

January 2015

# Experiences of LGBTQ Students Attending a University in Rural, Bible Belt America

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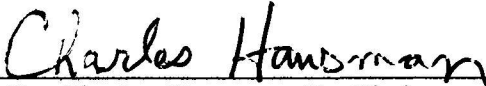
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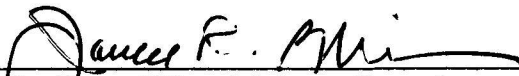
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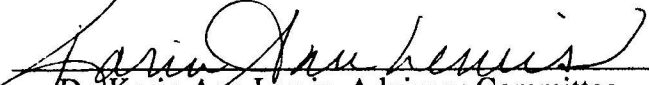
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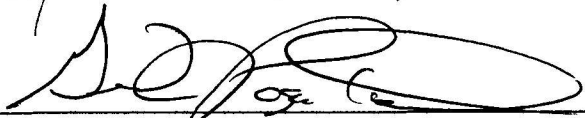
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EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ STUDENTS ATTENDING A  
UNIVERSITY IN RURAL, BIBLE BELT AMERICA

By

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Doctor of Education  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Richmond, Kentucky  
2015

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
December, 2015

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## DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Sue Mitchell, who I will always say is the smartest person I have ever known; for inspiring me to gain knowledge through reading; for tea parties that always included your grand*sons*.

To my husband Jerimy, for being on this journey of life with me; for being strong and confident; for demanding and advocating for equality for our family and our community.

To my son, Hunter, for being affirming of others of regardless of difference; for his generous and loving nature; the fan that kept me cool when I was writing. I love you right side in and inside out.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Deborah West, who was amazing to work with during the dissertation process. She pushed me to pursue excellence in my research and writing that led to a quality product—Thank you for your guidance and unwavering support in all of my academic, professional, and personal endeavors.

I would also like to thank Dr. Charles Hausman, Dr. James Bliss, and Dr. Karin Ann Lewis who also provided great support and encouragement throughout the dissertation process—Thank you for your insightful feedback and hard questions that helped me look at things from different perspectives.

I would like to thank my faculty gatekeeper for my research—Identifying participants for this study would have been difficult, if not impossible, without your connections and rapport with the LGBTQ community on campus. Thank you for being instrumental in the recruitment of participants.

A huge thank you to all the courageous LGBTQ students that agreed to participate in this study—Thank you for sharing *your* stories, this study would not have been possible without you. You are an amazing group of individuals and I am thankful I had the opportunity to meet you.

Thank you to my husband, Jerimy, for his constant support of all my professional and personal goals; for taking care of our family so I could dedicate time to write; for sacrificing to make things happen; for taking the brunt of my frustrations through this process.

## ABSTRACT

The experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students currently attending universities in rural, Bible Belt areas in the United States are unknown. Additionally, there is disconnect noted in the literature between the *purpose* of a postsecondary educational institution and what is *actually* experienced by LGBTQ students. While the college experience should promote personal and academic growth that allows students to reach their full potential, LGBTQ students have historically experienced ill-treatment on campuses which accounts for at least some disconnect noted in the literature. This qualitative phenomenological study offered a group of LGBTQ students the opportunity to tell *their* stories using *their* voices describing what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. Findings from this study provide an understanding for universities to promote a healthy, affirming campus climate and combat any findings of disconnect between a quality experience and what is actually experienced by LGBTQ students. Findings will also allow institutions to address the needs of LGBTQ students that could indeed increase retention and recruitment of LGBTQ students.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Whenever we're afraid, it's because we don't know enough.*

*If we understood enough, we would never be afraid" ~ Nightingale*

I did not realize I was Gay until the summer before my freshman year at college, but during my adolescent years I understood that being Gay was wrong and a sin—it is not clear how I knew, but I knew. As I reflect on my life, I did not conform to socially constructed gender norms; I played the piano, crocheted, dabbled in arts and crafts, and painted. I did not excel at sports—even though I played one season of baseball—but still have no interest in sports to this day.

When I indeed realized I was Gay and began to accept my own identity, I was afraid. I was afraid of the unknown because of what I understood about sin. I was harassed in high school because (I suppose) other students knew I was Gay before I knew. I believe I have blocked out a lot of my negative experiences with others for self-preservation—it was a very confusing time in my life. I do remember having my leather backpack taken by some guys at school, and when I got it back they had scratched “Fag” on it. I was forced to carry my backpack the rest of the day, and remember making up an excuse to my parents for needing a new backpack—I could not tell my parents. I was not yet ready to have such a conversation with them to reveal my identity. I was scared of their reaction, so I kept it to myself because of past experiences with bullies.

I finally told my family and friends that I was gay. My father is a saint who accepts me completely, however, my father's family had major issues with my identity because of their fundamentalist Christian beliefs. It was very painful for me that they wanted nothing to do with me because of who I was born to be. It was difficult to be oppressed by those I loved. My paternal aunt died a few years ago. I cried at her funeral as I mourned the lost time, lost connection, and lost opportunity with her to really know each other. My paternal grandfather also passed away a couple of years ago, and again I grieved for the missed personal connection *because of my identity*. I felt—and still feel—guilty for not being involved with my paternal side of the family, but how could I be when I am not accepted by them? I still feel apologetic for my identity—I say it is *because of my identity* and that I feel *guilty*—as if it my fault.

Today I still brace myself for the worst whenever I reveal my identity to others. I live in fear of the unknown based on my past experiences with the negative reactions of people when they learn I am Gay. I am in fear of the harassment or ill-treatment I will experience or the negative ramifications I will face for being myself. If I knew what to expect, I would not be afraid of others because I would be better prepared to handle their intolerant reactions. I embrace my differences at this point in my life, and I am a stronger, more inclusive individual because of my previous experiences.

In general, most individuals have a fear of the unknown. Earl Nightingale, an American motivational speaker and author of the 1950's once said, "Whenever we're afraid, it's because *we don't know* enough. If we *understood* enough, we would never be afraid" (Joshua-Amadi, 2013, p. 11). The experiences for LGBTQ students at many colleges and universities is *unknown*, which may invoke fear in some students and should

invoke concern in administration of postsecondary educational institutions. As I began my preliminary research review, I learned that there is a gap in the literature in regards to the experiences of LGBTQ students attending universities in the area frequently referred to as *rural, Bible Belt* America. This study sought to alleviate some of the fear of this unknown by allowing the voices of these LGBTQ students to share their stories of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. More voices must be added to the current discussion in the literature to fully understand the experiences of LGBTQ students to alleviate any associated fears.

The pervasiveness of unknowing, for me and others, in an institution of higher education, where most say they embrace diversity and researching is paramount and endless, is frightening and should be confronted with knowledge and understanding. Nelson and Krieger (1997) described disconnect between the purpose of a postsecondary educational institution and what is actually experienced:

Ideally, the college milieu should foster personal growth and development and allow students to explore their potential. However, certain students, especially minorities, are rarely afforded this opportunity. Instead, personal growth is obstructed by violent attacks, disparaging remarks, hypocritical behaviors, and blatant discrimination from the majority; in this case, the heterosexual community. As college student personnel, be it faculty, administrators, or resident assistants, we have an ethical responsibility to search for this ideal environment. (Nelson & Krieger, 1997, p. 79)

The college experience should promote personal and academic growth that allows students to reach their full potential. However, disconnect exists between what students

should be experiencing in college and what they actually experience (Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Worthen, 2011). LGBTQ students historically have had experiences of ill-treatment on campuses that hinders, if not prevents, them from achieving their full academic and personal potential.

Other than their identity as LGBTQ, these students are not unlike their heterosexual peers; however, they face unique challenges such as coming out—revealing themselves as LGBTQ—to family and friends, maintaining self-esteem, coping with being different, coping with harassment, violence and discrimination, and establishing relationships (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). The number of LGBTQ students is not clear, but LGBTQ students exist on *every* campus. Many institutions have historically failed to acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ students, choosing to ignore potentially uncomfortable and possibly charged issues rather than understanding and focusing on what is best for this minority group of students and their college experience (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012; Walters & Hayes, 1998). While there has been occasional attention given toward equality, studies suggest that LGBTQ students are, for the most part, marginalized on campuses and their experiences are unknown (Rankin, 2005). Despite efforts made by proactive colleges and universities, campuses have remained a hostile environment for LGBTQ students where they experience discrimination, harassment and violence.

As a member of the LGBTQ community, I can remember fears that consumed me during my undergraduate and currently as a graduate student and staff member at a university situated in rural, Bible Belt America; fears that persistently haunt me as I write this introduction—exposing myself as a member of the LGBTQ community to establish

why I am interested in this topic places me in a vulnerable position. I am still unsure of the level of acceptance by my university community toward LGBTQ individuals since there has been little, if any, effort to overtly promote the affirmation of this student population—such ideas have been left unsaid. As an undergraduate student, I did not pursue living on campus because of fear. I was afraid of having a heterosexual male roommate; I was scared of community bathrooms; I was fearful of potential harassment; and I was afraid for my safety as a Gay male student. I remember searching and finding a LGBTQ club at my university only to be hesitant to attend for fear of outing myself, which limited my social development within the community. I still do not know how to respond to questions and comments such as “What does your wife do?” or “Your son must get his red hair from your wife.” These questions and comments continue to place me in awkward situations. On one hand, I want to be honest about who I am but I do not want to be negatively impacted by correcting heteronormative comments and questions, as well. From my experience, I know that LGBTQ students want to feel free to share stories about their lives and families just as heterosexual students, without fear of creating conscious or unconscious bias towards themselves. It is important to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students to promote a healthier and affirming—celebrating and supporting—campus climate and to combat the noted disconnect between what a college or university experience should be for them and what they actually experience.



## **In the News**

Reports of harassment, assault, and suicide of LGBTQ college students are common on various campuses throughout the United States. It is unfortunate that these issues exist on every campus where students should be afforded a safe and affirming learning environment. The following examples are incidents that have occurred in recent years:

- A LGBTQ slur was carved into a bench that read “LGBT Alliance” at the University of Texas—Pan American (Ortiz, 2015).
- Tyler Clementi, a Gay student at Rutgers University, committed suicide after discovering his intimate acts with another man were made public online. Tyler jumped from the George Washington Bridge (*Tyler’s Story*, 2015).
- Lauren Meyer was attacked by two men in a parking lot at the University of Wisconsin—Whitewater. The men harassed and struck her, asking if she was a “faggot” (Melloy, 2010).
- The following phrases were written on sidewalks at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania: “Queers live here,” “Gays can’t make kids w/o a petri dish,” “For true equality let the women rape the men,” and ““#fuckherrightinthepussy” (Knight, 2014).
- A Transgender student was assaulted at the State University of New York—Geneseo. Her assailant yelled slurs, threw a drink at her, and punched her (*Transgender College Student Attacked in Possible Hate Crime*, 2014).

- A Berry College student in Mount Berry, Georgia entered his dorm to find bleach had been poured into his dresser drawers with a note that read, “Faggot nigger fuck off.” His car tire was also slashed (*Campus Hate Crime Inspires another Push for LGBT Student Group at GA College*, 2015).

Many of the university student participants included in this dissertation study do not feel safe at their institution. For example, participant Alexis shared, “I’ve had three...*three sexual* assaults on campus since I have been here—one my freshman, sophomore, and junior year.” Participant Liv described her friends fear about being on campus, “They have addressed and voiced to me how they feel uncomfortable walking around here on campus because of comments they get or looks.” Another participant Brad said, “We tend to travel in packs, I guess. Like regularly, if there’s an event, people rarely go to them alone, I guess for that reason [safety].”

### **A Related Field Study**

During my doctoral course of study, I conducted a field study where I became a participant-observer in an online community primarily comprised of LGBTQ individuals. While the majority of participants were LGBTQ individuals, other community members were heterosexual teachers, parents, and allies that participated in the community to provide support. The goal of this online community was to provide forums for LGBTQ individuals to discuss issues and provide support to one another.

This field study provided the opportunity to observe what members of this online community were saying about their experiences in college or at least what they

anticipated those experiences would be. In addition to observing what members were saying about their educational experiences, I made observations about other significant issues that seemed to be of concern related to college. The purpose of *this* study was to get an idea of what the college experiences, anticipated experiences, or related concerns that the LGBTQ community was talking about at that specific moment in time. Issues, concerns, and fear of coming out were mentioned in five of the eight discussion threads related to college. While some members were generally anxious about coming out, others are more fearful of their families finding out or word of their sexual orientation spreading to individuals without their consent.

This field study provided a snapshot of what LGBTQ individuals are talking about related to college experiences, anticipated experiences, or related concerns. Seven topics emerged:

- Coming out
- Fear
- Lack of Support
- Dorm
- Depression
- Violence/bullying/epithets
- Making others feel comfortable

It was remarkable how the findings from this field study mirrored the literature reports about experiences of LGBTQ college students. This study revealed that LGBTQ college students face unique challenges such as coming out to family and friends, maintaining self-esteem, coping with being different and establishing relationships. This study did

not reveal any experiences of actual harassment, violence, oppression, or discrimination, but it did show clear evidence that members are concerned and fearful of a hostile educational environment.

While this field study was brief, it served to be valuable in identifying areas that should be addressed by institutions of postsecondary education across the nation. If incoming students ask the question “Are colleges that bad?” it subsequently should raise concern, especially if students anticipate violence, bullying and epithets. This field study supports the need for further research into the college experiences of LGBTQ students.

### **Problem Statement**

Previously, I had not consciously considered myself as living or going to school in rural, Bible Belt America, but as I began the literature review for this dissertation study, I realized this *is* the context I am in. Rural—geographically isolated areas of the country—are often thought of as less progressive (Brown, Roseman, & Ham, 2003). While rural communities are generally thought of as less progressive than their urban and suburban counterparts, there is a difference between rural and rural, *Bible Belt* America. Bible Belt America is not a geographically defined area on any map; however, it is defined by the pronounced influence of fundamental Christian religions. Fundamental Christian religions influence how these communities view outsiders or those that fail to conform including LGBTQ individuals. The combination of rural and Bible Belt characteristics creates challenging and often hostile environments for LGBTQ individuals living in these areas. Within this region, in recent years, our newspapers reported a Gay

couple was ejected from a public swimming pool; a Lesbian couple reported being beaten due to their sexual orientation; a Lesbian couple (expecting mothers) was expelled from a park. LGBTQ leaders met city officials to negotiate a fairness ordinance to protect this minority group from discrimination; however, city officials refused, stating that the people of the city were not ready for such a progressive ordinance. Without such an ordinance, one can only wonder how many LGBTQ citizens face violence, harassment and discrimination in this area.

During the review of the literature for this study, I found that there is no evidence to date that universities in rural, Bible Belt America have conducted any climate surveys or studies on the experiences of LGBTQ students, which is consistent with the noted gap in the research. I did find instances of events offered through various departments and offices; however, there is no central venue or key individual responsible for coordination of LGBTQ student affairs. Institutions may have policy, programs and services to support and protect LGBTQ students, enabling them to say or feel that they have fulfilled their responsibility, but such policies, programs and services fail to describe the experiences of LGBTQ students; the actual campus climate or experiences of LGBTQ students cannot be evaluated without asking them.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. The majority of studies report on the perspectives and attitudes on heterosexual students, faculty, and staff towards LGBTQ individuals, but little data have been collected directly from this minority group of students. Interviews were conducted with LGBTQ students attending a university in the rural, Bible Belt area of the United States in collecting data to answer the research

question for this study: What is the college experience like for an LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America? Findings from this inquiry provides an understanding for administration to promote a healthy, affirming campus climate and to combat the noted disconnect between what a college or university experience should be and what is actually experienced. This knowledge also allows institutions to address the needs of LGBTQ students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America that can directly impact retention and recruitment of LGBTQ students.

Findings from this study can influence widespread societal change. Ash Beckham, an advocate for LGBTQ equality, travels the country with a message to LGBTQ individuals, “Give voice to your truth.” (Goodin-Smith, 2015). She says, “College campuses are now our battlegrounds. They’re where *we* can make change” (np). Beckham sees college as a catalyst for societal change and if we are able to make positive changes to the experiences of LGBTQ students at the college level, that will be the beginning to systemic societal change. It is my sincere hopes that this study inspires more research and positively impact the postsecondary educational experiences of all LGBTQ students.

## **Overview**

A qualitative phenomenology was best suited for the research question: What is the college experience like for a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America? I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten LGBTQ students

attending such a university. The following eight themes emerged from participant interviews:

- Region
- Campus climate
- Experiences with faculty
- Residence hall experiences
- Support
- LGBTQ visibility
- Resiliency
- LGBTQ student recommendations

Collectively, participants included in this study represented freshman to recent alum between the years 2006-2015 who identified as Gay male, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender male, Transgender female, and Queer female—LGBTQ. These students were given the opportunity to contribute *their* stories using *their* voices. Several of the LGBTQ students interviewed expressed gratitude for the chance to have their voices heard.

## **Conclusion**

While I have emerged stronger because of my life experiences, other Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals have not been as lucky or as resilient. Bobby Griffith, a Gay teen, was raised in a Christian home where being Gay

was a sin and struggled with his identity until he committed suicide in 1983 (Gay Teenage Suicide. n.p.). Bobby had written in his diary at the age of 16:

I can't ever let anyone find out that I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard them. They've said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad boys to hell. It really scares me when they are talking about me. (n.p.)

Other LGBTQ youth, like Bobby, grieve themselves to sleep at night because of their identity and being taught they are doomed to hell by fundamental religious Christians. These youth must be affirmed, supported, and given a voice.

Clint McCance, a Midland school board member in northern Arkansas, urged “queers” and “fags” to commit suicide on his Facebook page:

Seriously, they want me to wear purple because five queers killed themselves. The only way im wearin it for them is if they all commit suicide. I cant believe the people of this world have gotten this stupid. We are honoring the fact that they sinned and killed thereselves because of their sin. REALLY PEOPLE.(Advocate.com, n.p.)

McCance used his position of authority to pass judgement and encourage LGBTQ individuals to kill themselves.

Postsecondary educational institutions are morally and ethically obligated to accommodate for extreme negative experiences of LGBTQ youth, to assure their safety and affirmation. Institutions of education are the authorities society looks to for



knowledge and guidance; they can influence policy and best practices; and they are the educators of our future leaders.

Institutions must understand the experiences of LGBTQ students to adequately communicate where this minority group stands and whether these individuals are in a healthy, affirming community. LGBTQ recruitment and retention rates could soar if institutions can say, with a measure of certainty, that their campus is LGBTQ affirming, providing programs to support LGBTQ individuals, and promotes and enforces LGBTQ discrimination and harassment policy. This study allowed the voices of LGBTQ students to articulate their stories and describe what it is like to attend a university in rural, Bible Belt America. The stories of these students provided their perspective on the campus climate to allow administration, faculty and staff and policy makers to make informed decisions towards affirming this minority group and to overtly profess what it is like to be a LGBTQ student at their respective institutions.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

While reviewing the literature, I discovered that there is a shortage of publications in the academic literature about the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students in postsecondary education, especially in colleges and universities in rural, Bible Belt areas of the United States. Institutions of higher education are charged with the growth and development of students while assisting them to reach their full potential; however, minorities such as LGBTQ students are rarely afforded such opportunities (Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Worthen, 2011). Colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide and maintain a healthy, affirming—celebrating and supporting—and safe learning environment for all students. In this chapter you will find:

- The acronym LGBTQ expanded and defined
- Heteronormativity
- Federal and state laws pertaining to LGBTQ individuals
- Experiences of LGBTQ individuals in rural America
- Influences of Bible Belt areas of the United States
- University policies for LGBTQ issues
- Campus climate
- Experiences of LGBTQ students

## **LGBTQ Defined**

The acronym LGBTQ is commonly used to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community and individuals. LGBTQQIP2SAA is a more inclusive acronym used referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, Two-Spirit, Asexual, and Ally individuals. Each identity in the acronym is defined in this section; however, the acronym LGBTQ is used throughout this study because those were the only identities represented in this study. Although each individual subgroup within this minority group is unique, they are collectively considered a homogeneous group as they are non-heterosexual and are each likely to face oppression, discrimination and harassment on the basis of their identity.

