender fluid. Individuals from many cultures use queer as a derogatory noun or an adjective for homosexuality or effeminacy, often applying the term to something out of the ordinary or not quite right (Callis, 2009). In the 1990s, the gay pride movement reclaimed the word. A political identity embraced in the main by young, liberal, gender-variant, and sexually fluid individuals, queer challenges the assumptions of hegemonic sexuality and hegemonic gendered social expectations (Warner, 1993; Haywood & MacGhail, 2016). Queer-identifying members of the younger generations understand and embrace variations from heteronormativity but separate themselves from what is often viewed as the more politically moderate term, “LGBT.” Although other researchers express queer as an all-encompassing description of LGBT individuals, Warner, who defines queer as a critical

parallel to heterosexual normalization, advanced queer as a category aligned with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Warner (1993).

According to the National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health, published through the Trevor Project (2019), 39% of LGBTQ+ young people (ages 13-24) have considered attempting suicide. Two out of three LGBTQ+ youth (66%) reported outside attempts to convince them to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 71% had experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Finally, 87% of LGBTQ+ young people recognized the importance of reaching out to an organization that focuses on LGBTQ+ youth, and 98% indicated the value of safe spaces for social networking. Despite increasing cultural acceptance of inclusivity, LGBTQ+ youth continue facing oppression that causes psychological and interpersonal problems (Allen et al., 2012). According to Allen et al. (2012), community-based LGBTQ+ support programs provide young people with the social and psychological support that queer youth do not adequately receive from other programs and services. In addition to safe spaces, peer social support programs help reduce psychological anxiety and cultivate a sense of purpose by building community. LGBTQ+ youth find identity-based communities within LGBTQ+ youth-serving organizations (Gamarel et al, 2014). While there is little evidence showing that these organizational programs reduce depression and anxiety amongst and discrimination and violence towards queer youth (Allen et al, 2012), LGBTQ+ youth emphasize that interactions with other LGBTQ+ individuals and communities are essential to their identity development and sense of belonging (Nesmith et al, 1999; Wagaman, 2014). That said, youth-focused programs and interventions seldom address structural inequities or how young people can generate social change (Wagaman, 2016a). Instead, traditional methods of serving youth who face societal limitations aim to provide them with environmental and

organizational coping and adaptation abilities (Russell, 2005). Wagaman argues that, in this way, LGBTQ+ organizations do not realize their potential, writing, “Community-based LGBTQ youth organizations can engage LGBTQ youth in collective efforts to respond to negative environmental factors to create positive social change” (Wagaman, 2016a, p. 397).

Little research has been done on the perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals living in rural Central Appalachia. Most existing research on LGBTQ-identified people in the region focuses on the perspectives of already “out” and self-identified LGBTQ+ adults (Calzo et al., 2011), whose experiences of identity formation differ from those of their young counterparts (Robertson, 2014). To understand the needs of and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ young people in the region, it is essential to listen to youth’s voices and concerns (Lavender-Stott et al., 2018).

**Rural identity.** Walsh (2012) maintained that American society studies and expends resources on underserved populations around the world but rarely on underserved populations within its own borders. Rural people are one of many underserved populations. Much like LGBTQ+ populations, researchers classify and study rural people in their exclusive sociocultural communities (Bright, 2018). Many individuals living in rural areas, especially gender- and sexual-minority adolescents, feel unaccepted and marginalized by those in more urban areas (Kreiss et al., 2017; Pacey, 2016). Bright (2018) examined a shift in researching rural youth’s needs and emphasized supporting the LGBTQ+ youth population. Understanding and helping rurally marginalized individuals, particularly Appalachians, requires additional research to fill in existing gaps and highlight change for more understanding and acceptance today.

**Appalachian identity.** According to Yu (2017), LGBTQ+ youth remain underrepresented in Appalachian organizations. There is a need for targeted programs for LGBTQ+ populations to sustain a diverse Central Appalachian culture (O’Doherty et al., 2015).

An LGBTQ+ person living in Appalachia has different day-to-day experiences from their LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ peers living elsewhere in the United States (Out in the South Initiative, 2015). The typical LGBTQ+ person living in the South (the location of a large portion of Appalachia) is more likely to reside in a community with a social climate hostile toward LGBTQ+ individuals.

Garringer (2017) studied Appalachian identity including race, class, age, ability, gender identity, and religion and brought awareness to the struggles of loving, hating, and returning to a place that many see as unaccepting, conservative, and constraining. For young queer Central Appalachians, the process of remaining close to home centers on “the need to rename our identities, to connect to other LGBTQIA people in the mountains, and to demand that we belong, that we exist, and that we have been here all along” (Garringer, 2017, p. 90). Garringer emphasized the importance of connecting country queers with each other, regardless of geographic limitations, to mitigate isolation and strengthen the rural queer community. Garringer showed that queer individuals and identity invisibility require examination in order to change attitudes and conversations, indicating the need to share the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Central Appalachia. Struggles with the tensions between LGBTQ+ and Appalachian identities affect individuals through social and personal experiences with peers, family, and community.

### ***Belonging***

**As a Need.** Belonging is the awareness that individuals feel when they fit in with, and matter to, a group meeting a fundamental psychological human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Some researchers agree that individuals have a fundamental need to relate with others for security, care, nutrition, reproducing, and other benefits (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). History shows that strong social bonds improved survival and procreation



chances for individuals, so natural selection most likely favored ancestors possessing a strong motivation to create and sustain relationships with others, or the “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Many can satisfy this need to belong by supporting happy, equally understanding, lasting relationships centering on psychological and physical well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Just like other motivations, individuals may differ in their desire to form and maintain social bonds much (Verhagen et al., 2018). Chronic feelings of not belonging are associated with numerous negative outcomes, including low levels of self-esteem, high levels of loneliness, high levels of damaging instability, and high fear of criticism and rejection (Leary et al., 2013).

**Effects of Belonging.** Self-esteem is a core measure tracking an individual’s existing and prospective social acceptance level (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary et al., 1995). Self-esteem increases with social acceptance and is vulnerable to criticism and rejection (Blackhart et al., 2009). Many people sustain healthy levels of self-esteem if they experience periodic rejection, but it is challenging to maintain high self-esteem alongside prolonged social exclusion. Verhagen et al. (2018) offered that self-esteem is low among those who had unsatisfying relationships but a high need for belonging. Additionally, those who have both a high need to belong and troubled close relationships are susceptible to depression (Brown & Harris, 1978; Hagerty et al., 1996). As Verhagen writes, “Depression is not a reaction just to the external situation but to the mismatch between the person’s inner motivations and external circumstances” (Verhagen et al., 2018, p. 500). Indicators of depression would be highest among those displaying a combination of high belonging-need with less-than-satisfying relationships.

Feelings of loneliness reflect a gap between desires for human emotional connection and objective experience (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Verhagen et al., 2018). Lonely people do not

lack social interaction; they devote just as much time as non-lonely individuals to interpersonal interaction (Hawkley et al., 2003) but find these interactions unsatisfying. Possible reasons include a low quality of interaction or because their expectations were too extreme (Russell et al., 2012). Verhagen et al. (2018) theorized that loneliness would be highest among those individuals with a high need for belonging and less-than-satisfying social bonds. Research has established many adverse health effects of social isolation, including abnormally high mortality rates, weakened immune systems, and poor health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), linking a high need for social connection need to various physical and emotional illnesses (Hartung & Renner, 2014; Mellor et al., 2008; Piko et al., 2016).

Social value refers to the larger impacts of programs or organizations, including the impacts on individual wellbeing, community culture, the environment, and access to social capital (Mulgan, 2010). It is important to note that social value does not entail financial influences or outcomes. The relationship between social value and social connection has not received much attention. The only study examining this relationship (Mellor et al., 2008) found inconsistencies between a person's need for belonging and their satisfaction level with significant relationships correlated to a person's higher feelings of loneliness and lower life satisfaction in adults.

Research findings demonstrate that the need to belong is essential for youth. Feelings like they either belonged or not in their organizations, there is a need to focus on how identities correlate with belonging to unpack how interactions shaped those feelings and need applicability. This concept is vital to this dissertation because social value and relationships build on foundational needs and situations.

**Appalachian Belonging.** Negative stereotypes of people in many rural areas of America are consistent, stationary, and firm in literature, academia, and the media (O'Brien 2009). Being Appalachian means hearing and seeing images and ideas about "Appalachia" that have little to no similarity to one's own life experience in the region (Shelby, 1999). According to Hess et al. (2018), historically, negative stereotypes of Appalachians have been constructed by those not from the region. The most persistent stereotype of an "Appalachian" is the uneducated, rough and tough mountain hillbilly who speaks with a thick accents and long drawl. According to the Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati (2012), despite such negative stereotypes, Appalachians feel that their community provides them with a secure feeling of belonging because others in the community help them and they depend on one other. The strength and importance of Appalachian family units are also important to well-being. In Appalachia's close-knit society, one person's problem equates to a family problem (Willmore, 2015).

**Belonging in Youth Organizations.** Belonging occurs through effective engagement (Fredricks et al., 2011) and is a foundation for motivation, vitality, and achievement (Goodenow, 1993). Somers (1999) explored environmental representations linking an individual's sense of belonging to personal, friend, career, and school experiences throughout their community and organizational interactions. The cultivation of a sense of belonging among participants is a fundamental goal of many youth development programs. Research suggests that after-school programs should help youth feel wanted, comfortable, and seen (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1999). Others advocate that youth gain more from their participation when they form a connection with a particular program, when they commit to the organization's rules and norms, when they feel like they are contributing members, and when they feel as if they fit in and matter to a group (Akiva et al., 2013; Anderson-Butcher, 2000;

Heath, 1999; Larson, 2000; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). Limited research supports belonging as an interconnection among individuals and an organizations (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002). Belongingness forms a “home away from home” feeling in some extracurricular organizational involvement and engagement (4-H, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, 2005), but belongingness research in organized activities is lacking (Akiva et al., 2013). Culture impacts interpretations of interpersonal interactions, shaping feelings of belonging (Härtel, Cooper, & Ashkanasy, 2008). For example, in a toxic culture, “a simple gesture of friendliness can be interpreted with skepticism and doubt due to a lack of trust. Therefore, in a toxic culture where doubt and skepticism are the prevalent cultural norms, the most obvious outcomes would be toxic emotions such as fear and anxiety” (Härtel et al., p. 5). Furthermore, individuals who are new to a culture will complete an emotional learning cycle, adapting themselves to interpret experiences according to predominant cultural norms. This in turn regulates a self-reinforcing negative emotional learning cycle, leading to dysfunctions.

Commitment is a blend of the noticed importance a young person’s work receives along with their interest level in actively attending activities within the program (Arthur et al., 1997). Commitment also describes the connection or buy-in that youth have for the program (Martinek, 1999). Engagement is measured in the amount of time and energy a school or related organization devotes to creating a fun and exciting climate, whether the youth involved engage in learning new things (Antonovsky, 1983; Rosenfeld et al., 2000), how often youth come prepared, and how often they feel bored (Lee & Smith, 1993). Lastly, connectedness is a combination of youth perceptions of being taken seriously by adults, how close youth feel to others, whether they feel included or othered, and how satisfied they are with their interactions (Blum & Rinehart, 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Small, 1991).

Attachment is another term used in belonging research (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Anderson-Butcher & Conroy (2002) suggest that attachment, commitment, and bonding between youth during prosocial activities are essential. Several theories, including social learning theory (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978), social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), the social development model (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999), and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Turner, 1982), show that belonging, conveyed commitment, bonding, and attachment with prosocial individuals or organizations enhance youth development. Hence, developing a sense of belonging in youth programs is an essential means for youth development. Surprisingly, researchers traditionally limit their participation studies to more self-reporting or objective attendance processes. Organizations such as Big Brother/Big Sisters, Inc. and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America stress the significance of nurturing relationships and connections among mentors, staff, and youth participants (Big Brothers, Big Sisters, 2020; Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2020). Anderson-Butcher & Fink (2005) found that, beyond just attendance in community-based after-school programs, the Boys & Girls Clubs used belongingness as a measure to compare program attendance and used community involvement to predict protective and risk factors. Anderson-Butcher & Conroy (2002) stated that there is more to participation than expected attendance. Research showed that the effects of constructive participation might be strengthened when youth embrace a sense of belonging and connection to the organization.

### ***Othering***

**Influences of Othering.** Jauregui et al. (2020) defined “othering” through essentialism specific characteristics make their reality. Crediting de Beauvoir’s origination, Jauregui et al. described othering as the “interpersonal differentiation that generates social exclusion and

subordination” (p. 63). De Beauvoir (1989) provided an influential “othering” analysis identifying ways men utilize personal power to define women as “The Other,” stating that men began developing othering by differentiating women through dominant male standards. On a macro level, Said (1978) argued that “the Orient,” meaning the area for those living in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, is the source of the most profound and most prominent images of “othering.” Said took the position that those having “means”—through colonization, academics, general knowledge, or cultural hegemony—fabricate elaborate fictionalized descriptions of those without means and from these create political distinctions. His book *Orientalism* describes the ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident.” These arguments are useful for considering how residents of Appalachia were othered by early 18<sup>th</sup> century settlers due to their ability to self-govern and survive in remote geographic areas.

**Recognizing Othering.** Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) described deeply rooted instances of “othering” that take place when groups or individuals differentiate themselves from their communities and families. Psychologically, othering is a critical measure in the distinction of the “self” from “others” and acknowledging the “non-normal” (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Todorov (1984) identified three dimensions of “self” and “other” as value judgments: 1) “other” as good or bad, 2) “other” as psychologically and physically reserved and knowledge, and 3) “other” where history and culture is undetermined and varied from the norm. Othering happens when individuals recognize that something or someone is different from their own belief of what normalcy is (Riggins, 1997). Kristeva (1991) posited that some individuals who *other* project undesirable, repressed, and buried feelings of their own lives, leading to a broader logic that anyone and anything can be othered. Psychologically, othering connects ethical inadequacy

codes to “difference” (Pickering, 2001; Schwalbe et al., 2000), allowing individual discrimination and exclusion based on one’s marginalized group association (Boreus, 2006; Riggins, 1997).

The othering process constructs certain social groups as “normal.” Exceptions exist where some individuals belong to an “othered” group but on a “self” level (Riggins, 1997). As an “other,” their “self” perceptions and attitudes do not change concerning othered group members. Otherness is an oppressive influence separating imagined boundaries rooted from marginalized effects (e.g. exile or disassociation) in social situations (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). Otherness occurs through behavior systems and means of discussion, understanding, and presentation set by dominant groups where otherness is transparent and natural (Riggins, 1997). O’Barr (1994) posited that language should be tolerant of diversity; word and phrases sometimes diminish and mask othering, making it harder to find explicit oral strategies that reveal hierarchy, relegation, and authority.

**Othering Appalachians.** The Appalachian stereotypes and negative portrayals have a lengthy and plentiful history (Billings, Norman, & Ledford 1999; Lewis 1999). Otto (2002) and Straw (2006) shared examples of what others believe Appalachians are and how they act: huge hillbilly families, outhouses, log cabins, “shootin’ arns,” “feudin’,” “moonshinin’,” and redneck “hicks.” Scott (2009) wrote that illustrations of Appalachian difference emphasize physical traits that suggest essential otherness, including visible illnesses, physical deformities, ragged clothing, dirty faces and hair, bad teeth, and marks of poverty. Stereotypical images of Appalachian women include pictures of demoralized, passive femininity and women who are aging early, while Appalachian men are represented as being unbalanced and with damaged masculinity through strong-willed positions and blank stares.

Some scholars have argued that these visual Appalachian stereotypes serve to “other” those being represented (Said 1978; Shapiro 1978). Many stereotypes about Appalachian people surface from within their local communities. The fact that today’s society still views Appalachia as dumb hillbillies and out of touch with modernization speaks to the need for more research about the region. Appalachian difference is accepted in popular culture and academia, uncovering Appalachian marginalization as taken for granted and invisible (Billings et al., 1999). While media sources also build negative images of other rural groups such as the cowboy as the “midwestern hayseed,” stereotypical Appalachian characters are taken further, and often portrayed as violent and evil (Williams, 2002) through “backwardness” due to Appalachia lacking modernization (Straw, 2006). These negative representations are embedded into the mainstream and accepted as real without question (Hall, 2001), hindering progress toward telling a factual story.

**Social Impacts.** When dominant cultures build and maintain depictions or codes of people and backgrounds that are not like their own, such as Appalachians, the ensuing separation and social implications lead to “othering.” Brewer’s (1979) work explored the impact “othering” could have on the community and the in- and out-group classification means as “differentiating the in-group from the out-group” (p. 322). Specifically, the variance between self and a homogeneous group builds a margin between the in-group and the out-group. Brewer added that this perception in the in-group matches the “self.” Similarly, Leyens, Yzerbyt, and Schadrion (1994) stated that in-group dynamics mirror target group demonstrations and become normalized through time, setting up out-group barriers. Pickering (2001) shared that “othering” related to those who use stereotypes and how those stereotypes affect those who are “othered.” He noted that those who are “othered” take a converse position to those doing the “othering” in group



situations. Generally speaking, those who are members of a privileged space can differentiate themselves from “others” deemed different. Pickering (2001) argued that the complexity of the “othering” process leads those who are “othered” to view themselves as stuck in an irreversible structure involving social interactions. It then becomes evident that an individual’s effort to change their dual social representation is problematic and reflective. O’Brien (2009) resolved that there is, nevertheless, a lengthy and significant history where “othered” groups shifted power dynamics to reclaim disapproving terms used against them and make their own belonging space.

**LGBTQ+ Effects.** Effects of LGBTQ+ othering is not native nor unique to the United States; they stem from a broader global context. Scholars have argued that Western societies are now in a “post-gay” era (Savin-Williams, 2005), placing LGBTQ+ identities in a more mainstreamed and incorporated position within heterosexual norms (Seidman 2002; Warner 1999). Duggan (2002) termed “homonormativity” through Western neoliberalism as a unique culture impacting non-heterosexual identities. Neoliberalism, which coalesced in the 1970s and 80s, is the worldwide political and economic development increasing privatization, promoting deregulation, and minimizing state-funded welfare programs. Leitner et al. (2007) explored how neoliberalism shapes an individual’s self-determination when making self-involved decisions, holding people responsible for their well-being, and re-shaping citizens into consumers or clients. Duggan (2002) asserted that the connection between neoliberal politics and 21st-century gay rights focuses more on an LGBTQ+ person’s private and domestic life, for example, the push for marriage equality in certain countries, as opposed to focusing on heterosexual marriage norms. Similarly, Seidman (2002) contended that practical gay rights

discussions aimed to assimilate LGBTQ+ individuals into the group of inclusive citizens and valued social propriety.

Valentine (2007) described the homonormative turn as a normalization process in which LGBTQ+ people conduct themselves covertly as “straight” society members. Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira (2008) suggested that homonormativity made way for an “ideal queer citizen.” Through this idea, the idealized model of queer identity is accepted in the mainstream and is broadly considered “normal” like heterosexuality and gender conformity. Jones (2018) furthered that UK queer youth identity development, reflecting the homonormative dialogue, centered on its inconsistent and exclusionary underpinnings. She added that young people’s identity encompassed opposition because some do not want to be defined by their sexual desires and romantic relationships and *not* to be “othered” by their social groups.

Many young people do not relate homosexuality to specific identity characteristics, but instead define same-sex attraction without labeling it “gay” (Savin-Williams, 2005). They want to be “ordinary,” to not stand out as an “other,” and to dismiss homophobia (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). The discomfort around claims of self-identity and sexual orientation emphasizes a central conflict in youth identity development through the obstacles they must overcome (Jones, 2018). Even though some youth desire their sexuality to be unmarked or contested, it can define them through dominant heteronormative backgrounds that situate them as an “other.” It is something they must “come out” about in their life. While these young people identify with the non-normative “gay” category, they try to reimagine their “otherness” by minimizing or removing their sexual orientation altogether to take their “otherness” away. Jones (2018) stated that young people express themselves as “normal” by differentiating their sexual

desires from their social identities and avoiding gay identity stereotypes that differ from gender norms.

The next section offers a look into how youth organizations and positive youth development take shape in conceptualizing involvement, the climate and the culture of the organizations relating to belongingness or othering.

### ***Youth Organizations***

**Importance.** Oliver et al. (2006) noted that effective youth programs are essential means of developing social competence, community interaction, and life-long learning skills. Maturing young people frequently face negative family dynamics, peer problems, access to dangerous substances, and the temptation to engage in high-risk behaviors (Hindes et al., 2008). Mahoney et al. (2009) asserted that community programs provide spaces for personal and identity growth and enhance youth mental health. Organizational involvement has been shown to protect young people from experiencing trauma, social isolation, and family tension (Hull et al., 2008). Some organizations support young people in crises, such as poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and post-active duty (Le Menestrel & Lauxman, 2011), and provide skills training, educational opportunities, and work. Research on young people's experiences has included investigations into community programs' effectiveness at developing resilience and achieving outcomes (Ungar, 2003), however, researchers failed to investigate how participants achieved effective outcomes. Community youth involvement provides benefits, but little research exists on the effectiveness of community programs (Petitpas et al., 2004) centered on young people's psychological well-being and skill development (Bartko & Eccles, 2003). In addition, research is lacking into whether young people's life skill development correlates with community program involvement (Grover, 2004).

Smischney, Roberts, Gliske, Borden, & Perkins (2018) found a discrepancy among varying qualities of youth programs and changes in youth competencies. “First, higher youth ratings of programs’ skill building were associated with greater change in youth’s social conscience and personal values and second, higher youth ratings of programs’ positive social norms were associated with greater change in youth’s personal values, decision making, and critical thinking” (Smischney et al., 2018, p. 42). Because youth physical and psychological safety ratings were higher with less variation in personal values, supportive relationships, and support for value and mattering were not significantly associated with any youth competency outcomes. The missing relationship between core competencies and supportive relationships matches Rhodes’ (2004) suggestion about relationship quality affecting youth outcomes directly (close bonds with program staff) and indirectly (developing a sincere and encouraging program atmosphere). Smischney et al.’s study suggests that supportive relationships’ direct effect on youth outcomes may not be as notable as originally believed.

**Positive Youth Development.** According to Granger (2002), there is a future for positive social influence and skill development within the context of youth-development organizations. Supportive peer and adult relationships, task-specific skills, relational skills, and developmentally appropriate limits can enable the development of social skills and accomplishment. Granger maintained that these factors provide the frame for youth participation needed for organizational success. While there is evidence that participation in a youth organization can promote positive development in today’s youth, there is limited research connecting what impacts a young person’s decision to participate in a youth organization or not (McGuire et. al, 2016). Akiva (2012) posited that understanding the youth involvement experience—such as an individual’s in-the-moment psychological perceptions of their interactive

climate, their emotional reactions to the social context, and their cognitive engagement—can build a knowledge base as to why young people choose the organization or program that they do or do not participate in. Akiva’s work also considers feelings of belonging in the involvement experience. Even though belonging and belongingness have been prevalent in past studies on involvement, there is little evidence showing the direct effects of belonging on youth involved in organized activities.

According to Fish et al. (2019), studies about participation in community youth programs have varied patterns, mainly due to the broad focus of community youth programs. Youth organizations provide young people with strong support (Positive Youth Development, n.d.), giving them opportunities to explore interests and share their skills. Youth development workers, such as club leaders and youth group volunteers, typically focus on activities that develop resilience skills, which enable young people to overcome adversity, increase family support, and engage with caring adults and peers. With resilience skills, youth can enhance and cultivate their own learned knowledge and apply it later in life. The interconnectedness of positive youth development and organizational success requires a broad examination of young people’s involvement experiences to show program effectiveness.

**Organizational Climate and Culture.** Organizational culture and climate consist of perceptions and behaviors through collective interactions supporting organizational structure and focusing on interpersonal communication and identity (Tsai, 2011). Organizational climate and culture indicate the effect of affirmed interactions and how individuals shape their perspectives. Schneider et al. (2013) wrote, “Organizational climate and organizational culture are two alternative constructs for conceptualizing the way people experience and describe their settings” (p. 362). Culture and climate have shared meanings and understandings of individuals’

experiences within programming, work, and service opportunities (Ostroff et al., 2012).

Organizational climate consists of shared perceptions, values and belief assumptions, supported meanings, and expected interactions and behaviors in policy, practice, and procedure (Schneider et al., 2013); it is the atmosphere through which individuals see organizational practices, procedures, and rewards (Schneider et al., 1994). Schein (2010) defined organizational culture as a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions shared by members of an organization. Fundamental values impact the behavior of organizational members, as people depend on these values to guide their decisions and behaviors. The development of culture and climate perceptions is typically ongoing and indicates organizational leadership standards.

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) asserted that “program goals and [their] atmosphere characterize youth development programs” (p. 180). A program’s atmosphere—its surrounding environment or influence—is a means by which it can enhance adolescent skills and build confidence in its participants’ futures, characters, and connections. Programs produce environments, both during and outside, in which young people feel supported and empowered. Roth and Brooks-Gunn identified five dimensions of the youth-development program atmosphere:

1. Encouraging the development of supportive relationships with adults and peers
2. Empowering youth
3. Communicating positive behavior expectations
4. Providing recognition opportunities
5. Providing stable, long-lasting services

Youth well-being agencies (organizations) provide more engaged, more functional, and less stressful regulatory climates when they are less resistant to organizational cultures.

Additionally, these climates correlate with improved youth outcomes. An understanding of organizational climate and organizational culture provides a foundation for inclusive practices and policies that allow youth a sense of place and acceptance. Further, organizational climate and culture can open avenues for youth leadership and exploration without the confines of non-acceptance and othering.

### ***Youth Leadership Development***

Much like climate and culture, youth leadership development is a ‘blurred category’ including pre-teens, adolescents, students, and young adults (Gabriel, 2013). Considering that youth-development programs could not operate without leadership, understanding leadership is a key component to understanding interactions in an organization. Silva (2016) asserted that leadership is not a unique personal quality possessed by an individual; rather, it is a process of influence for leaders and followers. Silva stated, “Leadership is the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals” (p. 3). Community organizations provide a means of developing leadership skills through unique, direct, and observational learning opportunities that are key to youth development (Bolton, 1991; McCormick, 2001). Such programs provide opportunities to explore self-identity and skill development to equip young people to take on leadership roles (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Much like adult leaders, youth-leaders’ skills vary by individual, and individuals adapt skills to a groups or follower’s needs. The skills that young people learn shows how programming efforts develop and foster their learned knowledge through organizational interactions. Young leaders take their interactions and experiences more seriously if they feel they have value within their group or organization.

According to Parkhill et al. (2018), support from parents, teachers, and other adults contributes to the development of a young person's leadership skills. Adolescents share an increase in their enthusiasm for assuming leadership roles when adults have an active interest in developing their leadership skills (Hancock et al., 2012). Research shows that there is a link between identity development and empowerment, which creates leadership potential (Parkhill et al., 2018). This strongly suggests that community programs that provide empowerment can enable young people to thrive and develop through adolescence. There is a need for further investigation into how to support young people moving from a theoretical understanding of leadership to supervised leadership skill practice to consistent use of leadership skills.

According to Kress (2006), "Youth leadership is the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and decision-making" (p. 51). Research shows that developing youth leadership produces value in influencing community outcomes by lessening the disconnect between youth leadership efforts and youth needs (Kress, 2006; McElravy, 2015). Indeed, many organizations, agency, and political leaders identify young people as leaders and change agents. The purpose of most structured leadership programs is to foster young people's positive qualities, such as emotional intelligence, self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-confidence, all of which can help them navigate personal and association challenges (Conner & Strobel, 2007). Despite its social value, trends in youth leadership development have received only minimal research.

Most discussions on leadership potential ranges from teens to professionals, however few focus on younger ages and their developing leadership abilities (Trawick-Smith, 1988). Researchers, educators, and parents recognize early childhood as a foundational cognitive development period offering a stimulating environment for learning (Hailey & Fazio-Brunson,



2020). As a society valuing leadership skill development, it is a natural fit to study this development from a young age.

**The Importance of Youth Leadership Characteristics.** Puxley & Chapin (2021) found that teaching leadership skills to individual youth participants where group work, management, and communication skills get internalized to form foundations for civic engagement and place-based leadership. Their key implications that support positive impacts youth leadership programs have on young people, but broadly explain specific skills youth learn in their organizations. Conversely, Hailey & Fazio-Brunson's (2020), research into young people's leadership skills found that youth leadership work is scarce and commonly emphasizes leadership in early childhood classroom settings. To understand youth leadership development in contexts outside of the school, Hailey & Fazio-Brunson (2020) examined young leaders' abilities, leadership behaviors, and youth skills in rural populations looking at five youth leadership characteristics:

- *Linguistic capacity* is communicating using verbal and non-verbal (physical) language skills during interactions (e.g., listening, observing, and responding effectively).
- *Problem-solving* comprises the ability to explore innovative methods and strategies for accomplishing individual or team tasks (e.g., self-express, take risks, listen to followers, and make input-based decisions through curiosity and creativity).
- *Intelligence* is the ability to quickly analyze a situation, analyze possible outcomes and consequences of decisions, reach a logical conclusion, and organize a plan of action (e.g., expressing creativity, enhancing imaginations, and generating new and innovative ideas).
- *Social and emotional skills* are where individuals interact, manage their actions, negotiate, compromise, and collaborate, all with consideration of group social and

emotional needs (e.g., sharing resources, maintaining personal emotional control, and regulating and enjoying the social interactions within the group).

- *Social accountability*, an altruistic frame in which young leaders recognize injustice, find solutions (Hailey & Brunson, 2020), and resolve conflict without coercing others.

Hailey & Fazio-Brunson (2020) found that rural families did not live in geographically limited constraints to their home areas (Griffin & Galassi, 2010), but instead sought and supported the opportunities small town and rural life offers through young leadership development. Rural parents and educators recognize leadership opportunities through school functions, extracurricular clubs, churches, athletic events, community involvement opportunities, and relationships with neighbors and community members (Hailey & Fazio-Brunson, 2020). These can help them develop leadership skills within their communities.

**Rural Youth Leadership.** Community development requires community leadership practices such as teamwork, advocacy, and stewardship for future effectiveness (Starkweather, 2018). Many youth organizations have strategies that provide youth with decision-making opportunities and chances to share ideas about their communities' future. Studies have shown that the formation of leadership development programs in the community-change process is effective and thriving (Etuk et al., 2013). Within leadership skill development, practitioners, social scientists, and community members look to rural leaders' influence and direction to improve future decision-making and strategic planning. Although the core of small towns and rural communities' ability to enact change is their leadership (Starkweather, 2018), there is little research on community outcomes in rural leadership programs.

Involving young people in challenging decision-making processes encourages skill development, found abilities, and vision (Stay Project, 2019). Participation in community

organizations provides young people with ways to address issues in their hometowns and communities, giving voice to concerns surrounding their future in the local area. Youth organizational participation teaches young people to take initiative, organize, build community, and focus on social change issues (O’Doherty et al., 2015).

**Appalachian Youth Leadership.** There has been a steady decrease in Appalachia’s population due to out-migration, especially among young adults. Appalachia’s biggest “export” is not coal, but people many sources describe the need to bring more youth opportunities to keep the native-born Appalachians within the region to be prosperous and contributing citizens within their communities. However, while more youth (specifically LGBTQ+ youth) seek other opportunities to attend college and find careers that cannot support their degrees, Appalachia pushes more people to find jobs and sustainable lives out of the region.

According to O’Doherty et al. (2015), “Appalachia is facing a vacuum of new leadership to move forward” (p. 2). The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC; 2015) asserted,

The future of the Appalachian Region depends on both the current and the next generation of leaders. Investing in leadership development programs and activities and providing access to the resources, community leaders need to understand their economic opportunities and the root causes of the challenges they face [to] help create healthier communities in Appalachia. (p. 35)

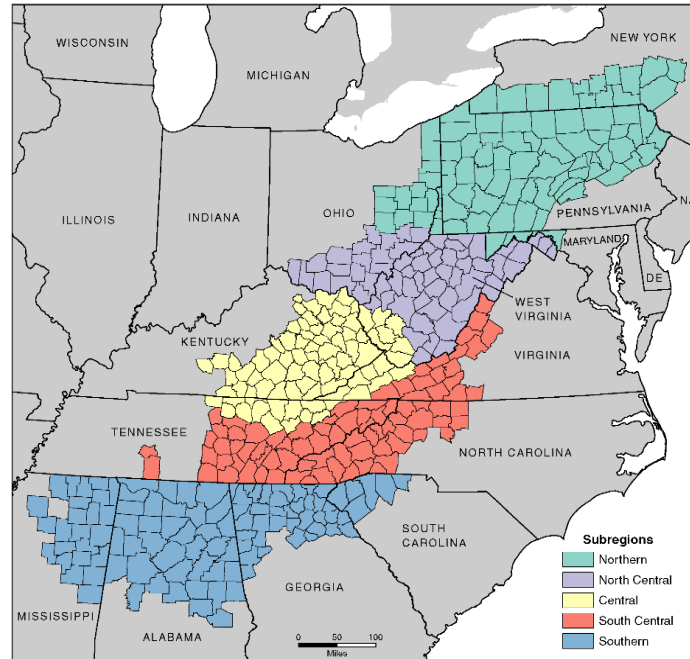
Leadership investment and realizations provide a vision for local development and action plans to support positive community change in Appalachia (Investing in Appalachia’s Future, 2015). Giving young people leadership opportunities enables skills to make better decisions for their lives, well-being, everyday challenges and barriers, and futures (Brennan et al., 2007; Stay Project, 2019). Appalachian leaders can focus efforts to support community viability by identifying youth as essential constituents. Youth leadership in Appalachia provides inspiration for goal achievement and growth, skills that help youth to become productive and prosperous community members. Because youth organizations offer their members examples of youth

leadership development, there is a need to understand the importance of youth organizations and their inclusivity policies and practices.

