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Queer Students' Perceptions of Inclusion at ABC Community College:

A Phenomenology

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by

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December 2019

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Keywords: Queer, LGBTQ, inclusion, campus climate

## ABSTRACT

Queer Students' Perceptions of Inclusion at ABC Community College:

A Phenomenology

by

Francis Canedo

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of Queer students at ABC Community College. Using phenomenology as its guiding framework, transcribed interviews were analyzed in order to seek the phenomenon of the experience. Examination of the literature suggested that Queer students' experiences of discrimination could have a negative impact on academic achievement and that inclusive and affirming spaces have the opposite effect.

Further, Queer students search for affirming spaces from their faculty and peers, and the engagement these spaces provide may be good prognosticator academic achievement. When students are provided with inclusive spaces, they may be more likely to come out, live openly, and represent themselves authentically (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014).

Other researchers are encouraged to replicate the study with a larger number of participants, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Faculty in institutions of higher education have a mission to impart knowledge. To achieve this goal, faculty and staff in colleges and universities must create an environment where knowledge can be cultivated and encouraged, with the understanding that institutional climate affects the campus community at large. However, campus climate not only influences knowledge, but also influences those who impart and receive such knowledge. Campus climate significantly impacts how any given academic community contributes back to their campus environment to create more inclusiveness and equity (Evans N. J., 2000). Indeed, it is a major component in the ability to create and establish inclusive campuses while other areas have more rapidly adapted to the recognition of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, most campuses have not kept pace (Evans N. J., 2000). Faculty, staff, and students in non-dominant categories of sexual identity may experience widespread harassment and bullying based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (Human Rights Watch, 2001). It is for this reason, in many cases sexual minority individuals stay in the closet and choose not to affirm their sexuality or identity. Developing and putting in place comprehensive policies that are Queer inclusive and affirmative has become necessary on campuses across the country.

Heteronormativity is an impediment to change because students on college campuses may experience pressure to adopt dominant gender norms and to question their sexuality (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). Administrators must prepare institutions of higher education to deal with sexual diversity in their midst and to confront the lack of resources granted to non-dominant groups.

Findings on a 2007 study by the Center for Public Education (CPE) described high school

students' reasons for dropping out of school varied in the following ways: not liking the school (36.6% of cases); not getting along with the teachers (25% of cases); "did not feel I belonged there" (19.9% of cases); "could not get along with other students" (18.7% of cases); "did not feel safe" (in 10% of cases) (Center for Public Education, 2007, p. 3). If students do not attend class because they have safety concerns in the classroom, at school in general, or if they are not capable of engaging fully with what is taught because of safety concerns, then a link in the educational chain is broken. Using this information as a stepping stone and extrapolating the results to a college and university environment, one could argue that an inclusive school climate can create favorable conditions for students to stay in school and complete their degrees. Findings on the Center for Public Education's (2007) research also provide evidence linking educational experiences, such as the quality of relationships with peers and faculty, to examples of persistence to graduation.

Queer youth face different social challenges than their heterosexual peers, but this is not to say that the social problems faced by Queer youth are exclusive to the group. College years are the time when many of the assumptions and preconceptions about sexuality, gender identity and gender expression are challenged, and this may be difficult for some youth (Stevens Jr., 2004). Stevens Jr. (2004) also states that "for some gay men their sexual identity development occurs simultaneously and in conjunction with race, gender, and religious identity development" (p. 184). In the phenomenology of Queer students, family and friends may not provide the necessary support to deal with both academics and the social changes during college. Queer youth are also considered to have higher numbers of depression, homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, and truancy than their heterosexual counterparts (Reed, Prado, Matsumoto, & Amaro, 2010). This is why studying the climate at institutions of higher education is necessary.



Colleges and university administrators are being pressured to pay more attention to student persistence and graduation rates (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). Given that campus climate can determine the persistence of Queer students, it is important for institutions of higher education to take steps to create a more diverse and inclusive campus climate.

Students spend most of their days at their institutions where faculty, staff, and peers shape their academic development, experiences, and outcomes (Kuh, 1995). Kuh (1995) also states that,

...substantial gains in knowledge (particularly in the major), autonomy, social maturation, and personal competence; modest gains in verbal and quantitative skills, cognitive complexity, aestheticism, and awareness of interests, values, aspirations, and religious views; and modest decreases in irrational prejudice, political naivete, and dogmatism. (p. 123+)

If an institution's climate is not inclusive, students can perceive themselves to be unwelcome. Indeed, unwelcoming environments can become hostile or unsafe for students (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). Clearly this is one of the fundamental reasons that institutions of higher education need to provide adequate support to students.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of Queer students in a community college, the institution's faculty and staff's response to those experiences, and to identify whether the visibility of clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances create a more welcoming environment for Queer youth on college campuses. This study may also provide insight into the experiences of Queer students. This study will examine the effectiveness and visibility of clubs like the Gay-Straight Alliance on the perception of inclusiveness of Queer students on campus. Many Queer students experience isolation and hostility, which forces them to be cautious in their approach to new experiences. Learning is

better achieved when students feel validated by their faculty and peers (Evans N. J., 2000).