**Lesbian (L).** Females who are exclusively attracted romantically, physically, sexually and/or emotionally to other females identify and are referred to as Lesbian (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Gay (G).** Males who are exclusively attracted romantically, physically, sexually and/or emotionally to other males identify and are referred to as Gay. Gay is also used to refer to the LGBTQ community (the Gay community) as a whole or as a label for any individual that is not heterosexual (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Bisexual (B).** A Bisexual is a person that is attracted romantically, physically, sexually and/or emotionally to males and females. Attraction is not necessarily equal males to females; there may be a preference of one gender over another (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Transgender (T).** Transgender refers to an individual who identifies and lives as a gender other than the anatomical sex at birth. Sexual orientation varies among those that identify as transgender and is not dependent on this identity. Transgender individuals typically seek out medical surgeries and treatment to modify their bodies to align with their gender identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Queer (Q).** The term Queer encompasses a number of sexual identities, orientations and practices including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. The label of Queer may be used by Bisexuals to acknowledge the existence of more than two genders to be attracted to or others that wish to avoid labeling themselves more than simply non-heterosexual. The term Queer was used as a derogatory slur for decades; however, it has since been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community who use it as a term of defiant pride. A large percentage of LGBTQ individuals still consider Queer to be offensive, especially when used by heterosexuals. The term Queer is typically offensive to LGBTQ individuals when used by outsiders (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Questioning (Q).** The term Questioning is used to identify an individual that is in the process of understanding and exploring their gender identity, expression and sexual orientation (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Intersex (I).** Intersex is the identity used by individuals whose sex is difficult to determine as male or female at birth. An Intersex individual has a combination of genitals, internal sex organs, gonads, chromosomes and hormones such that they cannot be categorized as either male or female (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Pansexual (P).** Pansexual is the term used for individuals that are attracted romantically, physically, sexually and/or emotionally to people regardless of gender identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Two-spirit (2S).** Two spirit individuals are native persons who have attributes of both genders and are often thought of as a third gender. Two-spirit individuals were historically honored and revered in their tribes, often involved with mystical rituals as shamans (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Asexual (A).** Asexual is a term for individuals that are not necessarily attracted sexually, but rather are attracted intellectually or emotionally to others (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

**Ally (A).** An ally is a member of the majority group—heterosexual in this case—that uses their privilege and power to support and advocate the LGBTQ community and end oppression (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2012; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2013; Green & Peterson, 2006; UC Davis, 2014).

## **Heteronormativity**

Heteronormativity is the “social and legal preference for heterosexuality” (Dent, 2010, p. 361). Heteronormativity asserts that heterosexuality and complete alignment of one’s biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and roles is the norm (Gray, 2014; Green & Peterson, 2006; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). Social institutions such as family, state, educational and social policies reinforce the belief that there are two distinct and complementary genders (male and female) each filling a natural role in life. Heteronormative practices stigmatize and marginalize LGBTQ individuals socially and politically (Gray, 2014; McCabe, Dragowski, & Rubinson, 2013; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Swank, Frost, & Fahs, 2012).

Heteronormativity contributes to experiences of prejudice, discrimination and stigma of LGBTQ individuals and is linked to heterosexism and homophobia (E. Gray,

2014; Green & Peterson, 2006; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011; Swank et al., 2012). Heterosexism is the systemic process that grants privileges to heterosexuals and oppresses LGBTQ individuals. Heterosexism is typically explained analogous to sexism where there is a preference or privilege given to males over females or racism where one race is held in higher regard than other races. Homophobia is the irrational fear of homosexuals and/or intolerance for any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. Homophobia can be expressed in a variety of ways from physical violence and epithets to practices that privilege heterosexuals as seen in marriage rights and workplace benefits. Efforts and strides towards LGBTQ rights and protections are counterattacked with homophobia and heterosexism. Homophobia and heterosexism exist amongst heterosexual students on campuses across the United States that leads to hostile environments for LGBTQ students.

### **Federal and State Laws**

According to literature, Americans historically have supported limiting basic human rights and protections for LGBTQ individuals which may be the most reviled minority group in the country today (Evans & Broido, 2005; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012; Walters & Hayes, 1998). LGBTQ individuals have been denied equal rights and protections at federal, state and local levels based on their sexual orientation. Nationally, LGBTQ individuals are not considered a protected class which makes them vulnerable to blatant employment and housing discrimination, harassment, assault and hate crimes (Biaggio, Orchard, Larson, Petrino, & Mihara, 2003; Nelson &

Krieger, 1997). Without all-encompassing federal legislation, states are left to decide the status of LGBTQ individuals within their own individual boundaries. Some states—California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin—have enacted statutes ensuring equal protection to LGBTQ individuals in credit, employment, housing, and public accommodations; however, in most areas of the country, LGBT individuals have been denied access to housing, employment, and insurance and benefits (Walters & Hayes, 1998). Of the legislation being proposed and passed, the majority aim at limiting the rights of LGBTQ individuals with those that attempt to afford equal rights and protections to the minority group lead to a backlash and protests (Biaggio et al., 2003). There has historically been a lack of federal and state constitutional protections for LGBTQ individuals which directly influences rights and protections this minority group is afforded at the local—towns and cities—and institutional—colleges and universities—level (Biaggio et al., 2003). The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in June of 2013 (Gutierrez, 2013). Until this time, DOMA denied federal benefits to legally married same-sex couples. Most recently, on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution guarantees the right to same-sex marriage in all 51 states (Liptak, 2015).

## **Rural and LGBTQ**

Between population size, distance from a major city or geographic isolation; there are multiple definitions of rural (Baso, 2013; Kazzyak, 2011). Some definitions are based



solely on population size that range from 2,500 to 50,000 people. U.S. Census and federal statutes use both population size and vicinity of a major city to determine if an area is classified as rural or not. There is no agreement on just how small or how far away from a major city or even how geographically isolated an area must be to be considered rural. Rural is a relative concept and “what constitutes rural depends on when and where rural is being defined, as well as who is doing the defining and for what purpose” (Baso, 2013, p. 570). Defining rural is subjective however, homogeneity in race, class, religion, and education are common characteristics in rural communities. Rural communities are typically described as less affluent, less educated and less racially and ethnically diverse than their suburban and urban counterparts (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009).

Regardless of the characteristics one uses to define rural, solidarity and familiarity are central organizing structures of these communities (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009). Many rural communities are places where everyone knows everybody or at least knows their family history and individuals depend on families for social, emotional and support. A sense of community is forged through getting to know one another through casual social interactions that further strengthen solidarity and familiarity. The strong value placed on solidarity and familiarity leads rural communities to be suspicious of outsiders or of individuals different than the status quo and encourages conformity.

Education and income are often discussed together in the literature related to rural areas that leads one to believe there is a correlation between the two. The poorest counties in America are rural with lower incomes and education often lacking in employment and educational opportunities (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009). Rural areas are dependent on a single industry limiting employment and furthering the

grip of poverty in these areas. Rural people have fewer educational opportunities and many do not even apply to colleges or universities. In 1986, Kentucky was ranked in the lower 20 – 25 percent in the nation in most categories used to measure educational performance and 35 percent of adults had dropped out of school before completing K-12. Rural county schools spend considerably less per student annually compared to urban and suburban schools.

Little, if any, racial or ethnic diversity exists in rural areas of America. Lack of racial and ethnic diversity is common in rural areas, and some areas of Kentucky are some of the least diverse areas in the mid-Southern Atlantic region (Gray, 2009). Even cities in Kentucky with a higher rate of diversity, remain less diverse compared to the national average. Lack of diversity in rural places can be traced back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when ethnic cleansing practices and Sundown laws were used to maintain racial divides. Sundown laws or less formal regulation of integration that threatened violence toward African-Americans remaining in town after dark were historically implemented in small towns at the end of the business day. Rural mobs ran out African-American individuals and other outsiders from small towns. Lack of such diversity leads rural communities to racial and ethnic homogeneity that further enhances the organizing structures of solidarity and familiarity.

Rural areas are described as being less liberal and adhering to more traditional ideals than urban and suburban areas (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009). Religious institutions play an important role in the lives and lifestyle of rural areas. Community and family norms and traditions in rural areas are influenced and defined implicitly, if not explicitly, by teachings of local churches or the echoes of past churches. This

characteristic adds to the solidarity and familiarity noted in rural America and is also the defining characteristic for the Bible Belt which is discussed in a later section.

The characteristics of rural areas have cumulative effects on the experiences of rural LGBTQ individuals. Rural areas are more hostile toward LGBTQ individuals than urban areas (Baso, 2013; Kazyak, 2011; Swank, et al., 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Rural areas typically have more negative attitudes towards sexual minorities than urban and suburban areas. LGBTQ individuals face more discrimination, harassment and assault in rural areas. Rural areas are less likely to have fairness ordinances protecting LGBTQ individuals from housing and employment discrimination and are also not likely to offer domestic partnership rights.

Rural areas lack visible LGBTQ communities and gathering places that are readily available in urban and suburban areas in the form of LGBTQ neighborhoods, community centers, clubs, bookstores, coffee houses, churches, and newspapers (Baso, 2013; Kazyak, 2011; Swank et al., 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Even informal support networks are hindered by the concern of discovery in small towns where everyone knows everybody. This lack of visible support networks leads to a feeling of isolation among rural LGBTQ individuals. Because of the negative attitudes towards sexual minorities, LGBTQ individuals often keep their sexual identities a secret; disclosure even to close family members and friends runs the risk of spreading in close knit communities. Rural LGBTQ individuals often attempt to pass as heterosexual or otherwise conceal their sexual identity which includes avoiding or limiting contact with other LGBTQ individuals. Conforming to rural norms in this way limits social and sexual relationships.

Despite the hostile climate in these areas, some LGBTQ individuals do not want to leave their rural hometowns (Baso, 2013; Kazyak, 2011; Swank et al., 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Some LGBTQ individuals choose to stay in the rural communities they were born and raised in to maintain close relationships with family and friends. Other LGBTQ individuals move into rural areas for the slow pace, simple life and all the benefits of wide open spaces. Although there are reasons LGBTQ individuals choose to stay or move to rural areas, there are barriers such as limited education and poverty to those that want to leave. Many rural LGBTQ individuals lack the education necessary to gain employment in more competitive and higher skilled job markets in urban and suburban areas. They also lack the financial resources to start a life in cities where the cost of living is often higher than communities they are moving from. Among the limited research conducted on the experiences of rural LGBTQ individuals, there are significantly more challenges than opportunities offered to LGBTQ individuals.

### **Bible Belt and LGBTQ**

The term Bible Belt was coined in the mid 1920's by the journalist H.L. Mencken during the time of the *Monkey Trial*, a legal case that decided if Darwin's theory of evolution should be taught in public schools (Barton, 2010). The Bible Belt is not a specific geographic location on a map as the delineation is dynamic and influenced by time (Brunn, Webster, & Archer, 2011). Although the Bible Belt is not found on a legend of any map, researchers have identified bands crossing several states that are considered to be in the Bible Belt. States consistently included in the literature as being

part of the Bible Belt either in part or whole are: Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida (Barton, 2010, 2010; Brunn et al., 2011). The Bible Belt is a diverse area consisting of large cities to small towns, various racial and ethnic groups, and religious affiliations; however, the one identifying characteristic is the dominance of fundamentalist Christian religions (Barton, 2010; Brown et al., 2003; Brunn et al., 2011; Castle, 2011; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010).

Fundamentalist Christian or religious right churches include but are not limited to Baptist, Pentecostal, Holiness, and Church of God that interpret the Bible literally. It is important to note, many churches and religions that identify as Christian do not have the same narrow view that this religious right adheres to (Barton, 2010). Churches and preachers in Bible Belt communities are the self-appointed authorities on all social and moral issues in the Bible Belt (Barton, 2010). Sermons from pulpit carry further than the four walls of any church in the Bible Belt wielding influence on the lives of community members at every turn from playgrounds and schools to work. With the influence and authority of churches and pastors in Bible Belt communities, individuals learn from family members, teachers, and neighbors that homosexuality is wrong and that homosexuals are doomed to hell; interpreting the Bible literally, fundamentalist Christian religions condemn homosexuality as an abomination. Fundamentalist Christian teachings about homosexuality have direct impacts on LGBTQ individuals. Homophobic hate speech, abuse and threats toward LGBTQ individuals elicit fear, depression, and self-esteem issues (Barton, 2010). In order to have a “normal” life in communities under

fundamentalist Christian influence, LGBTQ individuals seek asylum by choosing to pass as heterosexual or otherwise invisible in their daily lives (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010).

It is not only the communities where these churches have influence; they also have wielded influence on public policy (Barton, 2010). Fundamental Christian groups spend billions of dollars towards supporting politicians that will advance conservative Christian ideals into law (Castle, 2011; Brown et al., 2003). Fundamental Christian religions are more likely to oppose state-supported lotteries and have influenced laws and public opinion on moral issues such as abortion. Conservative Christian groups have expensed billions of dollars to support politicians that will support fundamental Christian agendas. Christian leaders, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, have made attempts to influence policy to limit the rights of the LGBTQ community and have received generous contributions to their organizations in the process (Barton, 2010).

### **Postsecondary Education Institutional Policy**

The lack of protection at federal and state levels trickles down to institutions of higher education that reflect the values of the dominant culture (Walters & Hayes, 1998). Less than 20 percent of the more than 4500 colleges and universities in the United States have “sexual orientation” in their nondiscrimination policies (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Of those 20 percent, many send mixed messages to the campus community (Biaggio et al., 2003; Fanucce & Taub, 2009).

A great deal of talk exists about nondiscrimination; policies have been revised to prohibit discrimination; mission statements have been revised to include diversifying

enrollment; institutions seem to be interested in building a diverse community but it seems to be all rhetoric with no action (Biaggio et al., 2003; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Institutions that want an affirming environment for LGBTQ individuals have often failed to do so because they do not “commit to fostering such an environment by publicizing its position, providing training for affirmative behavior, and addressing policy violations” (Biaggio et al., 2003).

Private religious institutions surpass public institutions in publicizing and acting according to institutional policy in regards to homosexuality. For example, one private religious institution in 2001 expelled two male undergraduate students for violating university policy by having sexual contact with another male; they have an explicit position on homosexuality publicly communicated and enforced (Biaggio et al., 2003). The action exhibited in this case is evidence of the commitment to the position and policy of this institution and allows current and potential LGBTQ students to make decisions accordingly.

### **Campus Climate**

Campus environments have been a focus of research for over 50 years (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004). Research describes campus environments related to specific populations including women, ethnic and other minority groups. Campus climates for LGBTQ students are measured by the perceptions and experiences of this minority group of students as well as the general campus attitude towards sexual minorities. A disconnect exists between LGBTQ student’s perceptions and experiences

of the campus climate and other members of the campus community. LGBTQ students report campus climates more negatively than the general student population. Published campus climates for LGBTQ students tell a story of discrimination, harassment and fear. Discrimination and harassment experienced by these students range from epithets to physical abuse based on their sexual identity. Because individual factors and characteristics can influence campus climates, individual studies should be conducted before conclusions can be made about issues related to perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTQ students.

A supportive attitude toward LGBTQ students and issues is measured by knowledge and interest in LGBTQ issues, participation in LGBTQ events and programing and interest and participation in workshops related to LGBTQ (Brown et al., 2004). Student affairs professionals are more supportive than faculty members in regards to LGBTQ issues. Female students are more tolerant and more supportive of sexual minorities than male students; they are more interested in and want to learn more about LGBTQ issues including their history and culture. Female students are also more likely to perceive discrimination and harassment towards LGBTQ students (Brown et al., 2003; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Nelson & Krieger, 1997). Freshman students had significantly more negative attitudes towards LGBTQ students and issues compared to other classes.



## **LGBTQ Student Experience**

The current generation of LGBTQ students is coming out at a younger age than previous generations, college age. LGBTQ children are born into heteronormativity where they learn norms and expectations that lead to fear, shame and isolation because of their sexual identity (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). These feelings can carry over to college where they tend to expect more of the same and there is little information to suggest an alternative reality (Rankin, 2005; Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Often lacking role models, these students face negotiating a new educational environment on their own. While the number of LGBTQ college students is not clear, this minority group of students exist on every campus (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). These students are similar to other college students except that they face unique challenges such as coming out to family and friends, maintaining self-esteem, coping with being different, coping with harassment, violence, oppression, discrimination, and establishing relationships (Rankin, 2005; Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012).

LGBTQ students have historically rated campus climates lower than their heterosexual peers citing campuses as hostile and unwelcoming; they fear for their safety, keep identities secret, experience hostile environments and feel that their institutions are unsupportive (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Fears lead students to have concerns about public displays of affection, assigned-gender residence halls and bathrooms, and how they are responded to by administration, faculty and staff compared to heterosexual students (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998).

Discrimination, harassment and even violence based on sexual identity is a general theme in society today evident in college climates across the United States where LGBTQ students face discrimination, harassment and even violence on a regular basis (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Worthen, 2011). LGBTQ students experience harassment, discrimination and violence more than heterosexual students with derogatory comments being the most common form of harassment (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Rankin, 2005; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Worthen, 2011). Phrases such as, “that’s so gay” or “no homo” is heard by, either directly or in passing, by an estimated 93 percent of LGBTQ youth (Riese, 2013). Out LGBTQ college students are four times more likely to be victimized compared to the general college student and even to LGBTQ students that are not open about their sexual identity (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Despite efforts made by proactive colleges and universities, campuses have remained a hostile environment for LGBTQ students where they have continued to experience discrimination, harassment and violence (Rankin, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that LGBTQ individuals have a lot of murky water to navigate through in the form of mixed messages and various perspectives in every aspect of their lives. LGBTQ individuals are unsure where they stand at federal and state levels in their hometown communities as well as, within their postsecondary educational environment.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative phenomenological study that offered an otherwise overlooked--or even neglected --group of LGBTQ students the opportunity to tell *their* stories using *their* voices to describe what it's like to be an LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. This chapter will discuss the methodology that was used to explore and understand the lived experiences of this minority group of students.

#### **Research Approach**

According to one of Creswell's (1998) rationales for conducting a qualitative study, the researcher is to be an "active learner who can tell the story from the participants view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (p. 18). This study allowed LGBTQ students to paint a vivid portrait of their experiences on a university campus through their own words rather than allowing me to be the expert. Asking these students open-ended questions such as "Tell me what it is like to be an LGBTQ student at a university in rural, Bible Belt America," allowed each participant the freedom to provide detailed accounts of their experiences from their own perspectives and thus providing others a better understanding of their lives. These experiences and perceptions could only be told from LGBTQ students within the specific context of this

study. These students make sense of and attach meaning to their experiences and perceptions based on their individual interpretations. The unique and personal experiences of these students would be lost if approached quantitatively. Additionally, this approach provided rich and specific details about the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ students that allow students, administration, faculty and staff as well as policy makers to make informed decisions towards affirming—celebration and support of—individuals of this minority group and understand what it is like to be a LGBTQ student at their respective institutions.