### **Contextual Framework: The Central Appalachian Region**

This study focused on the perceptions of experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) defines Appalachia as the region along both sides of the Appalachian Mountains, including all of West Virginia and sections of New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The entire region includes 420 counties in 13 states, covers 205,000 square miles, and has a population of more than 25 million (About the Appalachian Region, 2017).

Central Appalachia, the geographic area of focus in this study, consists of the entire state of West Virginia and the regions of Southwest Virginia, Eastern Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, Southeastern Ohio, and Western North Carolina (The Appalachian Region, 2015; Lavender-Stott et al., 2018). Central Appalachia includes three subregions—North Central, Central, and South Central—as shown in Figure 1 (Subregions in Appalachia, 2009). Outside of the urban areas of Roanoke (Virginia), Johnson City and Knoxville (Tennessee); and Asheville (North Carolina), Central Appalachia is predominantly rural.



Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.

*Figure 1: Subregions in Appalachia*

Appalachia is a social and geographic space defined by socioeconomic, cultural, and political realities (Detamore, 2010). According to Catte (2018), “Appalachia is, often simultaneously, a political construction, a vast geographic region, and a spot that occupies an unparalleled place in our cultural imagination” (p. 10). The geographical isolation has produced the reputation of the people living in Appalachia as “moonshine swillers,” “feuding hicks,” and poor, uneducated “hillbillies” (Detamore, 2010; Mann, 2003). However, this isolation has also contributed to the formation and maintenance of the close-knit communities found in the mountains.

The topic of isolation in rural areas raises concerns around youth and their well-being. There is a shortage of literature on how young people address the queer sense of self-negotiations and the visibility of modern LGBTQ experiences. Gray (2009) identified the importance of studying this population:

Studying rural queer and questioning youth identity formations build on new childhood studies and critical youth studies in two important ways. Unlike the independence and self-determination that define the queer-youth political culture of national LGBTQ youth advocacy programs or queer-specific, urban-based resources and social services, rural youth engagement with LGBTQ politics are marked by their interdependence with familiar queer adult advocates and non-LGBTQ allies (p. 20).

Studying rural queer youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to create youth-centered research models to account for adults' active participation in constructing rural, queer youth identity and community (Gray, 2009). Advocating for rural community concerns could provide additional visibility and enormous advancements for LGBTQ+ youth. That there are still prevalent anxieties about LGBTQ+ individuals in rural areas is a concern. Because schools and other public spaces provide vital community access to youth organizations with cultural-norm visibility could provide transformative avenues to sharpen and define LGBTQ+ identities for youth. Without change and inclusivity, rural communities remain in danger of slowly shrinking to the point where there is no effective leadership in decision-making and progressive action. The vitality of rural areas, including Central Appalachia, requires leadership, and particularly youth leadership, for community survival.

### **Problem Statement**

Community programs are a means of breaking down social and identity development barriers (Barber et al., 2001). Within them, there is an emphasis on positioning and stabilizing the formation of personal and social identity (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). For sexual minority youth, establishing identity is a complicated process, as they must develop a positive sense of self within heteronormative settings. Social changes cause young people to re-examine themselves, reflect on who they want to be, and find their places in society (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). Many individuals living in rural areas, especially gender- and sexual-minority adolescents, feel unaccepted and marginalized by those in more urban areas

(Kreiss et al., 2017; Pacey, 2016). Bright (2018) examined a shift in researching rural youth's needs and emphasized supporting the LGBTQ+ youth population. Understanding and helping rurally marginalized individuals, particularly Appalachians, requires additional research to fill existing gaps and highlight change. Garringer showed that queer individuals and identity invisibility require examination in order to change attitudes and conversations, indicating the need to share the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Central Appalachia.

There has been little research done on the perspectives of Central Appalachian LGBTQ+ individuals. This lack of scholarly inquiry could be the result of research on LGBTQ-identified youth originating from primarily retroactive adult perspectives (Calzo et al., 2011), in which researchers could have skewed current results from already "out" and self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals (Robertson, 2014). Listening to LGBTQ+ young people's voices and concerns provides more understanding of the needs and inconsistencies they face (Lavender-Stott et al., 2018). Some scholars have argued that these visual Appalachian stereotypes serve to "other" those being represented (Said 1978; Shapiro 1978). Many stereotypes about Appalachian people surface from within their local communities. The fact that today's society still views Appalachia as dumb hillbillies and out of touch with modernization speaks to the need for more research about the region.

Despite the increased cultural acceptance of inclusivity, LGBTQ+ youth face oppression that causes psychological and interpersonal problems (Allen et al., 2012). According to Allen et al. (2012), community-based LGBTQ+ support programs provide young people with the social and psychological development they do not adequately receive from other programs and services; peer social support programs provide benefits beyond security, from reducing psychological anxiety to forming a sense of purpose through constructed community. LGBTQ+

youth find identity-based communities within LGBTQ+ youth-serving organizations (Gamarel et al, 2014). However, there is little evidence supporting the success of these organizational programs and services provided (Allen et al, 2012).

Anderson-Butcher & Conroy (2002) stated that there is more to participation than expected attendance. Research showed that constructive participation effects might be strengthened when youth embrace a sense of belonging and connection to the organization. Most discussions on leadership potential ranges from teens to professionals, however few focus on younger ages and their developing leadership abilities (Trawick-Smith, 1988). Because youth organizations offer their members examples of youth leadership development, there is a need to understand the importance of youth organizations and their inclusivity policies and practices. Studying rural queer youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to create youth-centered research models to account for adults' active participation in constructing rural, queer youth identity and community (Gray, 2009). Advocating for rural community concerns could provide additional visibility and enormous advancements for LGBTQ+ youth. It is vital that research into the challenging circumstances that LGBTQ+ youth face be undertaken.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to attempt to make meaning of perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Intended findings included the effects that the interactions, relationships, and organizational policies and practices these individuals experienced in these organizations had on their perceptions of belonging or being othered. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on program leadership, self-identity, and inclusivity policies, procedures, and practices for LGBTQ+ individuals in youth organizations in Central Appalachia and beyond.



## Research Objectives

The research objectives used to guide this study focused on the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth from Central Appalachia who were also alumni of various youth-serving organizations.

1. Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have about their experiences in their youth-serving organization in Central Appalachia.
2. Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.
3. Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

Organizations with inclusive cultures provide welcoming environments for all social identity groups in their programming efforts (Wasserman et al., 2008). However, the question remains as to how to break down the barriers to participation rooted in the conscious feelings and experiences of exclusion in organizations. Making meaning of these experiences among LGBTQ+ alumni provide a basis for examining organizational interactions regarding belonging and inclusivity in rural areas, particularly in Central Appalachia. The intersection of leadership, social identities, and youth organizations show how queer identities and youth experiences provide a structure to belonging and othering in organizational practices and policies.

### Definitions of Key Terms/Organizations

- **4-H:** A youth-development program of the Cooperative Extension System, a community of more than 100 public universities across the nation offering experiences in which young people learn by doing. The 4-H program welcomes youth

of all beliefs and backgrounds, providing young people with a voice to express their identities and how they can improve their lives and communities (What Is 4-H, 2019).

- **Belonging:** Defined as being related to or a part of something such as through a membership. Belonging happens when individuals join others to make something better without the responsibility of doing it alone (Block, 2018).
- **Bisexual:** A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity, though not necessarily at the same time or to the same degree (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2019).
- **Climate:** The dominant influence or environmental conditions for a group or period, and the usual or most widespread mood or conditions in a place (Climate, 2019).
- **Culture:** The ethos of a program, also known as the program environment; a critical aspect of service delivery and potential influence on participant outcomes (Treskon, 2017).
- **Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA):** since 1954, FCA has been challenging coaches and athletes on the professional, college, high school, junior high and youth levels to use the powerful platform of sport to reach every coach and every athlete with the transforming power of Jesus Christ (Vision and Mission, 2020). FCA focuses on serving local communities around the globe by engaging, equipping and empowering coaches and athletes to unite, inspire and change the world through the gospel.
- **Future Farmers of America (FFA),** an agriculturally based youth organization focused on changing lives and preparing members for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education (FFA, 2019).

- **Gay:** Emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to members of the same gender (HRC, 2019).
- **Gender expression:** The outward presentation of gender (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).
- **Gender identity:** The internal understanding of one’s gender or the gender with which one identifies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).
- **Girl Scouts:** the first and largest girl-led organization in the world, and for over a century has been preparing girls in grades K–12 for everyday leadership by providing rich experiences for them to explore new interests, face challenges, form new friendships, and make lasting community contributions (Girls Scouts Membership, 2018).
- **Heteronormativity:** The tendency in the contemporary Western sex-gender system to view heterosexual relations as the norm and all other forms of sexual behavior as deviations from this norm (Spargo, 1999).
- **Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA):** a global student-led organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services and several federal and state agencies (What is HOSA, 2020). HOSA’s mission is to empower HOSA-Future Health Professionals to become leaders in the global health community, through education, collaboration, and experience.
- **Key Club:** is an international, student-led organization that provides its members with opportunities to provide service, build character and develop leadership.

- **LGBTQ+:** Common acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (HRC, 2019).
- **Lesbian:** A woman emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women (HRC, 2019).
- **Othering:** the process whereby an individual or groups of people attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them (Rohleder, 2014).
- **Promise Neighborhood:** A neighborhoods experiencing economic distress and its consequences, of inadequate access to high quality early learning opportunities, struggling schools, low high school and college graduation rates, high rates of unemployment, high rates of crime, and indicators of poor health (Promise Neighborhoods Program, 2018).
- **Queer:** A term expressing fluid identities and orientations; commonly used interchangeably with LGBTQ (HRC, 2019).
- **Rural:** Relating to the country and the people who live in nonurban settings as opposed to urban environments of a city; relating to the country, country people or way of life, or agriculture (Rural, 2019).
- **Transgender:** A blanket term for people whose gender identity and expression do not align with cultural norms and expectations based on the sex assigned at birth (HRC, 2019). Transgender does not correlate to sexual orientation. Transgender individuals may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or nonbinary.
- **TRIO Upward Bound:** The TRIO Upward Bound program helps to generate skills and motivation necessary for success in education beyond high school among low-

income and potential first-generation college students and veterans. The goal of the program is to increase the academic performance and motivation levels of eligible enrollees so that such persons may complete secondary school and successfully pursue postsecondary educational programs. For student who have completed the 8th grade, between the ages of 13 and 19.

- **Y Club (now Student Y):** is a student-led program for middle and high school students (grades 6-12) interested in making an impact in local and global communities (Student Y, 2021). Student Y is a way for your school or community organization to engage in meaningful service-learning projects throughout the school year and develop into compassionate community leaders.
- **YMCA:** a nonprofit organization whose mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all (Youth Development, 2019). The Y is committed to nurturing the potential of every child and teen. From cradle to career, the Y empowers young people to lead inspired, successful lives.
- **Youth and Government,** a national YMCA program, empowers students from every corner of the U.S. by giving them the opportunity to learn about—and experience—government policies and methodologies firsthand (Youth and Government, 2021).
- **Youth development:** The process of preparing a young person to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood to achieve their full potential (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition [NASET], 2010), implemented through activities, learning, and experiences and providing young people with opportunities to

develop social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies (NASSET, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

- **Youth development organization alumni:** An individual who has aged out of the parameters of a youth organization's age range who may or may not remain active as a former youth member (Kahane, 1975; NASSET, 2010).
- **Youth leadership:** Part of the youth-development process that supports young people in developing the ability to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and skills to carry them out (NASSET, 2010). The process also includes enabling young people to learn how to guide or direct others on a course of action, influencing others' opinions and behaviors, and serving as role models.
- **Youth organization:** Organizations with the following components: an active, expressive pattern of action, multidimensional models of performances, symmetric relationships among participants, a dual structure, and the principle of the moratorium (Kahane, 1975). All the components have a high degree of voluntary participation.

### **Limitations**

The focus of this study was self-identifying LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations which ranged from agriculture-based and rurally centered to community-wide. The participants within the study's scope might have experienced discomfort in sharing their experiences, subsequently disclosing less during the interviews. Because "youth-serving" is a broad term, some individuals who believed themselves to be eligible might not have qualified for participation and vice versa. The exclusion criteria were meeting any of the following:

1. Appalachian individuals who do *not* identify as LGBTQ+

2. Individuals *not* from the Central Appalachian county under study
3. Individuals with involvement in a *school-sponsored* youth-serving organization

### **Assumptions**

This was a study unique to Central Appalachia; as such, participants' experiences will not be generalizable to LGBTQ+ individuals in other regions. Because of the recruitment criteria, one assumption was that participants would truthfully answer questions about their Appalachian identity and their experiences in a Central Appalachian youth-serving organization. I assumed the LGBTQ+ participants would fully and accurately represent themselves and their experiences within their youth-serving organizations. These assumptions were necessary for me to rely on their perceptions, recollections, and accounts during interviews, member checking, and follow-up conversations.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided insight into fundamental aspects of social identities such as rural, Appalachian, and LGBTQ+. Because social identity played a significant factor in this study, it was vital to understand research surrounding social identity and its development in youth. Youth identity within a youth organization outlined another central concept for this study. By understanding components of social identity, the concepts of belonging and othering were vital in exploring how the ties among social identities intertwine within each explored. The research on youth organizations and positive youth development shows how social identity, belongingness, and how youth can feel othered by peers and adults in their organizations. The final concept focused on youth leadership and its characteristics. By studying youth leadership and its many facets throughout rural, Appalachian, and LGBTQ+ youth, the research provided a broad conceptual framework for this dissertation. Outlining the contextual framework in Central Appalachia provided a place for this study and how the alumni perceptions we needed to add

more breadth to Central Appalachian youth research. This study would not exist without the key terms that defined each organization, the problem statement, and the purpose. This chapter also presented the assumptions and limitations of this study to understand some of the difficulties and challenges.



## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

### Introduction

This study applies a queer theory lens to the collection and analysis of data on the experiences and perceptions of queer people who were involved in youth-serving organizations in rural Central Appalachia. As such, this chapter offers a review of queer theory literature, focusing on this literature's applicability to studies of young people's feelings of belonging and othering and to studies of queer visibility in the context of Central Appalachia.

#### *What Is Queer Theory?*

Queer theory is a field of critical theory that emerged out of women and gender studies. It seeks to denaturalize hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, arguing that such norms are culturally and socially constructed phenomena (Nylund, 2007; Rands, 2016, Warner & Shields, 2013, Browne & Nash, 2016). By focusing on the (re)production and normalization of, rigid gender performances and sexual desires, queer theory has been instrumental in challenging assumptions about the stability and rigidity of gender, sexuality, and associated identities, including hetero and homosexual (Diamond, 2016; Sedgwick, 1990). The theory focuses on dismantling gender binaries (masculine/feminine) and binaries of sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) and on highlighting "other" gender performances and sexual identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (Rumens et al., 2019; Mikdashi & Puar, 2016; Radi & Perez, 2016; Rumens et al., 2019). Through critical analyses of heteronormativity, queer theory suggests that there are no "natural" sexualities (Rumens et al., 2019), highlighting the inadequacies of classifications such as "male and female" and "gay and straight" (Rudy, 2000). Rather than a thing, identity according to queer theory is a "doing." A dynamic, progressive, and future-oriented theory, it attempts to disrupt the "norm," avoiding

fixed identities (Nylund, 2007). Many of its theoretical concepts are similar to those of cultural studies; like cultural studies, it is interested in social control, representation, popular culture, bias, identities, and social theoretical utilization.

Like queer theory, queer as an identity abandons the notion of fixed identities, making it somewhat difficult to pin down. At its most basic, queer refers to non-normative gender performances and sexualities - to anyone who feels marginalized by gendered and sexuality social norms – and highlights the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Some scholars treat the queer as a broad category encompassing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals, arguing that the term queer facilitates movement away from such fixed identification labels (Msibi, 2012). As queer scholar Msibi writes, their research participants are “sexual beings, whose sexuality is fluid and multiple depending on space, time and context” (Msibi, p. 516). Other researchers of queer youth argue that many queer young people are dissatisfied with contemporary LGBTQ+ categories due to limiting social construction factors and want more positive affirmations of gender creativity and sexual orientation. As such, this dissertation utilizes *queer* as an umbrella term throughout each chapter but keeps true to reported research literature findings where LGBTQ+ and other cited terms and acronyms are used.

When compared to other critical social approaches, queer theory is relatively new, the product of a convergence in the 1980s between Foucauldian theories of power and critiques by feminists, many of them lesbian, of dominant norms of gender and sexuality. The term, “queer theory,” was first used as an academic term in the 1991 book, *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (De Lauretis, 1991). In addition to Foucault, researchers cite Butler, Sedgwick, Rubin, Anzaldua, and Scott amongst the scholars who have most directly shaped the development and foundation of queer theory (Rumens et al., 2019).

Many scholars question queer theory's applicability and usefulness, arguing that it is not a coherent theory but rather lacks standards, models, and methods for examining individuals, groups, or social phenomena. Such critiques suggest that queer theory is neither "a single discourse" nor "a propositional program," for there is no single meaning of the term nor a universal set of beliefs surrounding it (Rumens et al., 2019). As such, queer theory causes discord within the social sciences, and many scholars avoid using it as theoretical underpinning.

These critiques come from queer theory lacking a rubric connection where, like many other social critical theories rely on set tenets to support the theory, queer theory is not bound by categorical boundaries for understanding (Rumens et al., 2019). Without a set rubric to follow, this dissertation focuses on deeper questioning of the needs, identities, and participant experiences to gain a better understanding to belongingness and being othered. Queer theory best suited this type of inquiry and provided the underpinning to this research.

### ***Queer Theory in Qualitative Studies***

As queer and other critical theorists have argued, humans construct their identities through language and prevailing discourses, which impact behavior in often limiting ways (Mostenbacher & Stegu, 2013). As such, queer theorists seek to uncover how language and discourse create, reproduce, and stabilize identities. Queer theory has therefore proved useful in qualitative research, for it lends itself to a critical analysis of language and narrative, thereby queering – or de-normalizing – everyday experiences and ostensibly fixed categories and identities. O'Malley et al. (2018) posited that queer theory contributes to qualitative examination, not principally by representing the non-normative desires and behaviors of sexualized or gendered minorities, but by engaging in a critical analysis of processes of normalization of particular sexual desires and gendered performances. Queer theory offers qualitative researchers

a span of epistemological, methodological, and analytic tools, including deeper rooted questions, less rigid categorical development, and deviates from the “normal” inquiry tenets of theoretical backings. As Wozolek (2019) argues, queer theory is a useful tool for engaging in qualitative research of higher education, sociocultural support systems, and the experiences of marginalized populations as it questions norms, trends, and happenings against fixed perceptions, socially constructed meanings, and unsupported findings. Indeed, queer theory rejects categorical research methods (Graham, 2019).

Queerness, when applied to academic fields, offers a particular critique of academic thinking where one collects data without critically examining one’s fixed ideas, the data takes on that much more researcher bias, embedding itself in heteronormative assumptions (Graham, 2019). Queer theory calls on researchers to question the natural origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than assuming conceptual acceptance and stability. Mayo (2017), for example, argued that queer theory involved consideration of how normative power shapes the types of investigations researchers do. Mayo described how destabilizing (queering) fixed categories challenges the correlation of sexual orientation and gender identity, and how generational and socioeconomic background disparities may structure future non-normative sexuality and gender identity works. Understanding overlapping and interactive subjectivities can muddle how researchers think about the people they investigate and their association to social identity and social formations (Mayo, 2017). In line with work on intersectionality, studies of queer lives must consider differences among queer people, including differences of race, ethnicity, class, age, and geographic location.

Despite queer theory’s contribution to qualitative research, the theory is often ignored by qualitative researchers for several reasons, including a tendency to use queer theory only when

studying openly queer research topics, and a reluctance among scholars to cross-examine the realistic deficiencies of a heterosexist culture using the ‘closet,’ a metaphor for keeping queer individuals invisible (Sedgwick, 1990).

### ***Why Queer Theory?***

The study of gender and sexual minority individuals increases the visibility of queer people in society while at the same time de-normalizing harmful, dominant gender and sexual norms (Butler, 1990). The experiences of people who are queer – i.e. people who are not straight and/or are gender queer, or gender nonconforming - can expose both the working and the fragility of patriarchal heteronormativity. Simply by being themselves, queer people can by virtue of their unique positionality interrupt society’s common-sense assumptions about the relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality. (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

For the reasons outlined above, and because heteronormative discourses remain dominant and standard-setting in everyday school culture, this study leans heavily on queer theory, joining other queer scholars in efforts to shift dominant understandings of gender and sexuality in schools and local communities. Wozolek (2019) posited that such efforts steer away from queer youth deficit models and allow for better visibility of young queer people’s needs, especially in schools. Because the adverse effects of invisibility and heteronormativity stands in Central Appalachia, they firmly tell the ways marginalized youth view their interactions with peers and adults. The implications show that queer theory is essential to the productive movement of qualitative research and education. In this context, queer theory raises questions about equity, social practices, and community organizational access for vulnerable queer youth.

## *Utilizing Queer Theory*

**Youth Development.** The presence and experiences of queer youth have motivated researchers and youth development experts to utilize queer theory to develop innovative research practices and educational approaches that challenge normalized identities (Mayo, 2017). Mayo posited that these practices and approaches help shape how we think about ourselves and the world, providing a way to “start conversations on the shortcomings of self-understandings” (p. 532). Notable research into the experiences and perspectives of queer youth include Msibi’s 2012 study. Designed to help improve queer learners' school experiences, the interventionist project analysis involved interviews of 14 participants, including high school students, university students, and teachers. Msibi’s work showed that queer learners commonly have negative schooling experiences as a result of limiting and discriminatory language, limiting gender roles, fear of violence, culture, and religion. One significant finding was that teachers were not intentionally homophobic but “lack[ed] understanding” and information about homosexuality and other queer issues (Msibi, 2012). Queer participants remarked that teachers and other adults often leaned on queer youth to clarify what it means to be gay and how one becomes homosexual. The findings in this dissertation correlate with and lend weight to Msibi’s conclusions, further highlighting the importance of educating educators about queer issues.

**Rural Youth Development.** While other scholars have focused on representations of rural queer youth (Schey, 2020), some treat this population as if it were identical across regions, while others have focused only on the viewpoints of adult educators, often leaving youth voices out (Blackburn and Thomas, 2019; Hall, Witkemper, Rodgers, Waters, & Smith, 2018; McCollum, 2010; O’Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010; Page, 2017). Studies have shown that staff in rural schools hold damaging attitudes about queer youth, have little

knowledge about sexual and gender diversity, and generally do not support queer students. Other research has shown that religion, specifically Christianity, plays a significant role in shaping the attitudes of leaders and teachers in rural communities and often increases anti-LGBTQ+ opinions (Beck, Walker-DeVose, Agnich, Town, & Smith, 2017; Dahl, Scott, & Peace, 2014; Page, 2017). There is a distinct gap in the literature with regards to the perceptions of queer youth in rural schools and young people in how school-based resources affect school conditions and educational outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth (De Pedro, Lynch, & Esqueda, 2018; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). There is also a lack in examining the viewpoints of rural queer youth that consider the educational components and learning opportunities they may or may not have compared to their less rural peers (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Dahl et al., 2014; Gray, 2009; Hulko, 2015; Yarbrough, 2004). Overall, research of queer youth in rural settings demonstrates that rural queer youth have inadequate access to support systems that could aid them in navigating the marginalization they experience in school and their communities (Schey, 2020). In addition to anti-queer sentiments, such limited access is the result of geographical isolation and a shortage of economic resources for use in queer youth programming.

In a study of rural queer youth's viewpoints, Schey (2020) found that earlier research on queer youth in small-towns and rural educational settings only included educators' perspectives on victimization of LGBTQ+ individuals. Schey's conducted interviews to examine queer youths' voice and agency, drawing on queer theories to consider time and space and their significance to cultural constructions of "be(com)ing" an individual. He talked with Sylvia, a queer young woman in a semi-rural, small, Midwestern US town as part of the interview process. Sylvia was involved in an ecumenical Christian youth group. Because she grew up attending

youth church programs and a small rural school, her story deepens understanding of youth points of view on programmatic and instructional experiences, highlighting that such experiences play a critical role in increasing or limiting the agency and access to resources of rural youth. In contrast to the youth victimization mindset held by adults, Sylvia's church youth group and school experiences helped her question and rethink normative structures of time, space, and queerness, leading Sylvia to better health and contentment. Sylvia's narrative provides a more nuanced understanding of queer youth's lives, showing that rural queer youth are not solely victims of harm or damage but are also able to thrive through oppression. Schey's work challenges researchers and educators to pay attention to rural queer youth heterogeneity and agency and to constructions of time, space, and queerness in queer-inclusive curricular work. Schey's (2020) study shows that care and trust are fundamental to learning, especially for queer rural youth in their processes of "be(com)ing."

Like Schey, in the 2019 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report, Kosciw et al. (2019) acknowledged the significance of supportive educators both in school and out-of-school learning spaces. The authors surveyed 16,713 LGBTQ students on the indicators of negative school environments and the ways in which school-based support (e.g. supportive staff, anti-bullying/harassment policies, LGBTQ-inclusive curricular resources, and gay-straight alliances (GSA)) can positively affect LGBTQ students' school experiences. They found that, attitudes about queer people and religious-based values shape the efforts of educators working with queer rural youth to cultivate queer-inclusive learning environments. They also found that, when provided with active, queer-inclusive, school-based support, students felt a sense of belonging in their local, intergenerational communities and reported positive changes in their school learning spaces as well as an increase in school-supported resource development and



policies. Kosciw et al. concluded that educators in small towns and rural communities can and should cultivate caring and trusting relationships with queer students. Such work does not only occur in formal classroom settings but also in spaces such as community programs, out-of-school activities, and other youth organizations. This dissertation builds on Kosciw et al.'s and Schey's work, likewise, focusing on the importance of educating educators and likewise arguing that, central to fostering queer inclusivity and support is the facilitation by educators of opportunities for queer youth to learn about themselves, other queer people, and communities where queer people are not othered or marginalized.

As demonstrated in Rosenberg's (2016) *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*, non-formal education systems also shape rural life and ideas about gender and sexuality. Crucially, 4-H is a state program, leading Rosenberg to conclude that the American state produces heterosexuality in rural America. The book tells three stories in one manuscript: 1. An institutional history of 4-H, including the centrality and social experiences of youth participants; 2. A cultural history of the political economy of agribusiness in the US, including the gendered assumptions that shaped the early years of modern farming; and 3. The history of a "biopolitical [state] apparatus" outlining the interlocking series of biopolitical units from gendered bodies of rural youth, their families, and communities (Rosenberg, 2016). Following Foucault's (1990) work on sexuality, Rosenberg defined *biopolitics* as a political technique to manage human life at the individual and population level. Using first-person accounts and historical records, he describes 4-H's community programs, including boy's corn clubs and girl's canning clubs, both of which remain Extension programs today. Rosenberg draws on queer theory and a Foucauldian theory of biopolitics to challenge scholarly representations of rural family life, calling into question scholars' assumptions that rural settings are somehow less

“normal” than their urban counterparts. Of particular import to this dissertation, he also addresses 4-H's role in reinforcing normative gender roles by emphasizing common beauty standards such as how to dress to your gender and how to act in your social role. Rosenberg notes that ideas about the traditional family farm had an enormous cultural influence on the managed industrialization of the rural American landscape. Without traditional farming families, rural regions would cease to exist. Rosenberg (2016) argued that 4-H acted on the body of its members, reproducing heteronormativity in rural America and demonstrated what the assembly of the American state should look like – binary and less diverse. Because 4-H's parent agencies, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Cooperative Extension Service (CES), have political influence on political science research, researchers often ignore the regulation of gender, sexuality and intimacy in studies of rural regions and agricultural programs. In contrast, Rosenberg shows how, in rural America, 4-H infrastructure helped cultivate not only prized livestock, abundant crops, hand-sewn clothes, home-preserved goods, foraged materials, precise record books, but also gendered young bodies, all of which were seen as state assistance of rural communities.

Additionally, Rosenberg examined the federal government's efforts at social transformation in rural America. Rosenberg (2016) documented concerns about population decline during the Great Depression and federal agencies' desire to save family farms. Such agencies imagined an ideal farm composed of “a male revenue producer and a female homemaker,” both white, middle-class “better sorts” (p. 126). Rosenberg details that, working with an ideal family farm image in rural America, USDA programs constructed rural heterosexuality as the norm in agriculture and youth programs through beauty pageants, Personal Appearance contests, and other personal competency contests promoted through 4-H. According

to Rosenberg, such contests were an outgrowth of the competitions used to assess corn or canning produce to define how advantageous these types of youth programs were for rural America. In other words, if you did not support this type of program or activity in your area, your rural regions would fail.

In addition to considering 4-H's role in promoting representations of the ideal youth, Rosenberg examined 4-H's role in establishing stereotypical gender roles. Rosenberg (2016) shared an account where 4-H members associated a pleasing personality with the maintenance of heterosexual relations and the possessions of specific characteristics, such as boys being strong and masculine and girls being meek, mannerly, and feminine, which made the individual "immediately desirable to the opposite sex...and ensured marital stability and healthy reproduction" (p. 138). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, club leaders taught their 4-H members ways to develop happy family relationships while teaching boys and girls how to attract the opposite sex. 4-H and Extension programming played a role in how participating youth viewed themselves, leaving room for anything outside of those behaviors considered normal.

Rosenberg's (2016) work, including rural history, 4-H, and the American state, spark critical conversations, analysis, and reflection, laying a foundation for how this dissertation examines the social norms, organizational climate, and sense of place built on the perceptions participants had in their Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

### ***The Queering of Appalachia***

In *Appalachian Values*, Loyal Jones (1994) counters the persistent negative stereotypes about Appalachian people. Using narratives and photography, mostly of Central Appalachia, his work illustrated Appalachian values such as faith, independence, self-reliance, pride, neighborliness, hospitality, familism, love of place, beauty, and humor. Jones argued that most

people were accepted and respected in their communities, even though visible societal bounds regulated the acceptance processes. Jones described Appalachia as a fabricated concept with no true equivalent, with a constant struggle to define who or what is Appalachian. He explained how Appalachia was settled by people seeking a “new way of life” away from the invasive oversight of religious and state authorities. He described the lessons that mountaineers learned from their search for freedom and independence through hard work, grit, and limited advantage. Jones yielded that Appalachians were hired as laborers to in the region’s timber, coal, gas, and oil industries. Many took on circumstances relegated to poverty in the economic struggles following industrial downfall. Even with dreadful events, Jones focused on the belief that Appalachians are independent and self-reliant, not captives to practicality, but providing for “ourselves” and family. His focus on “personalism” shows that Appalachians strive to relate well with others. Jones wanted to provide Appalachian kids with a complimentary view of their Appalachian culture due to negative attitudes toward the region and themselves. Jones’ work provides a glimpse into the values Appalachians hold close and adhere to through family tradition, regional knowledge, or religious conditions. This work provided a better understanding of the history of the Appalachian culture shared by participants in this dissertation’s research, and it re-examined Appalachia through another lens, like queer theory, bringing out varied conceptualizations of life in the region.

In *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, Vance (2016) described Appalachian culture as a blend of the values of honor, family devotion, and the bizarre sexism embodied by all Appalachians. Although Appalachia is a blended area, there is no defined culture inside the boundaries and outside Appalachia. According to Vance, the purpose of his book was not to convince readers of a “documented problem,” but to “tell a true story about what

that problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck” (p. 8). Vance described his childhood experiences in Central Appalachia and the ways his interactions with his family and community members he shaped his life. Vance drew on accounts of Appalachia and its “hillbilly” roots, political movements, and how racial biases result in continued community and economic failure in Appalachia. Despite the use of personal accounts instead of empirical evidence, critics from several non-Appalachian news outlets, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *National Review*, have identified Vance as a “voice for Appalachia.” The issue presented in *Hillbilly Elegy* is the generalization that all Appalachians are poor, dumb, and socially backward individuals, which politically charged Vance’s conservative values. Vance (2016) questioned how government officials could change situations for those less fortunate, particularly in Appalachia, but offered no resolutions, only suggesting that “doing better requires that we acknowledge the [deficit]role of culture [in Appalachia]” (p. 261). Without research to support the author’s claims, the book presented problems, suggesting the need to show that not all Appalachians fit these stereotypes. Vance did provide a glimpse into common perspectives about Appalachian culture, such as that Appalachians are hillbillies, mountain-awkward, and less-fortunate individuals, concepts that many participants may share in their experiences with youth-serving organizations; however, his work is problematic and flawed on many levels. The following works address how some of those flaws and problems take shape throughout American society.

In *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, Catta (2018) described the region as a “construction”: a concurrently viewed political structure, a broad geographic area, and a place that holds an unusual position in our cultural imagination. The author’s two objectives were (a) to provide critical commentary about who profits from excluding “other American” voices, such

as the voices of non-Whites, political progressives, LGBTQ individuals, and young people, using Appalachian history to push back against firm representations of the region, and (b) to publicly honor the lives, accomplishments, and legacies of those disregarded in discussions about Appalachia. Catte provided many perspectives based on the political environment, the status some gave themselves to speak for others, and the perceptions of the region. Rather than learning about what others shared in interviews and commentaries, the author sought to discover what they did not say. Appalachia did not have one social problem that scholars could not find in other U.S. regions. Catte (2018) examined Appalachia closely through scholarly work, visual art, and nonfictional accounts to stimulate conversations and thoughts about Appalachia as a whole, not as a project of providing a voice to the voiceless. The presentation of Appalachia's actual image was radical and diverse without deflecting the region's problems from those who have fought to survive poverty, natural disasters, and illness. In conclusion, Catte provided a vision in which Appalachians see their stories and memories as something more extensive than a disconnected display of damage and despair so they can "capture their own images" (p. 132). Many participants discussed the sociodemographics that were required of their families to participate in their organizations. The book brought a fresh perspective on changing views, erasing stereotypes, and making life in Appalachia more manageable for the voiceless.