Creating a supportive and welcoming climate for Queer students may result in a more effective learning environment where students can thrive in their educational pursuits, and colleges can benefit from the retention and graduation of such students.

This phenomenological study may provide a basis for further investigation of the Queer youth population and should provide a framework through which future studies can be performed. However, the intended purpose of this investigation is to document the phenomenon of experiences and perceptions of inclusiveness for Queer students at a community college.

Student engagement has been shown to be significantly related to the student's perception of campus climate (Kuh, 1995). At the same time, engagement is the biggest prognosticator of academic persistence (Kuh, 2001-2002). Reason and Rankin (2016) stated, "Negative campus climates, those in which students experience harassment and/or discrimination, hinder educational attainment and positive outcomes. Conversely, students who experience a campus as supportive are more likely to experience positive learning outcomes" (Reason and Rankin, 2006, p. 7). These instances explain why queer students who experience harassment and discrimination on their campuses are at risk for failing.

At the high school level, Queer students who are harassed and discriminated against have a higher risk for truancy, depression, homelessness, and suicide (GLSEN, 2012). Students with issues such as these, are more likely to fail classes and are also less likely to attend college. Despite all the risk factors Queer youth have to attain academic achievement, resources and institutional support for them lacks at colleges and universities. According to Campus Pride (2010) fewer than 7% of colleges and universities offered any support specifically for Queer

students. This demonstrates the need for colleges and universities to create a campus climate that is conducive to learning for Queer students.

### Significance of the Study

As a researcher, I am interested in understanding how Queer students perceive campus climate and if the visibility of clubs, like Gay Straight Alliances, encourages their persistence to graduation. The findings of this research may have implications for researchers, academic affair administrators, student services and student affairs professionals, students, and potential students.

This study contributes to our understanding of how campus organizations, like the Gay-Straight Alliance, at community colleges may increase the likelihood of students attending, achieve academically, and persist to graduation. This study also informs how the perceived effects of a more inclusive campus contributes to a better learning environment for students.

Furthermore, the study findings contribute to scant amount of literature about Queer students in community colleges. As reported by Garvey, Taylor, and Rankin (2015), “the dearth of research examining LGBTQ students at two-year institutions leaves scholars and practitioners without empirical evidence” (p. 528) to substantiate research about campus climate.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Queer students in community colleges, the community college faculty and staff’s response to those experiences, and to identify if visibility of clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, create a more welcoming environment for Queer students. This study will also provide qualitative research of the experiences of Queer students and examine the effects of visibility of the Gay-Straight Alliance on the perception of inclusiveness of Queer students on campus. This phenomenological study’s goal is to provide a basis for further investigation on the effects of

visibility of Gay Straight Alliances on Queer students' perceptions of inclusiveness, and whether these clubs have an effect on persistence to graduation.

Many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (Queer) students experience isolation and hostility, which forces them to be cautious in their approach to new experiences; when students feel validated by their faculty and peers, learning is better achieved (Evans N. J., 2000). Creating a supportive and welcoming climate for Queer students results in a better learning environment where students thrive in their education pursuits, and colleges benefit from the retention and graduation of such students. Specifically, this study explores whether the presence of student clubs on campus contributes to the positive visibility of Queer students and therefore to the campus climate as a whole.

#### Research Questions

In order to examine the experience of Queer students in community college, one first needs to understand school climate and its effects on student retention and persistence. Experiences at school and in the classroom have direct effects on students' academic achievement (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). It is also paramount to understand social roadblocks Queer students experience such as lack of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation diversity, lack of education about Queer issues, negative behaviors and views of homosexuality, and conservative climate statewide (Worthen, Understanding College Student Attitudes toward LGBT Individuals, 2012).

The primary objective in conducting this phenomenological study was to contribute to the discussion of how campus climate, diversity, and visibility of Queer faculty, staff, and students affects the academic achievement and persistence to graduation of sexual minorities and gender non-conforming students. Moreover, I sought to understand the experiences of Queer students at

ABC Community College and to explore their views of diversity and inclusiveness at the College.