Qualitative research is intended to understand and interpret specific phenomenon that are fluid and changing interactions of potentially multiple variables (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2009). Qualitative research considers there are multiple realities or truths to be discovered and those realities are constructed by the observer. This research method does not aim to make generalizations from findings; rather it seeks to understand a very specific phenomenon that occurs in a natural setting that may or may not be applied to other situations. Predetermining variables to measure based on the literature and collecting data through surveying or other quantitative methodology would only provide superficial generalizations about LGBTQ students. Even as a LGBTQ student, I cannot know what it is like for the LGBTQ student body at any given institution; I can speak for myself, but I cannot make generalizations as experiences and perceptions are deeply complex considering the individual, their specific context, background and personality. In approaching this study qualitatively, themes emerged as data was collected through the voices of students that quantitative measure could not collect.

## **Phenomenology**

Of the various qualitative research strategies of inquiry, a phenomenological approach was best suited for this study. Creswell (2007a) stated,

The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon. (p. 60)

The phenomenon for this study is what it means to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. The combination of multiple individual stories creates an understanding of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student in this specific context. Understanding the common or shared experiences of this minority group has the potential to inform practices or policies as well as identify areas for further research.

## **Research Question**

The research question was developed based on the phenomenon of what it means to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. The assumption is that the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ students are different from those of their heterosexual peers.

What is the college experience like for a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America ?

## **Interview Questions**

### **Demographic questions.**

1. How long have you been a student at this university?
2. Where is “home”?
3. What year of school? (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)
4. Do you live on or off campus?
5. How do you identify? LGBTQ?
6. Who are you out to? Family, friends, on campus?

### **Grand tour question.**

What is it like to be a LGBTQ student?

### **Follow up questions.**

1. Talk to me about safety on campus for LGBTQ students.
2. Describe your experiences in the residence hall as a LGBTQ student?
3. What is your experience with faculty, staff and administrators?
4. Tell me about your relationships with peers as an LGBTQ student.
5. What is the climate for LGBTQ students on your campus?
6. Are there unique obstacles for each members of the LGBTQ community at this university?
7. Is there anything else you can think of that would help me understand what it is like to be a LGBTQ student on your university campus?

## **Context and Participants**

This study was conducted at a rural regional public institution that serves over 16,000 students annually within a 22 county service region. The institution offers 168 degree programs leading to associate, bachelor, masters' and doctoral degrees in general and liberal arts programs, pre-professional, and professional programs in various fields. This rural institution is located within the Bible Belt, as defined by the predominance of fundamental Christian churches in the area.

I had initially planned to identify participants for interviews through purposeful and snowball sampling; however, participants were ultimately only identified through purposeful sampling. I made contact with a faculty member who had an existing rapport with a number of LGBTQ students to serve as a gatekeeper to the LGBTQ student community. This faculty member emailed invitation letters (see Appendix A) to LGBTQ students they knew. The invitation letter described the study and asked for their participation. Qualifications to participate in this study were:

1. Participants must have attended the postsecondary educational institution where the research is being conducted.
2. Participants must identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer
3. Participants must be 18 years of age or older

13 students contacted me after receiving the invitation letter expressing interest in participating in this study. Three students declined an interview after agreeing to participate, leaving 10 participants. Once these students had consented to participate, the goal was to conduct snowball sampling by asking this initial group to give the invitation

letter to other LGBTQ students they knew. I provided an electronic copy of the invitation letter to each of the initial participants and asked them to pass it along to any LGBTQ student they thought would be willing to participate; however, this method of sampling yielded no additional participants. A consent form was reviewed and signed by each participant (see Appendix B).

Ten eligible participants were interviewed. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. The following participant descriptions are intentionally limited to protect the participants to maintain confidentiality. Collectively, participants represented freshman to recent alum between the years 2006-2015.

- Palmer – Gay male
- Jackson – Gay male
- Rosalind - Lesbian
- Hanna – Gay female
- Liv - Lesbian
- Vicki – Bisexual female
- Cyndi – Queer female
- Brad – Transgender Gay male
- Alexis – Transgender Questioning female
- Mark – Transgender male



## **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of the 10 LGBTQ students which were digitally recorded to be transcribed. Each interview lasted from one to two hours in length and was conducted in a mutually agreed upon *safe space* where the students felt the most comfortable. Interviews were driven by one broad *grand tour question* to elicit a detailed description of experiences and perceptions to understand the phenomenon of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). The grand tour question allowed the participants the freedom to expand on those topics most important to them. Other open-ended follow-up questions were used as necessary to draw more depth and detail from each participant.

Each interview was transcribed from the digital recording using line numbers for reference and was saved under assigned pseudonyms to protect the identity and maintain confidentiality. To further protect participants, digital files were password protected and paper files were placed under lock and key; all files will be destroyed after three years.

## **Data Analysis**

A data analysis spiral was followed in analyzing the interview transcripts (Creswell, 2003). The data analysis of this qualitative study was not a linear process; instead, there were several rounds of analysis with each transcript. Based on this spiral, interview data were coded and analyzed by the following steps:

1. Each transcript was first read to familiarize myself and listen to the voice of the participant.
2. Each transcript was read a second time to highlight significant statements, sentences and words.
3. A Microsoft Word document was created and organized by highlighted sections from each transcript.
4. Direct quotes were copied and pasted from each transcript and organized according to similar topics.
5. The Word document was reviewed to identify patterns and repetitions present, identifying themes as they emerged.
6. A description of the experiences and perceptions of the participants were written using direct quotes from each participant.

## **Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is expected in qualitative research based on the role of the researcher as the filter or conduit for analysis and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003; 2007b; Lichtman, 2009). I am aware of ways in which my own personal experiences as a LGBTQ college student may lead to issues of bias regardless of my intentions to be objective. My own experiences may differ from the experiences of participants of this study based on individual differences including but not limited to age, major, gender, and residence.

I monitored my own subjectivity throughout this study by conducting a subjectivity audit (Peshkin, 1988). I made note of my feelings, both positive and negative. Taking notes was a reminder to be cognizant of subjectivity and to allow me to reflect on those feelings at a later date for future analysis. My dissertation chair was asked to validate the accuracy of the transcript and draft of report, allowing the opportunity to correct any errors made during transcription and/or interpreting the data. Additionally, each participant was offered a copy of their transcript.

### **Summary of Methods**

This section provided a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct this research study. A qualitative phenomenology was best suited for the research question: What is the college experience like for a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America? It is through this approach that the voices of LGBTQ students were heard which gives an authentic understanding of their experiences and perceptions.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This qualitative study offered a group of LGBTQ students the opportunity to tell *their* stories using *their* voices to describe what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. This chapter includes the experiences of this group of LGBTQ students using representative quotes from the participants.

The following eight themes emerged from participant interviews:

- Region
- Campus climate
- Experiences with faculty
- Residence hall experiences
- Support
- LGBTQ visibility
- Resiliency
- LGBTQ student recommendations

Ten students were interviewed. The following participant descriptions are intentionally limited to protect the participants and maintain confidentiality. Collectively, participants represented freshman to recent alum between the years 2006-2015.

- Palmer – Gay male
- Jackson – Gay male
- Rosalind - Lesbian

- Hanna – Gay female
- Liv - Lesbian
- Vicki – Bisexual female
- Cyndi – Queer female
- Brad – Transgender Gay male
- Alexis – Transgender Questioning female
- Mark – Transgender male

Listen to the voices of these LGBTQ students as *they tell their* stories of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America.

## **Region**

The combination of rural and Bible Belt characteristics creates unique and often hostile environments for LGBTQ individuals. Rural, geographically isolated areas of the country, are often thought of as less progressive (Brown et al., 2003). The Bible Belt is not found on a legend of any map; however researchers have identified bands crossing several states that are considered to be in the Bible Belt (Brunn et al., 2011). The one identifying characteristic of the Bible Belt region is the dominance of fundamentalist Christian religions (Barton, 2010; Brown et al., 2003; Brunn et al., 2011; Castle, 2011; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). The participants interviewed for this study shared their perspectives on the area where their institution was located, making references to both rural and religion in their accounts.

**Rural.** Rural areas can be characterized by population size, distance from a major city or geographic isolation; there are multiple definitions of rural (Baso, 2013; Kazyak, 2011). Regardless of the characteristics one uses to define rural, they are described as areas that are less liberal, adhering to more traditional ideals than urban and suburban areas (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009). As such, rural areas are more hostile toward LGBTQ individuals than urban areas (Baso, 2013; Kazyak, 2011; Swank et al., 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Several of the students I spoke with described the region of their institution as rural and confirm that these areas are conservative, traditional and not the most comfortable environments for them as LGBTQ individuals. Many participants referred to the region where their university is located similar to participant Vicki:

I'm from somewhere that is extremely rural... The place I'm from was literally one street long and it wasn't so much a street as it was dirt... There versus here [this university] I think is very different, but the culture is predominately the same, I think. Most people react okay [to LGBTQ], some people not so much. But I think that it's easier to go up to ah like two guys holding hands and say something rude to them than it is to come up to us. I don't know why, it's just something that I've observed, but it's really weird...because no one really says it, but everyone is obviously thinking it... This is a very rural, conservative place and the politics are conservative.

Similar to Vicki, Brad, from an urban area added:

[LGBTQ] is a very taboo topic so nobody talks about it but [the city where I am from] isn't as southern as here. I know we're not really that much more southern

but...down in [another state] it gets pretty bad...[This university] is very similar to the general culture [of the state], I guess. Those sorts of things [LGBTQ issues] nobody talks about because everybody's good Christians here... We're in the middle of a not so progressive state.

Additionally, a student, Rosalind, indicated a difference between on and off campus but agreed with the other two students that her university is not the greatest area to be out—open about one's identity—as a LGBTQ individual. Rosalind explained, “This is a very rural, conservative place and the politics are conservative.... There's this really huge jump between people that are from here and teach here to people that are from other places and come here.”

**Religious.** The students in this study are from a university located within an area of America known as the Bible Belt. Fundamentalist Christian teachings about homosexuality have direct impacts on LGBTQ individuals. Homophobic hate speech, abuse and threats toward LGBTQ individuals elicit fear, depression, and self-esteem issues (Barton, 2010). Some of the students interviewed recognize their institution is in a religious region. The participants note such a religious area poses potential, if not actual, issues for LGBTQ individuals. Rosalind described what she had experienced out in the community:

When I first got here and we moved into the dorm, we did our first run to Walmart. There were three church vans from the Pentecostal Church and ladies with the dresses, you know, the long hair in the buns, the Pentecostal hairdos...the PHD's if you will. I was [thinking], “Okay, this is a fairly small town and there are three different Pentecostal church vans in the Walmart parking lot!” I'm

walking through Walmart by myself like, in just jeans and a t-shirt, getting looks because they were baggy jeans and a t-shirt which, you know, I apparently looked very gay in, I mean...I was very tomboyish, butch...[thinking] “Okay...three vans, all these Pentecostal people cannot fit on all three of these vans. There are more Pentecostals than vans. This is a very religious place.

In addition, Rosalind recalls a time when she was holding hands with her girlfriend, walking through a store in town, when she was given a lecture by a woman, “The old lady stopped me and was like, ‘You girls know what you’re doing is a sin!’” Like Rosalind, Liv also encountered an in-store lecture by a random stranger in this area, “I had gone to Walmart and I looked Gay, I guess...to this older lady and she came over and started, spouting Bible verses at me.”

Similarly, participant Cyndi spoke about her perceptions of the region and her experiences with a local establishment:

I think if a gay bar opened up on Main Street, it would close within a month or two. I think there are locally owned places that are relatively awesome here in [this town] but...I like [this coffee shop because they] have good coffee but ...they’re obviously very church oriented and sometimes my little queer self does not feel comfortable going in there to get coffee...so I think there’s some give and take. There’s nothing for like...no one’s going to say “I’m going to move into the *gayborhood* in [town]” because there’s not one.

However, Brad believes this institution is not as much of a Bible Belt community as the surrounding area since the campus community is more diverse. Brad stated, “The school itself is not as Bible Belt as the surrounding area because people are from different



locations and we have a lot of international students, so it's a little more open than the general public.”

## **Campus Climate**

Campus climates for LGBTQ students are measured by the perceptions and experiences of this minority group of students, as well as the general campus attitude towards sexual minorities (Brown et al., 2004). LGBTQ students tell a story of discrimination, harassment and fear. Students interviewed for this dissertation study described their perceptions of the campus climate at their institution, including: harassment; fear; and safety —themes that emerged during my interviews.

**Perceptions of campus climate.** Many of the students focused on their perspectives of campus climate at this institution. Participant Palmer stated, “I think, overall people have accepted me, I mean there are a couple of people that tolerate it. I think overall I would say [this university] is accepting.” Participant Jackson agreed with Palmer, the campus is accepting, but added:

Campus climate here is fairly accepting. I say *fairly* because obviously you have to deal with students and some faculty members who may not necessarily be accepting. Generally, everyone is because a lot of times people just keep to their own business. I mean we do have...an organization on campus that focuses on traditional marriage and believes only *that* should happen. I'm sure there's one on every single campus. There's *one* LGBT organization [on this campus],

there's no LGBT staff directors, there might be staff directors who are LGBT, but there's no LGBT directors.

Liv believes the campus climate is better than the climate in the surrounding area and even her hometown. She explained that Lesbians are more accepted than Gay males and Transgender students have the most difficult time:

Having come from like a small town... I think it's really nice here...as far as campuses go, I feel it's pretty safe, I feel pretty accepted. I like it here, but I feel like it's still much more accepting of like...Lesbians than it would be of Gay males. Also for Transgender students that I know...they get like the worst [treatment]...Overall, the climate I feel like for LGBT students is positive, especially for us to be in *this* area...You have like Chick-Fil-A [who is not welcoming of us]. So, I mean the one on campus, it's not that you're going to walk up there [to order food] and they're going to be like "you can't have this because you have a rainbow on your shirt". But, it's the, you know the...just the idea if I go here I support this, I buy your chicken and you don't like me.

Rosalind felt that the climate for LGBTQ students has improved since she first enrolled in this institution:

I think as the years have gone by, it's gotten more tolerating. As the population of the LGBTQ student's grows, it's more like, "Fine they're around, whatever" but back in day it was, you know, there were very, very few [LGBTQ students] so, you know, we all grew up with very conservative parents, usually...most of us. So it was easy to be very judgmental and very like, point the finger, throw the Bible at you and not accepting and very hostile. But I think as more people [LGBTQ]

come [to this university] and the population gets bigger, it will be more accepting and tolerating than it was, you know, back when I started in 2007. So, I think it's getting better, but I also think that has to do with just the general climate of the U.S.

Cyndi also reported the campus climate has gotten better than when she first remembered, but believes there is still room for improvement:

I just remember seeing things that were more hurtful whenever I started here...I don't think it's a bad environment, I think there can definitely be strides to make it better...I know that there had been a while where they [LGBTQ students] pushed for a...LGBTQ floor. Like a living learning community in one of the dorms and that's never really went through. I don't think and I don't know if it ever will. I don't necessarily have an opinion on whether or not [the university should]...I think more education all around would probably help. More um...more support shown towards students that are LGBTQ would be kind of nice...I feel like every time they've gotten a space for the [LGBTQ] Center they also have been informed that that building is going to be torn down because it used to be in the basement of [an old building]...Now it's in the basement of this building, and the university is now saying "Oh, we're going to tear this building down...so you're going to have to move, so, you have to find somewhere else to go."...and I don't think it's necessarily that they're targeting and saying "let's get these queer kids out of this building" I think it's...they're putting them in buildings that they know aren't going to last....Unless you're part of the LGBTQ Center, then you go to the LGBTQ Center....I don't know how other Queer

people meet each other on campus. I really don't...I think...better [LGBTQ] visibility...and treating the only LGBTQ organization on campus like...you know...as an actual organization, because I know they cut off some of their [LGBTQ] funding this year....There's a whole lot of instances of [the university] saying well LGBTQ Center didn't do this, and this paperwork wasn't filled out, and stuff like that. But at the same time, there was other organizations that I know probably didn't have their paperwork filled out in time, and they were like letting them slide through...Not all the organizations on campus lost their funding like they [the university] wanted the center to believe. The university didn't give them any possible recourse...So, they've had to go through [Women and Gender Studies] and the office of diversity, to get any kind of funding for any of their events...I know that the LGBTQ Center has had a lot of problems scheduling venues for events...There was a film event that was supposed to take place during the Pride week and it didn't happen, it didn't happen because of weather. But also because there was three other events scheduled for that one room out of all the places on campus. I just feel like there are a lot of people that don't see the [LGBTQ] Center and the kids that rely on it as priorities...I just feel like there's so few people that are trying to do things for these students.

Hanna revealed that the campus climate was not friendly, but neither was the LGBTQ student organization. She told me:

[The campus climate] is not friendly. No, no one's really openly friendly. I mean, hello our own [LGBTQ Center] is not that friendly, that's how I feel. I don't know if I looked differently [more girly]. If I looked more girly [I may not

want to be as public about my identity] here [at the university] I wouldn't really want to be as on display as I am. I don't like to walk around holding her [girlfriend's] hand. But if I looked any different [more girly] or it was more obvious [my identity] – I don't need any more judgements... People here are very surfaced based. Whatever you produce to them on the surface, they want to look at before they get to really know you or get to know why you look the way you do. People are quick to judge here, but I think that people are quick to judge everywhere. But, I've lived in different communities and I feel like I can see some little differences in the acceptance. People feel uncomfortable in my presence sometimes but in my eyes, there's no reason for you not to like me because you don't know me. So to me, everyone in my life has a chance and until you screw that up, I don't know you until I get to know you. But, I don't feel like I, I'm granted that same chance with everybody else... I tried to go make friends in my community [LGBTQ Center] and it was unwelcoming. So that was the only time I outreached. I was so excited. You know, "here I am, I don't care, I don't know anybody, this is the best way for me to network, to go put myself in the place that I should feel comfortable – and it was not that. I mean, by all means other people may have different experiences, but mine, no [it was not a good experience].

**Harassment.** LGBTQ students experience harassment --more than heterosexual students—with derogatory comments as their most common form of harassment (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Rankin, 2005; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Worthen, 2011). Several students interviewed shared their experiences of harassment – most were in the form of

derogatory comments. Rosalind told me about the way people referred to her or made comments around her that were derogatory or judgmental about LGBTQ individuals:

You get, like the backhanded comments, even when people know. No one ever says it, it's always, "I know you're *that* way but..." and it's always the *but*. "I know you're this *but*..." .... It was Pride day and [a classmate and I] were walking up there and [my classmate] turned to me, and she was like, "What the fuck is this? Gay day?" .... She was just like super, like judgmental.

Similarly to Rosalind, Brad experienced indirect harassment in the form of comments or phrases. He did not have much faith in administration at the institution to put a stop to such occurrences:

I think, probably the most that anyone's really encountered is people just saying really offhanded derogatory comments. People saying stuff like, "Oh, that's Gay" that sort of thing, I don't think administration would do anything if it got that bad because they'd be like, "Freedom of Speech."