Harkins and McCarroll (2019) wrote *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* to refute the narratives non-Appalachians hear and see about the Appalachian region. *Appalachian Reckoning* provided a literary stage to uphold reactions and responses to Vance's (2016) book. It included writings in which the authors reached beyond *Hillbilly Elegy* in considering how "Appalachians experience their Appalachianess" (pp. 2-3). The conceptual structure of *Appalachian Reckoning* included a broad range of topics organized into two

sections—considering *Hillbilly Elegy* and beyond *Hillbilly Elegy*—each providing an educated analysis of Vance’s work, including Appalachian-rooted scholars’ and writers’ narratives. Harkins and McCarroll (2019) discussed how Appalachia’s misrepresentation was a disguise to willfully overshadow Appalachian pride and dignity. Because *Hillbilly Elegy* suggested that Appalachians should feel ashamed of their upbringing and blood ties, Harkins and McCarroll found Vance’s work demeaning to Appalachians and indicated that it presented a “hackneyed, stereotypical view of the region” (p. 164) to individuals who did not live or have connections in Appalachia. “It plays right into how people outside of the region have already been conditioned to see us” (pp. 164-165). Harkins and McCarroll emphasized “passing the microphone” to make room for those who have worked to combat poverty, solve family issues, eradicate the confines of race, and bring addiction to the forefront—issues Vance discussed in *Hillbilly Elegy*. They made room for scholarship, personal accounts, and artistic expression to provide a space in which individuals could be different, disagree, protest, reimagine possibilities, and, most importantly, learn. Much of this work focused on the struggles that participants might share in their interviews. Many individuals hope to realign how others see Appalachia and have pride in their home region, even in adversity. Harkins and McCarroll inspired hope in reclaiming Appalachia.

### **Review of Literature**

The following sections outline the review of literature for this study. Topics reviewed include belonging and othering in young people, Appalachia as a place, the visibility of queer Appalachians, and the role of religion in Appalachia. Each of the topics reviewed presents more in-depth literature that ties to the conceptual and contextual framework to the importance of this study.

### ***Belonging and Othering in Young People***

Newman et al. (2007) posited that relating to others in group situations requires numerous cognitive, social, and emotional skills. In their Achenbach Youth Self-Report Survey, they explored three aspects of adolescent peer group membership: peer group affiliation, importance of group membership, and a sense of belonging in peer groups. Participants included 733 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse adolescents ranging from ages 11 to 18. Overall, their examination focused on the relationship between a sense of group belonging and mental health. Unsurprisingly, their research showed a strong link between having a sense of group belonging and a young person's mental health capacity in group interactions. Their study results implied that parents, teachers, and other community leaders need to recognize the importance of youth participation in school and community groups because such participation can nurture feelings of group belonging, which is paramount to a young person's mental health and social well-being. Taking time to understand and foster the development of social competencies among youth contributes to effective youth participation. If belonging and not belonging are major variables in the complex world of adolescent mental health, Newman et al.'s study demonstrates that youth development professionals need to focus on participant needs, emotions, and development in terms of the participants feeling like they belong and are not being othered.

LGBTQ+ young people living in rural areas are at an increased risk of social isolation and social exclusion due to limited access to other LGBTQ+ individuals and supportive resources. Pacey (2016) examined how LGBTQ+ youth are at risk of mental and physical health problems due to social stigmatization and marginalization. Pacey's qualitative study involved interviews with 34 rural youth and found four "youth need" categories: decreased isolation, social acceptance and visibility, emotional support and safety, and LGBTQ+ youth



identity development. LGBTQ+ young people need ways to socially interact with peers, organizations, and their community. Pacey posited that community and youth development workers must be educated in LGBTQ+ issues to improve program sensitivity and reduce hostility. Further, there is a need for openness and inclusivity of LGBTQ+ identities in schools, mental health organizations, afterschool programs, and churches. This study provided an avenue for exploring the effects of needs and practices within LGBTQ+ young people's lives and well-being. Pacey's work provides an interpretive lens centering a queer perspective and pinpointing how organizations can further their inclusive policies and practices.

Akiva et al. (2013) examined program participation among youth and their psychological experiences through their cognitive and emotional reactions in order to understand the influence of organized activities. They investigated involvement experiences relating to belonging, cognitive engagement, demographics, previous contact, staff practices, and program types. Data was gathered through the Youth Program Quality Intervention Study, a randomized field trial conducted by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality from a varied mix of 66 youth programs in four states including community-based and school-based organizational structures. They found that increased participation intensity was associated with increased belonging and cognitive engagement; however, experience duration was negatively associated with these variables. Further, they found that active skill-building (not welcoming) predicted cognitive engagement and welcoming (not active skill-building) predicted belonging. They suggested that two out of the three staff practices (welcoming and active skill-building) correlated with youth involvement experiences. The significance of welcoming practices and active skill-building in youth program settings provided a research framework in which to study various features of youth program participation. Their findings reinforced that involvement

experience is formed by youth aspects relating to the person-context structure, such as demographics and previous exposure, as well as through program features including group characteristics, staff practices, and content offered. This study showed the connection between youth programming experiences and contextual engagement factors. Because there was a varied sample of youth-serving organizations, this work adds to understandings of belongingness and pinpoints varied factors affecting youth engagement and participation. If youth feel that they do not belong or are not achieving any goals or outcomes, they may strongly oppose continued participation. Shedding light on skill development and welcoming program environments adds depth to this research.

Much like Akiva et al., Anderson-Butcher & Fink (2005) explored the significance of attendance, age, and sense of belonging to predict varied risk and protective factors including problem behaviors among youth participants. Because social connections, networks, and the promotion of pro-social norms are important, they explored belonging in youth service organizations and its role in promoting positive youth development. They surveyed 98 youth participants and found that belonging had a significant correlation with protective factors and a negative correlation with various risk factors and problem behaviors. They concluded that youth are more at risk as they age, and therefore 1) an emphasis should be placed on youth development program involvement, and 2) program leaders must prioritize a sense of belonging in their programming design. This study provided evidence that youth development programs are imperative to a young person's sense of belonging. Their determination that a youth's just showing up for programs does not decrease their risky behavior is a warning sign, particularly for Central Appalachian youth-serving programs. Skill development and interactions play a key role in how young people associate their organizational experiences. Anderson-Butcher and

Fink's study reveals a need for understanding how youth navigate their lives and the importance of peer groups and being part of the program.

De Castro (2004) explored ways in which young people understand the concepts of "self" and "other" when relating to other youth. De Castro's qualitative study included 105 youth participants between the ages of 10 and 17 and examined how the creation of difference is directly related to social order issues. One of the study's main concerns is "otherness" as the cause of negativity in social relationships and how tension and contradiction within deep-rooted interactions gets repressed through the "other" affirmation. De Castro noted that otherness is an underlying aspect of a young person's social practices, so his work examined the conditions for creating social bonds through social inequalities. This work also refocused identity formation from adult-child interactions to child-child relationships to show how identity misconceptions foster otherness. De Castro determined that otherness plays an important role in youth interactions, slowly breaking group bonds. De Castro resolved that it was possible to counteract prejudice and hostility in social relationships based on difference; where "self" is constructed to be open and contested by its own irregularities. He concluded that receptiveness of "other" can achieve an openness to re-establish the interdependence of self and other. Difference, as a personal construct, can lead to displacement of conceptions of self, society and culture, adding value to dependence, openness and vulnerability. De Castro also emphasizes the importance of understanding social relationships and interactions among young people and adults. This understanding is key to how participants guarded their interactions with adults and peers and how they self-managed themselves to belong or not be othered. For youth to navigate their organizational relationships in this dissertation, there were shared perceptions that focused on mindfulness, tying De Castro's findings into this study focused on youth othering.

Each of the above studies has significance to how belonging and othering takes place through deeper connections, more than simply attending a program or being part of a group. The development of social interactions is key to how participants' experiences shaped their sense of belonging or being othered by their organizational peers and leaders.

***Place: Appalachia***

According to Soderling (2016), Appalachian culture is considered a queer concept to many non-Appalachians. One of the tensions between Appalachian identity and queer identity resides in experiences and ideologies associated with the region's natural environment (Barry, 2021). Like many cultures in the United States, Appalachian culture favors the traditional family model, promoting conventional marriage, procreation, and physical qualities of strength, beauty, and stature. Research shows how cultural emphasis on the traditional heteronormative family (man and woman raising children) influences socioeconomic ideas about work, labor, and community (keeping queerness out of work situations and not disclosing family makeup within their communities). However, Appalachian queer folks already have a more complicated relationship to home, family, and community.

Obermiller & Maloney (2016) examined the uses and misuses of Appalachian culture by Appalachian leaders, activists, and scholars. Reflecting on the many local cultures in rural and urban Appalachian communities, Obermiller & Maloney (2016) posited that Appalachian scholars and activists must emphasize the "variety in the Appalachian heritage of the diverse people in Appalachia" (p. 110) to celebrate variety and new ways of thinking. They reviewed artifacts and documents and interviewed Appalachian scholars on the early practices, the notions of Appalachian culture, and the effect of Appalachian studies on prominent cultural conceptions and misconceptions to argue that scholars should address what Appalachians have in common

with different regions' demographics. Through regional change and increased diversity, there is a need for additional research on Appalachian culture through theoretical practices. Obermiller & Maloney (2016) added that the lack of a deep understanding of the region's limitations results in a strengthening of misconceptions about the region and its people. They indicated that even Appalachian scholars and writers have misconceptions about Appalachian culture; thus, their findings contributed to this study the possibility that some participants can feel out of place or unwelcome in their youth-serving organizations.

Much like Obermiller & Maloney, Terman's (2020) qualitative study addressed the gaps in, and intersectional qualities of, social identities and place and their relation to college-educated young adults' perspectives. This study was based on focus groups and interviews from college-educated young adults living in the Appalachian region. Terman made meaning of how young people navigate social identities, place, mobility, and belonging connections to strengthen their relationship with the limiting factors of being queer, being Appalachian, and their willingness to leave the region. Much of the relationship between identity, place, mobility, and belonging for young people is significant to rural community sustainability threatened by outmigration. Terman found that identity-based social oppression played a role in community sustainability largely due to scholars and community and institutional leaders not acknowledging or addressing it. The study results position the burden of social identities that young people negotiate and overcome on finding belonging in rural places. Terman's work detailed a struggle that many young Appalachians face in their late teen years. Terman's study highlighted how social identities intersect with place and belonging, which relates to one of the major themes in this dissertation. Some participants discussed wanting to remain in Appalachia to make a life, while others sought more inclusive communities outside the region. Although the foundation of

Terman's work was centered on mobility, it grounds many of the participant's experiences within their own communities.

Inscoe's (2011) *Sense of Place, Sense of Being: Appalachian Struggles with Identity, Belonging, and Escape* is a comparative analysis of Appalachian authors describing formative times in their lives in their work. It aligns with Terman's (2020) views on social oppression but embraces Appalachian identity. Inscoe wrote, "Perhaps more than in most parts of America, place has always defined Appalachians' sense of being, and the linkage between geography and spirit often seems particularly acute in terms of how southern highlanders...identify themselves and define their life experiences" (p. 161). Inscoe states that for some native and transplanted Appalachian writers, sharing their background, family history, and experiences resulted in oppressive and constraining circumstances due to Appalachia's traditional and conformist attitude. Some Appalachian scholars believed that they could only ascend as successful adults if they left the Appalachian region; others explained that returning to the mountains provided their lives with fulfillment. According to Inscoe, the way Appalachian individuals engage in these works presents an inconsistency of Appalachian culture; although some experience it as a beautiful and rustic environment with healing and therapeutic capabilities, it causes others to feel pain and unfulfillment. Inscoe shared, "Far more than human development, family and socialization, even success and achievement, it is [writers'] attitudes toward Appalachia that are at the core of their 'inner scripts' and thus provide the basis for their self-examinations" (p. 162). This research provides insight into Appalachians' pride about where they were born and raised, while also indicating the region's limitations for expression of identity. Through discussing the concepts of identity and home, Inscoe presented a robust and in-depth understanding of why some individuals feel the Appalachian culture constraining, and others find it freeing.

Exploring how Appalachia as a place is felt by many growing up in the region, there are investments of time and energy that can be marginalizing and oppressive. Each of the participants in this study took pride in being Appalachian, however some felt as though they belonged when they were younger but found they were othered for reasons including the way they dressed, their lack of financial resources, and how they presented themselves within their organizations. The foundation for this study centers on whether they felt they belonged or if they were othered, not only because they were part of the Appalachian culture, but because they eventually identified as LGBTQ+.

### *Visibility of Queer Appalachians*

Black & Rhorer (1995) asserted that their hope for their “exploratory work-in-progress” was that it would prompt other researchers to incorporate gay and lesbian identities in future Appalachian conversations. Their project originated from a research paper on lesbians and gays in Appalachia, in which they interviewed five lesbian women and four gay men, who ranged from age 20 to 45, about their life experiences in Appalachia. Their findings revealed common themes, including feelings of isolation, importance of community connection, fears from inside and outside the closet, and various forms of oppression, discrimination, and identity. This study laid a solid foundation as to why this research focus is needed today. Despite Black & Rhorer’s significant addition to the body of knowledge about queer Appalachians, there is still little evidence of how queer identity and Appalachian living correlate with acceptance and visibility within the region, especially in youth populations. Additionally, Black & Rhorer’s study illustrated a clear need for research on how queer young people navigate their lives through their interactions with other non-queer Appalachian youth and adults. Because there is still so little

academic research specific to queer Appalachians and youth development, the link between this study and Black & Rhorer's work is ready to be explored.

Within Appalachia, Milam (2010) focused on early queer identity formations in Central Appalachia, providing the first written account of the history of gay life in West Virginia. He also gives an urban, historical view of gay life in twentieth-century United States, showing that LGBTQ+ life is a more inclusive culture than Appalachian and mainstream American culture. Milam interviewed LGBTQ+ men and women living in West Virginia in the 1960s and 1970s about four issues: West Virginia, violence, bars, and church. He argued that West Virginian and Appalachian cultures shape the lives of gay people in these regions. Many participants struggled to balance the clash of West Virginian and gay/lesbian as identities. Milam found that gay men and lesbians established a gay community mirroring a larger, more urban one. He also found that they advanced their community by asserting their "normalcy as West Virginians who abide by traditional—albeit somewhat redefined—Appalachian values" (pp. 50–51). His paper showed that gay identity awareness resulted in a distinguished Appalachian gay community that included church groups, bars, healthier communities, and lives with long-term partners in the West Virginia mountains. Because Milam focused on Central Appalachia, his findings regarding identity development are instrumental for this dissertation. His empirical evidence of the interconnection between Appalachian identity and queer experience is related to this study's purpose.

While Milam's work centered specifically on Central Appalachia, Baker (2011) broadened the concepts of rural queer identity and visibility, positing rurality as a strong tie to queer identity, an idea absent from hegemonic ideas of queer visibility. While non-rural queer visibility politics focus on a comparable paradigm, Baker argued that rural queer visibility



politics involve weighing the concepts of queerness and localness. The construction of LGBTQ+ identities in rural settings may muddle dominant conceptions of the closet model. His literature review explored topics including space for queer subjectivity, queering rurality, and rural queerness and the politics of visibility. Baker (2011) examined the possible constructions of rural queer subjectivity and exposed the hegemonic urban implications relating to common social constructions. Everyday heteronormative space and the related queering of it have been examined in queer studies; however, the differentiation of urban and rural space has not (Baker, 2011). Baker argued how rural space, which is not always visible, is seen as trivial and hostile toward queerness, and the politics of visibility characterizing modern LGBTQ+ developments, structured through an urban lens. Baker added that this hegemonic urbanism obscured the significance of rural space; life structures, community, and rural identity opposed the basic tenets of established visibility politics. Baker demonstrated how rurality is often strongly tied to identity, “queering” dominant models of queer identity and visibility. Baker’s study highlights the importance of queer rurality, rural identity, and visibility politics around social acceptance and self-regulation.

Ross’ (2019) work showed how queer Appalachians discussed their identities. Using grounded theory, Ross interviewed 14 queer Appalachians about how queer Appalachians in/from Central Appalachia negotiate their queer and Appalachian identities and how they experience social support. In their dissertation, identifying factors causing queer Appalachians to remain within the region included a significant factor of “possessing altruism.” Ross detailed how altruism played a decisive factor in identity negotiations where participants were more likely to negotiate their queer identity with altruistic motivation publicly. Altruism, or an intrinsic motive, includes “the desire to help others or create a better society” (2019, p. 91).

Queer Appalachians remain in the region through motivations to establish specific political goals of acceptance and inclusion to better their home region. Ross added: “Specific to place, [participant] described his eagerness to preserve a queer presence in Appalachia, ‘I want to make it a reality that people can stay here and come back here. Because it is home. And if we keep continuing to leave, the older generations are going to die off and then what’s left?’” (p. 93). In addition, Ross’s work demonstrates connections among the experiences of being queer and being Appalachian. This dissertation revealed a pressure to leave the region; however, Ross found that rural Appalachia was where many preferred to live and stay, not only due to their familiarity with the area but also to confirm that queer individuals could and would succeed in the region. Being Appalachian means many things; as Ross acknowledged, some within the region felt a better connection to their surroundings. Ross identified awareness of participants’ accents when speaking. The Appalachian accent is unique to the region, like a Southern drawl with differences specific to the mountains. Although accents can make a person as indigenous, many participants deliberately reduced their accent, visibly diminishing their Appalachian identity in order to “pass.” This inclination to elaborate or diminish elements of their Appalachian identity yields similarities to queer individuals’ decisions on “passing” or not. Appalachian identity is individually complex, just like any identity marker, but visible intersections with queerness can provide further knowledge and education opportunities. Due to the lack of scholarly research on queer Appalachians and how place influences intersections of those specific identities, the link connecting this study and Ross’s work is ready to be examined.

### ***Religion in Appalachia***

Denham (2016) reviewed historical, academic, and current literature of the many facets of Appalachian culture, stating that there is some disagreement about whether “Appalachian

culture” exists. One of the major focuses of Denham’s work is religion and health. The author discussed the many versions of Christianity that exist in the Appalachian region—including emotional worship services, testimonies, altar calls, acts of extreme faith, literal interpretation of the Bible, and baptism by immersion— describing Appalachian Christianity as a living theology (Denham, 2016, p. 98). For many in Appalachia, religion is closely tied to daily life, with many quoting Bible scriptures to describe events and discuss behaviors. Many families have religious images and symbols in their homes. Religious beliefs affect daily life through dress, hairstyles, consumerism, dancing, music, and church attendance. Denham states that various religious beliefs and faith practices in a particular geographic region influence values, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, some Appalachians believe that alcohol use is sinful, but others drink as part of their religious services. Differences among what is allowed, practical, prohibited, or tolerated according to religion can vary within families and in communities depending on beliefs and ethics. Denman stated that church groups, congregations, and extended families play important roles in Appalachian communities as supporters and resources. The importance of Denham’s study shows that many Appalachian communities, including religious congregations, influence the lives of those around them in various ways.

Lippy (1999) examined Appalachia’s “presumably unique religious character” (p. 40) within the bounds of Southern culture. The researcher explored characteristics of religion within Appalachia, including numerous independent churches and small Baptist congregations, and religious traditions such as feet washing, homecomings, and shaped-note hymns as an outermost layer of Appalachian culture. Two features of religions popular in Appalachia were identified: 1) the sense that a realm of power exists in everyday life, one in which good supernatural forces promise heavenly access through triumphs over evil, and 2) that life has two dimensions, with

the interaction of the present and the future in empirical reality. Each of these requires clarification through a sense of power and another plane of reality. Lippy addressed the sense of power through snake- or serpent-handling, the struggle that God and the devil posed in congregations, and how prayer was a connecting factor for almost all Appalachian denominations. The researcher further detailed a transcendent dimension in which God overcomes adversity, sickness, pain, and religiosity's role in "individual behavior and personal morality" (p. 47). Popular Appalachian religiosity is typified by many individuals wanting signs of God's presence with faith in the hope of reaching heaven. Appreciation of God's power is to understand its dynamics and extensive presence in the church by knowing that another reality awaits in heaven. The deep traditions that Appalachians hold on to through their faith regulate questions and discern behaviors that are considered outside the ordinary.

Lippy's work is mirrored in Jordan's (2015) perspective on Appalachian religion, but with a queer perspective. In a qualitative exploratory study, Jordan strove to create a narrative of the queer experience in rural Appalachia at a particular point in time. Data analysis from interviews with four LGBTQ+ youth from rural towns in East Tennessee resulted in four main themes: religious atmosphere, family, coming out, and peer networks. Findings showed that religious atmosphere was a destructive component of youth environments, causing the participants to fear for their safety and worry about coming out to others. Appalachia's religious, conservative nature was a barrier to coming out, resulting in shame, lack of self-worth, and discord between family members. Even though the religious atmosphere caused these negative emotions, individuals kept relationships with their families, whom they said were the main reasons they stayed in their hometowns. Most of the individuals in the study had anxiety before coming out and found relief and personal satisfaction after coming out. Forming peer networks

with other LGBTQ+ youth and adults was a significant component of the coming-out process. Jordan noted, “Not only did peer networks help to normalize experiences, but they also provided a protective factor against the unfriendly larger culture” (p. vi).

Jordan (2015) found that the younger individuals were when they came out, the more support they would need in Appalachia to create better relationships among regional focuses, advocates, and mainstream LGBTQ+ rights movements. Religious involvement is a positive factor for youth; however, many young people in the LGBTQ+ community experience trauma and victimization from members of their church communities. Jordan’s work provided three contributions for this dissertation: empirical evidence of queer identities in Central Appalachia, the need for comprehensive research, and the prevalence of religion in Appalachian young adults’ lives. This dissertation reinforces the need for attention on the impact of religion on queer youth in the region.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented queer theory literature applicable for research on belonging and othering in young populations, Appalachia’s place in society, queer Appalachian visibility, and ties to religion in the Central Appalachia. The themes presented in this review include conditions of acceptance, effects of silence, perceptions through homonegativity, being Appalachian, relating to others, lack of visibility, self-inclusion, and limits of faith. When values and traditions present difference as wrong or sinful, examining difference provides for a more profound connection within family and community. Social interactions with peers and adults could result in identity visibility and social cue assumptions. Because individuals may assume the intersection of religion and social conformity, it is still unclear if these unwritten “rules” were

forcing congregations to conform or received no discussion due to queer implications for individuals' families and the local community.

The research in this review aligns with findings from this dissertation, in that participants described their identities as LGBTQ+ and Appalachians, focusing on religion—mostly Christianity—and how Appalachia represents a queer region in the United States (Soderling, 2016).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals make meaning of their experiences in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. This chapter addresses the central aspects of study design, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, researcher bias, and trustworthiness.

#### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to give voice to the experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Intended findings included the impacts that the interactions, relationships, and organizational policies and practices these individuals experienced in these organizations had on their experiences of belonging or being othered. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on program leadership, self-identity, and inclusivity policies, procedures, and practices for LGBTQ+ individuals in youth organizations in Central Appalachia and beyond.

The research objectives used to guide this study include.

1. Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have of their experiences in their youth-serving organizations in Central Appalachia.
2. Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.
3. Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

Organizations with inclusive cultures provide welcoming environments for all social identity groups in their programming efforts (Wasserman et al., 2008). However, the question remains as to how to break down the barriers to participation rooted in the conscious feelings and

experiences of exclusion in organizations. Making meaning of these experiences among LGBTQ+ alumni provides a basis for examining organizational interactions and their consequences regarding belonging and inclusivity in rural areas, particularly in Central Appalachia.

### **IRB Statement (Protocol Number: 12743)**

Before contacting potential participants, I submitted this study for approval to the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which provides direction and confidence in ethical study protocol. This study was approved in December 2019.

### **Researcher Bias**

Bias is commonly understood as any influence that distorts findings in a study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Galdas (2017) examined “how much of a researcher’s own values and opinions need to be reflected in qualitative study questions, data collection methods, or findings” to form bias in research (p. 1). Because it is important to be “transparent and reflexive about data collection, analysis, and presentation” (Galdas, 2017), I chose to study LGBTQ+ and Appalachian identities because of my own experiences as a White, Christian, gay, gender-normative man who grew up in the heart of Central Appalachia in Southwestern Virginia. I was an active participant in several youth-serving organizations—first as a teen, and then as an alumnus and adult volunteer. My experiences living as a gay man in Central Appalachia would, of course, influence my desire to undertake this research as well as my data collection and analysis processes. To mitigate this bias as much as possible, I engaged in journaling and peer debriefing, explained in more detail later in this chapter.



## Epistemology

Critical epistemology is a comprehensive and developing body of theoretical methodologies that share critical takes on the nature of knowledge construction and the processes in which such construction takes place (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). A practice of knowledge production committed to human emancipation from unjust social structures and restrictive ideologies, critical epistemology centers subjective knowledge generated by personal and professional practices and experiences (Farias, L., Laliberte Rudman, D., & Magalhães, L., 2016). Critical researchers accept that knowledge produced by critical research is far from value-free or universally true, and they deem it essential to engage in ongoing questioning of researcher political and moral stances, ideologies, and social positionalities (Fine, Weis, Wesson, & Wong, 2003; Lather, 2004). Indeed, it is the commitment to examining an individual situatedness in society, history, culture, and exploring how social positionality shapes someone's individual and social values, morals, judgments, and gaze, that makes sets critical epistemology apart from other studies of knowledge production (Phelan, 2011). According to Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011), critical inquiry – like queer theory – questions common-sense assumptions of things such as gender, background, and race and deconstructs the "natural" or "given" in research. Critical scholars engaged in qualitative research are committed to exposing and critiquing inequality and discrimination and exploring the power relations that shape social associations (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). They tend to be involved in advocacy work and movements for social justice (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Their goal is to build knowledge that promotes social change by both identifying systems of oppression and supporting the empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Denzin, 2015).

In other words, critical researchers do not just *interpret* the world, the directive of traditional qualitative inquiry; critical researchers seek to create *change* the world, to reduce injustice and to cultivate individual and collective freedom inside full, inclusive, participatory democracies. In response to researchers who express reservations about qualitative research, arguing, "It's only a qualitative study!" Denzin (2016) offers a counterargument focuses on five goals that challenges the interpretive community:

1. Placing the voices of the oppressed at the center of the inquiry.
2. Use inquiry to reveal sites of change and activism.
3. Use inquiry and activism to help others.
4. Affect social policy by sharing critiques to be heard and acted upon by policy makers.
5. Affect change in the researcher's life, serving as a model of change for others.

Similarly, this dissertation is *not just* a qualitative study; it is an example of ethically responsible activist research work. In line with critical epistemology, its commitment to social justice focuses inquiry on research that will make a difference in the lives of socially oppressed individuals (Denzin, 2016), and the LGBTQ+ people who were interviewed for this dissertation.

My methodology aligns with that of Denzin and Lincoln, Lynham and Guba in that it too seeks to describe as well as critique and create change within a particular setting. The use of a queer theoretical lens facilitates this critique. What is more, I believe that, as a gay man, my link to the individuals who participant in my research process both shapes my desire to make a difference in the experiences of queer Central Appalachian youth region enabling me to engage with interviewees as a participant observer, or in other words, as someone who has participated in the experience of navigating queerness in a heteronormative society. My status as a participant observer along with my use of a critical epistemology guided by queer theory allowed more in-

depth questioning about how perceived notions of and organizational practices around gender and sexuality shaped the experiences of the LGBTQ+ alumni I interviewed. With the qualitative data gathered, I aim to intervene in discussions of youth-serving organizations with the hope of helping to transform accepted but often harmful notions and practices in order to ensure that future organizational participants experience an enhanced sense of belonging and value in their communities.

### **Introduction to Methodology**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers strive to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. They described three constructs in which qualitative researchers engage: the interpretation people give to their experiences, the construction they have given to their lives, and the meanings attributed to their experiences.

According to Janesick (2000), qualitative research starts with a question, analytical interest, or passion for a specific topic. Well-crafted qualitative research questions address sensitive topics and issues relevant to a field of study (Agee, 2009). In qualitative studies, the ongoing questioning process plays a key role in grasping participants' unfolding lives and perspectives. When current literature provides little to no information about a phenomenon, researchers must learn by exploring participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2015). My desire to learn more about Central Appalachian youth-serving organizational interactions surfaced through questioning why I simultaneously felt othered and a sense of belonging within my home region. Creswell (2015) identified the major characteristics of qualitative research:

- Exploring a problem and developing a thorough understanding of it,
- Relegating the literature review that sustains the problem,

- Collecting data through words (e.g., interviewing) from a small group of individuals to obtain their viewpoints,
- Analyzing data for descriptions and themes,
- Utilizing texts for analysis and interpretation for broader meaning, and
- Writing the report through flexible and emerging formations with evaluative measures for the researchers' reflexivity and bias.

Qualitative research allows for many kinds of data collection and analysis methods and a diversity of theoretical and epistemological structures (Guest et al., 2013). Aligning with Creswell (2015), I utilized interview-based data collection practices to make meaning of LGBTQ+ alumni perceptions of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Because the goal of this study was to make meaning of LGBTQ+ alumni experiences, I chose a qualitative research design to focus on meaning-making, process, and how participants constructed their lives around their identity, organizational experiences, and youth influences. Interview data provides valuable information, allowing researchers to make meaning from shared accounts instead of replicating each participants' words (Reissman, 2005). Using participant involvement, these methods were appropriate to reimagine lived experiences, tragic events, triumphs, and memories, to represent understandings, knowledge, and communication. In this case, using qualitative methods allowed the researcher to uncover valuable insights into participants' experiences of belonging and being othered in their Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population for this study was LGBTQ+-identifying alumni of youth-serving organizations in Central Appalachia. Participant recruitment took place through targeted public

social-media groups, word of mouth, and personal social media posts to LGBTQ+ groups of Central Appalachian organizations. Establishing criteria for study inclusion is essential for finding proper participants. For this study, inclusion criteria included: identifying as LGBTQ+, participation in youth-serving organizations (4-H, FFA, Boy Scouts, or Girl Scouts) for at least one year, and having had spent at least three of the formative years (ages 5 to 18) in one or more of the identified Central Appalachian counties (see Appendix A). Prior to scheduling an interview, each potential interviewee was asked screening questions to determine eligibility.

Sample size is how researchers determine how many individuals to include or dismiss for an effective study (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). First, I used a convenience sampling technique to locate easily accessible self-identifying Appalachian LGBTQ+ participants (Keyton, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I started contacting individuals I personally or professionally knew to discuss the study and ask about their interest in participating and if they knew others who might qualify. One strength of convenience sampling is that the study continued promptly, accessing individuals within the closest range. After that, I relied upon a snowball sampling technique. According to Parker, Scott, & Geddes (2019), snowballing is where researchers use their social networks to establish initial contacts. Sampling momentum develops from these contacts, and there is an increase in the chain of participants. I asked participants to contact others they might know who fit the sample description and would be interested in participating in the study. A drawback to using convenience and snowball sampling, in this case, was lack of diversity in the final participant group. While I remained open to the types of individuals I included in this study, the reality is that the final group ended up White or white-passing despite including LGBTQ+ individuals in the northern and southern parts of Central Appalachia. Even with the racially homogeneous group makeup, my participants were diverse in terms of age, social-economic

status, occupation, and sexuality. Beitin (2012) suggests that an appropriate sample could range from six to 12 participants, with the goal of achieving thematic redundancy. I completed 16 interviews with participants from Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and West Virginia.

## **Data Collection**

### ***Interviews***

According to Yin (2011), in qualitative research, the researcher plays a principal part in data collection by studying the meaning, describing the views and perspectives, acknowledging the contextual conditions, and offering insights to understand and explain human social behavior. Interviews are a way to glean unique insights about an individual's life (Kim, 2016). Individual interviews are the most routinely used data collection methods in qualitative research. When the interviewer asks open-ended questions, participants can share their experiences how they wish to respond (Creswell, 2015).

During interviews, participants must not be interrupted with questions or evaluations (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010). Researchers should act as listeners by supporting and encouraging the speaker to continue, only later, when the data is at its end, unclear fragments are checked with questions (Flick 2002). According to Dames (2019), the in-depth and related interview process allows for more opportunity to deepen understanding of the shared stories and to validate data interpretations. This approach encouraged reflection and discourse aiming to uncover meaning patterns and themes within the context and the alumni experiences. In semi-structured interviews, general questions predetermined by the researcher guide and sustain the interview focus rather than dictating direction (Kim, 2016), being mindful that interviews sometimes only draw on what is deemed necessary at the interview time (McAlpine, 2016). In this case,

interviews were beneficial for understanding LGBTQ+ individuals' perspectives because they allowed individuals the space to tell stories and share experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, interviews provided an opening for in-depth discussions of unplanned topics to emerge naturally.

I utilized a semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix B) to cover essential topics with room for follow-up questions that emerged throughout the interview process (Keyton, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). I conducted semi-structured interviews using flexibly worded questions, creating a conversation-like structure that enabled me to explore topics as participants shared their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, this data collection structure made it easier for participants to share their perceptions and experiences in their youth-serving organizations as full thoughts, not storied segments entrenched in multiple questions.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research allows researchers to view someone else's situation and world from the research participants' perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Researchers work to understand, interpret, and share information gained from qualitative research. As soon as the first piece of data is collected, analysis begins (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Corbin and Strauss recommended that researchers apply standard methods in the interview and fieldwork literature, assuring participants' credibility to avoid biasing their responses and observations. In order to maintain credibility and accuracy, data collection and analysis intertwined by using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative meaning-making brings out rich and descriptive data that are explained through theme and text identification, coding, sorting, and sifting, leading to notable findings that can contribute to theoretical understanding and empirical use (Boeije, 2010). My analysis

was informed by queer theory since my participants shared their experiences for queer worldmaking. Queer worldmaking involves a new path of identity and queerness furthered through a joint effort to redefine the limits of gender (Breger, 2017; Halberstam, 2011). Queer theory helped inform my attempts to honor the multiple realities of queer individuals from those in, and formerly of, Appalachia.