The phenomenological study addresses two central questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding faculty and staff support at ABC Community College?
2. What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding the Gay Straight Alliance at ABC Community College?

### Definition of Terms

**Sex:** The American Psychological Association defines sex, also referred to as biological sex, as “a person’s biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex. ...There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Gender:** The definition for gender is explained as “attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (American Psychological Association, 2011). Attitudes and behaviors that fall under a society’s expectations are called gender-normative. Attitudes and behaviors that do not fall under society’s expectations are called gender non-conforming.

**Gender identity:** An individual’s “sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Gender expression:** Refers to ways “...in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture; for example, in terms of clothing, communication patterns and interests” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Sexual orientation:** Sexual orientation “refers to the sex of those to whom one is

sexually and romantically attracted” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Queer:** Queer is a term used by individuals “who identify their gender as falling outside the binary constructs of “male” and “female.” They may define their gender as falling somewhere on a continuum between male and female, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Questioning:** Is an identity label for a person who is exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity, and is in a state of moratorium in terms of identity formation. (American Psychological Association and National Association of School Psychologists, 2015)

**Gay:** Merriam-Webster defines Gay as an individual who is “sexually attracted to someone who is the same sex” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). For the purposes of this research, Gay refers to an individual that self-identifies as male and is attracted to other males.

**Lesbian:** “Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people” (UCLA Campus Resource Center). For the purposes of this research, Lesbian refers to an individual that self-identifies as female and is attracted to other females.

**Bisexual:** Merriam-Webster defines Bisexual as “of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to both men and women” (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

**Transgender:** is an umbrella term that incorporates differences in gender identity wherein one's assigned biological sex doesn't match their felt identity. This umbrella term includes persons who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female (American Psychological Association and National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

**Cisgender:** Is an adjective. Having or relating to a gender identity that corresponds to the

culturally determined gender roles for one's birth sex (i.e., the biological sex one was born with) (American Psychological Association, 2015).

**Homophobia:** "The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals and other queer people, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid gender role stereotypes. It is this fear that enforces sexism as well as heterosexism" (UCLA Campus Resource Center).

### Limitations and Delimitation of the Study

The study had two delimitations worth noting. Although interviewees shared their experiences in high school or interactions outside the college boundary, these were not the focus of the research. Second, the Gay Straight Alliance had been on a hiatus at the time of the interviews. For this reason, many of the interviewees did not have any phenomena to discuss in regard to campus organizations and their participation in creating inclusive campuses.

A limitation encountered by this study was the subjectivity of the data collected from the participants may lead to difficulties in establishing how reliable and valid the approach to this information may be. In this phenomenological study, some of the participants are students with whom I have had rapport in the past or continue to have close relationships.

A second limitation was the size of the sample interviewed. Because phenomenological studies deal with a small sample, it cannot be extrapolated or generalized (Creswell, 1998). Experiences gathered from the participants' interviews cannot be perceived as typical; each student's background and individual experiences affect overall perception of the school climate.

### Summary

Researchers have increasingly focused their attention on campus climate and the effects of feelings of belonging on community colleges and universities. Faculty and staff at institutions of higher education strive to create an environment where students can achieve

knowledge in a safe and welcoming environment. Campus climate, though, not only affects students, but the institution at large. Students, faculty, and staff deserve full participation free of bias, harassment, rejection, or discrimination. (Evans N.J., 2000; Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Rankin, 2005)

Addressing the needs of Queer students through student support tools to create more welcoming environments is being recognized as necessary in order to increase students' retention and persistence to graduation. School climate and a sense of belonging on the part of students is linked to required conditions for learning; if students do not feel safe or welcome on campus, their academic outcomes and well-being will be negatively affected (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). Policies also need to be addressed by institutions in order to achieve a more inclusive campus. Non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression have been shown to create more welcoming environments for Queer students (Rankin, 2005).

This study, from its inception, was founded in concerns about inclusiveness and the realization that students deserve to feel safe and welcome in their institutions. Taking these concerns to heart, the researcher looks to make contributions to related literature about this topic.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter is a review of current literature and research. The literature discussed in this chapter informed this study's research questions and its methodology. In this chapter, the researcher will clarify the choice of the work Queer to encompass all LGBTQ individuals, present the concepts of identity development, present the history of campus organizations in higher education, discuss homophobia and school climate literature, present literature about the impact of Gay Straight Alliances on campuses.