Rosalind recalled instances of direct harassment she endured while being on campus. "Straight guys that are like, 'Hey! Can I watch? Can I join?' .... 'If you use a strap-on, then why don't you just fuck a man?' .... 'They called us dykes and what not.'"

Vicki also spoke to the experiences of indirect harassment. She told me about comments of judgement by staff and faculty members that were vague enough to avoid getting reprimanded:

There have been, even like remarks made—I think, by the staff that work there [an on-campus deli] and I think even some of the professors that go by [the deli].... There's never really anything explicit that could be related to the two of us

specifically, I think because they want to avoid getting in trouble. But there've been things [said] like, "Not the same kind of students that were here before" or "Not sure where all of these new kids are coming from" that sort of thing that is obvious in the moment who they're talking about, but that couldn't really be held against them later on—passive-aggressiveness and that's everywhere on campus though.

Rosalind told me about Gay male students that were harassed by heterosexual male students as a way to defend or protect their masculinity:

The Gay men, you know, especially the effeminate Gay men get called fags all the time which I hate that word. I'm sure everybody does, but you know, anything that's a threat to their masculinity is seen as bad, so they [Gay men] get beat up [here] and called names. That is a big threat! – Especially if they are on a floor with football players. I've noticed [football players] are very, very, like, "Hey there you fucking fag!"

Like Rosalind, Vicki also told me what she knew of harassment experienced by Gay males and Transgender students on campus:

For the Gay guys, it's harder, *way* harder! I don't know why. I don't know what makes it okay to approach a male with the things that they do and not to [Gay] females. [Male students] will go up to guys and comment on the size of their genitals, comment on what they're supposedly doing to each other all the time, make comments like, "What? You couldn't get any pussy?"

Rosalind and Brad both mentioned a similar experience of preachers who preach against homosexuality in the campus *free speech zone*. Rosalind described her experiences:

Then of course you have the lovely campus preachers. The wonderful days that they're here...I dress not girly at all, so they just assume that I am [Gay], you know, wearing cargo shorts and a t-shirt. They assume, so I get the lecture from them about how I'm going to hell because homosexuality is bad, and that it's worse than murdering.

Jackson remembered an instance of harassment that occurred at a public diversity event on campus by another male student who was passing by.

We were having an event and it was like, diversity beads or something like that. And people would come and, like, make bracelets and kind of hang out. And a guy walked by and he said, "Faggot" under his breath, barely, and only two or three people heard it.

Alexus had painful experiences of harassment as a Transgender student. She recalled being referred to as a boy, dude and even "*it*."

This past fall I was told that a female student referred to me as, "The boy on our floor" which was very upsetting considering I live on the floor, so obviously, I am female. So yea, people talk. I've had lots of people who were very kind but would tell me that they didn't know [I was Transgender] at first and they'd be like, "Until so and so told me..." or "someone told me..." a lot of them won't name people. At one point a friend came up to me and was like, "I read this article and I think it's about you." Someone at the [campus newspaper] ... wrote



this article of an event I knew nothing about, so I read this [article]... It was about how a Transgender person who had walked by and the students, one [of the students], was actually an alumni that came to visit. He was the instigator of it all, [he] had said, “Oh look! It’s that Transgender dude!” This is incorrect because I’m a Transgender female. Obviously the students didn’t understand. The article says about 15 heads turn. So, by him doing that, he outed me to people who may have not even known. Then the article talks about how you can’t choose what you want to be - you can’t decide you want to be a NBA player, be an astronaut, it doesn’t work that way. [I heard] he goes on to say, “That it’s not like if you want a 10 inch cock that you can have one.” So I was pretty hurt by that article—especially since I had been on hormones at that point. I thought things were getting better and people were noticing me less, and I was less of an eyesore or that freak show that people wanted to see. But I’ve learned that even that doesn’t really matter. I was visiting a friend in the Greek towers and someone told that I was there. This girl and a bunch of guys kept knocking at the door because they wanted to *see* me so they could go into the room and see me. Like, as if I was different from any other girl—[other than] I’m probably more stylish....I was walking to the computer store and there were a bunch of frat boys out, and I heard..., “What the fuck is it? Is it a boy or a girl?” So I had to deal with stuff like that.... “Are you a boy or a girl?”... I had students tell me [at my university] that I was a “Stupid fucking it.”

Vicki described how staff members, administrative assistants, and other non-faculty personnel were judgmental about her:

When I went to go talk to [a department about my major] and [my girlfriend] sat outside of the office... One of the people there was like, “Oh, who’s that? Who came with you?” and I was like, “That’s my girlfriend.” And she was like, “Oh, that’s sweet” in a very *that’s not sweet* voice and just some looks. It’s mostly looks. I think everyone is at least intelligent enough not to make specific comments, but it’s very obvious in their body language what is happening. I just think it was people in the hallways; people that go in and out [of the offices] that maybe aren’t in the higher positions but are still there. A lot of secretaries – the people that sit at desks in offices – have really adverse reactions more so than, than the upper people.

Vicki also recounted harassment she experienced while walking on campus:

It gets interesting the things that they will shout at us [as a female couple].... There was this group of guys asked how open we would be to a threesome from a car.... There’s been guys that are like, “Hey, so can we ask you questions? Have you figured out how to scissor? How does this work?”

Cyndi had friends who experienced direct and indirect harassment:

I’ve had some of my friends called faggots ... There’s been a few times when the religious organizations on campus have handed out pamphlets... I haven’t seen any recently, but whenever I started here was when it really happened. No one ever thinks whenever anyone hands anything to me but I have friends that are obviously more alternatively presenting [easily identified as LGBTQ] than I am... They [the religious organizations] seem to really target them more whenever they pass by.... Just, you know, “Fags go to hell” [on pamphlets].

Hanna recalled the surprise when people find out that an attractive female is Gay --as if Lesbians cannot be attractive, “Of course the ‘Too pretty to be Gay’ [comments]. Those are always my favorite lines, ‘You’re Gay? You’re too pretty to be Gay.’ Participant Liv also experienced people’s surprise when they found out that an attractive female was Gay, “I would get people that say that, ‘Oh you are really pretty. I don’t understand why you wouldn’t go and date guys.’”

Liv had a roommate that made comments and asked questions that were offensive but Liv did not think they were intentional:

My other roommate, she was heterosexual. There’s occasional times where she will say something that is offensive or something...A lot of hers comes from ignorance and the fact that she’s never been around anyone that had identified as LGBT. So, she has questions. She says things and she just doesn’t present them in a very friendly way.

**Fear.** Fears lead LGBTQ students to have concerns about public displays of affection, assigned-gender residence halls, bathrooms, and interactions with administration, faculty and staff (Fanucce & Taub, 2009, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005, 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Many of the students interviewed expressed fear at their institution as LGBTQ students.

Rosalind was fearful about being out as a Lesbian on campus, “I didn’t want anybody to know. You know?... Feeling like everybody is judging you...it weighs on you and it breaks you down.” Rosalind did not want to associate herself with anything that would identify her as a Lesbian, “I was actually handed like a Pride flyer and didn’t want

to touch it cause people would think I was Gay, even though I was.” This fear inhibited her from speaking up in classes:

I don't feel like I can say anything about being Gay to them because it's going to change the way they see me, and I don't feel like I'm going to get fair treatment....I can't speak up and tell them anything even though I really want to because then they'll know [that I am Gay]....What I thought would happen was everybody that knew me would turn against me. Almost like I'd be like the social outcast that no one would talk to. You know, like the whole thing that everybody fears would happen. That's what I thought [would happen]. I felt like if they [faculty] knew [I was Gay], then automatically they would be harder on me, and they would grade me harder, and they would do things, and it would make it worse for me which would affect my grade.

Rosalind described fear she had while on campus. She avoided holding hands with her girlfriend because of the harassment she experienced. Walking around on campus made her paranoid, especially when other people were around:

Walking at night with my girlfriend that I had at the time, we didn't hold hands. We walked like a foot away from each other just because we didn't want anybody messing with us....After being called, you know, the names with my girlfriend walking back [to our residence hall] I was always, you know, super, super aware of who was around me – kind of paranoid if there was people around.

Vicki was afraid about being out at night alone, but was more afraid of holding hands with her girlfriend. These fears stemmed from a belief that heterosexual males become more brazen at night and were more likely to say something:

I really don't like going out after dark just in general as a female for one. I feel awful saying that I feel less safe holding hands with her [my girlfriend] after dark, but I feel *way* less safe. I think that's [after dark] when, males especially, well straight males especially, they get a little bolder [at night]. The things that we've had said [to us] while walking after dark—that are yelled from across the street or yelled from cars—are obscene.

Liv described how other LGBTQ students she knew were afraid to walk around on campus because of harassment or looks they had experienced:

I have other Lesbian friends that identify more masculine in their appearance, you know stereotypically. They have addressed and voiced to me how they feel uncomfortable walking around here on campus because of comments they get or looks. They're afraid of like, I don't know, being assaulted or something.

Brad experienced feelings of apprehension at LGBTQ events from people walking by and glaring, "You do get a little bit nervous at the [LGBTQ] events when people are giving you very mean glances. That kind of makes me nervous sometimes."

Alexus was fearful on campus with everyone staring at her. Her concern was discounted by others who told her that she was just being paranoid:

It's been hard sometimes. People would say, "Oh, you're just paranoid."

...Walking to [the food services building] or through large groups, I would always get stares. I wouldn't understand why because I feel like I look like just any other person. I would know that they were staring at me and people used to say that [I was just paranoid] until some of my friends started noticing that there really were people—it wasn't like the spotlight effect was going on—there was

really people staring. That's very unnerving. It's so bad that I don't want to leave my room without makeup [on], I rarely do. It's hard if you don't feel good to go to class because you're scared if you go to class without makeup [on] people are going to be cruel or say something or stare at you.

**Safety.** Historically universities have not provided safe learning environments for LGBTQ students (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Safety was often associated with fear and harassment in the literature. Students interviewed for this dissertation study addressed aspects of safety as LGBTQ students on campus.

Palmer explained how he personally feels safe on campus as a Gay student; however, he believes that individual appearance plays a role in safety:

I also think it depends on the person because you can have Gay people that look straight, act straight [but] they're not. Nobody can tell [that they're Gay] until somebody hits on you or they tell you. Or you can have somebody that dresses in very flamboyant clothes. Like...in the spring time I like to wear like mint pants, purple pants, a pink shirt – then you can kind of tell more [that I am Gay] with that. You have more chances of a hate crime or something bad happening to you if you're dressed more like that than if you weren't just because. If a person was, let's say, against a Gay person then they see a male that's dressed like a heterosexual male, who acts like a heterosexual male they're not going to know [that they're Gay]. But, if they see a flamboyant Gay man, dressed like a flamboyant Gay man, then they're going to know [that they're Gay] and if they do

have that urge to hurt them, then they're more likely to do that with a flamboyant one.

Liv also believed that appearance was a factor in the level of safety experienced by LGBTQ students:

I guess it really depends on outward presentation, and that's terrible. I have some feminine [presenting] lesbian friends that feel completely comfortable walking around even if they hold hands with their significant others. They don't feel like they're in danger or anything of anyone coming up on them. But, I have other lesbian friends that identify more masculine in their appearance, stereotypically, and they have addressed and voiced to me how they feel uncomfortable walking around here on campus because of comments they get or looks. They're afraid of, I don't know, being assaulted or something.

Appearance aside, Palmer feels confident that if any issues of safety did occur then it would be dealt with swiftly by measures put in place by the institution:

I feel like, on campus, we have really good security. We have good resources to where even if somebody did have those feelings [of assaulting someone], I feel like those feelings would get deterred early on because of the presence of the security boxes or the officers.

Alternatively, Jackson did not believe the campus police could respond fast enough, especially if it involves LGBTQ issues:

I don't think that there is much [safety]. I've heard the whole spiel from the campus PD [police department], they can be anywhere within a minute because they're in the middle of campus, but a minute is a long time. A minute is life and

death for some people. When you have the level of ignorance that can come from certain places in [this state] who aren't understanding, aren't accepting of LGBT individuals, you deal with a very real issue of someone getting hurt.

Jackson assumed that members of the campus police do not identify as LGBTQ, thus, could not adequately be empathetic with LGBTQ students:

I don't really trust campus PD [police department], especially when it comes to LGBT individuals. In that situation, all you have is an ignorant person with a gun. "I'm assuming you're not a Gay man. I'm assuming you're not a LGBT individual. So, I'm not going to assume that you understand what I'm going through. What's just a word to you is detrimental to me." I got a couple of looks whenever I've dealt with certain officers about the "f" word [Faggot]. They just thought it was a word—they didn't see the severity of it. That's not comforting for someone to look at you and be like, "You're crazy."

Rosalind described feeling safer on campus when she was not walking with her girlfriend, holding hands or not. Her recount adds to the factor of appearance that Palmer and Liv described. Even in a group of LGBTQ peers, Rosalind did not feel as safe as if she were alone:

I actually felt safer when I was by myself. Like, if I was by myself, I felt okay because then I felt more like I blended in....If I was with, you know, other Gay people then I did not feel safe.

After being called derogatory names walking to her residence hall with her girlfriend, Rosalind became paranoid and thought being in the dark was safer than being



visible on campus. Rosalind admits that her feeling safer in dark spaces was counterintuitive:

I actually felt safer just avoiding light. I actually went into dark places, you know? People say at night to go into the light, which sounds weird. They say, “Stay in light places cause that’s where people can see you if something happens.” I go into the dark places because that’s where people *can’t* see anything....So, it was safer for me to be out of sight, but it was less safe because I *was* out of sight.

Rosalind explained that heterosexual male students take offense when their sexual advances are turned down by Lesbians, which could pose a safety issue:

Guys are super sensitive about girls—especially what they think are super attractive girls—and those girls not wanting to sleep with them especially if they are Lesbians. So, you know, if you get a super fem [feminine], super attractive woman that, you know, says, “I’m Gay.” then she’s got a higher risk of a straight man getting angry and, you know, getting violent just because she won’t sleep with him. But, that’s not her sexuality, that’s not what she’s attracted to.

Brad indicated that LGBTQ individuals stay in groups as a safety precaution. “We tend to travel in packs, I guess. Like regularly, if there’s an event, people rarely go to them alone, I guess for that reason [safety].”

While visually struggling to speak of this topic during our interview, Alexis described experiences of sexual assaults while on campus,

I’ve had three...*three sexual* assaults on campus since I have been here—one my freshman, sophomore, and junior year. One [of the assailants] even mentioned,

while the assault was going on, that he had noticed me before and how he could tell [I was Transgender]...So, I do think that being Trans kind of made me vulnerable and basically put “victim” on my forehead, even though I do not see myself as that. I see myself as a survivor. I think I was an easy target.

Knowing she was vulnerable, Alexis requested to participate in a self-defense class, but was denied. Although Alexis identifies as female, her university would not recognize her as female:

I had been trying to do RAD [Rape Aggression Defense class for female students]. Like I said, I had several sexual assaults and I wanted to be able to take care of myself. I just wanted to take care of myself because I knew that I was a target and, I mean, that’s a scary thought...I wanted to be able to protect myself. The first time I sent an email about RAD they ended up [saying,] “We’re not going to be able to let you in the course.” and she didn’t really say why.

### **Experiences with Faculty**

In an institution of higher learning, student interactions with faculty are a crucial component of the educational experience can impact student learning and engagement (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). All of the students interviewed had something to say about their experiences with faculty; some positive, some awkward, and some negative.

Palmer reported his experiences with faculty were limited to specific departments, but is appreciative of the positive experiences he had with them:

In my classes, it's [being Gay] never been an issue with any of my teachers or anything. I think faculty, at least with my classes, most of my classes are in... [a specific] department—at least teacher wise—has been really positive. They're willing to answer questions if I have questions. If I ask questions specific to LGBT things, they'll answer it.

Cyndi agrees with Palmer, reporting positive experiences. She is happy to call attention to her experiences with two openly Gay professors:

For the most part, in classes, like professors and stuff have been very *okay*. One of my professors was openly Gay and, *shew*, one of my professors now is openly Gay.... I've had really good experiences....They've always been really welcoming and nice.

Rosalind recognizes her teacher's attempt to manage a heated classroom discussion about families. Rosalind understands that teacher did the best she could—given the situation:

The teacher, being the teacher, she was awesome. I love that teacher. I love her to death. But, as a professor you kind of just have to let the student's speak their piece. Everybody's opinions are important. She did her best, I think. She [the teacher] did what she could with the whole you know... "Well, every family is important and every family has the right to be treated the same. It doesn't matter what you think." But pretty much all the students in there were like, "Well, kids need a mother and a father, and they shouldn't have to be raised in that kind of household because then they're going to think that that's normal." I was like,

[thinking] “But it is normal. It’s somebody’s normal. It may not be your normal, but it’s somebody’s normal. It’s my normal.”

Not all of Rosalind’s experiences with faculty were positive. Rosalind described her program of study as conservative and judgmental:

[This] is a very, very conservative major. [These professionals] treat everyone the same. We’re supposed to not judge anybody, but let me tell you... [these professionals] can be some of the most judgmental, conservative people that you will ever meet in your entire life. That also extends into [the] faculty.

The way the faculty referred to members of the LGBTQ community sent a clear message to Rosalind that it was not safe to be out in her program of study:

[The faculty are] like, “Now you know—with these changing times—you’re going to have more, and more gay people—come into the hospital and—you have to treat them—like you would anybody else.” They say it in that exact tone—with the pauses and the breaths. I’m like, [thinking] “It’s not like a disease. You’re not going to catch it. I promise. If they [LGBTQ individuals] cough on you, you’re not going to suddenly be attracted to the same sex. Trust me, I’ve coughed on you enough and it hasn’t happened yet.” It’s a very conservative major, very conservative profession in general.... I think a lot of it was just the way they expressed, you know, *we* [LGBTQ individuals] say, “LGBTQ.” *They* always said, “*The Gays*” or “*Those Gays*.” They [faculty] never used terms, they always said things like that.... I do remember this—the professor said, “HIV is usually found with *the Gays*.”

Brad initially says that teachers are fine, but he also goes on to say that faculty members are not as accepting as students are. Brad believes that there is more diversity within the student body compared to faculty:

Teachers are fine. Students are a little bit more accepting, I think, than teachers because a lot of the teachers are just old white guys, old conservative white guys. But students are generally more accepting just cause they're from such a diverse range of locations.

Vicki and Liv recalled similar awkward experiences in foreign language classes that resulted from heteronormative assumptions—assumption individuals are heterosexual. Both teachers assumed Vicki and Liv made a mistake in the use of the language when they referred to their girlfriend. Vicki explained:

There was an awkward moment in one of my sign language courses because it was, he was trying to ask like who we lived with and all of the girls were like, “Oh yea, I live in an apartment with my boyfriend” or whatever. And so, it was almost like every single girl in the class, and he, pointed at me. And he was kind of like laughing about it because every girl had answered that way, and he was like, “You live with your boyfriend too?” and I was like, “No. I live with my girlfriend.” And he went “girlfriend?” I think he thought I had the sign wrong at first, and I was like, “Yea” and he goes, “Okay” and moves on.