To keep true to critical assumptions through queer theory, I unitized the data to analyze the experiences shared by taking text segments and expanding and collapsing categories to produce overall themes (Kerwin-Boudreau & Butler-Kisber, 2016). Through this process, I immersed myself in the data analysis to root out a deeper understanding of participants' shared experiences. Unitizing the data simplifies and decontextualizes data, allowing researchers to see similarities across various participant interviews. I started by identifying data through constant comparison to develop overarching themes among text segments and condensing large segments into usable portions from my transcripts. Because analysis took place without preset categories or themes, I turned to open coding during data collection and analysis. This also coincides with employing queer theory in data collection and analysis as well.

### ***Coding***

Vaismoradi et al. (2013) define open coding as collecting codes, words or phrases assigned to data segments, under potential categories or themes and comparing the coded clusters relating to the entire data set known as the organizing phase of analysis. Open coding allowed me to create tentative themes from the data to summarize the shared experiences. I reviewed interview recordings and transcripts to allow codes to develop.

From the open codes developed, I moved to axial coding. Axial coding is the process of relating categories or themes to one another while refining the categorical or theme pattern



(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) As I continued collecting data, I compared the codes I assigned to each transcript and utilized note cards. I used hand-written note cards, a coding procedure to aid in discovering recurring data patterns (Suter, 2012), to visualize the open codes revealed. This form of coding kept terms as close to the participants' meanings as possible.

Using the emerged themes, I developed connections among the codes, compared my note cards, and developed themes from those cards to include in my findings. With the application of multiple analytic coding methods, and concept mapping, the findings presented in Chapter Four served to guide a comprehensive account of LGBTQ+ alumni perceptions of their youth-serving organizational experiences. It also assisted in how those experiences led to a sense of belonging or being othered.

### **Trustworthiness Criteria**

The most broadly used criteria for evaluating qualitative research analysis are those developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), known as trustworthiness. The goal of trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to reinforce the argument that the findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some researchers disagree over Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria being the standard to assess and ensure quality. However, the wide-ranging qualitative research community acknowledges their work as essential and influential. The following presents the validation standards of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### ***Credibility***

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is the confidence placed in the truth of the research findings. Credibility is established if the research findings present convincing information pulled from the participants' initial data and is an accurate interpretation of their

original views. Strategies that ensure credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, or member checking (Kortstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking, —the receiving of feedback on analytical categories, interpretations, and conclusions from participants—was used for this study, as it is a strategy that strengthens the data, particularly because researchers and participants view data with different eyes (Kortstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking took place after the initial data was analyzed, with some participants clarifying sections of their transcripts that I was unable to interpret using my notes or re-listening to the interview. Others examined written versions of their shared thoughts and my interpretations. The study’s credibility was ensured through member checking. I needed to cross-check my interpretations, as they tie closely to queer theory, against shared participant experiences. Once data collection and analysis neared completion, I approached three participants and asked them to evaluate the preliminary findings. Overall, participants noticed that most themes resonated with their experiences and with the experiences of other LGBTQ+ Appalachians. They found familiarity in the themes within other Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability refers to the level that the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers facilitate transferability discernment through thick descriptions for potential use. Thick descriptions are rich accounts of participant experiences and the contexts in which those experiences occurred, with thickness indicating the multiple layers of culture and meaning (Gasson, 2004). Kortstjens and Moser (2018) described the thick description strategy as encompassing behaviors and experiences, and also considering context so the behavior and experiences become meaningful to others. By

providing details that kept true to the participants' voices, descriptions provided the reader with the ability to bring themselves into the findings and help draw conclusions and implications.

### ***Dependability***

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined dependability as the stability of findings over a given time. Dependability involves participants' interpretation and evaluation of the findings and recommendations supported by the data. There should be a consistent, central issue of how a study occurs across time, researchers, and analysis techniques (Gasson, 2004). It is necessary to provide a transparent and replicable process, through which a researcher accomplished findings and audit trails.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability is described as the degree to which research findings could be confirmed by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main concern with confirmability is establishing that data interpretations and findings are not researcher fabrications but grounded in data.

### ***Audit Trail***

The strategy needed to ensure dependability and confirmability is an audit trail. Kortstjens and Moser (2018) described an audit trail as a transparent detailing of research steps from start to finish, which can include notes on decisions made during the research process, meetings, reflections, sampling, research materials, findings and data management. This transparency enables an auditor to study the research path. As this was a qualitative study, journaling and peer debriefing were the chosen methods of keeping an audit trail to ensure confirmability. I documented these steps in the process of planning, receiving approval,

defending my preliminary exam answers, and then recruiting and interviewing participants, analyzing data and presenting the findings in Chapter Four.

### **Summary**

Making meaning of the experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations provided the basis for this study. This enabled me to go beyond the search for that one “grand narrative” (Grbich, 1999) and examine the transformative storytelling process in organizational experiences and LGBTQ+ identity relating to belonging and othering. Natural themes occurred in the data collection stage to enable the interviews to explore relevant topics. This study occurred in a paradigm of critical epistemology. The happenings provide a better understanding of the lived interactions and identity experiences of the LGBTQ+ participating alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Instead of taking their words literally and not applying any critical lens to their shared story, I read deeper into the data using queer theory and multiple analytical lenses for the collective in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter highlights the experiences participants had in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations, the meanings participants gave to those experiences, and how those experiences shaped participants' lives. The findings of this study are organized by research objective and by the themes that emerged during data analysis. This chapter highlights the following principal main findings: 1. the need to educate leaders and educators on queer topics such as queer identity, social interaction, and program advocacy and 2. that queer youth, particularly those from Central Appalachia, are resilient in turning challenging life situations and experiences into successful and purposeful ways to live.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to give voice to LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Intended findings included the impacts of organizational culture, policies, and practices on queer youths' experiences of belonging in or being othered by youth-serving organization and the impact such experiences had on queer youth's developments. My hope is that this research will contribute to existing scholarship on program leadership, gender and sexual identity, and inclusivity policies, procedures, and practices for LGBTQ+ individuals in youth organizations in Central Appalachia and beyond. The research objectives used to guide this study include.

1. Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have of their experiences in youth-serving organization in Central Appalachia.
2. Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.

3. Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

### **Presentation of Data**

To understand alumni’s perceptions of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations, it is essential to understand how their experiences in such organizations shaped their lives. The major themes that arose from this study included those in Table 1:

**Table 1**  
*Research Objectives and Themes*

<b>Research Objective 1</b>	<b>Research Objective 2</b>	<b>Research Objective 3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Organizational Culture and the Dynamics of Acceptance</li> <li>● Queer Invisibility and Negotiating Heteronormativity</li> <li>● Power Brokers and the Importance of Educating Educators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Homonegativity and Othering Queer People</li> <li>● Internalized Homophobia</li> <li>● The Limits of Faith</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Personal Development</li> <li>● Leadership Development</li> <li>● Professional Networking</li> </ul>

### **Introduction to Participants**

For this study, sixteen alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations were interviewed. Participants were involved in one or more youth-serving organizations during their formative years (ages 5-18), and all identified as LGBTQ+. Participants were assigned pseudonyms matching their preferred pronouns. Each described themselves through an open-ended statement, “tell me about yourself.” Most all gave their orientation and preferred pronouns in their description, with a few exceptions in the interview process. All identified their home area

in the recruitment process, questions to elaborate on growing up in those areas for context followed.

- **Ben** - a gay resident of Southwestern Virginia, participated in church youth activities and church camp.
- **Chad** - a gay East Tennessean, currently in medical school and a Tennessee 4-H alum.
- **Corbin** - a gay Southwestern Virginia 4-H, FFA, and Health Occupations Students of America alum.
- **Dana** - a queer, gender normative woman born and raised in North Carolina – participated in YMCA programs.
- **Erica** – a bisexual native Tennessean, participated in Girls Scouts and Youth and Government.
- **Grace** - a gay woman 4-H alum member from Southwestern Virginia.
- **Howard** - a gay man living in Southwestern Virginia, participated in 4-H.
- **Leo** - a transgender man who grew up in West Virginia, is an Upward Bound and Girl Scout alum.
- **Lucas** – a gay Kentucky-born man who participated in Upward Bound and Promise Neighborhood.
- **Melody** - a lesbian Southwestern Virginia native, living outside of Appalachia, was a Girl Scouts member, participated in her church youth group and community youth choir.
- **Nicole** – bisexual woman and Southwestern Virginia native, participated in Girl Scouts and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA).
- **Nikki** – bisexual woman from Tennessee, participated in Youth Health Board, Key Club, and HOSA.

- **Oakley** - a gay Kentucky-born Y-Club alumni.
- **Simon** - a gay, [Kentucky] County Youth Service-Learning alumni.
- **Tommy** - a gay man, grew up in Southwestern Virginia attending church youth activities.
- **Zack** – a Southwestern Virginia transgender man, participated in Church Camp and 4-H.

Table 2 gives a snapshot of the demographics of each participant.

**Table 2**  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Preferred Pronouns</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Construct</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Earned Education</b>	<b>Original Central Appalachian Location</b>
<b>Ben</b>	he/him/his	27	White	Gender normative man	Gay	High School	Virginia
<b>Chad</b>	he/him/his	24	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Master's	Tennessee
<b>Corbin</b>	he/him/his	22	White	Gender normative man	Gay	LPN	Virginia
<b>Dana</b>	they/them/theirs	23	White	Gender normative woman	Queer	Bachelor's	North Carolina
<b>Erica</b>	she/her/hers	29	White	Gender normative woman	Bisexual	Master's	Tennessee
<b>Grace</b>	she/her/hers	36	White	Gender normative woman	Gay	Master's	Virginia
<b>Howard</b>	he/him/his	35	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Bachelor's	Virginia
<b>Leo</b>	he/him/his	28	White	Transgender Man	Queer	Bachelor's	West Virginia
<b>Lucas</b>	he/him/his	24	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Bachelor's	Kentucky
<b>Melody</b>	she/her/hers	27	White	Gender normative woman	Lesbian	Master's	Virginia
<b>Nicole</b>	she/her/hers	29	White	Gender normative woman	Bisexual	Doctoral	Virginia



**Table 2 (continued)**

<b>Nikki</b>	she/her/hers	28	White	Gender normative woman	Queer	Master's	Tennessee
<b>Oakley</b>	he/him/his	32	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Master's	Kentucky
<b>Simon</b>	he/him/his	26	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Bachelor's	Kentucky
<b>Tommy</b>	he/him/his	40	White	Gender normative man	Gay	Master's	Virginia
<b>Zack</b>	he/him/his	28	White	Transgender Man	Straight	High School	Virginia

### **Research Objective One – LGBTQ+ Alumni Experiences**

*ROI. Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have of their experiences in youth-serving organizations in Central Appalachia.*

Participants in this study recalled complex, nuanced experiences in their respective youth-serving organizations, all shaped by both unyielding social expectations and what were likely sincere efforts of adults in youth-serving organizations to welcome and serve all young people. While experiences varied widely across organizations; all participants recalled that, even at the best of times, queer people were rendered invisible by assumptions that all participants were straight by peers and adults. For this objective, three overall themes emerged from this portion of the interviews: organizational culture and the dynamics of acceptance, queer invisibility and negotiating heteronormativity, and adult power brokers and the importance of educating educators.

#### **Organizational Culture and the Dynamics of Acceptance**

The culture of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations varied from group to group and across the region. Some participants described the culture of their organizations as

“welcoming.” Others recalled a “sense of rigidity” underlying programmatic functions. These diverse organizational cultures shaped participants’ feelings of being accepted for who they were or of needing to conform to normative expectations.

Grace, for example, described 4-H in her home area in southwestern Virginia as “a very welcoming place.” Defining culture as “how we do things,” she said that the 4-H had a “welcome culture...it was a good experience, and it was something that I wanted to continue with. I felt welcome. I felt like it [4-H programming] was something that I excelled in.” She felt that 4-H did not just tolerate participants or even simply accept them but rather encouraged a feeling of belonging. In an accepting culture, she explained,

I may not welcome you with open arms and want to include you on everything.  
...belonging goes into that deeper...I’ll reach out to you and make sure that you feel comfortable and you belong and that you feel validated and worthy.

As a 4-H participant she felt welcomed, as if she belonged and had “a purpose” in the organization, where the culture could be described as, “I’m bringing you fully into the fold, and I want to make sure that you’re nurtured and that you’re validated in your being here.” According to Grace, this culture was an important part of her success in 4-H.

Similarly, Corbin, also from Virginia, found 4-H to be accommodating and open.

Implying that the 4-H in his area was open-minded, open to change, and flexible, he shared:

It truly is an organization [that] if you want to do 4-H and you need something to make you be able to participate, they’re going to find some way to accommodate you. It’s one of those organizations where they do 150% their best to include everybody and make everybody feel the best that they can while they’re in the organization.

Central to Corbin’s experiences in 4-H was a sense that “there was no judgment, there was no bias, it was like I could be exactly what I wanted to be any time that I wanted to be it.” For him, 4-H was defined by “the ability to be myself in an environment that makes me comfortable to do so.” He thrived in the organization.

Another 4-H participant from Virginia, Howard, likewise never experienced 4-H as a place where he was not accepted, or was confined, despite being different from other youth.

People knew that I was different, and I knew that all the time as a child, no matter where I was, I knew that I was different and that things were gonna be different for me, but at 4-H, it was less of a problem in a lot of ways, not only with interactions I had with people but there was no like, systematic thing about 4-H that made it more clear in my head in a way.

Howard's experiences in 4-H brought back memories of being himself and seeing others with whom he could relate. He shared how he observed others in the ways they "acted silly, were confident, and able to be liked within the organization" at a very young age. He did comment, however, on the lack of queer visibility in 4-H,

I feel like there were no examples of people who were flamboyant or gay necessarily... We're sheltered in this area in a lot of ways, I think gay issues are brought up more in other places than they were here at that time just because people didn't know how to broach the subject.

Nonetheless, he thought that 4-H did a good job "set[ting] the example in [his] mind that it was okay to be different." His perception from those interactions of "being different" allowed him to realize "it was okay to be unique as well." Howard noted that his "4-H was a lot more open," allowing him to be "around other people who were like that, who were like me, who were a little different in different ways, that you were accepted just in general."

Chad, a gay man from Tennessee, went as far as describing 4-H in his home region as "open minded." He recalled,

I could let my guard down and be a little more authentic with views, interests, just kind of like natural habits and ways, like speech patterns.... I didn't have to monitor every little thing that I did to make sure it fit in with a more heteronormative cis-gendered way of ...looking at things, ...I felt like, okay, they're more open-minded and they won't automatically think that if my voice isn't super deep or if I talk about liking this certain artist like Beyonce, they're not gonna be like, oh, what is this, what are you doing? You're [not] supposed to like that kind of stuff, you're a guy.

In contrast, Nicole, who also hailed from Virginia, recalled that her inclusion in the youth-serving organizations in which she participated, Girl Scouts and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), was conditioned by conformity to a rigid culture that heavily emphasized conservative and traditional methods of programming that were “normal” in Appalachia.

...with Girl Scouts and FCA, I would say [the culture is] pretty rigid and...in general just conservative, traditional kind of values were really heavily emphasized, so I think that, especially with FCA, communicated a very unforgiving kind of culture to me as a kid. You had to operate within the box and [there] wasn't a lot of gray room with it.

In particular, there was no room to be gay. Speaking about “being gay” and her “perceptions” of being gay, Nicole recalled, “I felt like it was clearly communicated to me in that organization, there was definitely a right and a wrong way to do things, to say things, there was a right way to be a Scout and a wrong way to be a Scout.” Nicole felt that she needed to keep herself confined within the organization’s box, to conform and avoid “any misstep in the wrong place” in order to avoid conflict. “I felt like I had so much more to lose than some of these kids,” she said, “because there were definite parts to me that if it got out would have been an absolute shit show for me to have to deal with, [so] I felt even more rigidly that I had to conform to all of those things.”

Other participants echoed Nicole. Erica, who participated in Girl Scouts in her home state of Tennessee, recalled a culture of “sameness” in the organization, the result of a lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity. It was “important to note,” she said, that “we were a bunch of white girls.” There was “not a lot of diversity there and we all came from fairly similar socioeconomic backgrounds, so in many ways, it was a culture of sameness.” Another participant of Girl Scouts and a member of her church youth group and community youth choir, Melody remembered that the “buttoned-up,” “conservative” culture of youth-serving organizations in her

community in Virginia placed pressure on youth to conform. Remembering that adults shut down teen conversations about sex, drugs, and differing religious points of view, she said,

Yeah, so that was probably the most conservative that I felt like those organizations were, especially because of the adult interaction there...I feel like the culture there was very buttoned up. It's very closed off, like you don't talk about things that could be seen as in any way controversial. You had to, kind of in a way, it feels kind of fake because you just have to be whatever you think other people want you to do.

Such recollections suggest that, for these participants, there were significant cultural differences between 4-H, Girl Scouts and church-affiliated youth-serving organizations. Throughout the cultures each organization fostered, the value of acceptance waned. Each participant was able to find their place, but many struggled with how organizations conveyed the culture they promoted. It is essential to understand how organizational culture shapes acceptance dynamics in youth-serving organizations. Without support and inclusive practices within an organization, acceptance cannot be genuinely conveyed without some feelings of being othered or isolated from the “normal” way of doing things.

### **Queer Invisibility and Negotiating Heteronormativity**

With few exceptions, alumni of youth-serving organizations of Central Appalachia consistently recalled that queerness was not visible in their organizations or in the larger community. Instead, adults and other youth assumed that everyone around them was straight. Such assumptions were not written rules or guidelines, but they were clear through peoples' interactions. The absence of queer people combined with assumptions of heteronormativity shaped participants' thoughts and behaviors in often limiting and harmful ways.

For example, Leo, a transman who was involved in Girls Scouts and Upward Bound, recalled that, in his youth-serving organizations, “nothing was talked about in relation to gay kids.”

I don't even think that I knew that LGBTQ+ identities could possibly exist. So therefore, there was no like, negatives about it or anything, but everybody just kind of had this understood role, like we're women and this is what we do and, yeah, it was just a very kind of one track this-is-how-life-is kind of thing.

Leo recalled, "people truly didn't think that they knew anybody who was any part of the LGBTQ+ acronym." He added that "they didn't understand what it meant, so it still kind of largely went un-talked about."

Nikki echoed Leo. She described her experiences in youth-serving organizations in Tennessee,

I definitely in high school had maybe fantasies and very early thoughts about being queer, but I don't even know how to explain, like I didn't even know that was an option. I didn't know a queer person...I didn't even put that much thought to it, I just was like, well, that's weird, all teenagers going through puberty probably have thoughts like this. I didn't even connect it to the idea of identity or reality.

Indeed, reflecting on her experiences in Girl Scouts alongside her experiences in the larger community, she concluded that queerness, and in particular "female queerness," was "so far beyond the pale of consideration that nobody's even thinking about it, you know? It's so, sometimes with women, it's like, well, yeah, everybody's straight."

Chad shared that, in his experience, "people weren't openly hostile toward [LGBTQ+ individuals] for the most part." Instead, queer identities were just never acknowledged:

I think it was something...like we're not gonna talk about it, we're not gonna get into that, because...they [4-H] didn't, ...understandably, want to get into any kind of ideological or political dogfight with anyone anywhere just because of the standing that 4-H has, and so I think it was just kind of a thing no one talked about and if it ever was talked about, I could tell people wanted to quickly move away from that topic, ...never addressed and if it was, it was..., meh, it's a thing, but we're not gonna deal with it.

Importantly, even where there was little outward hostility towards queer people, many interviewees described the lack of visibility of queer people and expectations of straightness as "limiting." For example, despite feeling that he could be himself in 4-H, Corbin criticized the lack of queer visibility in the organization.

The only way that I would have felt limited in 4-H was the fact that, even though it was such an accepting organization...I felt safe in it, there really was not many likeminded individuals in 4-H. ...besides the FFA [Future Farmers of America], it was probably the least number of LGBTQ+ persons that I had seen. There was really nobody to, you know, interact with...that felt the same way that I did and it did kind of limit me.

Corbin shared that “there were definitely peers in all three organizations [4-H, FFA and HOSA] that I definitely felt like I could confide in and I could, you know, that I could trust with my big secret.” He recalled, “some of them were like, oh, that’s cool, I totally support you, you know, I still love you anyway,” and “there were some that were like, you know, yeah, that’s cool, you just, you kind of keep that to yourself, you know?” He was convinced that, while he used humor to play down the importance of his secretive behavior, these interactions contributed to a lack of confidence, causing him to wonder if his peers did not want others to know they were friends with a gay person or if they did not want to be his friend for fear he would “give them what he had.”

Interviewees explained that, in addition to impacting their self-confidence, heteronormative expectations and the lack of visibility of queer people limited their self-awareness, self-exploration, and personal development. It was emotionally taxing as it forced queer youth to manage – or “repress” – their queerness. Erica was not able to see “alternatives to straightness,” not only in her personal and family life but also in youth-serving organizations. She reflected on the experiences of her queer friends who had also participated in such organizations, stating,

I think from conversations I’ve had with my friends who had more difficult times being a young person and not feeling fully themselves, not feeling fully seen, being bullied, whatever, I think the way that those organizations kind of didn’t make space for different kinds of people contributes to the hegemony that made my friends suffer.

When discussing to what extent she could be herself in her 4-H program in Virginia, Grace concluded that she was not in fact herself. To the contrary, she was “very intentional with how

she handled herself in 4-H for fear of social retribution.” She remembered seeing another participant being ostracized from the group for behaviors that everyone saw as “ridiculous.” The experience pushed her to “retreat into [herself] and start to carry [herself] closely and carefully.” Her fear of social ostracization also compelled her to “code switch” with even her “closest friends” in high school. She explained,

...for instance, you know, if you’re closeted, I’ll code-switch right a little with you, you know, in the car, I know exactly who you are and then we go into the 4-H meeting and we talk about what girl you’re taking to prom. We did it a lot, I mean, that’s just it, and it’s so seamless. You know who knows, you know who doesn’t, and you know what you have to do to keep them from knowing and it just becomes a second skin kind of. A very tiring second skin...

Echoing Grace, Oakley remembered how he “regulated” himself in his Y-Club, explaining, “I regulated myself because I understood that the expectation was that in this space, you have to be straight.” Ben remembered his experiences at church camp and seeing how youth and adults treated those who were “different.”

I was having to worry about concealing my thoughts and whatnot, I was having to create this air of dishonesty with myself and with others, and that layer of dishonesty kind of created this...kind of impression that I was maybe shy or something or maybe this impression of who I actually am not.

Ben knew he was “lying to himself” at a young age, but he also knew he needed to “be straight” to continue attending church camp.

Similarly, Chad remembered hearing how others talked about the LGBTQ+ community and seeking to protect himself from assumptions straight people made about gay and gender queer people. In his community and in youth-serving organizations, he felt that he needed to be a “straight-acting individual.” He felt this held him back until he began college. He shared:

I saw other people’s assumptions and other people, how they talked about the broader LGBT community. Not towards me, and then I was like, oh, if that’s how they’re acting now, I don’t want that brought onto me.



Being in the closet was for Chad “a protection mechanism,” which he adopted so as to not bring himself into the “limelight” and stir up controversy. In response, Chad felt himself “gravitating toward those that had a safe space” for him to interact in. He compared

I think it did shape my interactions with individuals. I think even though there wasn't any kind of, oh, you knew this person was gay or this person might be transgender or this kind of stuff, it was like you knew individuals and pockets in the community where it was [safer] to talk about that and I think I found myself gravitating towards those that had a safe space, but definitely switching how I acted and how I talked and my interactions with individuals based on who it was and what I perceived in that situation.

Like Grace, Chad also code switched. He knew there were peers with whom he could be himself and others with whom he had to take a different route.

Yes. I would say...during broader events..., I could choose who I was spending time with, who I was hanging with...and I didn't feel as much of a need to change, but specifically as I started trying to be a youth leader within the program, I found myself with groups of individuals who I did have to change how I acted around, either to get their respect and so they wouldn't totally write me off and I guess showing more masculine attitudes and identities and that's how a leader should act or whatever. I did find myself in those situations having to switch.

Chad's recollections suggest that he did experience overt hostility towards queer people, a sentiment expressed by other gender-queer interviewees. Reflecting on his involvement in church activities, Tommy recalled pressure to conform to gender norms by behaving in certain ways and engaging in certain activities. He explained:

I would say that any expression that would have been seen as incongruent with one's gender from birth, one's cisgender, we'll use that term, I think was discouraged and also shamed if it persisted, in my experience. For example, I would hear people say things like he's got a little lace on his pants or my father would say he likes to hang around with his mom a little much or he hangs around with the women a little much, a little too much.

He added that that gender shaming “seemed to be harsher toward boys who demonstrated some characteristics that were considered feminine;” the adverse consequences of gender nonconformity were “deeper for boys” than for “girls who demonstrated qualities considered more masculine.”

Zack shared why he felt he needed to “present” as straight and perform femaleness in gender normative ways. Even though it “was super awkward” to act accordingly, and even though some people in his youth-serving organizations “obviously knew” he “liked women” and saw him as “one of the guys,” he nonetheless conformed because “I had to be perceived a certain way to avoid controversy and to avoid everybody getting into some weird trouble, you know?” Zack added that he “loved his camp life,” but shared that he knew he could never come out as anything but straight as he “knew his camp life would be over.”

Participant interviews suggest that queer alumni of rural Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations negotiated social assumptions and expectations by repressing their true selves; however, there were some exceptions to this pattern, highlighting once again the diverse nature of queer people’s experiences in such organizations. Simon, for example, also recalled that, while queerness was “never really suppressed, it was something that wasn’t talked about until I was a little bit older.” Nonetheless, Simon came out during his time as a participant in [Kentucky] County Youth Service-Learning Council, an act that he credited with “opening doors for other youth after me.” He explained, “many other youth...came out to me because I was visible at that point, even as a kid, which I think was really helpful for them as well as the organization.” Despite criticism of tokenism, Simon felt that when he came out, he “became the token gay” for the organization, a positive move for the organization as his presence furthered modifications to programming to include queer issues and LGBTQ+ sex education.

...it sounds unfortunate, but it really wasn’t, but once I came out, in that organization, I became the token gay. So, by that, particularly with the sexual education that we were doing...I feel like the leaders of the organization became more aware of why I was asking for, you know, including gay sex education and things like that, at which point they did begin to include it, not on a large scale or anything like that, but I guess you could say they began acknowledging it.

In his turn, Lucas had a positive experience in Upward Bound. He explained,

I just wanted a space where I didn't get called the F-bomb, right? Well, yeah, I didn't want to get called that, I didn't want to get called gay, I didn't want to get called names or people make fun of me because I wanted to hang out with all the girls and not all the guys. That's what I wanted more than anything and that's what I got in Upward Bound.

Upward Bound provided him the opportunity "to exist in a space and do what I wanted to do" without others responding "oh, that's just a faggot, he's a queer, like, whatever, they would have never said it out loud just because the program would have laid the hammer down basically."

Lucas concluded, "So that's kind of how I felt safe." Arguably, Upward Bound felt like a safe space because it was one of the few spaces in which queer people were visible. Lucas described the group as "really progressive" in contrast to his peers. He said,

And I remember talking to [queer individuals] and, you know, the way that they talked about especially queer people, it just really made me feel welcome because I wasn't out at the time, but that was actually the first time I'd ever met another queer person as weird as that is.

Alongside the experiences of other interviewees, Simon's and Lucas' experiences speak to the importance queer visibility, queer role models, and discussions of queerness in youth-serving organizations to support the development of queer youth. The fact that queer youth were assumed to be straight and were not comfortable disclosing themselves to others demonstrates a broad example as to how belonging and othering were simultaneously demonstrated – conforming to belong and being self-othered because of their queerness. These interviews speak to the power of social norms, even when such norms do not take the shape of written guidelines, to shape organizational cultures, and they point to a need for more education on queer issues and identities for youth and adults alike.

### **Power Brokers and the Importance of Educating the Educators**

The importance of educating adult educators and volunteers about queerness surfaced repeatedly during interviews, as participants stressed the power that adults wielded in youth-serving organizations, adults' insensitivity to the realities and needs of LGBTQ+ youth, and

outright hostility from some adults who were able to shape the experiences of youth participants.

Melody, for example, explained that adults wielded enormous power.

There is often this pressure to impress the older members of a church... When you have that mix of adults and youth, there is this feeling you have to please those older members, so you end up doing a lot of extra things like Bible schools and going to Sunday school.

She felt “a lot of shame and perceived judgement where it was actually there or not” from her peers and adults if she did not participate the way they did in church or organizational functions.

Such power was often detrimental to queer youth. Corbin, for example, explained that his teacher in FFA was “against him.” He remembered how his advisor told him outright,

“I don’t like having faggots in my class,” and then told me that I wasn’t getting any special treatment in his class or his chapter [because of how successful I was in middle school]. He really treated me awful and any time, like when I was in ag class, if the other guys would pick on me and call me derogatory names, you know, make all kinds of rude comments and gestures, he just turned a blind eye to it. He just let it happen, like he didn’t try to stop ‘em or nothing because he knew I was (gay) and he didn’t like it.

Feeling anti-gay hostility from both his peers and advisor, he feared for his safety and was not able to be himself in the organization.

Lucas felt that, though some of his friends knew about him being gay, he “could never trust an adult to explore or even be comfortable discussing his identity.” He was “afraid they would tell his parents” or would “interfere with him being able to fully participate.” While he “superficially interacted with adults and coordinators to be liked and respected,” in order to not jeopardize his involvement in organizational activities, he stayed clear of adults’ questions and comments.

Would they tell my parents? Would they somehow impact the way that I interacted in this program, would they, even if they didn’t say anything and even if they didn’t do anything negative, would it still change the way they looked and thought about me as a person? And would that change how we had class discussions?

He recalled that he “did not code-switch for [adults] at all” but rather closeted himself entirely. Believing that he could not trust adults with his identity, he did everything he could to avoid being noticed.

With Upward Bound specifically, I did not code-switch for them at all. I was still that all-American, I did not trust adults with my identity whatsoever, so I would never have code-switched for them. Even though I knew that they, ...maybe that was irrational because even though I know that behind closed doors, they supported queer students, it was just so beyond terrifying, the anxiety that I built up over those years about what it meant to come out to an adult and the power that they had over me and what that could mean that I point blank would have never talked to an adult about my identity at that age.

He concluded that adults’ power in the organization alongside his queer sexuality generated quite a bit of anxiety for him. He also remembered that sometimes “coordinators thought they were being helpful, but they weren’t educated on how to best approach queer students and teenagers.” It turned out to be more harmful than helpful without them knowing it.

Similarly, Grace felt that “adults were the power holders” in 4-H; they made all the decisions. She worried that if they knew about her sexuality, they would limit her participation.

I feel like the adults were the power holders...they were the brokers in people staying or going and under what circumstance and then I think they held a lot of power over me whether or not they knew it, because I was watching that and seeing that and acting accordingly. We can’t ignore that adults in these programs had extreme power over us. From what we do to our basic participation, whether or not we’re there, so...

In contrast to such negative relationships, Oakley recalled the acceptance and care he received in the Y Club from his mentors, encouraging him to focus his energies on participating in the club.

I definitely targeted most of my time with the Y Club and the adults that were involved in the Y Club at the school, ...I became very close with those people. It created connections..., my first Y Club advisor, ...I still refer to her as my aunt [name], in that adopted kinship kind of concept, so I still have contact with her...and my second Y Club advisor, ...we became very close as well and I still have contact with her and still interact with each other pretty regularly in a way that I didn’t with the Junior Red Cross...so that perception of acceptance and care, it’s like you’re allowed to be here, but you’re wanted here, really created an environment where I hung pretty closely to that organization. That was my primary go-to, everything else kind of wrapped around it.

If an organization's power structure does not enable a sense of belonging but fosters an "othering" atmosphere, LGBTQ+ youth participants may find other avenues to participate in community organizations and leave the marginalizing organization. For example, the fact that participants were assumed straight and were not comfortable disclosing themselves to others shows the power of social interactions and the lack of organizational support and safety they needed. These interviews speak to the power of individual adults to shape queer youths' experiences and to the fear often generated by the inequitable power relationship between adults and youth participants. For queer youth to experience youth-serving organizations as safe, nurturing spaces, youth development professionals must appreciate the implications of the power they wield and understand how acceptance of difference shapes program participants' comfort levels and communication.

### **Research Objective Two – Belonging and Othering**

*RO2. Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.*

This study's second research objective generated responses that solidified the themes including queer invisibility and the utilization of self-management strategies in their interactions with organizational peers and adults. In addition, this second research objective brought up participants' feelings of fear and shame and highlighted the fact that queer youth self-managed to avoid the conflict, violence, and ostracization that they feared would come with being found out. For most interviewees, feelings of belonging were predicated on compartmentalization and conforming.

### **Homonegativity and Othering Queer People**

Repeatedly, interviewees recalled the ways in which they hid themselves from their peers, families, and communities in response to widespread homonegativity and othering of

queer people. In their experiences, belonging was conditioned upon the performance of normative sexual desires and gender roles. Not only was queerness often met by ridicule and social ostracization, at times, it was also met with violence such that the prospect of not belonging inspired fear and encouraged queer youth to make themselves “digestible” to straight peers and adults. In Grace’s words,

...when you sense the otherness, you modify your behavior. You do one of two things, you either make your otherness known, which I don’t think is your gut reaction, that’s no one’s gut reaction, you have to train yourself to be bold enough to do that...or you modify. You modify your otherness to make it palatable, you make it easier for other people to digest.