Liv's experience with a faculty member echoes Vicki's:

I had a Spanish class once and my teacher, she asked all of us what we did for the weekend. I responded in Spanish that I went to a birthday party with my girlfriend. Girlfriend in Spanish is *novia*. She [the teacher] looked at me and she

said “You mean *novio*?” I said, “No, I mean *novia*.” And she stopped and her face like completely flushed, and she was like “Okay, I am so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

And then [she] went along with class, which I was okay cause I’m sure she assumed. After class she pulled me aside and apologized to me for outing me to the class, which I didn’t care at all. I mean cause most of them already knew, but she was like “I am so sorry.” She’s like “I’m a supporter of the LGBT community and I would never ever do anything to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Hanna felt that a faculty member *hated* her at the beginning of one semester after being treated differently for no apparent reason. The differential treatment Hanna experienced caused her to question whether it was because she was Gay. The teacher changed for the better a few weeks into the semester:

I really felt like she hated me for a good two or three weeks starting of school for no reason. I cannot figure out why this woman did not like me. Everyone else in the class she was fine with, but now it’s totally, totally different. So I don’t know if it was just me being Gay or just her judging me, because you know, it’s only two or three weeks in class when I arrived early to class and I’m doing what I’m supposed to do, and I’m doing all of my homework. I don’t understand why you’re treating me any differently.

Jackson had negative experiences with two instructors, but pointed out that these were the only negative experiences that he had with faculty members:

I had a professor who was very clearly conservative, to the point that he actually made a few comments about Obama during the class... He would very visibly treat me differently if I were wearing some type of Pride shirt than when I wasn’t.

Like it was palpable.... On the days that I would wear my Pride shirts, he would not answer my questions. He would call on me so I could say them [questions], but he would directly ignore my question....A lab instructor who was very like macho man and the other like macho guys, he [lab instructor] would like bend over backwards for....I got to class [late] and they had finished the quiz as I had walked in the door, and I asked if I could take the quiz afterward, and he was like, “No man, like this is like the third week of class you should know when class is, so like I can’t let you do that.” And the next week he let someone else redo the quiz, and I was like, “That dude was an hour late to class and you’re letting him redo the quiz late, how is that fair?” But, that could have been a dude bro thing, like he recognized if someone was in a fraternity that he was in, or something like that. Those were really the only two negative experiences that I’ve had with like professors or anything.

Alexus was offended when the teacher did not refer to her by the correct pronouns, “She misgendered me and that was very upsetting ...I ended up failing the course because I didn’t want to go anymore. Because, I was already behind, felt bad about missing and like being misgendered by her made it worse.” She was also confronted with inequitable treatment by another professor:

I did take a course where I felt the professor was um, did treat me a little differently. I noticed that there were girls who would have projects who were either as good or not as good as mine, and would get better grades.

Vicki gave credit to a couple of inclusive instructors, “There have been a couple of them that have been very, very inclusive in their lectures and in other things—trying to

make sure that they use terms that are more like “partner” or “significant” other, and less like boyfriend or girlfriend.” However, she reported that the majority of instructors had not been so inclusive, “The majority of them [faculty], from what I have experienced, either get this weird look on their face and change the subject or purposefully leave it out.”

Cyndi questions an instructor’s motive for forcing a gay student to speak against same-sex marriage placing them in a distressing position:

[I know someone] who took a...course and the professor was, I don’t know if he was just an asshole or if he was homophobic, but she was obviously Gay and...he forced her to give a speech on why she thought same sex marriage was wrong, And as a lesbian she’s not going to be able to really form an opinion like that. She had like tried to talk to him and say “listen, I am not going to be able to effectively give this speech” and he just wouldn’t have it.

## **Residence Hall Experiences**

Living in a residence hall is part of the overall college experience offering the opportunity for students to be more involved on campus (Fanucce & Taub, 2009). There are many challenges for LGBTQ students living in residence halls. This section is divided into five subthemes that give understanding to what the residence hall experiences are for LGBTQ students.

**Residence hall staff.** Resident assistants and residence hall coordinators make up the residence hall staff that are charged with oversight and operation within the residence



halls for which they are assigned to. LGBTQ students told me about experiences specifically related to these staff as part of their residence hall experiences. Rosalind faced harassment with her suitemate, which happened to be her resident assistant—exposing her to unwanted religious materials such as Christian music:

It was nice until [my suitemate] blasted...her super Christian come to God music....She would come in and blare, like super, like come to Jesus like, we're having a prayer revival meeting in the bathroom music. My music is not that loud, I'm sure she could hear it because those doors are super thin. But I tried to be respectful....I'm pretty sure she set it right by my door and turned the volume all the way up. It was coming through my room....She continued to do that all semester.

The same suitemate of Rosalind's would hold Bible study with peers, blocking Rosalind's entry and exit into her own room, at times:

I came back from school, from class one night, and her and her friends apparently had Bible study in her room, which I knew cause I could hear them talking about scriptures. I could deal with that, the wall's thin. They decided to move it out into the hall in front of my door. So I had to walk through their Bible study to get into my door and walk out of my door through their Bible study again, and they all looked at me like I was being super disrespectful for interrupting.

Rosalind felt that her suitemate's actions were clear messages that her being Gay was wrong. She also remembered a friend being lectured by his resident assistant about God and his sexuality:

Actually one of my friends, his [Resident Assistant] actually took him into his room and sat down with him and told him that he was worried about his soul, and tried to put the fear of God in him to make him straight.

Rosalind had some positive experiences living in the residence halls. She told me about a resident assistant that was accepting and supportive, “I did have one really good RA [resident assistant] and she was super cool with it and she was just, ‘Okay, whatever. If anyone ever gives you a hard time, let me know.’”

Jackson reported an incident of harassment to his residence hall coordinator, but no action was taken:

I went to my [residence hall coordinator] who wasn’t exactly proactive. She was like, “I don’t know what to tell you to do. Sorry.” She scooted me out of her office. I was so angry that I actually cried...I was very much visibly upset.

It was not until he went to Housing that action was taken to resolve his issues.

They sent me to [Housing] and I tell this whole thing [incident] and I’m crying the entire time. I probably didn’t even make sense half the time. [She] was like, “I am not standing for this. This is not going to happen on my campus. You’re going to wait right here and if it’s okay, I’m going to call the cops and you’re going to file a report.”

Jackson knew of another LGBTQ student that sought resolution for harassment, but nothing was done, “The [residence hall coordinator] was like, ‘There’s really nothing I can do unless I catch them in the act.’”

One of the residence hall staff was accepting of participant Vicki and her living arrangements with her girlfriend; however, another staff member was placed in an awkward position:

We have a [resident assistant] that's really cool. She's really nice and has always been, "Oh you guys are such a cute couple." So, they've [residence hall staff] never been rude which is good. The [residence hall coordinator] is a little bit off standing. I think that her thought process is kind of the same as mine [the residence hall policy allows same sex couples to live together]. I think that the general goal is to prevent that [cohabitating] as much as possible with the way that they assign rooms by gender. So, she really doesn't know how to handle it because we're definitely not just roommates. I think it puts her in an awkward position too because she doesn't really know how to talk to us [my girlfriend and I] like other residents.

Liv described a similar issue as Vicki, regarding the ability to cohabitate in the residence halls as a Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual couple. Liv was able to live with her girlfriend because the rules only exclude male and female students from living together. Liv's residence hall coordinator threatened to evict them because he knew they were a couple:

There was our [residence hall coordinator] and he was not a supporter of Gay rights or anything like that. He said he was really traditional in his views....We actually got pulled into his office because he found out that we were a couple. He tried to bring it up to some sort of, I don't know, board to get us kicked out of the room together. It was completely ridiculous because there's no rule that says that we can't live together. Plus, he would have to prove the fact that we were

together. It was a big issue for a while and I felt really uncomfortable for that reason.

One couple Liv knew about had moved out because they did not feel comfortable with this same residence hall coordinator, “We had another couple that lived on the floor with us. They actually moved out because they just didn’t feel comfortable, and they wanted a space of their own and, everything.” Liv sounded relieved when she spoke about getting a new, more accepting, residence hall coordinator, “We had a new [residence hall coordinator] the next semester and he was much more accepting. He cared a lot.”

Even though Cyndi had good experiences with her resident assistants and residence hall coordinators, she admits that more training is needed for resident hall staff related to LGBTQ issues:

I’ve had really good experiences with the [resident assistants] and [residence hall coordinators] that I’ve had. They were always really like cool, realistic and open-minded about things....I think there should be more hands on training of issues with [resident assistants] because I know, while I’ve had good experiences, not every [resident assistant] has been the people I’ve had. While Cyndi said staff needed more training, Palmer told me that Housing provided training for LGBTQ issues to their staff. Palmer disclosed that the training provided was not as inclusive as it should be:

Housing even trains for LGBT stuff, they might not do it extensively like with Intersex or Transgender people. I think that’s because it’s not as prominent [common] in this area as just a Gay man, or Gay female, or a Bisexual person.

**Room Assignments.** LGBTQ students shared their experiences with roommates and assignments to floors that did not match their gender identity. Vicki stated that heteronormative policies allow Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual individuals to cohabitate:

One of the most beautiful things about heteronormativity is that they just stick Bi and Lesbian girls together because obviously they can never be a couple. And there's some Gay guys I know that are doing the same thing because there's really not, I think, especially for Bi people there's not a good solution to that.

Cyndi expressed concerns about random room assignments—not knowing if your roommate will be homophobic or not, “I know that some people had problems with the random lottery roommates they stick you with. You get stuck with the horrible roommate that's super homophobic.” Palmer talked about a heterosexual male that was not willing to room with a Gay male, but there was no conflict or harassment involved, “A Gay male moved into his room with a male who was straight. The straight male made it aware that he was not okay with it [having a Gay roommate]. He never said anything mean or harassed him. He was just like, ‘I'm not okay with Gay people.’” Hanna explained that she had a room to herself but would soon be forced to take on a roommate. She was relieved when a student approached her about rooming together. Hanna assumed this girl was at least accepting since she already knew Hanna was Gay:

I think we had our first floor meeting and...they were talking about consolidating...After the meeting finished, I went back to my room and someone came knocking on my door. I was like, “I know nobody. Who's knocking on my door?” I open it, and some girl's asking me, “Do you want to live together?” It's that girl that I was questioning already [thought she might be Gay] and I'm like if

we absolutely have to [have a roommate] because [thinking] “If you’re coming to me then I feel like you’ve accepted what you’ve already seen. So, I don’t feel like we’re going to have a lot of conflicts at least in the department of me being Gay, you know, and anything else you want to presume.”

Alexus, a Transgender female student, was placed on a male floor because the university would not recognize her gender identity as a female:

My first four years I had to live on a male floor. It wasn’t until, [I] guess, my second senior semester that I got to live on a female floor.... I didn’t even get to live on the floor that I identified with, even though I had been identifying as female since I had been here [at this university]. I was assigned a male roommate. After talking [with the roommate] I thought, “Okay, it will be a decent situation. That’s fine.” That was always a concern, [thinking] “Is my roommate going to be okay with it and am I going to be okay with it.” Honestly being a female and having to share a room with a random male is just very scary and awkward. Obviously, if this is how I prefer to dress [as a female]...I’m sure that’s not easy for someone. So, I met him [my roommate] after we had talked and he’s like, “I can’t do this.” I’m hurt because I was forced into this situation.

Rosalind thought Transgender students have a more difficult time in residence halls than other LGBTQ students because they are forced to live on floors that do not match their gender identity:

I think Trans people almost have it the hardest because colleges refuse to recognize the gender that they identify with. You have a [Transgender] male

living on a female floor, usually with a female roommate. Unless they pick that roommate, usually neither one of those people are comfortable, which leads to a lot of problems. The administration says, “Well, you’re a female by birth so you’re on a female floor.” And that’s not how that works.

Brad confirms what Rosalind feels about Transgender students. As a Transgender student, he told me he was placed on a female floor that did not match his gender identity. Brad isolated himself to avoid conflicts:

I hadn’t changed my name yet when I lived in the dorms so I got assigned to the female floor. I was used to it, I guess. It didn’t really bug me. I didn’t really talk to anybody cause this city has a lot of conservative individuals, and there were a lot of conservative individuals on the floor. I just didn’t say much. If I know that somebody is just going to tick me off, then I tend to avoid that person.

Palmer added to the discussion by sharing what he knew about some Transgender students that were forced to live on floors that did not match their identity:

Transgender people, I’ve seen two who live on campus or who *lived* on campus—one of them still does. There was one who was born a female and identified as a male, looked like a male, dressed like a male—who had to live on a female floor. Then there was one who was born a male, who looked like a female, dressed like a female, identified as a female and *still* had to live on a male floor....The female to male Transgender person lives in an apartment now. The male to female Transgender person fought housing tooth and nail and got to live on the female floor. She still lives on a female floor and there have been no issues.

Cyndi adds to what participants Palmer, Alexis and Brad said about Transgender students living on campus, “With Trans students there’s a lot of problems with the housing. I have several friends that are Trans and housing’s an issue.” She told me about one Transgender student moving because of roommate problems, “The one girl transferred to the apartment style housing. She had problems with several of her roommates.”

**Bathrooms.** Bathrooms came up often in the descriptions about LGBTQ student experiences in residence halls. Hanna told me about experiences she had with residence hall bathrooms and the reactions of her peers:

I think it’s very obvious just when you see me [that I’m Gay]. To the general public when it’s the whole, “Is that a boy?” or the weird looks in the girl’s bathroom—those are always fun. The very first time that I went into the bathroom, it’s always the bathrooms, someone went back to their roommate and was like, “There was a boy in the girl’s bathroom!” Later we became friends and she was like, “I totally freaked out the first time I saw you in the bathroom, then I watched you walk in your room and I was like, ‘Oh! It must be a girl.’...Number one, we have to share a bathroom and most girls you just feel like they try to move away from you when you’re in the same bathroom...[sarcastically] when you like girls, you like *every* girl that walks, but when you’re straight, you pick and choose.

Alexis told me about her issues with bathrooms as a Transgender female. She recognized that it was equally strange for the male students on the floor:



So four years of having to live on the male floor, use the male restrooms, share showers with men. The first year of being on hormones, I was actually having to share ah, use the male restroom, and I was having breast development. I honestly didn't look like I belonged there [in the men's bathroom]...I think it was strange for guys because they were seeing someone that looks obviously female in their bathroom. At one point someone put a sign on the bathroom door, "Men only." Of course that was very bothersome to me because I'm being forced to have to use this.

One student recognized Alexis' struggle and tried to help; however, Alexis was reprimanded for it, and had to publicly support the housing rules for which she did not necessarily agree:

[This one student] found out they wouldn't let me use the female bathroom, so she created a petition to get me to be able to use their [female] floor [bathroom], which I had no say. Of course I found it very endearing, but I heard that she tried, she kind of coerced some people too, but that was not me. I got in trouble [with Housing] for that and had to go to a female floor meeting on this floor to explain that housing has these rules for a reason.

Rosalind was aware of the plight of Transgender students in regards to bathrooms. She expressed to me that Transgender students are not given a choice:

A [Transgender] male living on a female floor, not being seen as a male by the outside population, but you know, being forced to use the female bathroom because nobody else sees them that way except for people that know them. So it's either get yelled at in a female bathroom because they don't look like a female—

because they're not—or get beat up by going into the male bathroom because according to the men in there, they don't look male enough... You have those options and both of those options suck. So, what do you do?

**Harassment.** Harassment emerged as a subtheme within the experiences of residence halls. Students reported instances of harassment either experienced personally or by other LGBTQ students they knew. Palmer shared that he knew of a LGBTQ student that experienced being harassed, “They were doing things to his door. They would put food under his door, so that was straight up harassment.” Jackson told me about harassment he experienced in the residence halls:

I looked through the peep hole and I could see someone writing and it was someone I knew and I had like interacted with... And then I heard like scratching on the wood of the door... And so they walked away and once I heard the door shut, I like unlocked the door and opened it. And it said “Shut the fuck up fag. You're a little bitch” and like on the door itself, they had written “Fag.”

Jackson also recounted another student's experience with harassment in the residence hall:

People were writing stuff on his door, like on his whiteboard. At one point they were filling up Chick-fil-A nugget boxes with ketchup and putting it on his doorknob so that whenever he opened the door it would fall and like spew ketchup everywhere. This was an everyday thing for him, like he lived through this every day, like *every day*. They would always beat on his walls and stuff like that.

Brad told me that he knew of a student that was harassed in the residence hall, but it was resolved, “I do know one guy who was getting teased in the dorm and I forgot how that was resolved, but it was.” Brad explained that he lived alone and did not have any issues:

I lived alone. That was my choice only because I’m a horrendous roommate. I tended to just keep to myself, played a lot of video games. Yep, nobody said anything in the dorms, but I also hardly ever saw anybody.

Rosalind told me that Gay men were called names and got beat up, especially if they live on a floor with men that feel their masculinity is threatened:

The Gay men, you know, especially the effeminate gay men get called fags all the time which I hate that word, I’m sure everybody does but, you know, anything that’s a threat to their masculinity is seen as bad so they get beat up and called names, that is a big threat, especially if they are on a floor with football players, I’ve noticed are very, very, like, “Hey there you fucking fag!”

Vicki had a few issues living in the residence hall, “There was one girl...who told a guy that we [my girlfriend and I] would be okay with it, so he actually came to our room and started touching us, wanting [sexual] things.” But Vicki stated that when it comes to females on her floor, girls really do not care about her LGBTQ identity, “Girls don’t really care from what I’ve noticed.”

Liv noticed LGBTQ event flyers posted in her residence hall that had Gay slurs written on them—things marked out on the flyers, and some flyers had been tore down:

She went through and marked it out in lipstick and stuff, x’ed it out and the ones that were hung on the boys floor, on the second floor, they had a lot of Gay slurs and stuff written on it.

Cyndi stated that living in the residence halls can be hard for some students, “I think that dorm life is hard for some people.” She knew of some LGBTQ students that experienced harassment and ended up moving because they did not feel safe:

I have two really close friends who just last semester moved from living in [one dorm] to living in [another dorm] because they were repeatedly being harassed in their dorm. People would write things on their door, they were given a fake eviction notice from housing posted on their door ... And nothing was really done about it other than them having to go to housing itself and say, “We don’t feel safe anymore.” And so, they had to move dorms.

Liv had a roommate that made inappropriate statements and asked questions that were offensive to her, but Liv did not feel that they were intentional:

There’s occasional times where [my roommate] will say something that is offensive or something. A lot of hers comes from ignorance and the fact that she’s never been around anyone that had identified in any sort of way as LGBT. And so she [my roommate] has questions and she says things. She just doesn’t present them in a very friendly way.

**Safety.** Conversations about residence hall experiences brought up the issue of safety for LGBTQ students, specifically Transgender students. Just as Cyndi described safety concerns for her friends after experiencing harassment in the residence hall, Alexis was forced to live on the male floor of a residence hall that she felt placed her at a safety risk as a Transgender female:

It wasn’t until I passed [as female], and I don’t really like that term but it wasn’t until I looked more visually female to them [Housing] that they were willing to

help me out, even though honestly it was probably a [safety] risk putting me on the male floor.

Palmer agrees with Alexis that such assignments place these students at risk, “That is incredibly unsafe for somebody who looks like a female, dresses like a female, identifies as a female, to be forced to live on a community style floor with all men.”

## **Support**

A supportive attitude toward LGBTQ students and issues faced by them is measured by knowledge and interest in LGBTQ issues, participation in LGBTQ events, programing, and interest and participation in workshops related to LGBTQ (Brown et al., 2004). Literature reports LGBTQ students feel their universities are unsupportive (Rankin, 2005).

Cyndi does not believe her institution makes the LGBTQ organization and students at a priority, “I just feel like there’s a lot of people that don’t see the [LGBTQ] Center and the kids that rely on it, as priorities.” She said that there is not enough being done for LGBTQ students, “I just feel like there’s so few people that are trying to do things for the students.” Brad expressed a lack of support at this school, “The [LGBTQ] Center is about the only thing that we have [in the form of support].”

Jackson said that the university does not take the LGBTQ student organization seriously, “That’s my big issue with this campus and with [this university] not taking it more seriously because we scrounge to get what little bit we can.” He said that the organization is not adequately funded, “The [LGBTQ] Center is a student organization, it

is not a university funded organization, problem number one because at any given point the [LGBTQ] Center can tank [shut down].” Brad agreed there were issues with funding support for the LGBTQ organization, “Something happened with the funding with the [LGBTQ] Center, it’s no longer considered a registered student organization.” Cyndi asserted that funding of the LGBTQ organization was needed, “[The university should] treat the only LGBTQ organization on campus like, you know, as an actual organization because I know they cut off some of their funding this year.”

Jackson had manned a table at orientations to publicize the LGBTQ Center, but he was not allowed to display a Pride flag:

During orientation I asked if I could put a rainbow flag on the wall next to the table, therefore still within my vicinity, with people that have banners like, over their tables and I was told no, because it could be offensive.

Jackson talked to me about the lack of support for acceptance at this university, “It’s fighting tooth and nail to get any type of acceptance. I don’t want tolerance at this point. I don’t want tolerance because if you have to tolerate me then you still hate me.” Cyndi expressed that there’s not enough support for LGBTQ students, “More support shown towards students that are LGBTQ would be kind of nice.”

Cyndi talked about lack of support for the LGBTQ organization in regards to committed space:

I feel like every time they’ve gotten a space for the [LGBTQ] Center, they also have been informed that that building is going to be torn down. It used to be in the basement of [one building] and now it’s in the basement here [this building], and they’re [the university] saying “Oh, We’re going to tear the building down so

you're going to have to move." I don't think it's necessarily that they're targeting and saying "Let's get these Queer kids out of this building." I think it's, they're putting them [LGBTQ Center] in buildings that they know aren't going to last.

Participant Jackson recalled his experience with the office charged with resolving harassment complaints at his university:

She [student rights and responsibilities officer] made them [the harassers] apologize to me while I was sitting there and obviously it didn't sound sincere because she *made* them do it. I was like "Okay. Fine. Whatever" and she said, "You know, names can really hurt people. I remember whenever I was little, people used to call me Betsy Wetsy which was a doll that wet her pants. It used to really upset me." I looked at one of the professional dudes and at the other two that had wrote on my door were thinking, "What are you talking about?" She had equated being called a doll to a derogatory slur. I will never, never, never be able to get that out of my head [thinking], "Where in your mind do you think it is okay for you to equate my experience to that?" They [the harassers] really didn't get punished. I wouldn't even say they got a slap on the wrist. They got a warning of a slap on the wrist because the woman [student rights and responsibilities officer] was like, "Now, we're not going to punish them in anyway, but if they have any type of discriminatory action in next semester then it will go on their record

## **LGBTQ Visibility**

Students reported a lack of a LGBTQ presence on their campus. The university studied does not overtly communicate the status of their campus climate for those interested, such as prospective LGBTQ students.

It was indicated by some students that if their university is not communicating their campus climate, then LGBTQ individuals must assume that it is not a good climate. Jackson made the following point about visibility:

Ash Beckham [LGBTQ motivational speaker], when she came to speak, she made a very clear statement, and it actually made a lot of sense. She said, “By not saying something, you’re saying something and that’s very heavy with colleges right now. If you do not have an LGBT organization on campus, then you are very clearly making a statement. By having a LGBT organization on campus, you *are* making a statement – ‘while not all people on campus may agree, campus itself is LGBT friendly.’”

Vicki also believes that the lack of visibility equals lack of support, “I think that when [LGBTQ students] look at [this school] there’s just nothing there, and it’s like, well if they’re not saying that they’re supporting it, then they’re *not* supporting it.” Vicki remembered not being able to find anything about this school’s climate prior to arriving on campus, “I looked for it, actually, when I was applying to schools, and there’s nothing. I mean nothing on any website linked to [this school] that I could find about LGBT people.” Cyndi says that lack of visibility leads students to think that there is nothing here for them, “If I was a student that knew nothing about [this school], looking at it to



come here, I would think there was nothing for LGBTQ students.” Rosalind agrees that the university does not communicate what the campus climate is, positive or negative, “There’s not anything that says we don’t want your kind [LGBTQ], but there’s also nothing that says we welcome everybody”.

Palmer felt there was a lack of visibility when it came to the LGBTQ organization and the overall campus climate for LGBTQ students. He offered some suggestions, “I think if they [this university] invested more, and have a link [website], have a more easy to find location for that organization [LGBTQ Center], it would be a lot easier to find the climate.” Jackson also said that the LGBTQ organization on campus is not visible, and recalled not knowing there was such an organization until he heard about it from another student. “There is no evidence, none, of the [LGBTQ] Center on this campus...There’s no specific LGBT office on this campus, none. Coming to this school, I had no idea that there was even a LGBT organization.” Frustrated, Jackson said that new LGBTQ students would not know where to go and that the administrator for diversity affairs *knew nothing* of the LGBTQ organization:

If I were a new student, I wouldn’t know who to go to if I’m having troubles with my sexuality. Fuck, I barely, I didn’t even know the [LGBTQ] Center was a thing until [a friend] told me about it. The director of diversity didn’t even know the [LGBTQ] Center was a thing [existed].

Jackson believes that the lack of visibility is directly related to university’s lack of support for the organization, “Unless the university takes the [LGBTQ] Center more seriously, no one’s going to fucking know about it.” Brad said the events of the LGBTQ organization are not publicized:

None of the ... events will make the front page—it will never be a feature. I guess it's kind of like, tucked away I guess, by the school, so it's not like their saying, "No you can't do this." It's just, "We have other things that are also important that we need to feature...not you guys." I mean, they put the announcements and stuff in the daily announcement thing, but they don't ever make the front page of the school website—none of the [LGBTQ] events would.

Palmer stated the lack of visibility is evident in the space the LGBTQ organization is given compared to other organizations on campus. He said that the organization's membership and turn out for events suffer because of the lack of visibility:

The [LGBTQ] Center needs publicity because we're kind of, I don't want to call it a dungeon, but it's kind of a dungeon. We were in [one] building before in the basement, it was awful. I don't know who decided to put us there, but this [location] is better than that. It's not that great. We are kind of out of the way because most organizations you expect to be like in [the student life building] or somewhere notable, and that's not us and it reflects in our attendance. We get probably 10 to 12 people a meeting and to our events there is not, not like other organizations. They get a lot of people, we don't.

Brad added that the few LGBTQ events were not easy to find:

We have stuff on campus but it's kind of hard to find. The [LGBTQ] Center is not the easiest thing to find in the world, and I don't know if they [the university] did that on purpose or if that was a decision by the people who run it.

Brad also longed for visibility and support for LGBTQ students, "I really do wish that the school would be more visible with us in a positive way.... I really do wish they

would let us do, let us be more visible than we are and actually support us.” Like Palmer and Cyndi, Bruce pointed out that the location for the LGBTQ center was tucked away, “I wish that we had a more visible location.” Liv wants to see the LGBTQ community visible on the university’s website, “It would be really cool to have a section on the...website that explains the community.”

## **Resiliency**

Some LGBTQ students are more resilient than others and are better able to succeed despite negative experiences (Wimberly, Wilkinson, & Pearson, 2015). All the participants had negative experiences at their university as LGBTQ students; however, all of them had experienced academic success and seemed to have adjusted well.

Cyndi, Palmer and Alexis exuded confidence, but did not indicate whether their confidence came from experience or if it was just their personality. Cyndi said, “I’ve never felt unsafe, but I have a lot of confidence in thinking if anyone says anything to me, I can take them down.” Similarly, Palmer was confident that he could turn any situation around, “I feel like I can take over the situation if something were to happen and turn it back around for my benefit.” Alexis admitted to speaking out when necessary, “I’ve been very outspoken about things.... I’ve been an activist pretty much since I’ve been on campus.”

Cyndi and Brad explained how their experiences differ from other LGBTQ students. Cyndi explained:

I was a little bit more outgoing, willing to get to know my...roommates and got to know my suitemates.... I put myself out there more, so I feel like...if anyone was going to say or do anything they wouldn't have felt as comfortable cause I had made connections with other people.

Brad expressed that he did not give people the opportunity to be negative, "I don't take any shit from anybody....I'm so in your face about it. I just don't give people the opportunity to be jerks." Brad's confident approach was one strategy to avoid negativity and force acceptance:

I've found if you are kind of in their face about it, you don't give them the chance to say anything negative or be negative—they get so flustered they can't do anything and they just kind of take it.

Another technique Brad uses is avoidance, "I tend to avoid, if I know that somebody is just going to tick me off, then I tend to avoid that person...I just don't want to deal with them."

Rosalind and Jackson explained that they were not strong when they initially started attending their institution; however, their negative experiences made them stronger. Rosalind became resilient through her experiences as a LGBTQ student at her university:

It doesn't bother me now when they look at me and they roll their eyes, and give me the sideways glance, that doesn't bother me anymore because it happened [at this university] so much. I've learned to just kind of let it roll off my back, but starting out here when it happened, it bothered me.

Experiences of harassment brought Jackson to the point where he was defensive and began to speak out against harassment:

At that point I was like, “Fuck it. Fuck it all. I don’t care anymore. We’ll just retaliate somehow. We’ll find a way.” And I kind of went a little militant for a while. The second I heard someone say something, anything, mostly LGBT slurs, I called them out publicly about it, very publicly.

Like Rosalind and Jackson, Hanna’s experiences brought her to the point of not caring what other people thought about her as a LGBTQ individual:

I stopped caring about what everybody thought by this point in my life, everybody, every single person in my life. Because I got to the point where [thinking], “You love me for all of me or you don’t really love me at all, and if you don’t love me for everything that I am, then I really don’t need you.” Just a lot of years of negativity or judgement or telling what you should or shouldn’t do. I guess I just hit my fed up point and ended it.

## **LGBTQ Student Recommendations**

The students interviewed commented about things they wanted to see happen including increasing support and visibility. Students made their wish list to include: institutional support, visibility and education.

**Institutional support.** Several students expressed a desire for their university to take more charge the LGBTQ organization. These students want to retain the control of the organization, but want legitimacy that the institution can provide. Palmer said, “I

think it would be better if universities took charge in their diversity and since we are talking about LGBT specific, into their LGBT organizations.” He was not the only student that thought the institution should take charge of the LGBTQ organization.

Cyndi said:

I think if [the LGBTQ Center] had more ties to a department, it would have better events and have better funding for things. I feel like there would be less hurdles for them to jump or maybe just different hurdles, but there would be more people to help them jump the hurdles instead of just the guidance.

Brad echoed Palmer and Cyndi, “Not just say, ‘Okay’ and leave us to our own devices. That makes it sound like we don’t know what we’re doing, but not just leave us without any protections. Jackson added:

It would have to make it something that is institutional. While I’m not necessarily a proponent of that, because then it takes all the power out of the student’s hands, and then you just end up with another office. You need to secure it like, it needs to be put in place, it needs to be something that is taken seriously.

**Funding.** Related to institutional involvement is the issue of funding for the LGBTQ organization. Lack of funding was a problem in hours the center is open and the events they can offer. Jackson said, “It is not a university funded organization....We don’t have anybody, like the school doesn’t fund it, so there’s nobody to be there all day.” Brad agreed with Jackson, saying, “There could always be more stuff I guess, but we just don’t have the resources right now.”

**Education.** Students want more education for the university community on LGBTQ issues. Palmer called for training for everyone and explains how he envisioned it playing out, and how it would benefit:

I feel like if they [the university] had everybody just sit down and like do a training, just to get it out there, it would at least give them some basic information ...If they started with the gen ed. teachers, that would be the smartest decision. If a student comes in as a freshman, they're Transgender, their gen ed. teacher [is ready] because they had training on it. [The student is] going to be like, "Wow! This is awesome!"...Then they're going to be more open about it or they're going to be like, "Maybe I don't have to tell the teacher in the beginning that I'm Transgender. I can just identify as a female and be okay with it."

Rosalind agreed that training, specifically on LGBTQ sensitivity is needed at her university. Her experiences with faculty revealed that such training is needed:

I actually remember wanting to go to my professor...and be like, "Can I please put together a PowerPoint on LGBT sensitivity?" Because I know for a fact that I'm not the only LGBT student in this program.... "Please, let me give you a sensitivity lecture so you'll stop saying *the gays* and *those gays*."

Cyndi also believed more education was necessary, "I think more education all around is, would probably help." She went on to identify training was specifically needed for resident assistants, "I think there should be more hands on training of issues with [resident assistants] because I know, while I've had good experiences, not every [resident assistant] has been the people I've had."

**Visibility.** These students wanted to see more visibility of the LGBTQ organization and community on campus. Brad said, “I just wish that we could be more visible on campus than we are. Not that it was encouraged, but it was accepted to be that way. Not be afraid to talk about these sorts of things.” Brad wanted to see bigger LGBTQ events, “Let us have big events that take over the whole courtyard or the fountain, you know, let us do big things like that.” Vicki suggested simply passing out information would be beneficial; “I think that there should really just be more information that is handed out.” She goes on to describe seeing Pride flag stickers around on campus could have positive effects:

Everywhere in DC has rainbow colored flag stickers if they are LGBT friendly. I think that if you can get it [the university] to the point that it was available [rainbow colored flag stickers] and be seen, that people would be more likely to be, “Okay, at least this is a safe space.”

Vicki continued to describe the benefits visibility could have for her institution:

[If there was LGBTQ visibility it would send the message that] you can come here [to this university] and be taught things that you would be taught in New York City , DC, or San Francisco with the same inclusion that you would be taught there, people would be like, “Okay. Yea. Let’s go!” instead of, “Nah. Backwater town...backwater school...Let’s move on.”

Like Vicki, Cyndi believes more visibility could benefit her institution by increasing enrollment and retention rates of LGBTQ students:

I think that if [this university] could step up one or two things and be like “We’re super Gay friendly! We have gender neutral bathrooms!” and just do one or two



things to become a little more Gay friendly, they would get more Gay students in, more students involved and it can be a better atmosphere for those here.

## **Summary**

In this chapter the voices of the participants describe their stories to help others understand what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. The eight themes that emerged in the course of this study—influences of the region, factors of campus climate, faculty awareness of LGBTQ, residence hall experiences, institutional support, LGBTQ presence, LGBTQ student resiliency, and participant recommendations for their university. In the next chapter, I discuss my findings related to my research question and the literature about the experiences of LGBTQ students. I also take this opportunity to give a voice to these students by making recommendations on their behalf to promote a healthy, affirming campus life for them and all future LGBTQ students attending universities in rural, Bible Belt America.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chapter IV comprised the experiences of ten LGBTQ students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. In this chapter, I will summarize the characteristics that best describe the college experience for a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America—based on the voices of LGBTQ students as *they* described *their* experiences during their interviews.

In beginning my research, I found that the current experiences of LGBTQ students at many colleges and universities are unknown. More specifically, the experiences of LGBTQ students attending universities in rural, Bible Belt areas—those areas with higher concentration of fundamentalist Christian churches that take a literal interpretation of the Bible and a majority of the population with strong religious views—in the United States are unknown.

Additionally, Nelson and Krieger (1997) described a disconnect between the purpose of a postsecondary educational institution and what is actually experienced by LGBTQ students:

Instead, personal growth is obstructed by violent attacks, disparaging remarks, hypocritical behaviors, and blatant discrimination from the majority; in this case, the heterosexual community. (p. 79)

The college experience should promote personal and academic growth that allows students to reach their full potential. However, historically, LGBTQ students have

experienced ill-treatment on campuses which accounts for at least some of the disconnect noted in the literature.

The number of LGBTQ students living on campuses nationwide is not clear; however, LGBTQ students exist on *every* campus. While there has been occasional attention given toward equality, studies suggest that LGBTQ students have been, for the most part, marginalized on campuses and their current experiences are unknown (Rankin, 2005). Many institutions have historically failed to acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ students, choosing to ignore potentially uncomfortable and possibly charged issues rather than understanding and focusing on what is best for these students and their college experience (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Despite efforts made by proactive colleges and universities, campuses have been hostile environments for LGBTQ students where they have experienced discrimination, harassment, and violence.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students attending universities in rural, Bible Belt America. Personally, this research is important to me as a member of the LGBTQ community and advocate for social justice to give a voice to LGBTQ students and let them tell their stories of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student. I remember my own experiences as a LGBTQ student from my undergraduate studies to my current status as a doctoral candidate. It is my sincere hope that the research conclusions in this chapter will contribute to the literature in a way that resolves the disconnect noted, helping to ensure healthy, affirming—celebrating and supporting—postsecondary experiences for LGBTQ students attending universities in rural, Bible Belt America. Additionally, it is critical that institutions understand the experiences of

LGBTQ students to adequately communicate this minority group's standpoint and whether these individuals are attending a healthy, affirming institution. Findings from this study provide an understanding for universities to promote a healthy, affirming campus climate and combat any findings of disconnect between a quality experience and what is actually experienced by LGBTQ students. Findings will also allow institutions to address the needs of LGBTQ students that could potentially increase retention and recruitment of LGBTQ students.

Not only are there implications for postsecondary educational institutions in rural, Bible Belt universities, this study will also have far reaching societal change. Ash Beckham, an advocate for LGBTQ equality, travels the country with a message to LGBTQ individuals, "Give voice to your truth." (Goodin-Smith, 2015). She says, "College campuses are now our battlegrounds. They're where *we* can make change" (np). Beckham sees college as a catalyst for societal change and if we are able to make positive changes to the experiences of LGBTQ students at the college level, that will be the start to systemic societal change.

A qualitative phenomenology was best suited for the research question: What is the college experience like for a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America? I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten LGBTQ students attending such a university. The following eight themes emerged from participant interviews:

- Region
- Campus climate
- Experiences with faculty

- Residence hall experiences
- Support
- LGBTQ visibility
- Resiliency
- LGBTQ student recommendations

## **Region**

Listening to the voices of the ten LGBTQ students interviewed for this study revealed characteristics of both rural and religiousness in the region of interest to this study. Findings related to region contribute to the discussion of rural, Bible Belt areas of America found in the literature. These findings validate the region culture as rural and religious—important since defining both *rural* and *Bible Belt* can be subjective. The combination of rural and Bible Belt characteristics create unique and often hostile environments for LGBTQ individuals as noted in the literature. It is important to note the climate of the surrounding community, service region, and state where institutions are located since universities are subject to influences of the external environment.

Participants described the region where this study was conducted as conservative, less progressive, and southern which is consistent with the literature. Rural areas are typically described as less: diverse; affluent; educated; liberal; and adhering to more traditional ideals than their urban and suburban counterparts (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013; Gray, 2009). Personally, I had a difficult time relocating to this area from a larger urban area because of these characteristics since these attributes are often related to bias. I had

significant concerns about harassment and ill-treatment we might face as a Gay couple just starting a family. We thought the population in this area would be different than most rural communities because it includes faculty and staff from the university—who are presumably more: diverse; affluent; educated; and liberal. Ultimately we made the move and quickly learned that our assumptions about university faculty and staff among us in the community was incorrect; many faculty and staff do not live in the area, instead they commute in from a larger urban area. This area does indeed exhibit many of the characteristics described in the literature. The rural area studied is not widely accepting LGBTQ individual because of characteristics described by students and those discussed in existing literature. Many students reported similarly to Brad:

[LGBTQ] is a very taboo topic so nobody talks about it but [the city where I am from] isn't as southern as here. I know we're not really that much more southern but...down in [another state] it gets pretty bad... [This university] is very similar to the general culture [of this state].