Recognizing that her “[true] presence would make them [other people] uncomfortable,” Grace avoided conflict. She explained, “not conflict in the sense that it ever felt tense because you train yourself to make it not tense,” to “make it seem normal and comfortable,” but the reality is that “you’re the one that’s working hard to make it look easy.”

Zack’s fear of being outed was also apparent in the experiences he recounted. He felt this fear in church camp and more generally.

...as a trans person, it’s really awkward to be in the wrong cabin I guess...this kind of goes more into the church camp thing, but I guess all around, being a guy who is in a cabin with a bunch of girls, there’s almost a guilt there ‘cause you feel like you have to be way more guarded like, oh, can’t watch so-and-so undress, you feel like you don’t belong there. Even though it wasn’t at all like a sexual thing like I wanted, you know, I wanted to watch them, I didn’t, it was just weird ‘cause I felt like I had to be extra, extra careful in circumstances like that, ‘cause I was in the wrong cabin, you know?

Even in a 4-H camp experience, where he was always “known as one of the guys,” Zach remembered how counselors picked on a youth for being gay. Seeing such behavior, Zach felt he needed to hide himself in the crowd. Highlighting his fear, he described his mindset, “What would people do if they knew that I was different?”

Feelings of fear also pervade Lucas’ memories of his involvement in youth-serving organizations in Kentucky. He understood that it “wasn’t ok to be gay at all;” most people

“walked on eggshells around any queer issues.” He feared that, “if I do this thing, are people gonna call me gay,” worrying for example about “what [he was] wearing - are my shorts too short?”

Chad remembered how people in his community responded negatively to conversations about and overt displays of homosexuality and gender nonconformity. As a rule, 4-H leaders “never really talked about” queerness.

there was never anyone who stood up and said, “you shouldn’t be this way, you shouldn’t be gay or lesbian or transgender or that’s not a thing,” no one said that, but I think the silence made me think that was a default. Silence is a lot louder than somebody saying something.

Lack of queer visibility and conversations about queerness caused Chad to question himself, and when queerness did become visible, it carried negative connotations and repercussions, further closing him off, even to himself.

I think I saw people talking with other people about political issues of LGBT rights and when there was a guy who was more feminine acting or was in the performing arts show, how they talked about that individual, whether or not they were out or not, just seeing that, I think then got translated to me. Now in my hometown, it’s very different, not with 4-H but just interactions and other places in the community and then I think making connections of, oh, I’ve seen this before, I’ve seen how this person acts and what can happen, so I’m just gonna default to not talking about my sexuality and my identity and not just even opening up the door to exploring that, so...

Chad concluded about his experiences, “in some ways, it did kind of hold me back for a few years into undergrad” because he was holding on to being “this straight-acting individual who just ‘didn’t have time to date’ and wasn’t interested “expressing things like feelings and stuff like that.” He added, “I think it held me back from kind of progressing and developing emotionally and socially in that aspect.”

Such fear was not specific to the experiences of queer alumni of youth-serving organizations. Rather, queer youth experienced homonegativity in youth-serving organizations, their families, and the wider community. Tommy talked about his fear of his dad. He realized as



a teen that he was gay; however, he knew he would never be able to come out to his father, as he “was afraid of being bullied or [being] called a sissy.” He did not want to risk the “violence or abuse or rejection and shame and judgement,” explaining,

My father was very violent when I was young so, when I came out to him as an adult, he told me that had he known, he would have tried to beat it out of me and I’m pretty sure he would have tried, so that was a big reason. And then socially too, at school growing up, I was afraid of being bullied or called a sissy. Yeah, I guess that would go back to violence or abuse or rejection and shame and judgment. Those are all things that I was afraid of.

Similarly, Corbin was “petrified” by the prospect of being outed to his family. He remembered, “I had absolute petrified fear that my family was going to find out and so I didn’t want anybody knowing regardless because I was afraid that they [a 4-H adult] would run back to my parents and tell them.”

Rather than provide a haven from violence, social ridicule, and banishment, youth-serving organizations were themselves often violent spaces for queer participants. Talking about his experiences in FFA, Corbin described his male peers as “rough, tough, southern boys and they didn’t like me...they would threaten me and tell me that if I ever looked their way ‘you goddamn motherfucking faggot, I’ll kick your ass.’” This was a common experience for him. To protect himself, Corbin chose not to interact with many of his peers, retreated socially and taking himself out of the limelight to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Similarly, Oakley recalled that when he was in Y Club he “had to be conscious of the way [he] presented [himself] and what [he] was doing and where [he] was at and who [he] was with” to make sure he was safe. As such, he was “very conscious about how [he] expressed [himself].”

Though this study was not focused on participants’ home and community lives, the fact that interviewees recalled experiencing homonegativity and fear at home, in the community, as well as in youth-serving organizations speaks to such organizations’ embeddedness in society

and social norms. Both in and outside of youth-serving organizations, interviewees felt pressure to self-regulate via masking, code-switching, and blending in order to protect themselves from being outed.

Participants stressed that fears of ridicule, banishment, and violence caused them to “mask” themselves, an exhausting and confusing activity. For example, Nicole recalled,

Now, from FCA, obviously, it’s exhausting to run a mask... ‘cause you’re having to shut down your sexuality, your personality, your beliefs, your struggles with your beliefs, your political outlook, it felt like in that organization, I was really tamping down all the fires all the time. So that felt really limiting ‘cause I felt like I wanted to be more involved in that organization and explore my religion and try to understand it better, but I was so limited in everything else that that just wasn’t possible.

Nicole also talked about how she felt the need to mask herself with the adults in all her organizations.

...you know you can’t be your full self and you can’t really express deep down who you are or at least it feels that way, so you do learn to kind of, I think that helped and hurt, you know, you learn to mask and I think anything like that that dealt with other kids my age and especially when it was run by adults, that interaction between adults and kids and learning where those edges were, where things could go and where they couldn’t, where you could go and where you couldn’t, was a lesson and it was my way, you know, nothing horrible ever happened or anything like that, but you just learn where those lines are with folks and it becomes second nature to slip into them.

She shared her feelings on how she expressed herself and how the adults directed each program. She pinpointed that nothing negative ever happened to her, but she did not take the chance for it to take place either. She felt that masking was a “second nature to slip into them” when interacting with adults.

Meanwhile, Leo struggled with his identities, unsure of where he fit in.

...from my young childhood, I definitely played around with my gender role and sort of didn’t really know the difference or what I was really doing as a kid, ‘cause you just don’t, and [in] Upward Bound...I could not be trans because they could look past, like if they thought that I was gay but I was just still basically a normal person, that didn’t cause quite as much fuss...I didn’t want to have conflict with any of these people, like I really, really loved them, like it was like this huge group of people that I had very strong feelings for, so I just sort of realized the stakes and ended up just being super feminine,

like I would do all of this stuff kind of like for them, like be on their sports teams and their dance squads and sing at events and just kind of put myself out there for them, but I did it in what I perceived to be a really safe way.

In short, longing for safety and acceptance drove participants to act in ways that negated their true selves. It is crucial to understand how othering queer individuals and displays of homonegativity affect participants as it could lead to harmful behaviors and social ostracization.

### **Internalized Homophobia**

When discussing their experiences of belonging and being othered in youth-serving organizations, interviewees repeatedly spoke about their feelings of shame, the result of internalized homophobia and of having few if any role models or peers to relate to in their early lives. Along with the fear of social ostracization and violence, such feelings of shame encouraged queer youth to mediate their interactions with other people to blend in.

While Tommy insisted he did not “ever want people to think that I’m just bashing the community I grew up in or the youth-serving organization of the church” – he professed that his community and church “did a lot of good things for me and who I am in ways that I’m very proud of today” – it was nonetheless true that both community and church “instilled so much internalized shame within me.”

Melody recalled, “I definitely felt...pressure to not be targeted out for those things, kind of blend in with the crowd. Again, I definitely felt...shame and fear about having any same sex attraction or even too close of friendships with women or girls, at the time, girls.” Such feelings made her more mindful of her speech and behavior in each of her organizations.

I felt the need to think through everything I was saying out loud, to think through how I interacted with people, how I talked about people to where they couldn’t be perceived as like, too flirtatious, just even if they weren’t directly or they weren’t directed at me, I felt like the interaction with [Christian Musical advisor] praying for my gay friend and just sometimes being in the lunch room talking about whatever and people would say being gay was disgusting and often that was related to guys being gay and talked about girls making out as hot for guys more than it just being a thing that they would want to do for

themselves and definitely felt like a lot of internalized shame because of a lot of those things.

Again, feelings of shame surfaced in youth-serving organizations and in the family and wider community. Grace, for example, remembered her mom talking with her aunt about her “boyfriends.”

We never talked about it [homosexuality]. Nobody ever said anything. I remember one time when I was 16 or 17, my aunt asked me if I had any boyfriends and my mom just looked at her and said, “[Grace]’s not interested in boys,” and I remember being offended by that...that was totally societal. And also, what does my mom think about me, like, you know, there are lots of things that came to play with that, but I feel like my attitudes in that...[there was] a lot of self-shame in play with that, absolutely. But it was never on the table on for discussion. It was never a possibility.

Whereas youth-serving organizations could have offered queer youth an opportunity to explore their differences, fears, and feelings of shame, as a rule, those organizations did not create space for exploration, instead reinforced socially constructed expectations. As Chad recalled, he did not feel that in 4-H he could explore his own identity, and he felt that he was left out of opportunities that other teenagers enjoyed, such as finding their “first serious boyfriend or girlfriend.”

I’d say socially, like with my personal identity with being a gay man in the south. And what that means and expressing emotions and how I feel about people and what I think and who I choose to be interested in, have crushes on and that kind of stuff. That was never something that I felt a space within 4-H to talk about where other people had those opportunities ‘cause a lot of people had their first serious boyfriend or girlfriend from 4-H which some of them have gone on to marry, but for me, it was very much a thing that cannot be explored here, I cannot interact with other individuals in that light or even tell people that’s what I want just because that’s not the environment ‘cause it’s not that someone said you can’t do that, but you can’t do that ‘cause it’s not done.

For Ben, his involvement in youth-serving organizations was part of the process of learning how to be in the closet. He remembered,

I was having these feelings and whatnot and I was like, “what the fuck is wrong with me?” And I was noticing myself giving looks and I’m like, oh my God. People getting undressed or whatever and I’m like what is wrong, I’m, like, sick, and I would have these like self-shame moments and then I’m like having to conceal having that and then on the

other hand, I'm not necessarily being myself, I don't know. So, on one hand, I am being myself because it's not like super present in my mind, but on the other hand, I'm not being myself at all, I'm having to cover it up and I'm learning how to cover it up. I'm in the early stages of learning how to be in the closet, you know?

Remembering her experiences in youth choir and Christian Musical, Melody spoke about feeling the "need to regulate herself," to not be "overtly flirtatious" with other girls and to "dress certain ways." She furthered explained, "I had no room to explore any other feelings that I may have," so she "did not allow [herself to] feel them."

I felt the need to dress certain ways and talk about guys and if I wasn't even part of those conversations, like even if I just remain silent, that would get perceived as weird. And I definitely feel like I had no room to explore any other feelings that I may have, which looking back, I definitely did and I just didn't let myself feel them.

She discussed her thoughts on how church choir was limiting in exploring identity.

Yeah, so, all the things. I think having avenues for, especially for youth that are wanting to explore, like wanting to be open about how they feel, wanting to, and by explore, I mean explore the feelings that they're having or like talk about any of those things, I think it would be a lot more beneficial if there was not that immediate gut reaction of, this is the devil's work. Said in all sarcasm but also kind of not.

Indeed, Melody recalled that she often felt more "self-shame" in youth-serving organizations than in the general community.

I definitely felt more self-shame and self-judgment and self-containment in a lot of those organizations in my life in general in central Appalachia because I perceived that I wouldn't be accepted. I didn't want to walk that path of rejection, I didn't want to really be an individual, honestly, like I wanted to blend into the crowd more. I didn't want to stand out in any of the bad ways or things that I perceived were too bad. I didn't want, obviously, too much attention on the things that I've felt were struggles or burdens at the time and that definitely made me, honestly, really start to hate myself for a long time and feel really inferior to a lot of my peers and very scared to be open with my feelings.

Speaking about her involvement in Christian Musical and church choir, Melody recalled the emotional toll of hiding in order to conform to others' expectations.

I definitely acted, did things differently, presented differently, said things differently, in those organizations than I did if I was just in a group of people that I felt comfortable with and felt like I could be myself around. I definitely put on a lot of masks back in the day and honestly, because of that, I barely ever cried in high school or middle school

because I held in a lot of emotion through all of those things and I just tried to make myself whatever I felt like those people wanted me to be and felt a lot of pressure to conform to things that they would be comfortable with. Also definitely upped the Jesus talk.

In contrast, Howard experimented with his personality while in 4-H because, as he explained, “I was safer, I perceived 4-H as a safer place to be me than any other place in my life, any other, except for home.” As such, “I would act more, either more myself or more like I thought I could be, so I could experiment with, as most kids do, experiment with your personality and the way that you can interact with the world.” As he grew older, Howard’s comfort levels increased. He moved from saying “no, I’m not gay” to sharing his sexuality with a few others and, eventually, coming out to everybody.

Maybe more so as the younger we were, I think we did have to limit how we acted just to ease into being more comfortable as time did go on...as gay people then...you test the waters a little bit...a couple years later, you know, well, maybe tell, say something, slip something in here, but you know, you ease into the process of coming out just like anybody does as a sexual human being, you know? Like, you’re not sexual at ten necessarily but you know that your identity is different. Yeah, I didn’t have to stop being different in 4-H.

Howard’s experiences appear to have been relatively unusual. As a rule, youth-serving organizations in Central Appalachia did not address homophobia or develop programming that provided queer youth with queer role models. Erika spoke about queerness in the youth-serving organizations of which she was part, saying, “I think there was just total erasure across all of them. Total erasure. I don’t think, within the context of any of those organizations, I don’t think I ever encountered a conversation, an acknowledgment, a discussion about queerness at all.” Howard recalled, “it just wasn’t brought up.” Grace remembered that organizations dealt with queer youth by “turning a blind eye.”

By understanding how participants internalized their own shame, judgment, and homonegativity, the value in learning more about how queer youth navigate their interactions

surfaced. These first-hand accounts bring forward many needs and lessons to be learned about queer issues, particularly in Central Appalachia and through a queer lens.

### **The Limits of Faith**

Participants repeatedly stressed the role that Christianity, or *the faith*, played in shaping the culture of youth-serving organizations and their experiences. *The faith* played both positive and negative roles in participants' young lives. Interviewees who identified with a religion felt that Christianity served as a bond that tied the community together, cultivating feelings of belonging, particularly when believers held a more liberal view of Christianity.

An impassioned believer during his adolescence, Leo recalled feeling at home in Upward Bound and other youth-serving organizations, which in his experience were "worldly" and accepting, making him feel like he could be himself. He said about Upward Bound,

Everybody was primarily Christian, I think a lot, the thing that all of those cultures really had in common was the faith. Yeah, that just kind of tied everybody right together. Including myself, I was actually very religious at like 14, 15, 16. And I appreciated that about that group, like I actually had a way better experience with them in terms of religious affiliation and input than I did in my own town, but I mean, everybody over there is way more worldly, like they're chill. They've seen more things; they realize that it's just better to let people be themselves, I guess. Or maybe it's that they truly believed in the teaching of Jesus and just didn't condemn others.

In contrast, Grace felt that religion was a conservative force in her 4-H program. She explained,

4-H had the tendency to be very cliquy and...they had the tendency to be very exclusive, they pulled directly from several churches, their membership pulled very firmly, at least in my town, from a couple different churches. And those tended to be the more conservative churches, the bigger churches with more community influence and community voice.

While "4-H is not a religious organization," and while no one "ever tried to lead [them] to Jesus in a 4-H meeting," an "overall evangelical feel translated itself" in the programming. Staff and volunteers talked about "what in their life drives" their "moral compass," due to the tie the adults had to a church in the region. She felt that even though most "try very hard to separate the sacred

from the secular,” the idea of a moral compass “bleeds into your work.” She remembered a particular paid staff member who was from a “super conservative evangelical Southern Baptist Convention church” whose beliefs and values shaped the undertone of 4-H programming. Grace passionately recalled that “we didn’t always see eye to eye,” but she ended up going along with the majority in order to keep participating in her county’s 4-H program.

Simon had his own experience with a conservative, religious volunteer in his youth-serving organization who, because of her religious beliefs, engaged in homonegative behaviors that impacted the quality of the organization’s sex education.

...it’s interesting because the one volunteer within the organization who led the sexual education portion of the service learning, that kind of changed because she was extremely conservative and religious and entirely against the LGBTQ+ community. So, my interactions with her lessened of course. Which was fine, it’s her loss. I was trying to virtually educate her a little bit from a youth perspective, and she didn’t really want to hear that.

Tommy, who was “very involved with church,” recalled that religious organizations taught youth that “homosexuality was a sin and people who are gay, there’s no hope for them.” He learned that gay people are going to hell and “God hates gay people.” Tommy was nonetheless very religious, and able to find in *the faith* a certain haven from his family’s gendered social expectations. He never took an interest in hunting and other “masculine”/ “manly” activities, but since he read and wrote sermons, no one questioned his devotion to God. He used this devotion to avoid participating in “manly” activities while avoiding being outed.

My dad would say things like, “you don’t want to go hunting with me...,” and then I would say something like, “well, dad, you know I got to preach Sunday and I have to work on my sermon and I have to write my sermon and do some studying the Bible,” and not only was that okay, he would, you know, but that was actually esteemed because like, oh, of course you’re a man of God and of course you need to do that and he would feel like, well, I should be in church too. I mean, he had some guilt about not being in church. So, I kind of played that. I played that a lot and I found within the church itself actually a subversive way to play that game.



Melody shared her experiences growing up in church and participating in faith-based organizations. She felt that she was “preached at” if you were anything besides what others viewed as normal in the eyes of God and the community. She furthered that it was not ok for others to accept “black sheep” in friend groups and if you did, you too would become an outlier.

Like getting baptized was something that honestly, I didn’t really care about and I felt like I kind of had to because of my relationships through choir and that commitment through there obviously doesn’t really mesh with feeling okay about any of those feelings about same sex attraction or whatever and I mean like, I was preached at. Not even because I was targeted or seen as like, queer but that it was a very bad thing to be, that you would go to hell, that you would be a bad example for the other people in your community and you would be kind of like the black sheep in your friend group and that people shouldn’t accept those things in other people and that you can’t really be friends with those “outliers” of society.

For Zack, his faith and his gender and sexual queerness were at odds with one another. He spent years “trying not to be [himself],” praying to God to make him something other than he was at the time. Oakley felt that because his family “was very religious,” he was not accepted in his home. Nicole revealed that she never disclosed herself to her family because her grandmother was “deeply religious.”

My mom’s not really religious but my grandmother who, once my dad left, it was really my grandma and my mom that raised me. My grandmother was deeply religious. We started this relationship and I realized I was bisexual and all that while my grandmother was still alive, but I never came out to her at all. I was pretty determined that I was never going to come out to her because I just knew it was just going to be, just really, it was really, I knew it was gonna be really upsetting for her and hard for her to bear, you know?

Similarly, when reflecting about how his family would be perceived in the community if he were to come out publicly, Tommy said that he felt that in God’s eyes, queerness was something you had to hide. He was shamed by his mom to keep quiet about his dark secret.

That it was something that was wrong and sinful, that something that God was not pleased with and it was not something to be proud of. It was something to hide. It was something to keep a secret. For example, when I first came out to my mom, which is long before I came out to my dad, one of the first things she says, “please don’t tell anybody. Please don’t tell anybody.” And that’s what I mean by shame is that it’s just like, staying

in the dark in secret and, to me, the shaming is also very isolating and it's just this feeling of being bad.

Both queer and not religious, Melody felt doubly alienated from religious youth-serving organizations but nonetheless wanted to participate in the programs' activities. She described how she "never really felt super connected to Christianity" but was drawn to Christian Musical because it offered her opportunities to sing. In this and other organizations, such as FCA, she hid her queerness and her disconnect with the faith out of fear that, if she showed her true self within organizations whose purpose was rooted in religion, she would have had limited interactions in the organization.

I would say with FCA, I don't think there was any part of that that I felt like I could be myself or be genuine about because even the stated purpose of the organization is like this religiously based organization and I didn't really feel like I could even be honest with my struggles with that, let alone any of the other things that I think.

Leo was motivated by individuals who acted on behalf of the faith, however, for some queer youth, the faith had a negative influence on the lives of other young queer people in their families, communities, and youth-serving organizations, generating feelings of shame, encouraging queer youth to hide themselves from their friends and families, and limiting their education about crucial topics, including sexual health. To borrow Tommy's words, youth were "discouraged" from engaging in self-exploration – a requisite for self-growth – more stress was placed on being godly and Christian than on being yourself. The topic was an emotional one for each of the participants, for both those who retained their religious ties and those who have moved away from what they felt were the confines of their family's beliefs. The importance of understanding how faith played in the lives of these participants focused on their connections to the church, family, and peer groups. While most found negative relationships with the faith, others were able to bring meaning into their own lives through their faith.

### **Research Objective Three - Influential Factors**

*RO3. Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.*

In the final portion of the interview, participants spoke about influencers that helped shape their personal and professional lives in various ways, focusing on personal development, leadership development, and professional networking. This section maps each of those influential factors and the themes that emerged from their shared experiences. Queer youth are resilient. Despite the challenges they faced, queer youth were able to carve out space for personal and professional growth. It is important to recognize the challenges queer youth face while not turning them into victims. The other main takeaway is despite their flaws, these organizations are valuable and so it is important they do the work required to change to be inclusive of queer youth.

Despite their criticisms and negative experiences, most participants reflected positively on their interactions within their organizations, suggesting that youth-serving organizations have an essential role to play in the lives of all youth, straight and queer alike. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the challenges queer youth face while not becoming victims. The main takeaway is that these alumni viewed their organizations as valuable despite being flawed in many respects.

#### **Personal Development**

According to participants, the challenges they faced as queer youth in Central Appalachia eventually contributed to their personal development, fostering friendships, interpersonal skills, empathy for and a desire to include others, strength of character, healthy personal values, a willingness to speak up when needed, and a desire to explore queerness.

Participants who had less-positive experiences shared similar sentiments. Chad attributed his involvement with 4-H to helping him learn how to be a “very open and welcoming person regardless” of a person’s situation. Having experienced feelings of exclusion, he wanted to make “people feel more comfortable and where they feel welcomed” when interacting with others, LGBTQ+ or not.

Howard, who works in food service, attributed his involvement in 4-H to much of his success as an adult. He felt that 4-H helped him be more “confident in [his] sexuality” because he was able to explore “facets of [his] identity” that he was not able to explore in his school setting. He was able to express himself, discuss his troubles with peers, and see more LGBTQ+ people, even though only a few, in 4-H. The organization also provided him with lessons in how to be a “moral” person outside of the framework of religion, cultivating his growth into “a strong gay man.”

Oakley, who works in youth development administration, developed better understanding of self and was able to see how he “guards” himself around people who he does not want to be around. He felt that his organizational experiences helped to develop his “strength of character.”

I think it’s a combination of all three [organizations] that have definitely shaped that because when I look at it and reflecting on that, so I think that I developed quite a bit of strength of character out of the situation. The Y Club definitely gave me a place to be and exist, especially because it was an afterschool program, I was able to stay at school and to engage that for much longer.

Nicole also discussed the ways her involvement in youth-serving organizations built her character and confidence. She compared her life to then and now when it came to being “less willing to compromise parts of [herself]” at work. She detailed how she felt her accent hindered her at work when dealing with others who were not from Appalachia or even the South. She reflected on deciding what she “needed to hold on to and what she needed to let go [of] in order to be successful.”

Chad shared that 4-H instilled its “others first, self second” mentality in him. He took hold of the 4-H motto, “making the best better.” This motto along with his experiences as a queer youth contributed to him being able to now say something when he sees something wrong. He can “stand up and push back” with confidence in hopes of making a change or sparking some growth in acceptance.

Melody similarly attributed her confidence when discussing her positions, morals, political beliefs, and her religion to her experiences in Christian Musical and Girl Scouts. She revisited the fact that she “did not feel comfortable voicing these” while she was a youth participant, but her experiences “helped her get to where she is today to not be timid and silent.” Her participation in youth-serving organizations prepared her to face issues of gender normativity and to challenge traditional outlooks on what a woman’s role is in society. She reflected:

It kind of really pushed me to just be who I wanted to be and I think also with the constant pressure to feel like I needed to be very feminine, like the housewife mentality, just be in my place as a woman. I definitely rebelled a lot against that...and I’m now a lot more comfortable with any feminine or whatever feelings that I have, if I want to do those things, I don’t think of it as bad anymore, I don’t also think that I need to wear anything specific and I’m allowed to also even wear dresses at this point if I want to, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t mean that I am any less than, it doesn’t mean that I’m conforming to whatever, I can do things because I want to, because I feel like me.

Nicole felt that, though FCA held her personal development back “due to the religiosity of the region and the organization,” the experience made her more resilient person today. She noted that “if you’re constantly confronting that othering” because you are different from what society views as normal, “you become resilient to it, you know how to navigate it.” She was grateful for that ability.

For Grace, 4-H was crucial to building long-lasting friendships. In a particularly emotional moment during the interview, she noted that 4-H gave her experiences outside of her

home county and opportunities to interact with people from other parts of Appalachia, opportunities she felt she would not have had without 4-H. She asserted that she was “one of the kids that was able to have a good experience,” and this helped her to see who she was as an individual.

For all its faults, and it has a lot of faults, I’m really, I mean, a big part of who I am. Why am I gonna cry...a big part of who I am is thanks to 4-H, it’s thanks to the programming, it’s thanks to the personal interactions that I had, the friend groups that I gained, you know, 95% of my friends are former 4-H’ers and not just from our county, not just from our town or our program, but from across the board and I feel like that has been incredible to see. But again, I’m one of the kids that was able to have a good experience...It helped me see who I am.

Zack talked about having a great camp experience and how that experience gave him “an [insane] work ethic” that he feels he would not have acquired in other teenage work experiences.

So I think I kind of touched on this earlier when I was talking about that not all LGBT people really appreciate having been raised a certain way, and don’t get me wrong, there’s some things that I wish I didn’t have like guilt and I guess personal conviction that I don’t think that I would have if I hadn’t been raised the way that I was, but I think growing up in camp gave me an [insane] work ethic that I don’t think I would have otherwise developed from working regular teenage jobs.

Discussing her development from childhood to college, Dana shared that was able to go from debating with others about sexuality and gender to actually studying the subjects and pursuing a career in women’s and gender studies.

To continue my education in these controversial topics...I studied women’s and gender studies in college so it did, I mean, it did continue. It continued on to college and I studied it for five years. Yeah. I mean, I think it’s a success...for me, women’s and gender studies was, that wasn’t just, oh yeah, the queer kid who wanted to debate about abortion in school grew up and now is studying being queer and debating abortion. No, it’s a legitimate field of study about theory and reading these theorists and I think that being able to go from the high school version of me to the college version that actually knows what I’m talking about. I mean, there is success in that. There’s growth.

Tommy shared that his experiences in youth groups in church allowed him to develop his preaching skills and confidence. They gave him the “courage in a way and nurtured” his desire to be a preacher.

... they encouraged me to do that, to preach, to be me, right? Now, they would not have wanted me to go as far as I have gone, and...some of them have been clear about that since and basically said you're no longer welcome here in our pulpit, which I knew that would happen. But still, they gave me this courage in a way and nurtured this and encouraged the courage.

Simon discussed how being involved in his service-learning organization has led him to “be a lifelong learner,” not only of LGBTQ+ issues, but in all paths of life. He felt that his organizational experiences gave him that “explorative attitude and to challenge himself daily as an adult.”

Leo shared how his experiences in youth-serving organizations helped to navigate the world outside Appalachia. He left his home area for a short amount of time and ended up moving back:

I actually did end up leaving when I was 19 but I think that the lesson of being able to have these honest conversations with people and kind of be patient with yourself through this process and be calm the whole time, it kind of teaches people how to empathize with it and realize that it's not such a big deal. I think those skills that I learned in high school with that organization have helped me immensely as an older adult and a young professional. 'Cause I mean, you're just are not always gonna be surrounded by people who accept you for who you are. Sometimes you are, but sometimes you're just not.

The interviews above focus on many positive aspects to the challenges interviewees faced as queer youth in rural Central Appalachia. Many found confidence in themselves, found that they could be open-minded, and developed a self-understanding setting them apart from their less-positive peers. Their desire to be more than what they had experienced – good and bad - showed how their resiliency had laid personal and professional paths to success.

### **Leadership Development**

Participants stressed that, despite whatever challenges they faced in their youth-serving organizations, their experiences with these organizations developed their leadership skills. Participants shared how they learned to appreciate their own leadership abilities and how to navigate their own experiences using their learned skills in personal and professional settings.

These participants related how their surroundings played a key factor in their leadership skill development through organizational and regional culture, self-awareness, and learning more about how people operate.

Simon shared that he was planning to “be a follower” in his youth-serving organization. He had no desire to speak in public and he did not want to oversee anything with the organization. Once he got involved, however, he started to realize that “doing some of those things, number one is fun, and number two, it’s helpful because...[he] realized he was a natural talker,” and he fell in love with educating others. Simon added that he “gained confidence” and is able to talk to people when in a leadership role.

Equating leadership with accountability and effective collective action in organizing events, Erica said about her experience in Girl Scouts:

...each of us was given responsibilities, that’s kind of where I learned accountability to a group. I learned about collective action also, like that we can organize and change something. You’re pushed so much to be a leader that you’re never kind of asked to be reflective about it.

Grace credited 4-H in helping her to develop skills to become a teacher through “given leadership opportunities.” She focused on how the leadership experiences in 4-H led her to education, and those experiences were “a big part of who [she] wanted to be as a leader.”

Leadership, it has made me who I am, I was given leadership opportunities and opportunities to grow when I was a teen and then when I worked for 4-H in the summer camp setting, I was given that leadership opportunity and it was very deliberately developed and honed and, you know, I feel lucky for that because I feel like that’s transferred in my life as far as a teacher and then hopefully one day a school administrator.

Even the not “particularly good leaders” she saw shaped her by motivating her to do her best to be different in her leadership roles.

Nicole credited all her organizations in making her “a better leader and better teammate or just a better person” because she was always having to fight her own inner struggles. Tommy



reflected about the women in his church and youth group in giving him “really good nuggets of wisdom about leadership.” His experiences in leadership roles play a large part in his career field now to help families who are grieving. Tommy added that he was able to find his own style of leadership through the encouragement he received as a youth participant. Tommy shared a quote that was significant for him as he was navigating through youth experiences and challenges attempting to be a man of God. He reflected:

The hands that praise you today are around your neck tomorrow. You know, these little sayings that I don't even remember exactly who said that to me, but it was years and years ago back in my community. Again, as a budding leader, that was offered to me and one of the preachers, I'm pretty sure it was one of the men who had been doing it for years and said basically, what he was encouraging me about was don't spend your time just trying to please people as a leader all the time. You're gonna have to say some things and do some things that some people are not going to like. Yeah, and I found that to be very true as far as the hands that praise me, I'm always suspicious when people are praising me because I'm like, yeah, you're gonna choke me tomorrow. It's not always true, but it has been at times.

Zack, who identified as “a natural born leader,” felt that that he learned the right ways to lead and the wrong ways to lead and it has stuck with him throughout his life.

To a point. I'm kind of, well, I'm not kind of, I am a natural born leader, I've always known that. I kind of have to watch it sometimes because I have the ability to sway a room in my direction and sometimes that's not always the best thing, so there are times that I have to watch myself, 'cause otherwise, I'll get in trouble, you know. Like I said, I worked my ass off to get to the point where I could be in a position of leadership and what I did [as a youth], I think it really gave me a better understanding of what being a leader is and how vastly important it is that you not lead people the wrong way.

Melody spoke about her experiences in Girls Scouts and how she felt “female empowerment” was a large part of her own leadership development. She talked about seeing many examples of “female leaders that [they] could look up to and try to emulate.”

Especially with Girl Scouts, we definitely had a lot of female empowerment built into that and were given a lot of really great examples of female leaders that we could look up and try to emulate and were consistently told that you can do whatever you want even if that wasn't kind of the pressure, they put on you. I definitely think that made me feel definitely more empowered to put myself out there to be more confident that I was good enough to lead things, that I was knowledgeable enough and honestly, good enough, to

put myself out there and have more responsibility than I could have probably thought than I could have held before then.

Leo shared that his experiences with youth-serving organizations allowed him “to focus on leadership roles in other ways.” He added his connection to personal development in how leadership development fed into his jobs and the working roles he has been working in for many years. His experiences “led him to his own self-acceptance and his ability to lead others” because he did not want to be like the people he saw on a regular basis who never really wanted to create progressive change. His confidence led him to “being more comfortable talking about himself and other queer issues.”

Lucas reflected that, because of the experiences he had in Upward Bound and Promise neighborhood, he was “more willing to stand up for people who were struggling” with their identities. He added that he learned to care more about people and become an example for others to look toward.

I was more willing to stand up for people who were struggling but maybe weren't struggling just like I was. But it was because I struggled in the way that I did that I knew how influence and, you know, even in my privileged identity what that meant in my interactions with other people, so I think in that moment, that period of development, especially my leadership skills, I started caring more about, not that I didn't, I mean, just to be honest, there was some issues that, yeah, I cared about and I thought were important, but I wasn't actually an ally, I wasn't actually an advocate for those people. And I think in that moment, I feel like a leadership skill that I developed was just being able to speak out on behalf of other people, especially people who didn't have the same experiences that I did because that even means more, it's more impactful when I'm saying I have this privileged identity and what we're doing is pretty shitty, right?

According to Chad, 4-H showed him that “leaders aren't necessarily individuals who are constantly at the front of the room giving directions.” He credited this realization to how he leads now as a “team-based mentor.” He went from seeing leadership as “a pyramid to more of a roundtable” characterized by teamwork and listening skills.