However, the participants in this study reported that their campus environment as more accepting of LGBTQ individuals than the surrounding community—most likely due to a more educated, more diverse population. LGBTQ students are considerably more comfortable on their campus than in the surrounding community and are, therefore, likely to feel isolated or limited to the on-campus environment.

The region where this research took place is identified as being within the Bible Belt, as defined by the dominance of fundamentalist Christian religions (Barton, 2010; Brown et al., 2003; Brunn et al., 2011; Castle, 2011; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). Findings describe evidence of religiousness of the area by the number of Pentecostal

church vans in the Walmart parking lot and local businesses with a strong Christian influence. I made phone calls to several churches in the community when we first moved to the area to inquire if we would be welcome into their congregation as a Gay couple. The majority of responses were, “No, homosexuals are going to hell.” There was only one church that was affirming of LGBTQ individuals. The participant descriptions of blaring Christian music, Bible study activities, and preachers on campus indicate Bible Belt influences; however, the campus is not as religious as the surrounding community possibly because of the diversity that exists among students and faculty just as participant Brad’s stated, “The school itself is not as Bible Belt as the surrounding area cause people are from different locations and we have a lot of international students and so it’s a little more open than the general public.”

### **Campus Climate**

Campus climates for LGBTQ students are measured in part by the perceptions and experiences of this minority group of students (Brown et al., 2004). This study contributes to the literature related to perspectives of campus climates as well as experiences of harassment, fear, and safety of LGBTQ students. This is an important contribution to the literature because individual factors and characteristics—such as rural and Bible Belt— influence campus climates, requiring individual studies be conducted before conclusions can be made. The findings of this study add to the existing literature which brings researchers closer to making conclusions about campus climates.

Perceptions of campus climates are vitally important for understanding what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. Just as pain and fear are individual experiences that cannot be judged by anyone except the person experiencing the phenomenon, perceptions of campus climate are the truths and realities of LGBTQ students that cannot be denied. The campus climate at the studied university is not affirming--it is fairly accepting at best. There is some evidence that the climate has improved over the years; however, LGBTQ students yearn for more widespread and timely improvements. Participant Cyndi's sentiments are representative of the LGBTQ students included in this study, "I just remember seeing things that were more hurtful whenever I started here...I don't think it's a bad environment, I think there can definitely be strides to make it better." Perceptions of campus climate are influenced in part by making comparisons to other climates. Students that perceived the campus climate more positively had negative experiences in their hometowns which make the campus climate to be subjectively more positive. Conversely, students interviewed that were from urban areas or larger universities perceived the campus climate more negatively. This finding indicates that perceptions of campus climate may be relative to the background and experiences of LGBTQ students. There is also some indication that LGBTQ students are willing to settle for less than an affirming campus environment because it is better than it used to be or a more affirming environment than where they came from. LGBTQ students become complacent from the minimal incremental improvements and are willing to settle for less than a healthy and affirming campus climate. The acceptance of a substandard campus climate and token improvements leads to minimal activism and campaigns to obtain a healthy and affirming campus climate.



I was surprised to hear one account of the LGBTQ organization on campus as unfriendly by one student that led them to believe that the overall campus climate was equally unwelcoming. Hanna reported, “[The campus climate] is not friendly. No, no one’s really openly friendly. I mean, “hello” our own [LGBTQ Center] is not that friendly, that’s how I feel.” It is counterintuitive that a LGBTQ organization--operated for and by LGBTQ students--would be unwelcoming towards any student, especially a LGBTQ student. I remember having a difficult time meeting and connecting with LGBTQ individuals on campus as an undergraduate. When I finally found an organization for LGBTQ students, I could not bring myself to attend any meetings for fear of being outed and a target for harassment or ill-treatment.

LGBTQ student perceptions of campus climate in this study are also influenced by their experiences of harassment, fear and level of safety. According to the literature, LGBTQ students experience harassment on a regular basis, with derogatory comments being the most prevalent form of harassment (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Worthen, 2011). The LGBTQ students included in this study shared stories of harassment consistent with the literature. Participants reported being exposed to derogatory comments and name calling on campus such as, “Oh, that’s Gay!” or “What is this...gay day?” Preachers preaching hate against homosexuality in the campus free speech zone was another common unwelcome experience of harassment. I remember preachers on campus spouting hate and displaying signs against homosexuality. It was difficult to avoid these preachers walking to class; I was always afraid of being called out as I walked by the free speech zone telling myself, “Don’t appear to be Gay.” LGBTQ

students are direct targets of derogatory comments and name calling such as, “Faggot”, “Dyke” or “You’re too pretty to be Gay.” The harassment reported by LGBTQ student participants is unacceptable, yet there is no evidence to the participants that the institution is taking *any* action to address these issues.

Male heterosexual students are more often the offenders of harassment experienced by the LGBTQ students studied. These offenders use harassment to defend or assert their masculinity when confronted with Gay males and Transgender students. Harassment is also used as a form of retaliation when their advances towards Lesbians or Bisexual women are rejected. I was surprised to hear that a Gay male student participated in the harassment of a Transgender student, calling her “Queer”, and a “he/she/it.” Participant Alexis stated, “It shows that any person can be ignorant and discriminate.” The participation in the harassment by this Gay male student could have been an attempt to pass as heterosexual, assimilate or otherwise conceal their identity to avoid becoming victims of similar harassment.

The majority of incidences of harassment in this study were said to be perpetrated by students; however, there are instances of university personnel making comments that are harassing to LGBTQ students. University administration, faculty and staff help establish and maintain a culture on campus by the way they conduct themselves in their roles. University personnel that make comments like, “Not the same kind of students that were here before.” communicate unacceptance of LGBTQ individuals and encourage a culture of harassment towards LGBTQ individuals.

Findings of fear in this study contribute to the stories in the literature: fear of the unknown; safety; discrimination; and harassment (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson &

Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). These fears impact most every aspect of student experiences. Students fear that their identity as LGBTQ will bring discrimination and ill treatment; therefore, some students choose to hide their identity on campus. As participant Rosalind stated, “I didn’t want anybody to know...Feeling like everybody is judging you...it weighs on you and it breaks you down.” Students avoid fellow LGBTQ students, events and anything else that may expose their identity. Hiding their identity limits the social and academic interactions of these students. LGBTQ students avoid interactions and making friends with members of the community, which is an unfortunate result of fear. Even meaningful relationships with heterosexual peers are stunted because LGBTQ students conceal aspects of their lives, making it difficult to make deep personal connections. As an undergraduate student, I did not know what would happen if people knew I was Gay. I was only open about my identity with a few select individuals during those years; I did not have many friends.

Fear of harassment and personal safety hinders LGBTQ student public displays of affection, such as holding hands with their significant other. Participant Vicki shared, “I feel awful saying that I feel less safe holding hands with her [my girlfriend] after dark, but I feel *way* less safe.” These fears are based on past personal experiences or experiences of other LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students are not afforded the same opportunities as their non-LGBTQ peers to express themselves with their significant others – instead they take measures, such as walking a safe distance away from their significant others, to avoid drawing attention to the fact that they are a LGBTQ couple and thus, avoid harassment and safety issues.

In addition to fear of harassment and personal safety, LGBTQ students fear discrimination and unfair treatment by instructors because of their identity. Students fear instructors will be harder on them or otherwise treat them differently, making academic success difficult. Rosalind's report expresses the general feeling of the LGBTQ students interviewed:

I felt like if they [faculty] knew [I was Gay], then automatically they would be harder on me, and they would grade me harder, and they would do things, and it would make it worse for me, which would affect my grade.

Findings related to experiences with faculty are discussed later in this chapter; however, some students did have experiences of discrimination based on their LGBTQ identity. LGBTQ students attempt to conceal their identity from their instructors to avoid discrimination or unequal treatment.

While some LGBTQ students feel safe on their campus, there are some safety concerns ranging from fear for personal safety to assaults. The most severe safety issues facing LGBTQ students are physical and sexual assaults. Transgender students are easy targets for not only more frequent and severe harassment, but they are also more vulnerable to sexual assaults than other students. I was not emotionally prepared to hear Alexis' account of sexual assaults she experienced as a Transgender student:

I've had three...*three sexual* assaults on campus since I have been here—one my freshman, sophomore, and junior year. One [of the assailants] even mentioned, while the assault was going on, that he had noticed me before and how he could tell [I was Transgender]...So, I do think that being Trans kind of made me

vulnerable and basically put “victim” on my forehead, even though I do not see myself as that. I see myself as a survivor. I think I was an easy target.

The threat of physical assault is a reality for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students can be victims of violence, especially at the hands of heterosexual male students either because of homophobia or a measure to enforce gender norms. Rosalind described her perspective about safety related to heterosexual male students:

So, you know, if you get a super fem [feminine], super attractive woman that, you know, says, “I’m Gay.” then she’s got a higher risk of a straight man getting angry and, you know, getting violent just because she won’t sleep with him.

Heterosexual male students may become violent toward Gay male students due to homophobia or as a way to enforce gender norms. In addition, heterosexual male students may also become violent towards Lesbians when sexual advances are rejected, again, because of homophobia or a way to enforce gender norms or otherwise defend their masculinity. I am generally intimidated by men, although I cannot recall having any specific negative experiences. The intimidation I experience stems from an assumption that heterosexual men are likely to be homophobic, harassing, and violent towards LGBTQ individuals, especially Gay men. This intimidation led me to avoid certain areas on campus where groups of male students, like fraternities, would congregate.

Appearance is a factor for the safety of LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students that are more easily identified as LGBTQ are less safe than those that appear non-LGBTQ. Appearance includes the way a student dresses, mannerisms, public displays of affection, proximity to other LGBTQ individuals, interest in LGBTQ issues or material, among others. Being invisible is a strategy among some LGBTQ students as a way to be safe on

campus. Just appearing to be LGBTQ places a student at risk for a hate crime or assault which makes this a concern for heterosexual students as well.

Current safety measures put in place by the institution studied are not adequate for LGBTQ students. While some students feel any safety issues would be quickly resolved, others feel that safety measures, particularly campus police, are not capable of responding in a timely manner and lack sensitivity to deal with LGBTQ incidents. LGBTQ students feel that their safety concerns may not be perceived as significant by non-LGBTQ individuals and, thus, would not be responded to with the due diligence these students deserve. As Jackson stated:

I don't really trust campus PD [police department], especially when it comes to LGBT individuals. In that situation, all you have is an ignorant person with a gun. "I'm assuming you're not a gay man. I'm assuming you're not a LGBT individual. So, I'm not going to assume that you understand what I'm going through.

Rape aggression defense (RAD) classes offered through the campus police department are gender exclusive which prohibits some LGBTQ students from acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to defend themselves against physical and sexual assaults. Alexis attested she was not allowed to attend RAD classes as a Transgender female, "I wanted to be able to protect myself. The first time I sent an email about RAD they ended up [saying,] 'We're not going be able to let you in the course.'" and she didn't really say why." Such classes must be inclusive and accessible to all students regardless of their identity.

The combination of these perceptions of climate, experiences of harassment, fear and safety give insight into the overall general campus climate of the institution studied as evaluated directly by LGBTQ students. It is through their perceptions and experiences that we can come closer to understanding the phenomenon of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America.

### **Experiences with Faculty**

LGBTQ student experiences with faculty are generally positive and the majority of faculty are at least tolerating of LGBTQ students; however, some of the students interviewed reported issues with faculty. LGBTQ students interviewed for this study do not define their overall experiences with faculty based on negative experiences, and are sincerely grateful for the positive experiences they have had thus far. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that some of the positive faculty experiences included faculty that are openly out to their students as LGBTQ individuals.

Some faculty and, in some instances, entire departments are more conservative and less accepting of LGBTQ individuals than others, which negatively impacts LGBTQ student experiences. Participant Rosalind shared:

I think a lot of it was just the way they expressed, you know, *we* [LGBTQ individuals] say, “LGBTQ.” *They* always said, “*The Gays*” or “*Those Gays*.” They [faculty] never used terms, they always said things like that.... I do remember this—the professor said, “HIV is usually found with *the Gays*.”

It is not surprising that LGBTQ students like Rosalind would be hesitant on disclosing their identity or otherwise contribute to the education of others about LGBTQ issues when they are faced with faculty that clearly have bias's against LGBTQ individuals. One can only wonder about all the educational opportunities that are missed by LGBTQ students who are not contributing their perspectives in class because of fear of consequences.

LGBTQ students may choose not to disclose their identity to faculty, and are less likely to report faculty for derogatory comments made toward these students to university administrators for fear of retaliation that may negatively impact their grade or treatment in classes. A few years ago a faculty member, who is no longer at the university, referred to my dissertation topic in front of a classroom full of my peers as being about “LGB [pauses] XYZ, you know, you’re people.” I was offended and embarrassed; she outed me to my peers and made me feel as if my topic was not significant. A peer approached me after class to apologize for what this professor said in class. LGBTQ student learning and engagement can be negatively impacted from the cognitive dissonance—conflicting thoughts and beliefs—that occurs from keeping their identity a secret and not speaking up against discriminatory or derogatory remarks about LGBTQ individuals. Alternatively, some faculty are sensitive to LGBTQ issues and attempt to maintain safe learning environments that respects all.

Heteronormativity exists among even well intentioned faculty members that can contribute to experiences of prejudice, discrimination and stigma of LGBTQ students. While the presence of heteronormativity does not equate to anti-LGBTQ, it does influence student experiences with faculty. Heteronormative assumptions—assumption



that all individuals are heterosexual—lead LGBTQ students to question if it is safe to disclose their identity or speak up about LGBTQ issues. These assumptions also can create awkward moments in the classroom when, for example, an instructor asks a female student, “Do you live with your boyfriend?” and her response is “No, I live with my girlfriend.” Instructors often do not know how to react when heteronormative assumptions are corrected which leads to uncomfortable reactions. Heteronormativity can make instructors appear to be not inclusive and leave LGBTQ students questioning their acceptance. Just as the students interviewed, I was confronted with heteronormativity among faculty. I continue to struggle with how to respond to some, likely innocent questions, such as, “What does your wife do?” or “Your son must get his red hair from your wife.” On one hand, I want to be honest and tell instructors that I have a husband, not a wife; however, I am concerned about negative implications for outing myself. Often times, heteronormative assumptions are honest mistakes that I, as a member of the LGBGQ community make; however, these situations still place students in awkward positions.

Somewhat related to heteronormativity are errors made when faculty members do not address Transgender students by their preferred name and/or pronouns. A Transgender student may not have legally changed their birth name, Nick, but wish to be called by Nikki; their appearance may be male, but they prefer to be referred to by female pronouns such as she, her and hers. Transgender students are proactive in emailing instructors prior to the first day of class to inform them of their preferred name and pronouns; however, instances of faculty not abiding by those wishes exist at the university studied as Alexis testified, “She misgendered me and that was very upsetting

...I ended up failing the course because I didn't want to go anymore. Because, I was already behind, felt bad about missing and like being misgendered by her made it worse.” Such mistakes draw attention to them as being different or non-conforming which can be humiliating, and can negatively impact the student's motivation to attend and perform well in class.

### **Residence Hall Experiences**

A large component of the overall college experience includes experiences of living in residence halls which serves as a student's home during their academic career (Fanucce & Taub, 2009). Many of the LGBTQ students interviewed talked about their residence hall life that included interactions with hall staff, room assignments, bathrooms and issues of harassment and safety.

Resident assistants and residence hall coordinators make up the residence hall staff that interacts with students on a daily basis. While, the majority of these LGBTQ student experiences with residence hall staff are positive, some are not accepting and inclusive of LGBTQ students. There is evidence that some staff assert their personal religious beliefs on LGBTQ students to express disapproval. Rosalind described a resident assistant that forced their religious beliefs on a friend of hers:

Actually, one of my friend's [Resident Assistant] actually took him into his room and sat down with him and told him that he was worried about his soul, and tried to put the fear of God in him to make him straight.

This bias based on religious beliefs created an uncomfortable living environment for LGBTQ students that led some to seek housing off campus. Some residence hall staff—representatives of the university—failed to address harassment reported by LGBTQ students, which indirectly condones and potentially increases the occurrence of such harassment. Residence hall staff receives limited LGBTQ training which is not sufficient given the experiences outlined in this study, just as participant Palmer stated:

Housing even trains for LGBT stuff, they might not do it extensively, like with Intersex or Transgender people. I think that's because it's not as prominent [common] in this area as just a Gay man, or Gay female, or a Bisexual person.

Room assignments present a challenge for LGBTQ students. Residence hall assignments based on biological sex instead of gender identity and/or sexual orientation are heteronormative—assumption that all students are heterosexual. There is no good solution for the room assignments of LGBTQ students beyond private bedrooms and bathrooms, because of all the complexities—especially with traditional heteronormative practices as Vicki alluded:

One of the most beautiful things about heteronormativity is that they just stick Bi and Lesbian girls together because obviously they can never be a couple. And there's some Gay guys I know that are doing the same thing because there's really not, I think, especially for Bi people, there's not a good solution to that.

LGBTQ students are forced into living arrangements that are uncomfortable for all involved. Consider the following room assignments:

- A Gay male student being assigned to live with a heterosexual male student
- A Lesbian assigned to live with a heterosexual female student

- A Bisexual student assigned to live with a same sex roommate
- A Transgender female being assigned to live with a heterosexual male

These room assignments leave LGBTQ students vulnerable to harassment and assaults within their private living space, as well as the mere awkwardness of such living arrangements. I did not live on campus because I was concerned about roommates and communal bathrooms. As I mentioned, I am intimidated by men and I was afraid of harassment or violence I may have experienced, thus, I made a 25 mile commute to campus every day to attend classes.

The premise behind same sex room assignments is assumed to control the sexual activities and cohabitation of students; however, this practice cannot be effectively applied to LGBTQ students. According to this assignment practice, LGBTQ students are able to cohabitate and share intimacy with their partners, and many do. Cohabitation of LGBTQ couples in residence halls does not break any policy or practices of the university; however it is frowned upon and challenged by some residents and hall staff. Cohabiting or not, LGBTQ students prefer to room together as it is considerably more comfortable and avoids potential issues related to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

Transgender students are forced into room assignments that do not match their gender because the institution refuses to recognize their gender identity. Alexis spoke about her experiences as a Transgender female living in a residence hall:

My first four years I had to live on a male floor. It wasn't until, [I] guess, my second senior semester that I got to live on a female floor.... I didn't even get to live on the floor that I identified with, even though I had been identifying as

female since I had been here [at this university]. I was assigned a male roommate.

Essentially the university studied assigns Transgender females student to male residence halls or floors with male roommates or, conversely, Transgender male students to female residence halls or floors with female roommates. Failure to respect the gender identity of Transgender students places them in living situations that are uncomfortable and potentially laden with complications including safety issues as Palmer contested to, “That is incredibly unsafe for somebody who looks like a female, dresses like a female, identifies as a female, to be forced to live on a community style floor with all men.” This practice is a serious safety issue, Transgender students must be treated as the gender they identify with. Additionally, this practice does nothing to affirm Transgender students who already face discrimination and harassment in every aspect of their lives. Transgender students on this campus studied have no safe personal space to call home during their college career given these current practices.

## **Support**

LGBTQ students believe that their university is unsupportive, which is consistent with the literature (Fanucce & Taub, 2009; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Rankin, 2005; 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). The studied campus’ LGBTQ organization and its students are not a priority and are not earnestly supported, just as participant Cyndi reported, “I just feel like there’s a lot of people that don’t see the [LGBTQ] Center and the kids that rely on it, as priorities.” LGBTQ students are offended by this lack of support; especially

given the support *other organizations* receive. Limited, if any, financial support is given to the LGBTQ center by the university which hinders its ability to establish a presence within the campus community through outreach activities and events. Many participants echoed Jackson's thoughts, "The [LGBTQ] Center is a student organization, and it is not a university funded organization—problem number one, because at any given point the [LGBTQ] Center can tank [shut down]." The LGBTQ center at the university studied was even prohibited in displaying a Pride flag as part of their information table at university events.

While LGBTQ students are thankful for meeting space provided, such meeting space is temporal and not located in the most inviting areas of campus. The space allocated for the LGBTQ center was relocated from one difficult to find, dingy basement of one building to another. The center's hours of operation are negatively impacted by negligible financing that prohibits adequate staffing to keep their doors open as a safe space for LGBTQ students. This lack of support has direct impact on LGBTQ visibility on campus and is discussed in the next section.

Support extends to support for resolving experiences of harassment but even that support is lacking as Jackson explained:

She [student rights and responsibilities officer] made them [the harassers] apologize to me while I was sitting there and obviously it didn't sound sincere because she *made* them do it. I was like "Okay. Fine. Whatever" and she said, "You know, names can really hurt people. I remember whenever I was little, people used to call me *Betsy Wetsy*, which was a doll that wet her pants. It used to really upset me." She had equated being called a doll to a derogatory slur. I will

never, never, never be able to get that out of my head [thinking], “Where in your mind do you think it is okay for you to equate my experience to that?” They [the harassers] really didn’t get punished. I wouldn’t even say they got a slap on the wrist. They got a warning of a slap on the wrist because the woman [student rights and responsibilities officer] was like, “Now, we’re not going to punish them in anyway, but if they have any type of discriminatory action in next semester then it will go on their record.

It is clear administration does take LGBTQ issues of harassment seriously enough to impose punishment on the perpetrators of such harassment. There is also a failure to recognize the severity of harassment directed towards LGBTQ students. There is apparent lack of support at the university studied on multiple levels, from funding of the LGBTQ organization to appropriately reprimanding students for harassment of LGBTQ students.

### **LGBTQ Visibility**

There is a lack of visibility or LGBTQ presence on campus, and the university does not overtly communicate the status of their campus climate publically. The lack of visibility noted is directly related to the lack of support discussed in the previous section of this chapter. LGBTQ students that find the LGBTQ Center do so through word of mouth because it does not exist on the university’s website or any directory as Vicki reported, “I looked for it, actually, when I was applying to schools, and there’s nothing. I mean nothing on any website linked to [this school] that I could find about LGBT

people.” As an undergraduate student, I could not find any organization or programs for LGBTQ students on campus. I remember wanting to come right out and ask a university official where I could find a LGBTQ student organization but never did because I did not want to out myself.

The limited number of outreach activities and events provided by the LGBTQ center are not adequately publicized. The lack of visibility negatively impacts the organization’s membership and event attendance, as Cyndi indicated, “If I was a student that knew nothing about [this school], looking at it to come here, I would think there was nothing for LGBTQ students.” The organization was not permitted to display a Pride flag at their showcase table on orientation days because, as Jackson said, “it may be offensive”. The space for the LGBTQ center is tucked away in the basement of a somewhat unwelcoming building which communicates a lack of importance and an attempt to conceal.

There is no LGBTQ presence on the university website or publications that communicates anything about the campus climate or that the institution has a LGBTQ Center. By not communicating the campus climate publically, by not having a LGBTQ organization, by not having a LGBTQ presence or allowed to fly the LGBTQ flag, the university is sending a clear message that the campus climate is not friendly, affirming or inclusive. Potential LGBTQ students are not able to adequately evaluate the campus climate or otherwise make an informed decision on attendance because of the lack of LGBTQ visibility.



## **Resiliency**

Some LGBTQ students are more resilient than others and are better able to succeed despite negative experiences (Wimberly et al., 2015). All of the LGBTQ students interviewed for this study displayed evidence of resiliency and academic success regardless of their negative experiences. It is unclear if their confidence came from experience or personality but it is clear that these students were survivors. Alexis had experienced much negativity as a Transgender student still drips of resilience, “I’ve been very outspoken about things.... I’ve been an activist pretty much since I’ve been on campus.” Regardless of experience or personality, LGBTQ students develop coping strategies like Brad who stated:

I’ve found if you are kind of in their face about it, you don’t give them the chance to say anything negative or be negative—they get so flustered they can’t do anything and they just kind of take it.

Whether LGBTQ students step foot on campus, resilient or not, they will become resilient because of the experiences during their college career just as Rosalind:

It doesn’t bother me now when they look at me and they roll their eyes, and give me the sideways glance, that doesn’t bother me anymore because it happened [at this university] so much. I’ve learned to just kind of let it roll off my back, but starting out here when it happened, it bothered me.

The evidence of resiliency of the LGBTQ students included in this study brings concern about LGBTQ that are not as resilient. One can only assume that it is this trait of

resiliency that brought these specific LGBTQ students to participate in this study to begin with, or only resilient LGBTQ students exist on the campus studied.

## **Recommendations**

The university must begin working towards a healthy and affirming environment for LGBTQ individuals. The negative experiences described in this study are unacceptable and there is no evidence the institution has taken any steps to address the needs of this minority group. One can only wonder— in a time where budgets have been cut in colleges and universities and enrollments are especially critical—why every student is not as important as the next. University leaders must wield their power and privilege to support and affirm LGBTQ students. The LGBTQ students interviewed made some recommendations based on their own experiences which are included in this section along with other recommendations based on the findings of this study. The recommendations outlined in this section are not exhaustive; however, provide a foundation to establish a healthy and affirming climate for LGBTQ students.

Recommendations included are increasing LGBTQ visibility, funding, institutional support, zero tolerance policies, education, housing, and future research.

LGBTQ students and their organization can no longer live in the shadows as if the institution does not recognize or are embarrassed of their existence. While the number of LGBTQ students is unknown, these students exist on every campus. The university can no longer seclude the LGBTQ student organization to dingy and dark basement or refuse to allow a Pride flag to be displayed at orientation tables for fear “it may be offensive.”

LGBTQ visibility must be allowed to exist if the institution expects to recruit and retain these students. LGBTQ visibility will send a message to current and future LGBTQ students that this institution is a safe and affirming campus. One of the simplest recommendations to increase LGBTQ visibility is from participant Vicki:

Everywhere in DC has rainbow colored flag stickers if they are LGBT friendly, and I think that if you can get it to the point that it was available [at this university] and seen, people would be more likely to be, “Okay. At least this is a



safe space.” [If there was LGBTQ visibility it would send the message that] you can come here [to this university] and be taught things that you would be taught in New York City, DC, or San

Francisco with the same inclusion that you would be taught there, people would be like, “Okay. Yea. Let’s go!” instead of, “Nah. Backwater town...backwater school...Let’s move on.”

A simple Pride flag sticker indicated safety to Vicki in a large metropolitan area—safety to be herself; safety to enter places of business; and safety to use transportation services.

A simple Pride flag sticker strategically placed, would communicate great meaning to current and potential LGBTQ students at the university studied. Stickers must be displayed prominently throughout campus—doors of admissions, financial aid, dining services, student life, everywhere. A simple Pride flag on the university website becomes a beacon to current and potential LGBTQ students saying, “This is a safe and affirming place for you!” This same website logo could serve as a hotlink to the university’s LGBTQ resource page. Faculty who support LGBTQ students can display these symbols

to give students notice that their offices are a place they are welcome. Such a simple mark can communicate so much with little effort and increase enrollment and retention rates of LGBTQ students.

While LGBTQ visibility is vitally important, sufficient funding to support LGBTQ students, organizations, and events is required. The study university does not hesitate to throw money at athletic programs and other elite student programs that are deemed worthwhile; the affairs of LGBTQ students are just as worthwhile as any other student organizations on campus. Limited funding for the LGBTQ center and LGBTQ events was an issue discussed by students interviewed for this study. Participants reported that the LGBTQ center was not funded by their university, which limits the hours of operation and events held by the center. These LGBTQ students want to hold bigger events that would increase LGBTQ visibility, but scarce resources prohibit them from doing so as participant Brad indicated, “There must be sufficient, reoccurring, university funding allocated to LGBTQ student affairs to support the LGBTQ center and events.”

Related to the recommendation of adequate funding, the LGBTQ students interviewed expressed wanting support from their university for the LGBTQ center. These students were clear, they do not want to relinquish their control of the center to their university, but they do want support and guidance. Jackson offered:

It would have to make it something that is institutional. While I’m not necessarily a proponent of that because then it takes all the power out of the student’s hands, and then you just end up with another office. You need to secure it like, it needs to be put in place, it needs to be something that is taken seriously.

The LGBTQ center must be affiliated with a university office or department that will provide support and guidance. A LGBTQ student affairs office must be created, with an advisory board of LGBTQ students, to address many of the issues and recommendations discussed in this study and to advocate for the LGBTQ student population.

Cases of harassment and serious issues of safety are inexcusable and can no longer be allowed to be ignored; they must be dealt with, not warnings, not apologies, but with absolute severe consequences that send a clear message to the campus community that such incidents will not be tolerated. No tolerance policies must be implemented and strictly enforced to combat harassment and threats of physical and sexual assaults experienced by these LGBTQ students. Incidences of name calling such as “Faggot” or “Dyke” must be taken seriously and addressed swiftly. The concerns and complaints filed by LGBTQ students must be taken as seriously, if not more seriously, than any other issue reported. Alexis was sexually assaulted *three times* as a student—this is horrific and inexcusable. One can only wonder if these sexual assaults would have happened if there had been a history of a campus culture that did not tolerance harassment and acts of violence against LGBTQI students. In addition, self-defense classes offered by the university currently discriminate against students based on gender as they only allow females—biological females—to participate. These self-defense classes must be gender inclusive as all students, regardless of gender or identity should be afforded the same opportunity to learn skills necessary to protect themselves against assaults.

Ignorance can no longer be an excuse for the way in which LGBTQ students are addressed and treated by the university community. The university must provide and

mandate LGBTQ training for students, staff, faculty, police, and administration.

Participant Palmer suggested such training would have systemic effects:

I feel like if they [the university] had everybody just sit down and like do a training, just to get it out there, it would at least give them some basic information ...If they started with the gen ed. teachers, that would be the smartest decision. If a student comes in as a freshman, they're Transgender, their gen ed. teacher [is ready] because they had training on it. [The student is] going to be like, "Wow! This is awesome!"...Then they're going to be more open about it or they're going to be like, "Maybe I don't have to tell the teacher in the beginning that I'm Transgender. I can just identify as a female and be okay with it."

Mandated LGBTQ training provided by the university will give the university community the knowledge and skills necessary to affirm these LGBTQ students and be more sensitive to their needs. In addition to mandatory training, there must be opportunities for LGBTQ students to work with non-LGBTQ peers for purposes such as Toys for Tots or Habitat for Humanity project. These partnerships will provide a platform for students, regardless of identity, to work together; learn about and from each other; build relationships and friendships; and see one another for more than just one's identity.

LGBTQ students cannot continue to be *forced* into living arrangements that are uncomfortable, inappropriate, and extremely unsafe. Housing for LGBTQ students, especially for Transgender students, must be addressed by the university studied. Not only are residence hall assignments uncomfortable and laden with problems, they are unsafe. Transgender females are placed in the most unsafe living arrangements as Palmer

attested to, “That is incredibly unsafe for somebody who looks like a female, dresses like a female, identifies as a female, to be forced to live on a community style floor with all men.” LGBTQ students must have a place they can call home during their academic career where they are safe and affirmed. An alternative to traditional gender-specific housing is gender-inclusive or gender-neutral housing. This housing alternative would allow LGBTQ students to select room assignments based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Other options for LGBTQ students are private rooms or LGBTQ themed housing where LGBTQ students can choose to housing assignments in a living community exclusively for LGBTQ students. Gender-inclusive or gender-neutral housing may be the best option for universities because isolating LGBTQ students to private rooms would exclude them from the experiences of a community living environment and consolidating LGBTQ students into one living space could lead to segregation and issues of safety. Alternative housing must be an option for LGBTQ students, never a requirement.

One final recommendation is future research, including constant monitoring and reporting of the experiences of the LGBTQ students. This monitoring and reporting aims to measure the effects of changes made to address LGBTQ student issues as well as identify any experiences not included in this study. The disconnect noted in the literature of what a college experience should be and what is actually experienced by LGBTQ students will be addressed as more research contributes to this discussion—making conclusions and influencing change.

## **Limitations**

The purpose of this study is to understand a very specific phenomenon—what it means to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America—it does not aim to make generalizations from findings. Findings from this study may or may not be applied to other situations.

All of the LGBTQ students included in this study exhibited some level of resiliency as observed through their confidence and success, despite negative experiences at their university. The voices and experience of less resilient LGBTQ students are not included in this study for various reasons. This subgroup of LGBTQ students may not have received an email invitation because they did not have an existing rapport with the faculty gatekeeper used to recruit participants. Selection of LGBTQ students through purposeful sampling did not yield the number of participants anticipated—three participants ultimately backed out before interviews were conducted. Another possibility for the lack of representation of some LGBTQ students is fear—fear of identifying themselves to the researcher, and fear that confidentiality would not be maintained. Yet another reason for limited participation is some LGBTQ students are not out and, in some cases, have not accepted their own identity. Methods to include the voices of less resilient LGBTQ students or those that are not out must be identified and used in future research.



## Final Thoughts

This study ends where it began—with a quote from Earl Nightingale, an American motivational speaker and author of the 1950's, who once said, “Whenever we're afraid, it's because *we don't know* enough. If we *understood* enough, we would never be afraid” (Joshua-Amadi, 2013, p. 11). The experiences of LGBTQ students at many colleges and universities are *unknown* which invokes fear in students and should invoke concern in administration of postsecondary educational institutions. Additionally, there is a gap in the literature related to the experiences of LGBTQ students attending universities in rural, Bible Belt America. This study sought to alleviate some of the fear of this unknown by allowing the voices of these LGBTQ students to share their stories of what it is like to be a LGBTQ student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America.

Leaders in higher education have a moral and ethical obligation to address the findings of this study and to work diligently toward an educational environment that is safe and affirming of LGBTQ students. Institutions of higher education have an undeniable responsibility to be change agents—to be a catalyst for social change. Society historically has, and continues to, looked to institutions of higher education for knowledge required to make decisions, inform policy, and implement best practices for the common good—institutions of higher education are well positioned to influence the public related to the affairs and rights of LGBTQ individuals. A wild-spreading fire can ignite from institutions of higher education that will have long lasting and far reaching societal change when future leaders developed at these institutions demand the safety and

affirmation of LGBTQ individuals in their own communities wherever they go far into the future.

Several of the LGBTQ students interviewed expressed gratitude for the chance to have their voices heard. It was an honor to serve as the facilitator for these students; however, more voices must be added to this discussion to fully understand the experiences of LGBTQ students and eliminate any associated fears. This will require more individuals in leadership roles that understand the importance of this field of study to step forward to ensure more LGBTQ student voices are heard. It is my sincere hope that this study will contribute to the literature and significantly improve the postsecondary educational experiences for all LGBTQ students.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Invitation Letter**

## INVITATION LETTER

Date

Dear (Insert Participant's Name):

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree dissertation study in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Eastern Kentucky University under the supervision of Dr. Deborah West.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQI students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. Historically, research focus has been on the perspectives and attitudes on heterosexual students, faculty, and staff towards LGBTQI individuals, but little data have been collected directly from LGBTQI students. Interviews will be conducted with LGBTQI students attending a university in the rural, Bible Belt area of the United States to collect data to answer the research question for this study:

What is the college experience like for an LGBTQI student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America?

Findings from this inquiry will provide a better understanding for university administrators to promote a healthy affirming campus climate and combat any findings of disconnect between what a college or university experience should be and what is actually experienced by LGBTQI students. This study will also allow institutions to address the needs of LGBTQI students attending universities in the United States which can directly impact retention and recruitment of LGBTQI students.

Participation in this study will include an interview of approximately 60 minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will be digitally-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Your interview is confidential; all digital files will be password protected and any paper documents will be kept under lock and key. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study. Since data will be intermixed with data from other participants, the findings will assure participants anonymity. All files associated with this study will be destroyed after three years. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at [Eric.Weber@eku.edu](mailto:Eric.Weber@eku.edu). You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Deborah West at [Deborah.West@eku.edu](mailto:Deborah.West@eku.edu). Please reply if you are willing to participate in this study.

I look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

**APPENDIX B**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Experiences of LGBTQ Students Attending a University in Rural, Bible Belt**

#### **America**

#### **Why am I being asked to participate in this research?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the experiences as a LGBTQI student attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you identify as a LGBTQI university student and are 18 years of age or older. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 10 – 15 student participants.

#### **Who is doing the study?**

The person in charge of this study is Eric Weber, an ECU doctoral candidate. I will be guided in this research by Dr. Deborah West, an ECU professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

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

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQI students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America. Findings from this inquiry will provide an understanding for administration to promote a healthier affirming campus climate and to address disconnects between what a college or university experience should be and what is actually experienced by LGBTQI students. This knowledge can address the needs of LGBTQI students attending a university in rural, Bible Belt America and impact retention and recruitment of LGBTQI students.

#### **Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**

The bulk of my research will be conducted at ECU. However, we can meet at a mutually agreed location for a one hour interview. You may be asked through email at a later date to provide clarifications or additional information.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview about your university experiences as a LGBTQI student.

#### **Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?**

You must identify as a LGBTQI university student and be 18 years of age or older.

#### **What are the possible risks and discomforts?**

To the best of our knowledge, the interview will have no more risk or harm than you would experience in everyday life.

#### **Will I benefit from taking part in this study?**

The hope is that information learned from this study can make any needed improvements for LGBTQI students on university campuses.

**Do I have to take part in this study?**

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may stop participation at any time.

**If I don't take part in this study, are there other choices?**

Interviews are the only methodology for collecting data for this inquiry.

**What will it cost me to participate?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

**Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?**

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

**Who will see the information I give?**

Your data will be combined with data from other participants taking part in this study. When findings are revealed in this dissertation, it will not be identifiable to one participant. The final dissertation will be published on Pro Quest, an online source for dissertations across the globe read by educators.

**Can my taking part in the study end early?**

If you decide to take part in this study, you have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

**What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?**

Although highly unlikely, if you believe you are impacted in some way because of your interview, you should contact Eric Weber at Eric.Weber@eku.edu immediately. Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any necessary care, treatment, or lost wages while taking part in this study, but instead refer to your own medical coverage

**What if I have questions?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Eric Weber at Eric.Weber@eku.edu If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. You will be provided a copy of this consent form before your interview.

*I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.*

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Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

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Date

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Printed name of person taking part in the study

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Signature of researcher