I think it was very much kind of like going from a pyramid to more of a roundtable and how are we gonna work together and yes, there may only be one leader but we all had

very important roles to play in this and we have to do this and listen to each other. Otherwise, it's just gonna fall apart and it's not gonna be a really effective environment and we're not gonna do whatever it is we need to do. And so I'd say in a leadership development perspective, it's definitely gone from that managerial style to more of a team-based approach of working on things together.

Leadership development is crucial to how youth take learned skills such as teamwork, group dynamics, and followership and puts them to use in their lives. The interviews above suggest that queer youth were able to take advantage of and benefit from their participation in youth-serving organizations. Interviewees were placed in early leadership role and had realizations about their ideas about leadership beliefs and they value others in their lives.

### **Professional Networking**

Participants had mixed feelings on whether their participation in youth-serving organizations led to more professional development and networking opportunities. While the interviews provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on opportunities, many naturally moved toward the successes and challenges they have faced in their lives pertaining to professional environments.

Grace, who works as an assistant principal outside of Appalachia, shared that “[4-H] shaped [her] professional trajectory as far as wanting to work with youth populations and wanting to be in education and being more of an experiential learner;” She credits her embrace of experiential pedagogic models that “transfer into [her professional] life” to her experiences in 4-H using methods of experiential learning and social change models.

Grace also felt her 4-H did not provide its participants with significant professional networking opportunities.

Now, professional networking, I feel like I have been at a deficit. I missed out on things that should have grown me professionally. Other 4-H programs do it well, but our particular program did not do a good job of developing us as potential business leaders, you know, potential people out in society.

She added that she was trained in some leadership skills but was never introduced to professional networks to assist her in her future. She credited her 4-H's failure to expose its members to professional networks to the fact that her 4-H community was part of a tight circle.

They did great, you know, development skills, leadership is great, but they didn't connect us to anyone other than the people that were already part of the circle, so...professionally my network is all of the people that I've known since I was 9, 10 or 11, you know? That's counterintuitive. That sets a person back. And so I feel like they didn't do a fantastic job of setting us up for success in that way.

In contrast, Chad, who is currently in medical school, explained that his experiences in 4-H enabled him to connect with "state lawmakers and lobbyists." These connections forwarded his interest in social policy and advocacy. His ties to 4-H gave him a "shared history" with individuals who he felt broadened his network and connected him to people at high professional levels.

These are different people that I know or connections who have similar goals and shared things that we want to accomplish, and I can go through that or we have the shared history of 4-H and you know who I am, so it automatically establishes me with this individual so they kind of know me or who I am and I can mention, "oh, I was in 4-H," and that immediately starts a conversation and a connection with people.

Nikki, who started her own technology company to "change the conversations around sex and sexual health," stressed that, through her church activities, she made connections to a bigger professional network of doctors and federal judges.

I mean, [at] church I got to meet some maybe like, fancy people, like for instance, there were some doctors that I did rotations there that helped me, would let me volunteer and figure out if I wanted to go to med school, it was just access to maybe a bigger professional network of doctors or federal judges, state people like that.

Simon, who is employed as a real estate agent, shared that his experiences in his service-learning organization allowed him to meet "many community leaders," to whom he was able to reach out for advice, such as how to approach others when he is trying to enact a change to make a difference in the community or start a program today focused on varied populations in my area.

Through the service-learning organization, I had met so many community leaders who I was able to reach to for advice on how to approach the community leaders of the other community, if that makes sense, to, how to interact with them, questions I should be asking, so it really set the foundation for that. It also helped me, well, then as a youth, I was attending Chamber of Commerce events and downtown events to promote the organization and stuff like that. And now as an adult, I kind of make it my mission to attend at least two of those a month here in my current community.

Professional development and networking are vital to show the resiliency each queer participant has from their youth experiences. The interviews above show that queer youth could use their experiences in their youth-serving organizations to build successful careers and job paths they hold today. Tying back to the overall takeaway, Central Appalachian queer youth – past, present, and future – are resilient and can tackle obstacles, adversity, and hardships. These participants model resiliency and hold to themselves to persevere and succeed.

### **Summary**

Participants' interviews brought out mixed emotions, perceptions, and feelings toward youth-serving organizations and Central Appalachia. Their discussions of the culture of their organizations and their experiences of belonging and othering and of homonegative and queer invisibility, their memories of how they guarded themselves with peers and adults and how they navigated assumptions that they were all straight, speak to the challenges queer youth face in rural Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. At the same time, these organizations made significant positive contributions to the lives of queer youth. These organizational experiences shaped the personal growth, leadership development, and professional opportunities of queer participants, speaking volumes about their tenacity, resilience, and grit.

Still, these interviews show that, despite long-standing efforts to build youth experiences, youth-serving organizations still overlook the fact that not all young people are the same. Together, these interviews attest to the important role that youth-serving organizations play in the lives of rural Central Appalachian youth, and they attest to the work that such organizations

must do to ensure that they are safe spaces for queer youth. They also draw attention to the important role that youth-serving organizations could play in countering homonegativity. These findings demonstrate that now is the time to realize this change.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to attempt to make meaning of perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Findings included the effects that the interactions, relationships, and organizational policies and practices these individuals experienced had on their perceptions of belonging or being othered. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on program leadership, self-identity, and inclusivity policies, procedures, and practices for LGBTQ+ individuals in youth organizations in Central Appalachia. The research objectives used to guide this study focused on the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth from Central Appalachia who were alumni of various youth-serving organizations. These objectives were:

1. Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have about their experiences in their youth-serving organization(s) in Central Appalachia.
2. Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.
3. Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.

Organizations with inclusive cultures seek to provide welcoming environments for all social identity groups in their programming efforts (Wasserman et al., 2008). However, the question remains about breaking down barriers to participation rooted in the conscious feelings and experiences of exclusion in organizations. Making meaning of LGBTQ+ alumni's experiences of leadership and social identity formation within youth-serving organizations provides a basis for examining organizational interactions with queer youth and understanding

how such interactions shape queer youth's feelings of belonging or othering in rural areas, particularly in Central Appalachia.

### **Summary of Conceptual Framework**

This section provided a broad conceptual overview of the relevance of social identities, belonging, othering, and leadership to youth organizations. With the overall concepts studied, the link among social identities, such as between Appalachian and LGBTQ+ identities, provides insight into how individuals who identify with these social identities may perceive their interactions with adults and peers based on their experiences with youth-serving organizations. Individuals' organizational experiences take shape according to the climate and culture of organizations and depend on how much an organization focuses on positive youth development and on how important skill development and social interaction were for participants.

As discussed, social identity is a psychological construct critical to a person's well-being (Haslam et al., 2021), providing a sense of psychological connection, building trust and support with group members, building self-esteem, feelings of control and agency, and a sense of purpose, direction, and meaning. Community programs work in stabilizing the formation of personal and social identity (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). Social change pushes young people to re-examine themselves, reflect, and find their own place (Crocetti & Rubini, 2017; Dahl et al., 2015). Because the bulk of social identity formation occurs during childhood and adolescence, this concept is crucial to making meaning of young queer people's experiences. Sexual orientation and gender expressions, essential aspects of a young person's individuality (LGBT – Youth, n.d.), are fundamental to developing one's identity. Unfortunately, despite increasing cultural acceptance of inclusivity, LGBTQ+ youth face challenges because of their non-normative sexual orientations or gender expressions, causing psychological and



interpersonal problems (Allen et al., 2012; Wright & Perry, 2006). Exploring identity relevance for LGBTQ+ young people needs more research due to modern sexual-minority young people self-identifying as LGBTQ+ earlier than previous generations (Calzo et al., 2011; Wagaman, 2016b). *Queer* status includes individuals who identify as non-conforming, fluid, and challenging the assumptions of hegemonic sexuality and is a critical parallel to heterosexual normalization (Warner, 1993). To understand the needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ young people, hearing youth voices and concerns is essential (Lavender-Stott et al., 2018). Much like LGBTQ+ populations, rural populations get classified and studied as exclusive communities (Bright, 2018). Those who are rural, particularly gender- and sexual-minority adolescents, are unaccepted and marginalized (Kreiss et al., 2017; Pacey, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth remain underrepresented in Appalachian organizations; therefore, targeting programs for LGBTQ+ identities offering a diverse Central Appalachian culture is needed (O'Doherty et al., 2015; Yu, 2017). Queer identity invisibility requires further examination to change attitudes and conversations about the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Central Appalachia (Garringer, 2017). Most existing research on LGBTQ-identified people in Appalachia focuses on the perspectives of already “out,” and self-identified LGBTQ+ adults (Calzo et al., 2011), whose experiences of identity formation differ from those of their young counterparts (Robertson, 2014). Such research also focuses on urban queer people having different day-to-day experiences from their LGBTQ+ peers in rural areas (Out in the South Initiative, 2015). Tensions among LGBTQ+ and Appalachian identities surface through social and personal experiences with friends, family, and community.

Belonging is the feeling of fitting in with, and mattering to, a group meeting a fundamental psychological human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Individuals have a fundamental need to relate with others for security, care, nutrition, reproduction, and other benefits (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000), particularly with youth. One effect of belonging includes social acceptance in how it builds self-esteem but leaves vulnerabilities to criticism and rejection (Blackhart et al., 2009). Through healthy self-esteem levels, individuals may experience periodic rejection, but prolonged social exclusion can decrease those levels. Loneliness reflects the lack of human emotional connection and an objective experience (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Verhagen et al., 2018). Mellor et al (2008) examined social value and social connection inconsistencies between need for belonging and satisfaction level with significant relationships tied to loneliness and lower life satisfaction. Research findings demonstrate that the need to belong is essential for youth, focusing on how identities correlate with belonging to unpack how interactions shaped feelings and applicability. In Appalachia, historically, negative stereotypes are from those not from the region (Hess et al., 2018). Common “Appalachian” stereotypes include uneducated, rough, and tough mountain hillbilly with thick accents and long drawls. Despite these negative stereotypes, Appalachians feel their community provides them belonging because they can depend on the community and each other (Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, 2012). In youth organizations, belonging occurs through effective engagement (Fredricks et al., 2011) and is a foundation for motivation, vitality, and achievement (Goodenow, 1993). Somers (1999) explored environmental representations linking an individual’s sense of belonging to personal, friend, career, and school experiences throughout their community and organizational interactions. Belongingness forms a “home away from home” feeling in some involvement and engagement (4-H, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, 2005), encouraging youth to *engage*, not just attend. Anderson-Butcher & Conroy (2002) showed there is more to participation than attendance through the effects

constructive participation does to strengthen a sense of belonging and connection to an organization. Research shows when youth connect with an organization, they engage more deeply and draw more social value leading to more feelings of belonging. Several theories show that belonging, commitment, bonding, and attachment with individuals or organizations enhance youth development, therefore, developing the sense of belonging is essential to youth development.

“Othering” is described as a personal, relational discrepancy generating social exclusion and relegation (Jauregui et al., 2020). To recognize othering, Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) described instances when groups or individuals feel different from their communities and families. The othering process builds the “normal” social groups but generates disassociated feelings in those deemed “not normal” (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012; Riggins, 1997). Through oppressive influences barring imagined boundaries from marginalized effects (e.g., exile or disassociation) in social situations, otherness forms (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). Othering in Appalachia spins from long-standing stereotypes and negative portrayals (Billings, Norman, & Ledford 1999; Lewis 1999), such as how others see Appalachians and how they act (Otto, 2002; Straw, 2006): huge hillbilly families, outhouses, log cabins, “shootin’ arns,” “feudin’,” “moonshinin’,” and redneck “hicks.” Scott (2009) emphasized physical traits that “other” include visible illnesses, physical deformities, ragged clothing, dirty faces and hair, bad teeth, and marks of poverty. These negative “othering” representations mainstreamed as real without question (Hall, 2001), hindering progress toward facts. The social impacts take hold when dominant cultures maintain backgrounds not like their own, such as Appalachians, leading to “othering.” Brewer (1979) explored how “othering” in communities through in- and out-groups classifies who is in those in or our groups. Pickering (2001) argued that “othering” leads those who are

“othered” as stuck in an irreversible structure involving social interactions. However, O’Brien (2009) resolved that “othered” groups shifted power dynamics to reclaim their own belonging space. Effects of LGBTQ+ othering stem from a broader worldwide context. Scholars argue that today is a “post-gay” era (Savin-Williams, 2005), where LGBTQ+ identities are more mainstreamed within heterosexual norms (Seidman 2002; Warner 1999). The homonormative turn as a normalization process where LGBTQ+ individuals conduct themselves as “straight” society members shows homonormativity made way for an “ideal queer citizen (Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira, 2008); Valentine, 2007). Most do not relate homosexuality to identity characteristics, they define same-sex attraction without the “gay” label (Savin-Williams, 2005), in order to be “ordinary,” not be an “other,” and to dismiss homophobia (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Jones (2018) found young people express themselves as “normal” by discerning sexual desires from social identities avoiding gay identity stereotypes differing from gender norms.

The importance of youth organizations by Oliver et al. (2006) shared that effective youth programs help develop social competence, community interaction, and life-long learning skills. Community youth involvement has benefits, but little work on community program effectiveness (Petitpas et al., 2004) centered on young people’s psychological well-being and skill development (Bartko & Eccles, 2003). Research also lacks life skill development correlations to community program involvement (Grover, 2004). As scholars note, effective youth programs can provide spaces for healthy identity growth and enhance youth mental health by developing social competence, community interactions, and life-long learning skills (Mahoney et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2006; Granger, 2002; Positive Youth Development, n.d.). As Smischney, Roberts, Gliske, Borden, & Perkins (2018) found, youth ratings of programs – and by implication, queer youth ratings – will impact the social value that queer youth draw from youth-serving organizations.

Smischney et al.'s study suggests supportive relationships' effect on youth outcomes may not be that notable. Supportive peer and adult relationships, task-specific skills, relational skills, and developmentally appropriate limits enable social skills growth factors that promote youth participation and organizational success (Granger, 2002). Evidence shows youth organization participation promotes positive development, even though there is limited research connecting what impacts the decision to participate or not (McGuire et al., 2016). As Akiva (2012) posited, understanding experiences of youth involvement builds a foundation as to why young people choose the organization or program to participate in. Youth organizations provide strong support (Positive Youth Development, n.d.) to explore interests and skills. Youth development workers typically help develop resilience skills to overcome adversity, increase family support, and engage with caring adults and peers. With resilience skills, youth can enhance and cultivate their learned knowledge and apply it later in life. Organizational culture and climate have a defining impact on youth perceptions of their experiences. Organizational culture and climate are perceptions and behaviors through interactions supporting organizational structure and environment, mainly through interpersonal communication and identity (Tsai, 2011). Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) shared that program goals and its atmosphere (environment or influence) depict youth development programs by enhancing adolescent skills and building confidence. Programs produce supportive and empowering environments. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) identified five dimensions of the youth-development program atmosphere: 1. encouraging the development of supportive relationships with adults and peers, 2. empowering youth, 3. communicating positive behavior expectations, 4. providing recognition opportunities, and 5. providing stable, long-lasting services.

Like climate and culture, youth leadership development is a ‘blurred category’ including pre-teens, adolescents, students, and young adults (Gabriel, 2013). Silva (2016) asserted that leadership is not a unique personal quality an individual possesses; it is a process of influence for leaders and followers. Community organizations provide leadership experiences through unique, direct, and observational learning opportunities key to skill development (Bolton, 1991; McCormick, 2001). Opportunities to explore self-identity and skill development equip young people to take on leadership roles (Avolio & Gardner, 2005); however, skills vary by individual and follower needs. The skills learned to show how programming fosters learned knowledge through organizational interactions. Young leaders are more serious about their skill development if they feel they have value within the organization. According to Parkhill et al. (2018), support from adults contributes to a young person’s leadership skill development. Adolescents increase enthusiasm for assuming leadership roles when adults show interest in their leadership abilities (Hancock et al., 2012). Research shows a link between identity development and empowerment, creating leadership potential (Parkhill et al., 2018) – showing community programs provide empowerment to thrive and develop. There is a need to study how young people move from a theoretical leadership understanding to supervised leadership practice in leadership skill development. Kress (2006) shared that youth leadership involves youth in responsible, challenging actions meeting needs through planning and decision-making opportunities. Developing youth leadership builds community value, lessening the disconnect between youth leadership efforts and youth needs (Kress, 2006; McElravy, 2015). Despite its social value, trends in youth leadership development have received only minimal research. The importance of youth leadership characteristics in teaching youth leadership skills encourages group work, management, communication skills, forming civic engagement foundations, and

place-based leadership (Puxley & Chapin 2021). Hailey & Fazio-Brunson's (2020) work on young people's leadership skills shows that youth leadership research is scarce. Hailey & Fazio-Brunson examined young leaders' abilities, leadership behaviors, and youth skills in rural populations through five youth leadership characteristics: linguistic capacity, problem-solving, intelligence, social and emotional skills, and social accountability. In rural youth leadership, the cultivation of leaders is essential for community development, which requires community leadership practices such as teamwork, advocacy, and stewardship (Starkweather, 2018). Many youth organizations provide decision-making opportunities to share ideas about their communities' future. Through organizational programs, studies on leadership development positively impact the community-change process (Etuk et al., 2013). Involving young people in challenging decision-making processes encourages skill development, found abilities, and vision for the future (Stay Project, 2019). Participation in community organizations provides young people with ways to address issues in their hometowns and communities, giving voice to concerns surrounding their future in the local area. Research shows a link between healthy identity formation, empowerment, and leadership potential (Hancock et al., 2012; Parkhill et al., 2018). If queer youth become community leaders, youth-serving organizations must encourage healthy queer identity formation. The future of Appalachia depends on the next generation of leaders (ARC, 2015). Investing in leadership development, and providing resources, help community leaders understand economic opportunities and face challenges to create healthier communities. Appalachia's youth leadership investment provides a vision and community action supporting change in the region (Investing in Appalachia's Future, 2015). Giving young people leadership opportunities enables better decisions, well-being, overcoming challenges and barriers, and brighter futures (Brennan et al., 2007; Stay Project, 2019). Appalachian leaders can

support community viability by identifying youth as essential constituents. Because youth organizations offer their members examples of youth leadership development, they need to understand the importance of youth organizations and their inclusivity policies and practices.

### **Summary of Contextual Framework**

This study focused on Central Appalachia, which consists of West Virginia and Southwest Virginia, Eastern Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, Southeastern Ohio, and Western North Carolina (The Appalachian Region, 2015; Lavender-Stott et al., 2018). I chose to study Central Appalachia through my own personal and professional experiences in the region's youth-serving organizations. Studying rural queer youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to create youth-centered research models accounting for adults' role in constructing rural, queer youth identity and community (Gray, 2009). That there are still prevalent anxieties about LGBTQ+ individuals in rural areas is a concern. Advocacy for rural community concerns must give greater visibility to queer people if it is to realize advancements for rural LGBTQ+ youth.

What is more, there has been a steady decrease in Appalachia's population due to the out-migration of young adults. Without change and inclusivity, rural communities remain in danger of slowly shrinking to the point where there is no effective leadership in decision-making and progressive action. Moreover, the vitality of rural areas, including Central Appalachia, requires leadership, particularly youth leadership, for community survival.

### **Summary of Theoretical Framework**

This study applies a queer theory lens to collecting and analyzing data on the experiences and perceptions of queer people involved in youth-serving organizations in rural Central Appalachia. Queer theory seeks to denaturalize hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, arguing that such norms are culturally and socially constructed phenomena that often have



harmful effects (Nylund, 2007; Rands, 2016, Warner & Shields, 2013, Browne & Nash, 2016). The theory dismantles gender binaries (masculine/feminine) and sexuality binaries (heterosexual/homosexual) and highlights “other” gender performances and sexual identities such as LGBTQ (Rumens et al., 2019; Mikdashi & Puar, 2016; Radi & Perez, 2016). Msibi (2012) shared that queer participants are sexual beings with fluid sexuality depending on space, time, and context; this dissertation utilizes *queer* as an umbrella term throughout keeping true to reported research findings. Comparable to critical social approaches, queer theory is relatively new, the product of the convergence of Foucauldian theories of power and critiques by feminists. The term “queer theory” was first used academically in 1991, *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (De Lauretis, 1991). Many scholars question queer theory’s applicability and usefulness, arguing it lacks standards, models, and methods for examining individuals, groups, or social phenomena. These critiques suggest queer theory is not “a single discourse” or “a propositional program,” with no single meaning or beliefs surrounding it (Rumens et al., 2019). As such, queer theory causes discord within the social sciences as a theoretical underpinning.

In qualitative work, queer theorists argue that humans construct identities through language and discourses, which limit behaviors (Mostenbacher & Stegu, 2013). As such, queer theorists study how language and discourse create, reproduce, and stabilize identities. Queer theory in qualitative research is useful for critical analysis of language and narrative, thereby queering – or de-normalizing – everyday experiences, fixed categories, and identities. O’Malley et al. (2018) posited that queer theory contributes to qualitative work by engaging in a critical analysis of processes of normalization in sexual desires and gendered performances. Queer theory offers qualitative researchers various research methods that deviate from the “normal” theoretical inquiry tenets. Wozolek (2019) argued queer theory is useful in engaging in

qualitative research particularly in marginalized populations as it questions norms, trends, and happenings against fixed perceptions, socially constructed meanings, and unsupported findings. Indeed, queer theory rejects categorical research methods (Graham, 2019), as it questions natural origins and concepts instead of assuming conceptual acceptance and stability. Mayo (2017) argued that queer theory involved how normative power shapes investigations researchers do in destabilizing (queering) fixed categories, challenging the correlation of sexual orientation and gender identity for example. Despite queer theory's qualitative contribution, it is often ignored due to a tendency to use queer theory only when studying openly queer research topics, and a reluctance to cross-examine realistic deficiencies of a heterosexist culture (Sedgwick, 1990).

Evidence shows studying gender and sexual minority individuals increase queer visibility while de-normalizing harmful, dominant gender and sexual norms (Butler, 1990). Queer individuals' expose the fragility of patriarchal heteronormativity. Simply by being themselves, queer people interrupt society's common-sense assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). This study leans heavily on queer theory, joining other queer scholars in efforts to shift dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. Wozolek (2019) argued moving away from queer youth deficit models allows better visibility of young queer people's needs. Because invisibility and heteronormativity of queer people is strong in Central Appalachia, marginalization in their interactions with peers and adults exists. Queer theory is essential to qualitative research on queer youth, raising questions about equity, social practices, and community organizational access.

Utilizing queer theory in youth development builds on queer youth experiences where youth development experts expand research practices and educational approaches challenging normalized identities (Mayo, 2017). These practices and approaches shape thoughts about

ourselves and society to start conversations about self-understandings. Msibi's (2012) work showed that queer learners have negative school experiences because of schools' culture and queer youth's exposure to limiting and discriminatory language and practices. Msibi found that teachers were not intentionally homophobic but "lack[ed] understanding" and information about homosexuality and other queer issues. Furthermore, Msibi posited that queer participants shared that adults often leaned on queer youth to clarify what it means to be gay and how one becomes homosexual.

Some scholars focused on representations of rural queer youth (Schey, 2020); however, many treat this population equally across regions. Others focused on the educator's viewpoints - leaving youth voices out (Blackburn and Thomas, 2019; Hall, Witkemper, Rodgers, Waters, & Smith, 2018; McCollum, 2010; O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010; Page, 2017). There are few examinations of how educational experiences of rural queer youth have compared with less rural peers (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Dahl et al., 2014; Gray, 2009; Hulko, 2015; Yarbrough, 2004). These studies focus on educators' perspectives and build disempowering narratives of LGTBQ+ victimization. Queer rural youth research shows lacking access to support systems in navigating marginalizing schools and communities (Schey, 2020). This limited access is due to geographical isolation and economic resource shortages for queer youth programming. Schey's work challenges adults to give attention to heterogeneity and agency and to constructions of time, space, and queerness in queer-inclusive curricular work with queer youth. In the 2019 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report, Kosciw et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of supportive educators in learning spaces. They found that attitudes about queer people, including religious-based values, shape the efforts toward queer rural youth for queer-inclusive learning environments. Such work occurs in formal classroom settings and

community programs, out-of-school activities, and other youth organizations. As demonstrated in Rosenberg's (2016) *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*, non-formal education systems also shape rural life and ideas about gender and sexuality. Rosenberg draws on queer theory and a Foucauldian theory of biopolitics to challenge scholarly representations of rural family life, questioning assumptions that rural settings are less "normal." He also addressed 4-H's role in reinforcing normative gender roles. Rosenberg notes the traditional family farm's cultural influence on the rural American landscape. Without traditional farming families, rural regions would cease to exist. Rosenberg (2016) argued that 4-H reproduced heteronormativity in rural America and demonstrated how America is binary and less diverse. Rosenberg also examined 4-H's role in establishing stereotypical gender roles. Rosenberg (2016) shared that personality correlated with heterosexual relations and possessing specific characteristics (boys being masculine and girls being feminine) made the individual ready for marital stability and healthy reproduction. 4-H club leaders taught ways to develop happy family relationships while teaching members how to attract the opposite sex. 4-H and Extension played a role in how participating youth viewed themselves, leaving anything outside as not normal.

Many scholars and literary works queer Appalachia or consider Appalachia as "different." In *Appalachian Values*, Loyal Jones (1994) counters negative stereotypes through narratives and photography. Jones argued that most were accepted and respected in their communities, even with regulated acceptance. Jones described Appalachia as a fabricated concept with no true equivalent; hard to define who or what is Appalachian. Appalachia was settled by people seeking a "new way of life" outside the religious and state authorities. Jones showed how Appalachians hold close to family tradition, regional knowledge, and religious conditions. In *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, Vance (2016)

described Appalachian culture as a blend of the values of all Appalachians. Although Appalachia is a blended area, there is no defined culture inside the region. The issue presented in *Hillbilly Elegy* generalizations that all Appalachians are poor, dumb, and socially backward. The book presented problems without research to support claims, but not all Appalachians fit these stereotypes. In *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, Catte (2018) described the region as a “construction”: a concurrently viewed political structure, a broad geographic area, and a place that holds an unusual position in our cultural imagination. Catte provided perspectives on politics, voice, and regional perceptions. The author discovered what Appalachians did not say because the region did not have one social problem not found in other U.S. regions. Catte provided a vision where Appalachians see their own extensive display of life, not despair. Harkins and McCarroll (2019) wrote *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* to refute the narratives non-Appalachians have about the Appalachian region. It included writings beyond *Hillbilly Elegy* in how Appalachians experience their “Appalachianess.” Harkins and McCarroll (2019) conveyed how Appalachia’s misrepresentation willfully disguised Appalachian pride and dignity, providing a space where individuals could be different, disagree, protest, reimagine possibilities, and learn. Harkins and McCarroll inspired hope in reclaiming Appalachia.

### **Summary of Salient Literature**

This section reviewed relevant literature on young people and feelings of belonging and othering, Appalachia as a place, the visibility of queer Appalachians, and the role of religion in Appalachian culture. It focused on studies that showed a strong link between feeling a sense of group belonging and a young person’s mental health when engaging in group interactions. These studies suggest that, to the extent that belonging and not belonging are significant variables in the

complex world of adolescent mental health, youth development professionals must focus on participant needs, emotions, and development in terms of participants feeling like they belong and are not being othered.

Research on belonging and othering in youth showed value to how the following works intertwined. Newman et al. (2007) found that relating to others requires various cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Their study demonstrates that adults need to recognize that youth participation in school and community groups nurtures feelings of group belonging, improving mental health and social well-being in terms of belonging and not being othered. Understanding and fostering social competencies among youth contributes to effective youth participation. LGBTQ+ young people living in rural areas face social isolation and social exclusion because of limited access to other LGBTQ+ individuals and resources (Paceley, 2016). Paceley argued that LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk of health problems than the general youth population. Queer youth need services and opportunities provided by youth-serving organizations to interact socially. If youth feel that they do not belong or are not achieving any goals or outcomes, they may strongly oppose continued participation. Paceley also found that youth development workers must be educated in LGBTQ+ issues to improve program sensitivity and reduce hostility, furthering openness and inclusivity. Akiva et al. (2013) showed the connection between youth programming experiences and contextual engagement factors. They found that increased participation intensity correlated with increased belonging and cognitive engagement, but the duration was negatively associated. Akiva et al. showed an understanding of belongingness and the varied factors affecting youth engagement and participation. Their findings reinforced youth involvement relating to demographics and previous exposure. If youth feel that they do not belong or are not achieving any goals or outcomes, they may strongly oppose continued

participation. Anderson-Butcher & Fink (2005) explored the significance of program attendance, age, and sense of belonging in youth participants. Their study showed how youth development programs consider young people's sense of belonging and understand how they navigate interactions. Anderson-Butcher and Fink found that youth are more at risk as they age. They concluded that skill development and interactions are essential in how young people associate organizational experiences with peer groups and being part of the program. Conversely, De Castro (2004) explored "otherness" as negativity in social relationships and how tension and contradiction get repressed through the "other" affirmation. De Castro determined that otherness happens in youth interactions but resolved it can counteract prejudice and hostility. This understanding is key to how participants guard their interactions with adults and peers and self-manage to belong and not be othered.

According to Soderling (2016), Appalachia, as a place, argued that Appalachian culture is a queer concept to many non-Appalachians. Tensions among Appalachian and queer identity shaped experiences and ideologies about the region's natural environment (Barry, 2021); however, Appalachian queer folks already have a complicated relationship to home, family, and community. Obermiller & Maloney (2016) examined Appalachian culture and found that the lack of understanding builds misconceptions about the region and its people. Their work ties what Appalachians have in common with other regions, but with regional change and increased diversity, more work on Appalachian culture through theoretical practices is needed. Obermiller and Maloney showed that even Appalachian scholars have misconceptions about Appalachian culture; and shared that Appalachian scholars and activists need to emphasize the diverse Appalachian heritage looking toward the future. Terman (2020) addressed how young people navigate place, mobility, and belonging connections to strengthen their relationship with their

own identities. Terman highlighted how social identities intersect with a place and belonging and discussed remaining in Appalachia versus seeking more inclusive communities. Terman found that identity-based social oppression in community sustainability largely comes from leaders not acknowledging or addressing it. Although the foundation of Terman's work centered on mobility, it grounds many of the participant's experiences within their communities. Inscoc (2011) studied how Appalachian individuals engage in inconsistencies of Appalachian culture -- some experiences show a beautiful and rustic environment with healing and therapeutic capabilities, others see pain and unfulfillment. Inscoc provided insight into Appalachian expression and identity limitations as to why some individuals feel the Appalachian culture is constraining, and others find it freeing. Exploring how Appalachia was felt through time and energy as marginalizing and oppressive showed how some felt they belonged as kids but were othered for their clothes or lack of financial resources.

The visibility of queer Appalachians showcases Black & Rhorer's (1995) study, which found common themes in Appalachia like feelings of isolation, the importance of community connection, and personal fears. Aside from their significant addition to queer Appalachian research, there is still little evidence correlating queer identity and Appalachian living -- additionally tying acceptance and visibility in youth populations. Black & Rhorer's study showed a need to understand how queer young people navigate their interactions with other Appalachian youth and adults.

Milam's (2010) work focused on early Central Appalachian queer identity formations, the first historical account of gay life in West Virginia. Milam showed that LGBTQ+ life is more inclusive than Appalachian and mainstream American culture. The author argued that West Virginian and Appalachian cultures shape the lives of gay individuals. Milam's research showed



that gay identity awareness founded an Appalachian gay community within the mountains. Baker (2011) argued that rural queer visibility politics involve weighing queerness concepts and localness through rural queer subjectivity and exposed the hegemonic social construction through urban implications. Baker shared how some rural space is trivial and hostile toward queerness and how modern visibility politics get structured through urban lenses. Baker's study highlights the importance of queer rurality, rural identity, and visibility politics around social acceptance and self-regulation. Ross (2019) showed how queer Appalachians discussed their identities, detailing altruism as a decisive factor in negotiations with their queer identity along with altruistic motivation. Queer Appalachians remain in the region through political motivations and goals of acceptance and inclusion to better their home area. Ross found that many preferred to live and stay in rural Appalachia due to its familiarity and confirmed that queer individuals could succeed there. The Appalachian accent is unique to the region, as a Southern drawl with differences specific to the mountains. Although accents can make a person indigenous, many participants deliberately reduced their accent, visibly diminishing their Appalachian identity to "pass." Due to the lack of scholarly research on queer Appalachians and how place influences intersections of those specific identities, the link connecting this study and Ross's work is ready to be examined.

Aligning with religion in Appalachia, Denham's (2016) work focused on how religious beliefs and faith practices influence values, attitudes, and behaviors. The author discussed the many versions of Christianity in the Appalachian region—including moving worship services, testimonies, altar calls, acts of extreme faith, literal interpretation of the Bible, and baptism by immersion—describing Appalachian Christianity as a living theology. The importance of Denham's study shows that many Appalachian communities, including religious congregations,

influence the lives of those around them in many ways. Lippy (1999) examined the characteristics of religion within Appalachia, including numerous independent churches and small Baptist congregations, and religious traditions such as feet washing, homecomings, and shaped-note hymns as an outermost layer of Appalachian culture. Popular Appalachian religiosity proved many individuals wanting signs of God's presence with faith in the hope of reaching heaven. Appreciation of God's power is to understand its dynamics and extensive presence in the church by knowing that another reality awaits in heaven. The deep traditions that Appalachians hold on to through their faith regulate questions and discern behaviors considered outside the ordinary. Jordan (2015) created a narrative of the queer experience in rural Appalachia and found four main themes: religious atmosphere, family, coming out, and peer networks. Even though some religious atmospheres caused negative emotions, individuals kept relationships with their families, whom they said were why they stayed in their hometowns. Jordan found that religious involvement is a positive factor for youth; however, many young people in the LGBTQ+ community experience trauma and victimization from members of their church communities.

The research in this salient review aligns with findings from this dissertation, in that participants described their identities as LGBTQ+ and Appalachians, focusing on the religion—primarily Christianity—and how Appalachia represents a queer region in the United States.

### **Summary of Methodology**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers strive to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. When there is little to no information about a phenomenon, researchers explore participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2015). The desire to learn more about Central Appalachian youth-serving organizational interactions came from

my own questioning of why I simultaneously felt othered and a sense of belonging in my own youth-serving organizations. Aligning with Creswell (2015), I collected data through interviews to understand LGBTQ+ alumni experiences in their organizations. To make meaning of these experiences, I chose a qualitative research design to focus on how participants constructed their lives around their identity, organizational experiences, and youth influences. Qualitative methods allowed me more insight into belonging and being othered in alumni's youth-serving organizations. The population for this study was LGBTQ+-identifying alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Participant recruitment involved targeted public social-media groups, word of mouth, and personal social media posts to Appalachian LGBTQ+ groups. To qualify for this study, individuals must identify as LGBTQ+, have participated in a youth-serving organization (4-H, FFA, Boy Scouts, or Girl Scouts) for at least a year, and spent at least three years (ages 5 to 18) in an identified Central Appalachian county. Convenience sampling helped locate accessible self-identifying Appalachian LGBTQ+ participants (Keyton, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Sampling momentum increased after participants contacted others who qualified and were interested. One drawback was the lack of diversity in the final participant group. Beitin (2012) suggests six to 12 participants to achieve thematic redundancy. Using a semi-structured interview guide with a conversation-like structure (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), sixteen participant interviews covered essential topics and follow-up (Keyton, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). In order to maintain credibility and accuracy, data collection and analysis intertwine using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009). Analysis was informed by queer theory and kept true to critical assumptions by unitizing data to analyze text segments to produce overall themes (Kerwin-Boudreau & Butler-Kisber, 2016). Because analysis took place without preset categories or themes, I turned to open coding during data collection and analysis.

Open coding allowed me to create tentative themes to summarize the shared experiences. Next, I moved to axial coding, comparing the assigned codes. Finally, using hand-written note cards, a coding procedure to aid in discovering recurring data patterns (Suter, 2012), I developed code connections using the emerged themes, compared my note cards, and developed themes for my findings. This study occurred in a paradigm of critical epistemology. The happenings provide a better understanding of the lived interactions and identity experiences of the LGBTQ+ participating alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. Instead of taking their words literally and not applying any critical lens to their shared story, I read deeper into the data using queer theory and multiple analytical lenses.

### **Summary of Key Findings, Conclusions, and Implications**

Below are this dissertation's key findings organized according to research objective, including emergent themes, conclusions, and implications for future practice.

#### **Research Objective #1**

*Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have about their experiences in their youth-serving organization in Central Appalachia.*

This objective focused on understanding the alumni experiences, which varied widely across organizations. Three major themes emerged from this portion of the interviews:

1. The relationships between organizational culture and acceptance dynamics.
2. Queer invisibility and pressure to negotiate heteronormativity.
3. The influence of adult power brokers and the importance of educating educators.

#### ***Organizational Culture and the Dynamics of Acceptance***

Participants discussed how they experienced the culture of their organizations when interacting with their peer groups and with adults in charge. They described how they felt accepted, and at the same time did not belong because of their desires, feelings, and interactions.

They focused on what those experiences meant to them as LGBTQ+ individuals, noting that some had not acknowledged their identity as LGBTQ+ when they were young.

Findings indicated that the culture of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations varied from group to group and across the region. Some participants described the culture of their organizations as “welcoming.” Others recalled a “sense of rigidity” underlying programmatic functions. The culture and atmosphere of youth-serving organizations impacted Central Appalachian LGBTQ+ alumni experiences and their feelings of belonging, or not belonging, to the organizations’ community. This is congruent with Akiva (2012), who argued that understanding youth involvement experiences such as in-the-moment psychological climate perceptions, emotions toward social context, and cognitive engagement—builds knowledge about why young people choose organizations they do or do not participate in.

Each participant was able to find a place in an organization, but many still struggled with how organizations fostered their culture. This paralleled other researchers (Akiva et al., 2013; Anderson-Butcher, 2000; Heath, 1999; Larson, 2000; Youniss, Yates & Su, 1997), who advocated that youth gain more from their participation when a positive connection with a program forms. Many stayed involved within their organizations because they built connections and valued their experiences as youth participants; however, some moved on to other outlets and programs because many felt that the culture of the organization was toxic, was not welcoming and did not foster belonging.

### ***Queer Invisibility and Negotiating Heteronormativity***

Another key finding was that queer people and queerness were almost always invisible in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. The absence of role models, discussions, and

support created confusion and disorientation. The absence of queer people shaped participants' thoughts and behaviors and was often limiting and harmful.

Adults and other youth assumed everyone around them was straight. Such assumptions were not written rules or guidelines but were made clear through interactions and voiced expectations. This sense of othering queer people for being "different" combined with assumptions of heteronormativity limited LGBTQ+ youth from feeling as if they could completely belong in their organizations.

For youth identifying as LGBTQ+, establishing identity is a complicated process, because often they must develop a positive sense of self within heteronormative settings. Participants testified to the power of heteronormativity, to its ubiquitous presence despite the absence of explicit rules or regulations. These youth believed they only had one option: to be straight. Unable to see themselves reflected in the world, queer youth repressed their true selves, in many cases hindering their identity formation.

### ***Power Brokers and the Importance of Educating Educators***

The importance of educating adult educators about queerness surfaced repeatedly during interviews. Participants stressed the power that adults wielded in youth-serving organizations, adults' insensitivity to the realities and needs of LGBTQ+ youth, and outright hostility from some adults, shaped the experiences of youth participants. Adults often utilized their power in ways detrimental to queer youth, but with some important exceptions. For example, many adults ignored the fact that queer issues were evident in their programs and turned a "blind eye" to participants experiencing negative consequences from bullying, physical harm, or other forms of oppression. This finding is like Wagaman (2016a), who found that youth programs seldom

address inequities because each participant felt the inequity identified through bullying, feeling powerless in their interactions, and unwelcoming environments.

Many participants shared how silence on queerness, and especially queer issues, affected their organizational experiences and negated their feelings of belonging. Because the need to belong is key in organizational experiences, ignoring, not discussing LGBTQ+ issues, proves more problematic than mere identity development. This finding supports Leary et al., (2013) found that chronic feelings of not belonging are associated with various negative outcomes, such as low levels of self-esteem, high levels of loneliness, high levels of damaging instability, and high fear of criticism and rejection.

The fact that participants were automatically assumed straight and were not comfortable disclosing themselves to others, demonstrates how the interactions between youth and adults combined with the lack of organizational support, education, and safety related to addressing LGBTQ+ issues, caused feelings of self-shame, internalized homophobia, and fear of being found out. These findings speak to the power of how adults can shape queer youths' experiences and the fear often generated by the inequitable power relationships between adult and youth participants.

### ***RO 1 Conclusions and Implications***

All participants recalled that, even at the best of times, queer people were rendered invisible by assumptions that all participants were straight, by a failure of organizations to recognize individual differences, and by a lack of adult addressing LGBTQ+ issues. If youth-serving organizations are to be spaces where all youth can engage in positive social identity formation, the organizations must take steps to make queerness visible in positive ways. As

Nesmith et al. (1999) and Wagaman (2014) argued, LGBTQ+ youth interactions with other LGBTQ+ individuals and communities are essential to identity development and belongingness.

Heteronormative assumptions, forced conformity, and an environment where youth were not comfortable disclosing themselves to others shows is a demonstration of how othering surfaced in these organizations. Even when there were not written guidelines to shape organizational cultures related to sexual identity, these organizations exhibited the need for more education on queer issues and identities for youth and adults alike.

LGBTQ+ youth participants face issues in their Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations when the organization's power structure fosters an "othering" atmosphere and does not create a sense of belonging. When "othering" is evident, LGBTQ+ youth participants can, at best, find other avenues for participation or, at worst, turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms including self-harm. This aligns with Kosciw et al.'s (2019) work positing that educators in small towns and rural communities can and should cultivate caring and trusting relationships with queer students in both formal classroom settings and in non-formal spaces including community programs, out-of-school activities, and youth organizations. Not dismissing or ignoring queer issues, young queer and non-queer people have a better chance of success within their organizations and in the region.

## **Research Objective #2**

*Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.*

This objective focused on describing the alumni's feelings in their youth-serving organization. Three major themes emerged from this portion of the interviews:

1. Homonegativity and othering queer people.
2. Internalized homophobia.



### 3. The limits of faith.

#### ***Homonegativity, Internalized Homophobia, and Othering Queer People***

Participants recalled feelings of homonegativity in their organizations, families, and the wider community. Repeatedly, they recalled ways they hid themselves from their peers, families, and communities to protect themselves from the widespread homonegativity and othering of queer people. In their experiences, belonging was conditioned upon the performance of normative sexual desires and gender roles. Not only was queerness often met with ridicule and social ostracization, but it was also met with violence such that the prospect of being outed inspired fear and encouraged queer youth to make themselves “digestible” to straight peers and adults.

Many participants shared their fears, elements of shame, and negative feelings in navigating their experiences because of the homonegativity in youth-serving organizations, their families, and their community. Rather than provide a haven from violence, social ridicule, and banishment, youth-serving organizations were themselves often violent spaces for queer participants. Though this study was not focused on participants’ personal lives, the fact that each recalled experiencing homonegativity and fear at home and in the community in addition to the youth-serving organizations, speaks to how these organizations are embedded in the society and social norms of their immediate location. Both in and outside of youth-serving organizations, participants felt pressure to self-regulate by masking, code-switching, and blending to protect themselves from being outed. Participants stressed that fears of ridicule, banishment, and violence caused them to “mask” themselves, an exhausting and confusing activity.

Participants were mindful of the “othering” nature of their organizations and the work that they had to do to keep themselves safe. This aligns with Jones (2018), who found that young

people express themselves as “normal” by differentiating sexual desires from social identities and avoiding gay identity stereotypes. The need to fit in rarely meant that participants were their authentic selves. The discomfort participants described around claims of self-identity and sexual orientation emphasizes a central conflict in youth identity development. This aligns with Coleman-Fountain (2014), who found that youth just want to be “ordinary,” not stand out as an “other”. It is crucial to understand that othering queer individuals and displays of homonegativity affect participants leading to harmful behaviors and social ostracization.

### ***The Limits of Faith***

When speaking of their feelings of belonging or being othered, participants repeatedly stressed the role that Christianity, or “the faith,” played in shaping the organizational culture and experiences, even in secular organizations. Interviewees who identified with religion felt that Christianity was a bond that tied the community together, cultivating feelings of belonging, notably when believers held a more liberal view of Christianity. Interviewees who did not feel religious, struggled to feel a sense of belonging in Christian youth-serving organizations, particularly those organizations that stressed heteronormative ideas about which sexualities and gender performances were acceptable. This was an emotional portion of the interviews because participants tried to retain their religious ties but ended up moving away from the confines of their family’s beliefs and culture.

The topic of faith in all interviews was unsurprising given scholarship on religion’s critical role in Appalachia in maintaining culture, and defining behaviors considered outside the ordinary (Lippy, 1999) and how religion weaves itself into daily life for many in Appalachia, many quoting Bible scriptures to describe events and discuss behaviors (Denham, 2016). Appalachia’s religious, conservative nature was, likewise, a barrier to coming out, resulting in

shame, lack of self-worth, and discord between family members. Hull et al. (2008) argued that organizational involvement can protect young people from experiencing trauma, social isolation, and family tension. Though interviewees participated years ago, many shared that, despite the increased visibility of gay people and culture in society, the culture and programming of their youth-serving organizations had not changed much.

Youth-serving organizations must be mindful of the ways religion shapes their culture and programming to provide all youth with opportunities to grow regardless of individual differences. Participants were “discouraged” from engaging in self-exploration for self-growth because more emphasis was placed on being godly and Christian than on being yourself. This aligns with Jordan’s (2015), work which found that a religious atmosphere was a destructive component of youth environments, causing participants to fear for their safety and worry about coming out to others.

## ***RO 2 Conclusions and Implications***

Overall, participants shared feelings of how limiting being othered felt in their youth-serving organizations and reflected on how each of their organizations claimed to have a belonging culture related to their needs and development. Because of explicit homonegativity and their own internalized homophobia, each participant regulated themselves in order to better “fit in” and not disrupt the “norm” within their organizations. This is like Härtel, Cooper, & Ashkanasy (2008), who found that culture impacts interactions and feelings related to belonging or otherness. In toxic cultures, gestures can be taken with uncertainty and doubt (prevalent culture norms) because of the lack of trust leading to toxic emotions such as fear and anxiety. When individuals are new to a culture, they adapt themselves to predominant cultural norms that triggers regulation, leading to dysfunctions and feelings of otherness, not belonging.

Many studies including 4-H (2010, Eccles & Gootman (2002), and Hirsch (2005), posited belongingness forms a “home away from home” feel in extracurricular organizations through involvement and engagement. For many of these participants, home was not always a safe place so fostering a home away from home atmosphere is less than ideal. Many feared that they would be found out in their organizations, and in turn lead to more negativity at home. These feelings were reflected in their own internalized homophobia and in their beliefs of the limitations of faith because many participants focused on the religious nature of their interactions within their organizations that were negative and reinforced the othering of queer identities. It is important to understand that cultivating a culture that promotes homonegativity, self-shame, and marginalization is concerning.

### **Research Objective #3**

*Discuss what influenced the personal development, leadership development, and professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ alumni of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations.*

Participants spoke about influencers that helped shape their personal and professional lives in various roles, focusing on personal development, leadership development, and professional networking. This section maps those influential factors and themes that emerged from their shared experiences.

### ***Personal Development***

The challenges participants faced as queer youth in rural Central Appalachia did eventually contribute to their personal development; fostering friendships, interpersonal skills, empathy for and a desire to include others, strength of character, healthy personal values, a willingness to speak up when needed, and a desire to explore queerness. They shared examples and stories that detailed courage, learning how to be themselves, and seeing the bigger picture in

their organizational experiences. Termans's (2020) work spoke to the burden social identities pose for young people in overcoming adversity and finding belonging in rural areas. Many young Appalachians face a struggle with place and belonging, some wanted to remain in Appalachia, others wanted more inclusive communities outside the region.

### ***Leadership Development***

Participants stressed that, despite the challenges they faced in their youth-serving organizations, their experiences with these organizations developed their leadership skills. Participants shared how they learned to appreciate their own leadership abilities and how they use their learned skills in personal and professional settings. Further, each participant discussed how organizational and regional culture contributed to greater self-awareness and learning more about how people operate. This is compatible with Conner & Strobel (2007), who shared that most structured leadership programs foster young people's positive qualities like emotional intelligence, self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-confidence, which can help them navigate personal and association challenges.

These young people received leadership opportunities via their youth-serving organizations that built skills that enabled them as young adults to make better decisions about their lives and well-being, everyday challenges and barriers, and futures. This is also congruent with several research studies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bolton, 1991; McCormick, 2001), that shared community organizations provide a means of developing leadership skills key to youth development.

### ***Professional Networking***

Participants shared how their organizational experiences have led to learning about professional perceptions, the downfalls of some opportunities, and how maintaining their

Appalachian accent has been a defining part of preserving their identities. Reflecting on how organizations failed to connect interactions to future professional opportunities, some participants related how their small communities hindered their networking abilities outside of Appalachia. Because others were involved on a larger scale in their organizations, they were able to find the ways to network and build rapport inside their community and beyond. This coincides with Terman's (2020) work that made meaning of how young people make connections through social identities, place, mobility, and belonging despite the limiting factors of being queer, being Appalachian, and their willingness to leave the region.

### ***RO 3 Conclusions and Implications***

Central Appalachian queer youth – past, present, and future – are resilient and can tackle obstacles, adversity, and hardships. These participants modeled this resiliency. Despite their negative experiences, most participants reflected positively on their interactions within their organizations, suggesting that youth-serving organizations have an important role to play in the lives of all youth, straight and queer alike. This is similar to Schey's (2020) work that examined queer youth voice and agency – using queer theories - to relate how time and space influence cultural constructions of “be(com)ing” an individual in rural youth organizations. Schey described how rural queer youth are not solely victims but are able to thrive through oppression. And that was clear in this study as well.

Care and trust are fundamental to learning, especially for queer rural youth in their processes of “be(com)ing” themselves. Many participants found confidence in themselves, through these experiences, to be open-minded, and better at self-understanding, setting them apart from their less-positive peers. Their desire to be more than what they had experienced – good and bad - showed how their resiliency laid personal and professional paths to success.

Another takeaway is that these organizations are valuable despite their flaws, so they must change to be more inclusive of queer youth.

Participants struggled with healthy identity formation but were nonetheless able to take advantage of the social values offered by youth-serving organizations, and in their view, their struggles made them more compassionate, open-minded, and critical people. Having gained appreciation for leadership abilities, navigating their professional paths, and refocusing how they viewed networking opportunities, participants developed skills to be successful in their lives despite the “othering” in their organizations. These queer youth used their experiences to build the successful careers and job paths they hold today. However, given participants’ circumstances, the fact that they were able to be successful and stay within their career paths is remarkable. Although some individuals moved out of the region to succeed, there is still a strong tie to their Appalachian roots and LGBTQ+ identity.

Findings show that, despite long-standing efforts to build youth experiences, youth-serving organizations still overlook that not all young people are the same. Together, these findings attest to the critical role that youth-serving organizations play in the lives of rural Central Appalachian youth, and they attest to the work that such organizations must do to ensure that they are safe spaces for queer youth. They also draw attention to the critical role of youth-serving organizations in countering homonegativity. These findings demonstrate that now is the time to realize this change.

### **Recommendations**

Despite the challenges they faced, queer youth could carve out space for personal and professional growth. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the challenges queer youth face while not becoming victims. These organizations made significant positive contributions to the lives of

queer youth. These organizational experiences shaped the personal growth, leadership development, and professional opportunities of queer participants, speaking volumes about their tenacity, resilience, and grit. This dissertation's findings speak to the power of social norms, and how they shape organizational cultures, and point to a need for more education on queer issues and identities for youth and adults alike. There is a need to consider why professionals still claim that LGBTQ+ participants are not present in their organizations or programs today.

### ***Suggestions for Practice***

1. Given the lack of understanding and knowledge of queer people and issues in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations, there is a pressing need to train and provide engagement strategies for youth development professionals in LGBTQ+ matters. As Croteau et al. (2008) recommended, professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth populations should complete competency training in social issues, cultural perspectives, and queer literature to address the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and understand LGBTQ+ issues. While Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations do not identify queer youth as their target audience, they will inevitably serve a minority of queer youth who require greater adult awareness and acceptance of queerness to develop healthy social identities.
2. By employing adults who identify as LGBTQ+ and allowing participants to explore their identities through organizational components and not dismissing queer issues, young queer people have a better chance at success within their organizations and region. This also gives participants the courage to be themselves and relate to someone who identifies similarly to their own identity. This challenges researchers and educators to pay attention



to rural queer youth heterogeneity and agency through constructions of time, space, and queerness to build queer-inclusive curricular work.

3. Organizations should embrace the concept of belonging, and they should examine their policies and practices to create more inclusive climates for marginalized youth. As discussed, youth involvement in community organizations benefits youth and the community.
4. The purpose of many community decisions focus on youth and the needs they have, but rarely hear their thoughts, concerns, or remarks. Appalachian leaders can focus on supporting community viability by identifying youth as essential constituents. This supports Stay Project's (2019) work where involving young people in challenging decision-making processes encourages skill development, found abilities, and vision. Through this skill development, it is important to understand that youth have voices.

### **Further Research Suggestions**

Because available resources and time constraints limited this study, various other factors and topics emerged from discussions that guide further research suggestions. The following are suggestions from this study:

1. Examining Appalachian families' socioeconomic status could reveal connections between youth's class positionality and youth participation and program choice. Understanding the family makeup and background could show how youth populations' connections fit their basic needs and skill development better within the region they live in or aspire to move to in the future.
2. However, little research exists on the effectiveness of community programs (Petitpas et al., 2004) regarding the cultivation of young people's psychological well-being and skill

development (Bartko & Eccles, 2003). We know that the more youth feel they belong to a group, the more they participate. Moreover, because organizational involvement is measured only by participation, the value in community programming encompassing youth needs further examination. This study did not make conclusions about family matters; however, the family was a topic of apprehension and trauma, and fear about being “outed” to their family prevailed in many participant interviews. Suggested research surrounding family dynamics and child nurturing could explain why many felt they could not come out or be themselves in their youth-serving organizations.

3. Because Appalachia’s demographics are predominately white, racism is not a topic of interest in many organizations. For example, many participants who now live outside of Appalachia shared a perceived issue among race and gender roles “back home.” Because racism is still very prevalent today, understanding diversity and inclusion around race and gender could open doors to more inclusive practices in Appalachian youth organizations.
4. Mental health struggles, particularly in young Appalachian populations, surfaced through this study. The ties to alcohol abuse, suicide, and drug-related deaths relating to belonging and being othered could provide insight into youth's social abilities and interactions in organizations and communities.
5. The brain drain of individuals from rural areas to more urbanized ones is a growing concern among Appalachian communities. The issue is that most generalize rural struggles to urban comparisons, which skews the desires and goals of rural Appalachian youth. More focused research on a tie between why brain drain occurs and the effects of being othered in the region is needed.

6. Appalachia, the region overall, is a topic needing more exploration. The hindrances of geography, cultural variance, and economic limitations in this region could explain why youth populations turn to more destructive behaviors and do not seek other interaction outlets. Connecting the pros and cons of the place of Appalachia is crucial in understanding the region.
7. Suggested topics encompassing bullying, particularly in Central Appalachia, can provide a broader scope for how schools, community programs, and youth-serving organizations address issues of belonging and othering. Understanding the effects bullying and non-allyship have in youth's lives can connect several personal needs such as belongingness and inclusivity, wanting to fit in and belong in their peer groups and communities, and life goals of attending college or working careers they plan for in their future.
8. The inclusivity through lived experiences, particularly within leadership roles, to empower individuals to be a voice in building and sustaining community programs enacting norms of belonging and non-othering. Examine how alumni, who are able and comfortable, can enact change within their own organizations to foster more inclusive environments and belonging policies.
9. Build upon how tokenism and perfectionism produce anxiety and fear within organizations, particularly within youth audiences. The effects of tokenism provide opportunities to tear down comfort levels and acceptance feelings to build self-shame and lack of self-worth.
10. Compare how youth engagement is affected by family ties and family legacy in school and community-based programs. Deeper understanding to why youth participants choose to stay involved or choose to leave their organization related to family influence.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Study Recruitment Flyer

**Central Appalachian  
Counties by State**

**KENTUCKY**

Adair, Bath, Bell, Boyd, Breathitt, Carter, Casey, Clark, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Edmonson, Elliott, Estill, Fleming, Floyd, Garrard, Green, Greenup, Harlan, Hart, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lawrence, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Lewis, Lincoln, McCreary, Madison, Maguffin, Martin, Menifee, Metcalfe, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Nicholas, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Powell, Pulaski, Robertson, Rockcastle, Rowan, Russell, Wayne, Whitley, & Wolfe

**NORTH CAROLINA**

Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Davis, Forsyth, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Stokes, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yadkin, & Yancey

**OHIO**

Adams, Athens, Brown, Clermont, Gallia, Highland, Hocking, Jackson, Lawrence, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Noble, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Vinton, & Washington

**TENNESSEE**

Anderson, Bledsoe, Blount, Bradley, Campbell, Cannon, Carter, Claiborne, Clay, Cocke, Coffee, Cumberland, De Kalb, Fentress, Franklin, Grainger, Greene, Grundy, Hamblen, Hamilton, Hancock, Hawkins, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Knox, Lawrence, Lewis, Loudon, McMinn, Macon, Marion, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Overton, Pickett, Polk, Putnam, Rhea, Roane, Scott, Sequatchie, Sevier, Smith, Sullivan, Unicoi, Union, Van Buren, Warren, Washington, & White

**VIRGINIA**

Alleghany (Clifton Forge & Covington), Bath, Bland, Botetourt, Buchanan, Carroll (Galax), Craig, Dickenson, Floyd, Giles, Grayson, Henry (Martinsville), Highland, Lee, Montgomery (Radford), Patrick, Pulaski, Rockbridge (Buena Vista & Lexington), Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington (Bristol), Wise (Norton), & Wythe

**WEST VIRGINIA**

Barbour, Berkeley, Boone, Braxton, Cabell, Calhoun, Clay, Doddridge, Fayette, Gilmer, Grant, Greenbrier, Hampshire, Hardy, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Kanawha, Lewis, Lincoln, Logan, McDowell, Marion, Mason, Mercer, Mineral, Mingo, Monongalia, Monroe, Morgan, Nicholas, Pendleton, Pleasants, Pocahontas, Preston, Putnam, Raleigh, Randolph, Ritchie, Roane, Summers, Taylor, Tucker, Tyler, Upshur, Wayne, Webster, Wetzel, Wirt, Wood, & Wyoming

# Central Appalachian LGBTQ+ Perspectives



**We are looking for LGBTQ+ individuals to participate in a research study exploring the culture and climate of youth organizations in Central Appalachian areas.**

**Criteria that you must meet in order to participate:**

- 1. Spent a majority (5+ yrs) of your formative years (5yo-18yo) in at least one of the counties identified as "Central Appalachian."**
- 2. Participated in at least one youth serving organization.**

**Participants will interview with the principal researcher face-to-face, virtually, or via phone for approximately one hour. Interviews will be recorded for data collection purposes.**

**If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have questions concerning the information you have read here, please email, call or text Daniel P. Collins, Doctoral Candidate at NC State University at [ncsudrdpcollins@gmail.com](mailto:ncsudrdpcollins@gmail.com) or 276-477-4221.**

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

Initial Interview Protocol approved through IRB:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Describe your involvement in youth organizations growing up.
3. How do you feel the LGBTQ+ identities were perceived in your organization?
  - a. How did that perception influence your interactions in your organization?
4. Describe the culture of your youth organization.
  - a. Open minded or open to change?
5. What ways did you feel you were able to be yourself within your organization?
6. What ways did you feel you were limited in being yourself in your organization?
7. How did your identity change within your interactions in your organization?
  - a. How about your interactions with peers or friends?
  - b. How about your interaction with volunteers or adults?
  - c. How about your interactions with paid staff or assistants?
8. Tell me some feelings you have about how your life was shaped from your interactions in your organization.
  - a. Personal Development
  - b. Leadership development
  - c. Professional networking
9. As an LGBTQ+ person, what do you feel can be done differently to better the culture around LGBTQ+ member in your organization?



**10.** Are there any questions or topics that you think we should have covered, but missed in this conversation?

## Appendix C: Email to Prospective Participants

Dear Potential Participant:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study about Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations and the perceptions from an LGBTQ+ alumni member. Enclosed you will find the consent form for this study. I must have this consent form printed, signed, and emailed back to me no later than a week following your interview date. Should you have any questions about the consent form, please let me know as soon as possible. Without the consent information signature, I will not be able to use the data you provided in your interview. Thanks so much for your quick response on this matter!

You will also find the questions enclosed with this email as well. I like holding interviews that feel more like a conversation, because I want to maximize the time we spend together in the interview process. I am providing the questions ahead of time to allow you some time to think about experiences that you had in your given youth-serving organization and to give you some time to reflect on happenings and occurrences during your time as a participant. Please let me know if you have any questions about this interview protocol and I will gladly get you more insight or guidance as needed.

Your Zoom link can be found in your calendar invite on Google. I will also provide the information below for your convenience. Many of you that requested a phone option will be happy to see that there is a call-in option to the Zoom call. This will allow me to record the interview, whether you choose to do video or phone conversations with our time together. If you have any concerns, please let me know and we will work out logistics before the call time. Again, thank you for providing your insight into this study and I am looking forward to talking with you about your respective experiences in your organization. Respectfully,

Daniel P. Collins

### ZOOM INFORMATION:

Daniel Collins is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: S. D. Interview (DISS)

Time: Dec 28, 2019 12:30 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://ncsu.zoom.us/j/348142184>

Meeting ID: 348 142 184

One tap mobile

+19292056099,,348142184# US (New York)

+16699006833,,348142184# US (San Jose)

Dial by your location

+1 929 205 6099 US (New York)

+1 669 900 6833 US (San Jose)

Meeting ID: 348 142 184

Find your local number: <https://ncsu.zoom.us/j/91234567890>

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Daniel P. Collins  
Agricultural & Human Sciences  
Graduate Assistant & Doctoral Candidate  
204 Ricks Hall - NC State University  
1 Lampe Dr. or Campus Box 7607  
Raleigh, NC 27695  
Phone: 276-477-4221  
He/Him/His

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Guidance

### Adult Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** *Perspectives of Central Appalachian Youth-Serving Organizations through an LGBTQ Lens (eIRB # 12743)*

**Principal Investigator:** *Daniel P. Collins, dpcollin@ncsu.edu, 276-477-4221*

**Funding Source:** None

**Faculty Point of Contact:** *Dr. Jackie Bruce, jabruce2@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8801*

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#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of alumni experiences of Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations through an LGBTQ+ lens. We will do this through an interview that asks you a series of predetermined questions about those experiences.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because of your identity and experiences in a youth-serving organization in Central Appalachia. You may not want to participate in this research because you do not wish to discuss your experiences.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to understand perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals that live or have lived in Central Appalachia and participated in youth-serving organizations/programs as youth. There is a gap in research literature on LGBTQ+ populations in rural areas particularly in Central Appalachia. We will interview these alumni about their experiences in respective counties of WV, VA, TN, KY, OH, and NC. The hope is that this research will provide opportunities to foster greater inclusion in the Central Appalachian area of the US.

#### **Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**

There will be approximately 16-24 participants in this study.

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study, participate in an interview that is face-to-face or virtual, identify as LGBTQ+, and live or lived at least five or more of your formative years (ages 5-18) in one of the identified Central Appalachian counties of WV, VA, TN, KY, OH, and NC.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not want to be in the study or if you do not meet the above criteria.

Updated 12/12/2019

# NC STATE UNIVERSITY

## Informed Consent for Participation in Research

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Contact Daniel Collins, Primary Researcher via email, text, or phone.
2. Set up a time and location to conduct a voice recorded participant interview.
3. Participate in the voice recorded participant interview either face-to-face, phone, or virtually to share your experiences as an LGBTQ+ alumnus of a Central Appalachian youth-serving organization.
4. Participate in member checking and information clarification following the interview.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is a one-hour interview plus time to review information for clarification and validation of information.

### **Recording and images**

If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to be audio recorded. If you do not agree to be audio recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

### **Risks and benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. The risks to you as a result of this research include having an emotional response to sharing information with the researcher; reliving emotionally charged experiences; sharing information about another person who might have violated organizational policy or the participant code of conduct, or you might be identified if someone sees you doing the interview, if you tell someone you did the interview, or someone might assume you participated in the study if they read the final research report. However, the research team will do all that we can to mitigate these risks. We will be walking you through this form to ensure that you understand what your participation means.

The interview can go as quickly or as slowly as you need it to in order to recount your experience. You will choose a time and space that is safe for you in which to conduct the interview. None of the information you share with us will be attached to your name. We will not use your name or your organization, the names of peers or staff and volunteers that you might share. Any quotes that we use will be attributed to a pseudonym (fake name).

If there is a situation where names and organizations are pertinent to the shared information, you are under no obligation to disclose those specifics or experiences with the researcher.

The direct benefits to your participation in this research is the hope that there will be an active change in how interactions with LGBTQ+ populations are handled in Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations. The indirect benefits are to have more inclusivity in these youth-serving organizations as well as the regional workforce for Central Appalachia.

### **Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. In order to stop your participation, please communicate with the researcher your wish to not continue. You may refuse to answer any of questions at any time, or stop the interview all together, at any time, without any penalty to you. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect to not be contacted in the future about this research and your information will not be included of any final reports of the study.

# NC STATE UNIVERSITY

## Informed Consent for Participation in Research

### **Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management**

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that we have described to you in this form. The information that you share with us will be held in confidence fully allowed by law. Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to us. However, there are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where we may have to share information about you. These are limited to instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How we manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that we protect your personal privacy. Data generated about you in this study will be de-identified.

**De-identified.** De-identified data is information that at one time could directly identify you, but that we have recorded this data so that your identity is separated from the data. We will have a master list with your code and real name that we can use to link to your data. While we might be able to link your identity to your data at earlier stages in the research, when the research concludes, there will be no way your real identity will be linked to the data we publish.

Data that will be shared with others about you will be de-identified because the information that you share is generated from your own personal experiences in your respective organization. No one else had your own unique experiences and sharing your own experience may contribute to how policy and decisions are made in the future around inclusive and diverse populations.

To help maximize the benefits of your participation in this project, by further contributing to social science and our community, your de-identified information will be stored for future research and may be shared with other people without additional consent from you.

### **Compensation**

For your participation in this study, you will receive no compensation as a participant. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will be excluded from the final reports.

### **Emergency medical treatment**

If you are hurt or injured during the study session(s), the researcher will call 911 for necessary care. There is no provision for compensation or free medical care for you if you are injured as a result of this study.

### **What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Daniel P. Collins at [dpcollin@ncsu.edu](mailto:dpcollin@ncsu.edu) or 276-477-4221 or the Faculty Point of Contact: Dr. Jackie Bruce at [jabruce2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jabruce2@ncsu.edu) or 919-515-8801

### **What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) Office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State IRB Office via email at [irb-director@ncsu.edu](mailto:irb-director@ncsu.edu) or via phone at 919- 515-8754.

# NC STATE UNIVERSITY

## Informed Consent for Participation in Research

### Consent To Participate

By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

Participant's Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Peer DeBrief

**To:** *Peer Debrief Committee*

**From:** *Daniel P. Collins*

**Subject:** *Dissertation Research – Update (Nov 15th - Jan 1st)*

**Date:** *February 9, 2020*

### Research Update

The information that follows is to update you about the processes and information that I have done since my exam defense on November 15th. Each bullet point gives a brief overview of the steps that I took during this time period toward my dissertation.

### **Digital Journaling**

- I have been journaling since before my exam defense that details some thoughts of reflection.
- Journal entries are dated chronologically in the outline of the document to access information I will need reflection pieces and when writing chapter four.

### **IRB Process**

- Working with the IRB office was challenging with the amendment to my original IRB I submitted in the past.
- I submitted the protocol 3 times for approval and spoke to Carter in the IRB office before submitting the 3rd revision.
- I received approval for my study on December 16th.

### **Data Management**

- I set up Google Drive folder through my NC State Unity ID to provide folders with access for a transcriptionist when I completed my interviews.
- I accessed Zoom through NC State and read through the information for data storage, meetings, and scheduling.

### **Recruitment**

- My recruitment flyer: [Collins Dissertation Recruitment Flyer](#)
- On December 17th, I prepared my information blurb and the recruitment flyer to be sent out on the To Practice Brotherhood private group on Facebook. I also prepared a post on the Tri Cities PFLAG private group and the Young Appalachian Leaders and Learners (Y'ALL) group.
- Within about 20 minutes, I had five interested in being interviewed for this study. Each of them had questions about what a youth-serving organization was and I responded to give them some details. I cannot believe that I already had 5 interests. I composed this follow up email to be sure they qualified:

*Hi [participant name]!*



*Thanks so much for reaching out! I need to get a few things from you and then we can definitely get you set up for an interview for this study.*

*What are your preferred pronouns and how do you identify yourself other than pronouns?*

*What youth-serving organization(s) did you participate in?*

*What is your preferred method of interview: face-to-face, phone, virtual meeting?*

*When would you be available for an interview (dates and times)?*

*Looking forward to hearing back from you!!*

*Daniel*

- Out of those first 21 contacts before December 30th, there were 13 that qualified.
  - Five never returned correspondence after the initial email.
  - One returned correspondence, thanked me for getting back to them and wished me luck on the study.
  - Two scheduled an interview, but missed the interview and asked to reschedule. Neither of them responded back to attempts to reschedule.
  - The remaining 13 were scheduled after January 1st.

### **Scheduling Interviews**

- I scheduled my first five interviews before December 31st (IH - 12/28, RS - 12/28, NP - 12/29, AT - originally for December 26th, but his work schedule changed and we moved it to 12/29; WB - 12/30).
- Each of my scheduled participants received the information below.
- Each agreed to a virtual meeting, so I sent each the following email with the Collins Dissertation Consent Form and Collins Dissertation Interview Questions attached as well as a Google Calendar invite with the Zoom information included:

*Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study about Central Appalachian youth-serving organizations and the perceptions from an LGBTQ+ alumni member.*

1. *Enclosed you will find the consent form for this study. I must have this consent form printed, signed, and emailed back to me no later than a week following your interview date. Should you have any questions about the consent form, please let me know as soon as possible. Without the consent information signature, I will not be able to use the data you provided in your interview. Thanks so much for your quick response on this matter!*
2. *You will also find the questions enclosed with this email as well. I like holding interviews that feel more like a conversation, because I want to maximize the time we spend together in the interview process. I am providing the questions*

*ahead of time to allow you some time to think about experiences that you had in your given youth-serving organization and to give you some time to reflect on happenings and occurrences during your time as a participant. Please let me know if you have any questions about this interview protocol and I will gladly get you more insight or guidance as needed.*

- 3. Your Zoom link can be found in your calendar invite on Google. I will also provide the information below for your convenience. Many of you that requested a phone option will be happy to see that there is a call in option to the Zoom call. This will allow me to record the interview, whether you choose to do video or phone conversations with our time together. If you have any concerns, please let me know and we will work out logistics before the call time.*

*Again, thank you for providing your insight into this study and I am looking forward to talking with you about your respective experiences in your organization.*

*Respectfully,  
Daniel P. Collins*

## **Initial Common Thematic Trends (1st Five Interview Participants)**

### ***Family Ties***

- IH: I had a complicated relationship with my local 4-H program because my mother was the agent. So that complicates that a little bit, right?
- RS: I just, yeah I don't know, I just had a weird childhood. I had a weird upbringing that wasn't necessarily...and there was also this weird family drama, money component that I grew up around that my parents went through this sort of pseudo divorce, they would be together for like a month and then they'd get separated for a month and then they'd get back other, it was like this constant back and forth, so it was really a tumultuous childhood, so I didn't really have an idyllic upbringing.
- NP: My mom had to drive me to a neighboring town to go to another school's pool, because my school doesn't have a pool. So I would be coming home at 10, 11 at night and I just, I wasn't getting enough sleep. My mom was trying to make friends, but we weren't Christians so we didn't get involved.
- AT: I mean, I did have a really big awful coming out because my family found out in a way that I never imagined them to find out and I never wanted them to find out that way, but I never, I didn't get the whole peaceful coming out, you know, one day I just decided to just let the world know, it was not by my choice by any means.
- WB: So I really valued education from an early age, so did my parents, even though my dad didn't even graduate high school, right? But he knew how much that meant to me

and to my mom so they really, I had a really supportive family. I would say that I'm a family guy.

### ***Religion***

- IH: That family concept. And my household was a very religious one, so was it as accepted? No. But that's based on, again, that familial connection.
- RS: I mean, it was a positive culture [church camp]. I wouldn't say that it was a negative culture. I wouldn't say that they were hammering dogma necessarily, that I was being brainwashed to be a soldier or whatever or brainwashed into...
- NP: There was one thing I went to, it was a summer camp at Montreat College, there was summer camps at churches that we all kind of hated because we weren't Christians, so it just wasn't a good fit.
- AT: I come from a very conservative Christian family and so, you know, that throws a whole 'nother aspect into my life because it's not accepted and it's not something that they look on very lightly and so comparing me now to younger me, I've not been out forever and so I used to have a double life of, you know, you acted straight at home and you acted gay around your friends and you did what you had to do to not let anybody know the true you, but...
- WB: the program itself is gonna cater to the culture of the students and we're deep Appalachian, very southern Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, they're just really religious.

### ***Acceptance***

- IH: But now at a state level and we would go to events and things, it was openly accepted as part of the teen programming at least. I find that 4-H is so segregated based on who's running what program, right, and we're very siloed in that way. So some programs are gonna be more open and accepting while others are going to feel very not open and accepting.
- AT: I had the support system of the other teens and I had you and Sarah Jo and none of y'all ever made me feel like I was different and like I wasn't included, you know? I really had no negative experience with 4-H, I mean, it was completely positive.
- WB: I would say that it started out at Upward Bound, I started getting my feet wet, like I started talking to people who were like me for the first time, like I said, even though I wasn't out, I mean, they knew but they didn't and then when I got to Promise Neighborhood, by that time, I'd come out to my friends, it was me and my friends I'd come out to that were participating heavily in Promise Neighborhood.

### ***Code Switching***

- IH: Like I was able to exist without having to consider things and within the other ones, while I was able to be there, I had to be conscious of the way I presented myself and what I was doing and where I was at and who I was with to ensure, I don't know. I don't think

I was ever not safe, but in my mind, right, like, safety. I was very conscious about how much I expressed myself.

- RS: I don't know who I was. I was all over the place. I was all over the place. I was whoever you needed me to be. I would think it was whoever I needed to be in the moment.
- AT: In FFA, that would be the one that I would say that I completely strayed from my own self identity because there was a majority of the time that I felt like I had to act straight because if I did act myself that I would just be tormented and harassed and, you know, get physical contact.
- WB: it was big switching because I didn't even want to talk about Upward Bound that much when I was in high school just because I didn't want people to really know what was going on or feel like I was, 1) being braggadocious or, 2) just letting them in on what my friends were doing and it was just kind of one of those things where in Upward Bound, I definitely was a different person than when I was in high school, because when I was in high school, I was very much like, yes ma'am, yes sir, like I was the Kentucky boy, just all around, I did my sports, I did my academics and then I was getting out of there, right?

### ***Self Regulation or Unwritten Rules of Visibility***

- IH: Like I regulated myself, but I regulated myself because I understood that the expectation was that in this space, you have to be straight.
- RS: Well, since I was having to worry about concealing my thoughts and what not I was having to create this air of dishonesty with myself and with others and that layer of dishonesty kind of created this, I don't know, maybe this kind of impression that I was maybe shy or something or something or maybe this impression of who I actually am not. And maybe people, I just was perceived differently than who I actually am, I would think, maybe one thing.
- AT: So in a big way, I was in fear most of the time but I think most of the reason why I didn't interact with any of them is because I had enough self respect in myself that I was not going to lower myself to interact with these people that belittled me. I was not gonna give them the satisfaction of interacting with them just so they could call me these names and, you know, if I ignored them, they couldn't say anything to me because if I acted like I didn't exist, then they didn't notice me enough to say anything to me.
- WB: Some of them probably travelled to Union College to do Upward Bound, they're from different backgrounds that were more accepting, there was never any attempt to do anything outwardly, like there was never a written statement or anything that said, "we're queer friendly," right? Like, you never saw a rainbow flag anywhere or anything like that, but on the back end, what I heard from the students who did come out to the coordinators of the program, they were helpful except for instances where they thought they were being helpful but they weren't educated on how to best approach queer students and teenagers, but they would be harmful without knowing it.

### *Welcoming or Belonging*

- IH: So I do think that while I might not have engaged those organizations in the same way, that the adversity and/or lack of connection allowed me to really figure out how to navigate situations that weren't necessarily welcoming. And I think that's an important leadership quality that I still use.
- RS: I don't know what made me feel like I belonged. There was always kind of a sense of... There was kind of always I guess a wanting to belong. That wasn't me whatsoever, but I made myself belong there. Changed who I was.
- AT: It's really just one of those organizations where they do 150% their best to include everybody and make everybody feel the best that they can while they're in the organization.
- WB: And I remember talking to them and, you know, the way that they talked about especially queer people, it just really made me feel welcome, because I wasn't out at the time...

### *Spaces of Existence*

- IH: Like I was able to exist without having to consider things and within the other ones, while I was able to be there, I had to be conscious of the way I presented myself and what I was doing and where I was at and who I was with to ensure, I don't know. I don't think I was ever not safe, but in my mind, right, like, safety.
- AT: I mean, it made it to where I felt like I could truly be myself and be happy because there was nobody there that was going to knock me down, judge me, there was nobody there that was out to get me just because of my sexual orientation. Like, I felt like I could, you know, in a sense of the word, I felt like I could do anything that I wanted to.
- WB: I just wanted a space where I didn't get called the F bomb, right? Well, yeah, I didn't want to get called that, I didn't want to get called gay, I didn't want to get called names or people make fun of me because I wanted to hang out with all the girls and not all the guys, right? That's what I wanted more than anything and that's what I got in Upward Bound.

### *Shame*

- RS: People getting undressed or whatever and I'm like what is wrong, I'm, like, sick, and I would have these like self shame moments and then I'm like having to conceal and having that and then on the other hand, so I'm not necessarily being myself, I don't know. So on one hand, I am being myself because it's not like super present in my mind, but on the other hand, I'm not being myself at all, I'm having to cover it up and I'm learning how to cover it up. I'm in the early stages of learning how to be in the closet, you know?

- WB: I think my mind just went into a couple different directions. Would they tell my parents? Would they somehow impact the way that I interacted in this program, would they, even if they didn't say anything and even if they didn't do anything negative, would it still change the way they looked and thought about me as a person? And would that change how we had class discussions?

### ***Self Realization***

- AT: It was similar if not more beneficial to my self identity because being around so many likeminded individuals, it made me realize that it was okay for me to be gay and that, you know, it was okay for me to be who I was even though, you know, everybody and their mother was telling me that it was not okay.
- WB: I think just talking to people who were queer in the first place, like it really, I was already questioning my identity at that point, like it was very formative, you're going through puberty, a freshman in high school, it's just one of those developmental stages that are really important and I think for me, going through that period and also talking to, like speaking directly with queer students who were out even and were talking about what it was like, I think for me, that kind of did help me sit down with myself and talk about my identity and what really was going on and kind of accept myself in that way.

### ***Geography***

- IH: Then I went to high school in Breathitt County, because we were on the county line. And I went to Jackson City School, my mother was adamant that I attend Jackson City School because it was a better school and Wolfe County High School and it was the same distance from our house.
- NP: And I was in Hendersonville, North Carolina, so it was a little bit maybe more rural than would have been easy for a single mom to get these kids all over the place. We couldn't get as involved as maybe we would have wanted to.
- WB: So yeah, I grew up Owsley County, specifically, really, really poor town. I think in 2010 it was the poorest county in the United States and my parents really pushed me to go to college, but in a really positive way, just 'cause they wanted me to get out of poverty and that's like a cycle, so it's just really rough.

### ***Self Discovery or Identity Exploration***

- NP: Like when I was 14, so the ninth grade, and I started hanging out with my friend who was gay at the Gay/Straight Alliance club and during that time, my identity did change and I started identifying as bisexual.
- AT: In 4-H I feel like my self identity didn't really change at all. I did, you know, I acted more straight when I was a teen counselor for the campers just because of the fact that, you know, A), it wasn't any of their business, and B), it wasn't, my sexuality had nothing to do with their camping experience and so it was not my place to throw it up in their face.

- WB: I felt safe exploring my identity just because, obviously, you can tell the group of queer students when we're hanging around each other and everyone kind of knew, right, but it was one of those things where no one said anything, we weren't bothered, we got to be ourselves and it really was like a big sense of community and we were hanging with the 'backer chewers anyways because they were just there as well.

### ***Orientation Assumptions***

- IH: I understood that the expectation was that in this space, you have to be straight.
- NP: Like, having the gay debate in school is assuming your kids are all straight.
- AT: I felt like it was my responsibility as their teen counselor to, you know, not put my viewpoint on them because even if they themselves were struggling with their self identity, it was not my place to step in and say, "hey, let me help you figure yourself out," you know? If they confided in me, that would be different because I would give them the best advice that I could without trying to step over that fine line but still, at the end of the day, it's not my place.
- WB: I would have never talked about anything queer related. I would have just been in the program, been like, okay, going to college, that's what I'm here to do and I'm not gonna have kind of awakening or anything important like character development, that's not what's gonna happen here so it was a lot of, like I said, we were doing the work ourselves, so there was no intentional effort towards inclusion when I was in Upward Bound. Like, that just wasn't something that happened.

### ***Turning a Blind Eye***

- AT: I was in ag class, if the other guys would pick on me and call me derogatory names, you know, make all kinds of rude comments and gestures, he just turned a blind eye to it. He just let it happen, like he didn't try to stop 'em or nothing because he knew I was and he didn't like it.
- WB: But the thing I want to say about that is, if I had, like we had to get our speeches approved and if I had mentioned anywhere in there about being gay, it would have been like, absolutely not, right?

### ***Fostering Relationships with Adults or Allyship with Adults***

- IH: It created connections with those individuals so my first Y Club advisor, before she left, is a good friend of mine, and I still refer to her as my aunt Beth, in that adopted kinship kind of concept, so I still have contact with her, and we still, you know, and my second Y Club advisor, after she went on to a different position,
- AT: It was the fact that I respected their beliefs enough to not try to shove my own down their throat and I mean, there were likeminded individuals within the organizations that I could relate to. For example, like when I did 4-H, I don't know if you remember, I think his name was Greg, he was an EMT and he was an adult volunteer for a while. But Greg and me, I confided in Greg when I was a, I believe I was the CIT, I possibly may have

been a camper, but I confided in him and I told him that I was gay and he confided in me and he told me, he said, “I am too and I’m not here to judge you,” he said, “I’m here if you ever need anything,” he said, “you can always come to me if anybody’s messing with you or anything.” So I mean, it was, I did feel like there were individuals that I could share my beliefs with and individuals that I respected enough to not push my beliefs on them.

### ***Distrust with Adults***

- WB: I did not trust adults with my identity whatsoever, so I would never have code-switched for them. Even though I knew that they, and you know, maybe that was irrational because even though I know that behind closed doors, they supported queer students, it was just so beyond terrifying the anxiety that I built up over those years about what it meant to come out to an adult and the power that they had over me and what that could mean that I point blank would have never talked to an adult about my identity at that age.

### ***Safety***

- IH: Yeah, there’s definitely a feeling of acceptance and safety that there wasn’t in the others.
- AT: 4-H was honestly the safest environment that I ever felt that I participated in. The ability to be myself in an environment that makes me comfortable to do so, like, there was no judgment, there was no bias, there was no, you know? It was like I could be exactly what I wanted to be any time that I wanted to be it.
- WB: Okay. I definitely felt more comfortable with the people who ran the show because I knew that, like I knew how they had, even if it was behind closed doors, which it was, I knew how they responded to queer students, so I also knew that that wasn’t something, like, they wouldn’t let anybody, you know, bully my friends or myself for being queer, right? Like, they would protect us. I really felt safe there because of that...

### ***The Way We Speak or Mountain Accent***

- RS: I don’t know if it helped it or not, but it made it so that my accent is a lot less than other people that live in Wytheville. I have a lot less of an accent for some reason. Actually, I don’t know if that’s the military school thing or if that’s the gay thing. I wondered about this for a long time because early on, I started to notice that I would have an effeminate kind of drawl to my voice, like a vocal inflection, and so I would correct that and so one way to correct that would be to fully enunciate all my words and so it’s like something that I started doing, especially at military school I remember, and I’ve been doing it ever since.
- WB: So I grew up in eastern Kentucky, deep Appalachia. Actually, all of my family sounds very much like you, my accent kind of, it’s still there, but it kind of went away after a while since I’ve been in academia, I’m trying my best not to let it die completely.



### ***Visibility***

- WB: And I remember talking to them and, you know, the way that they talked about especially queer people, it just really made me feel welcome, because I wasn't out at the time, I wouldn't be out for another two years, but that was actually the first time I'd ever met another queer person as weird as that is. I mean, I was in the middle of nowhere, in person, and it was one male who identified as gay and one female who identified as lesbian and, you know, she had a girlfriend. It was a big deal, no one talked about it, like the student didn't, right?

### ***Homonegativity or Internalized Homonegativity***

- RS: On the other hand, I was having these feelings and whatnot and I was like, "what the f\*\$# is wrong with me?" And I was noticing myself giving looks and I'm like, oh my God.
- AT: For me, it was more of a, I had absolute petrified fear that my family was going to find out and so I didn't want anybody knowing regardless because I was afraid that they would run back to my parents and tell them and Sarah Jo and my mom are really close and so it was one of those things that if Sarah Jo would have come out and told me, "hey, I know and I don't care," it would have made it easier on me, but I still would have had that fear that she would have, you know, ran to my mom and been like, "hey, do you know Austin's gay?" But of course we both know that Sarah Jo, you know, she's not that kind of person.
- WB: And also, I mean, at my high school, it just wasn't okay to be gay at all so it was one of those things where it was like you're always walking on eggshells, right? Always like, if I do this thing, are people gonna call me gay, what am I wearing, are my shorts too short, what are people gonna say about me being the volleyball manager?

### **Further Action Steps**

- Finalize Chapters 1, 2, and 3.
- Schedule meetings with Dr. McKee, Dr. Orders, and Dr. Hardison-Moody.
- Complete coding for my final transcriptions.
- Begin process of narrowing down codes to identify stronger trends among participants.
- Continue to collect raw data member checks from participants.
- Re-analyze data from transcriptions, field notes, journal, and member checks.
- Begin to write Chapters 4 and 5.

## Appendix F: Code Book

*RO-1: Identify the perceptions LGBTQ+ alumni have of their experiences in youth-serving organizations in Central Appalachia.*

First Level Themes	Second Level	Third Level	Salient Literature	Overall Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture of Sameness</li> <li>● Shock of organizational diversity</li> <li>● Buttoned up culture</li> <li>● Welcoming culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture of the organization</li> <li>● Comfort level in the organization</li> <li>● Welcoming vs Unwelcoming Environments</li> </ul>	<b>Culture of the Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Akiva, 2012</li> <li>● Akiva et al., 2013</li> <li>● Anderson-Butcher, 2000</li> <li>● Heath, 1999</li> <li>● Larson, 2000</li> <li>● Youniss et al., 1997</li> </ul>	<b>Organizational Culture and the Dynamics of Acceptance</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rigidity in practices</li> <li>● Not straying from the standard</li> <li>● Inclusive practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Organizational practices</li> <li>● Standards for interaction</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Space to exist (in the program)</li> <li>● Space to be unique</li> <li>● Space to exist and be comfortable</li> <li>● Space to interact was limited (queer)</li> <li>● Finding my own safe space</li> <li>● Lack of inclusive space (program)</li> <li>● Importance of spaces to exist</li> <li>● No true outlet for creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Spaces of interaction</li> <li>● Allowance of existence in the organization</li> </ul>	<b>Spaces of Acceptance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Verhagen et al., 2018</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of role models/someone to confide in</li> <li>● Lack of seeing others like me</li> <li>● Saw others out and comfortable</li> <li>● Double standard on topic discussions</li> <li>● Lack of labeling</li> <li>● Visibility within the organization</li> <li>● Did not know LGBTQ+ identities existed</li> <li>● Lack of allyship/mentorship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Issues of invisibility related to LGBTQ+</li> <li>● Lack of self-awareness around organizational experiences</li> <li>● No one to confide in about LGBTQ+ identity</li> </ul>	<b>Lack of Visibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Black &amp; Rhorer, 1995</li> <li>● Baker, 2011</li> </ul>	<b>Queer Invisibility and Negotiating Heteronormativity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Being non-existent</li> <li>● Judging a book by its cover</li> <li>● Misconceptions about identity from others</li> <li>● Discouraged to explore my identity</li> <li>● Lack of opportunity</li> <li>● Free to experiment with identities</li> <li>● Assumptions about others based on their actions</li> <li>● An assumption made if I defend someone</li> <li>● Assumed all kids were straight</li> <li>● Expected to be straight</li> <li>● Self-acceptance and struggles of identity</li> <li>● Not fitting the stereotypes around me</li> <li>● Lack of knowledge about identity</li> <li>● Hid my identity due to religious ties</li> <li>● Identity awkwardness</li> <li>● “You’re having issues because you’re gay”</li> <li>● Tokenism</li> <li>● Identity bullying</li> <li>● Assumptions from others about my sexuality</li> <li>● Living stereotypes</li> <li>● Choice as a key term</li> <li>● Living the assumption others had about me</li> <li>● Comparison to a “phase” of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identity expectations</li> <li>● Factors limiting identity exploration</li> <li>● Identity in terms of experiences</li> <li>● Expectations of identity</li> </ul>	<b>Assuming “Straight” Expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Jones, 2018</li> <li>● Barber et al., 2001</li> <li>● Crocetti &amp; Rubini, 2017</li> <li>● Dahl et al., 2015</li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distinction of roles (adults encouraged, peers chastised)</li> <li>• Knowing the parameters of interactions</li> <li>• Being mindful of the impact actions/words adults have</li> <li>• Keeping adults at a distance (power struggle)</li> <li>• Power roles with adults</li> <li>• Being intentional with interactions</li> <li>• Advisor torment</li> </ul>	<p>Adult interactions Mistrust with adults Adults not addressing issues</p>	<b>Guarded Interactions</b>	Nesmith et al., 1999 Wagaman, 2014 Wagaman, 2016a	<b>Power Brokers and the Importance of Educating Educators</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unspoken rules in a circle of trust</li> <li>• Fostered relationships</li> <li>• Support of peers/trust</li> <li>• Intentional involvement, not everyone was interested</li> <li>• Gravitated toward those I felt comfortable with</li> </ul>	<p>Peer relationships Peer interactions Comfort level with peers</p>			

*RO-2: Describe LGBTQ+ alumni's feelings of belonging or being othered in their youth-serving organizations.*

First Level Themes	Second Level	Third Level	Salient Literature	Overall Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling others were being ostracized</li> <li>• Otherness</li> <li>• Realized people were being treated differently/othered</li> <li>• Seeing a difference, but it was ignored</li> <li>• Seeing others that did not fit the organizational norm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Othering realizations</li> </ul>	<b>Realized Homonegativity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pacey, 2016</li> <li>• Holt &amp; Lunstad et al., 2010</li> <li>• Ryff &amp; Keyes, 1995</li> </ul>	<b>Homonegativity and Othering Queer People</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive adults after I came out</li> <li>• Realizing volunteers were not bigots</li> <li>• Conditioned responses to understood roles</li> <li>• Peers angered for me coming out</li> <li>• Lessons learned with adult interactions</li> <li>• Fake interactions to mask myself</li> <li>• Passion behind my interactions and involvement</li> <li>• Felt the need to present differently with peers</li> <li>• Felt I could not be myself until I left the organization</li> <li>• Regulated interactions</li> <li>• Pressure to impress adults</li> <li>• Pressure to fit in with peers</li> <li>• No pressure to fit in</li> <li>• No true effort to be inclusive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer interactions</li> <li>• Adult interactions</li> <li>• Responses from peers and adults</li> <li>• Realizations about adults from a youth perspective</li> <li>• Pressures/efforts from the organization</li> <li>• Peer pressures</li> <li>• Non-inclusive efforts</li> <li>• Adult pressures</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping quiet to not disrupt the heteronormativity</li> <li>• Keeping silent, social expectation to not be different</li> <li>• Power of silence</li> <li>• Being guilty to keep quiet, developing isolationism</li> <li>• Problems with not discussing LGBTQ+ issues</li> <li>• Was not repressed, just not talked about</li> </ul>	<p>Issues of silence Issues of not discussing LGBTQ+ Not being different</p>	<b>Effects of Silence</b>	<p>Leary et al., 2013 Hindes et al., 2008 Hull et al., 2008 Oliver et al., 2006</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of training on queer issues</li> <li>• LGBTQ+ issues were not acknowledged or discussed</li> </ul>	<p>Queer issues in the organization Effects of not discussing queer issues</p>			

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoided LGBTQ+ issues</li> <li>• LGBTQ+ was non-existent/not discussed by adults</li> <li>• Perception that others avoided LGBTQ+ for job security</li> <li>• Turning a blind eye (adults)</li> <li>• Support from the shadows</li> </ul>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness I was being talked about</li> <li>• Self-comfort being open (not talked about)</li> <li>• Lack of self-awareness</li> <li>• Self-repression</li> <li>• Lying to myself</li> <li>• Shame for being different</li> <li>• Shame in God's eyes</li> <li>• Shame in myself</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Internalized homophobia</li> <li>• Doubt</li> <li>• Knowing I was different</li> <li>• Being comfortable with myself</li> <li>• Do I really belong?</li> <li>• Comfort level in org</li> <li>• Being comfortable being open, no true fear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Belonging</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Comfort levels</li> </ul>	<b>Being Mindful</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hartung &amp; Renner, 2014</li> <li>• Holt &amp; Lunstad et al., 2010</li> <li>• Mellor et al., 2008</li> <li>• Piko et al., 2016</li> <li>• Krumer-Nevo &amp; Sidi, 2012</li> <li>• Riggins, 1997</li> </ul>	<b><i>Internalized Homophobia</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt the need to lead a double life out of fear</li> <li>• Will I be called gay? (Homonegativity)</li> <li>• Anxious about being outed</li> <li>• Fear of disappointing others</li> <li>• Fear of rejection</li> <li>• Fear of judgment from others</li> <li>• Fear to be me</li> <li>• Fear of being bullied</li> <li>• Fearing adults/lacking trust</li> <li>• Regulated interactions out of fear</li> <li>• Rationalization to reality</li> <li>• Using the closet as a protective mechanism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fears about what others will do or say</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realizing there were other LGBTQ+ people</li> <li>• Realizing it was ok to be gay</li> <li>• Felt the need to come out</li> <li>• No fear to be different</li> <li>• Never felt I was different</li> <li>• Meeting other queer people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Queer realizations</li> <li>• Importance of queer identities</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditional acceptance</li> <li>• Acceptance vs Tolerance</li> <li>• Acceptance in the environment of the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt the need to present as straight to not cause trouble</li> <li>• Self-doubt/questioning if things were different</li> <li>• Codeswitching and awareness of my own codes</li> <li>• Performing to make life easier</li> <li>• Keeping face and not being myself (walking on eggshells)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management strategies for self-regulation</li> </ul>	<b>Strategies of Self-Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newman et al., 2007</li> <li>• Akiva, 2013</li> <li>• Anderson-Butcher &amp; Fink, 2005</li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compartmentalizing to self regulate</li> <li>• Self-preservation</li> <li>• Felt the need to suppress my own feelings</li> <li>• Blending</li> <li>• Regulated myself to adapt to social norms</li> <li>• Masking</li> </ul>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Switching the script to offset difference (man of God vs. sissy)</li> <li>• Family ties limiting organizational interactions</li> <li>• Family's religious values</li> <li>• Praying the gay away</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious ties to interactions</li> <li>• Family ties with religious values</li> </ul>	<b>Limits of Faith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jordan, 2015</li> <li>• Lippy, 1999</li> </ul>	<i><b>The Limits of Faith</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious ties in the organization</li> <li>• Commonality of faith</li> <li>• God motivated programs/evangelical feel</li> <li>• Undertones of religion in programming</li> <li>• No deviation from what the Bible says</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programming centered around religious values</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on bible verses and scripture</li> <li>• Using religion to regulate behavior</li> <li>• Use scripture to make points in programming</li> <li>• Questioning facts and values being taught</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavior modification through religious ties</li> </ul>			

First Level Themes	Second Level	Third Level	Salient Literature	Overall Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of comfort and welcoming environments</li> <li>• Learned to navigate relationships</li> <li>• Learned to navigate the world as an LGBTQ+ adult</li> <li>• Developing a sense of "other first, self second"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering environments for others</li> </ul>	<b>Relating to Others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive Youth Development, n.d.</li> <li>• Fredricks et al., 2011</li> <li>• Goodenow, 1993</li> <li>• Somers, 1999</li> </ul>	<i><b>Personal Development</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal skills/Strengthening character</li> <li>• Empathy/Compassion for others</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Exploration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills learned</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to relate to other queer individuals</li> <li>• Recognizing the importance of safe spaces</li> <li>• Having a sense of belonging and purpose</li> <li>• Self-reflection about personal gay issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Queer experiences</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining courage and confidence in myself</li> <li>• Learned to be comfortable voicing my opinions</li> <li>• Learned to take the opportunity to speak up and push back</li> <li>• Gave voice to myself and others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courage to be me</li> </ul>	<b>Self Inclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• De Castro, 2004</li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being resilient</li> <li>• Helped me see who I am as a person</li> <li>• Built-up my own self-image</li> <li>• Worked hard to have less guilt and self-conviction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including myself in my own life</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using 4-H experiences as standard for organizations</li> <li>• Self-educating and learning more knowledge</li> <li>• Appreciation for life-long learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bigger picture of personal development</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to speak publicly</li> <li>• Forwarded my abilities to lead</li> <li>• Pushed as a leader, no formal skill development</li> <li>• Saw others and did the opposite, use the skills learned in everyday life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts learned</li> </ul>	<b>Appreciating My Abilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avolio &amp; Gardner, 2005</li> <li>• Bolton, 1991</li> <li>• McCormick, 2001</li> <li>• Kress, 2006</li> <li>• McElravy, 2015</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadened my path to success</li> <li>• Allowed me to see I could be successful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making my own opportunities</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating culture and expectations</li> <li>• Learned to navigate leadership in Appalachian culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture in leadership</li> </ul>	<b>Navigating My Own Leadership Journey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conner &amp; Strobel, 2007</li> <li>• Hancock et al., 2012</li> <li>• Parkhill et al., 2018</li> </ul>	<b>Leadership Development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-regulation</li> <li>• Admitting to myself I was gay</li> <li>• Realizing my double life before I accepted myself</li> <li>• Being true to myself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being self-aware</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The hands that praise you today are around your neck tomorrow”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lessons learned</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early realization about acceptance in leadership</li> <li>• Able to deal with issues related to gender</li> <li>• Power in change and becoming a leader myself</li> <li>• Taught me to step up</li> <li>• Learned that role modeling is key</li> <li>• Recognized the roles and types of leadership</li> <li>• Allowed me to see the abstract ideas of leadership and group accountability</li> <li>• Shifted my thoughts on what leadership looks like (the pyramid vs the roundtable)</li> <li>• Courage to lead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realizations about leadership</li> </ul>	<b>Refocusing the Leadership Lens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brennan et al., 2007</li> <li>• Investing in Appalachia’s Future, 2015</li> <li>• Stay Project, 2019</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opened my eyes to advocacy and influence (being an example)</li> <li>• Showed me caring for others/realty of vulnerability</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for others to lead, allowed me to follow (as a leader)</li> <li>• Able to have better understandings of others</li> <li>• Being aware of my own actions</li> <li>• Able to recognize my own points of privilege</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing others</li> </ul>			

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Appalachian accent perception at work</li> <li>● Learned what professional perceptions are all about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perceptions observed</li> </ul>	<b>Professional Self-Preservation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Garringer, 2017</li> <li>● Obermiller &amp; Maloney, 2016</li> </ul>	<i><b>Professional Opportunities</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Organizations want to set us up for success, but most don't know how</li> <li>● Realized I could not disclose at work</li> <li>● Refusal to compromise myself for professional opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Limiting opportunities</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Building connections for the future</li> <li>● Learned about connecting policy and advocacy</li> <li>● Learned how to build connections not directly related to my career</li> <li>● Interact better with others</li> <li>● Develop meaningful relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Connections</li> </ul>	<b>Shaping My Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Terman, 2020</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developed skills to take charge</li> <li>● Shaped my desire to work with youth</li> <li>● Growth in my awareness of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learned skills</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Realized I was in a closed circle and put at a disadvantage in professional opps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Disadvantages</li> </ul>			