#### The Term "Queer"

According to the University of California, Los Angeles, Campus Resource Center, the term Queer is,

An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender persons, intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers. (p. 1)

The UCLA Campus Resource Center also describes Queer as a term that,

...is sometimes used as a sexual orientation label instead of 'bisexual' as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to, or as a way of stating a non-heterosexual orientation without having to state who they are attracted to. (p. 1)

For the purpose of this research, the term Queer is used as,

A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur but that has been semantically overturned by members of the maligned group, who use it as a term of defiant pride. For decades 'queer' was used solely as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1980s the term began to be used by gay and lesbian activists as a term of self-identification. Eventually, it came to be used as an umbrella term that included gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons, and people of other sexual orientations and gender identities. Nevertheless, a

sizable percentage of people to whom this term might apply still hold 'queer' to be a hateful insult, and its use by heterosexuals is often considered offensive. Similarly, other reclaimed words are usually offensive to the in-group when used by outsiders, so extreme caution must be taken concerning their use when one is not a member of the group. (p. 1)

According to the American Psychological Association, Queer is a term used by individuals "who identify their gender as falling outside the binary constructs of male and female. They may define their gender as falling somewhere on a continuum between male and female, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms" (American Psychological Association, 2011, p. 1). According to Chase and Ressler (2009), Queer can be defined in three ways. One, "an umbrella term that includes all LGBT people" (p. 24). Second, "a person who has a non-normative sex/gender identity, but does not consider himself to be straight or gay" (p. 24). Third and lastly, "a perspective that challenges normative ideas, particularly but not exclusively about sex and gender (as in queer theory)" (p. 24).

Zosky and Alberts (2016) stated that "terms denoting positive and negative social value have changed over time, and how LGBT people respond to a term can be different from generation to generation. This seems to be particularly marked with use of the term 'queer'" (p. 597). The authors also affirm that "terms used to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have changed over time and across contexts" (p. 600). In addition, "the use of the word queer in an academic context is used in a postmodern, post-structural way to emphasize non-heteronormativity and contests oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender" (p. 600).

Activist and radio personality Michaelangelo Signoreli stated,

...As historian George Chauncey showed in his 1994 book "Gay New York," before queer was used as a pejorative by non-gays, the adjective for different and unusual was used among some gay men themselves in the 1920s and 1930s as a coded reference to describe one another. Things changed by the 1950s, as one

man's diary entry from 1951 - quoted in the Chauncey book - pointed out: "The word 'queer' is becoming more and more derogatory and less and less used by ... homosexuals, especially the younger ones, and the term 'gay' is taking its place. I loathe the word, and stick to 'queer' but am constantly being reproved." Today, the word queer has been transformed once again, surging into popular culture big time. The stars of the TV hit shows "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and "Queer as Folk" are currently gracing the cover of the very mainstream Vanity Fair magazine. "Queer studies" courses are prevalent on college campuses. Film-industry types talk about "queer cinema." And gay-affirming groups with the word queer in their names abound all over the Internet. (Signorile, 2003)

According to Levy and Johnson (2011), the number of people who have reclaimed the term Queer for themselves and use it, has grown profoundly (Levy & Johnson, 2011). Levy and Johnson also state that "within the academy, queer theory has emerged as a valid and valuable worldview, condemning conventional understandings of sexual binaries" (p. 131). Levy and Johnson (2011) also add that "with the popularity of queer theory and the increasing number of queer-identified individuals in our society, queer research is growing" (p. 134).

Gender is a societal classification that puts individuals in either a man's or a woman's identity. Queer research is set to disrupt notions of this binary. Qualitative researchers should take methodological considerations for working with Queer participants (Levy & Johnson, 2011). Queer qualitative research may have benefits for researchers. An important first, is that qualitative highlights Queer voices. A second benefit is the political nature of the term Queer. According to Kornak (2015), "for many academics and activists "queer" marks a search for new ways of articulating politics and political action" (p. 5). In addition, Kornak (2015) states,

"Queer" only recently became a political term, yet people who used it were very successful in mobilizing various signifiers around this concept. Although there is a variety of topics and metaphors around which "queer" was deployed in texts, in this study I identify certain topics to which "queer" has been most frequently attached. My study shows, for instance, that identity and utopia are the signifiers to which "queer" in different ways frequently relate. (p. 4)

According to Garvey (2017),

Including sexual identities in education survey research is critically important to uncover large-scale processes that perpetuate systemic social and institutional inequities and more appropriately describe LGBTQ educational experiences. (p. 1113)

Garvey (2017) adds that researchers in the field of education have opted for including sexual identity demographic questions on national surveys,

there are few guidelines for how to adequately represent participants' sexual identities in survey instrumentation and question construction, which is evident when examining the response categories included across the aforementioned survey instruments. (p. 1113)

Garvey (2017) states that he “consciously chose this term as it reflects the predominant language that critical and post-structural scholars have used to describe sexuality” (p. 1114).

Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2011) add that “the term queer challenges heteronormativity and privileged positionality, providing a prism for examining student development across multiple identities” (p. 37).

### Identity Development

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), there is a large body of work on the theme of student development and development theory. The authors' research focuses on the study of how college affects students from a developmental perspective. The authors explain that when students graduate from college, they have gone through a transformation from when the students first entered college. The authors' expectations are that the changes these students face during their college years are positive, that the students have gained maturity and the ability to make decisions independently (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The 1970s were marked in the United States by new studies and research on identity development. Since then, authors like Cass (2002), D'Augellis (1994), and Fassinger (1998)

have focused on sexual orientation and gender identity development and brought studies regarding LGBTQ individuals into a new era.

Cass (2002) asserted that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals move through stages of identity development. This movement between stages usually happens during the individual's teenage years or early twenties, when these individuals start to understand their sexual orientation identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Cass' (2002) Gay and Lesbian Identity Development model focused on the coming-out process. Coming-out is the act of sharing with one's family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, etc., that one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Bobker, 2015). The process of coming-out is about "recognizing, accepting, expressing and sharing one's sexual orientation with oneself and others" (Cass, 2002). Cass' Identity Development model consisted of six stages: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis.

The Cass Identity Model was published in 1979 (Cass, 2002). According to Cass (2002), LGBT individuals first step to identity development is to experience identity confusion, where individuals recognize non-heterosexual thoughts and behaviors and redefine what they mean. Identity comparison follows identity confusion. Individuals start accepting their sexuality in a positive light on this second stage, but in a partial way. In this stage, LGBT individuals feel positively about being different but not yet fully embrace non-heterosexual identity. In the tolerance stage, Cass (2002) points out that individuals seek others who identify as LGBT. Cass (2002) adds these individuals may frequent gay or lesbian bars, attend LGBT events, and start building a connection with the LGBT community. Cass (2002) indicates that identity acceptance comes next. In this stage, Cass explains, individuals start actively taking participating in LGBT subculture and achieve identity pride. Cass (2002) explains that the culmination of this identity development is identity synthesis, where LGBT individuals recognize their own sexual identity

as a secondary factor in building relationship with both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people (Cass, 2002; Lee, 2014).

D'Augelli's (1994) Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) Identity Development identified six interactive processes, not stages like Cass' model. These processes are exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal LGB identity, developing a LGB social identity, becoming a LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status and entering a LGB community (D'Augellis, 1994).

Fassinger (1998) also developed an LGB identity development model which depended more on demographic and cultural influences than the disclosure of one's identity. The Fassinger model consists of two separate but reciprocal processes: one internal that requires awareness and exploration of sexual identity, and one that involves a deepening commitment and internalization. Fassinger (1998) indicates that "for most minority groups, identity transformation involves changed attitudes toward the meaning of an identity already known" (p. 16). Fassinger (1998) adds that "LGB individuals must pursue two goals simultaneously" (p. 16).

Fassinger (1998) adds that LGB individuals,

...must personally deal with a sexual identity that they previously considered reprehensible and/or irrelevant; and they must acknowledge their membership in, and change their attitudes toward, a largely invisible minority group that they also previously considered reprehensible and/or irrelevant. (p. 16).

According to Fassinger (1998), the first step to identity development is awareness. In this stage an individual develops the awareness of "feeling different" or of the "existence of different sexual orientation in people" (p. 17). The second stage, exploration, is one of "strong erotic feelings for same sex people or a particular same sex person" (p. 17). The third stage, according to Fassinger (1998) is that of deepening/commitment. In this stage, an LGB individual achieves a

deepening or commitment “to self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and crystallization of choices about sexuality” (p. 17). The last stage, internalization or synthesis, is achieved when an individual internalizes “love for same sex people, sexual choices into overall identity” or synthesis "of identity as a member of a minority group, across contexts” (Fassinger, 1998, p. 17).

The role of students’ sexual identity development is an aspect that college and university administrators should take into account when providing student support services. Many, if not most of the services provided to sexual minority students on campus, have been drawn from sexual identity formation theory and have focused on the coming out process as proposed by Cass’s model of sexual identity formation (Cass, 2002). In this model, Cass (2002) identifies six stages of perception and behavior that move from a pre-stage to a gay identity while working through confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis (Evans N.J., Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). This model assumes that identity is acquired through a developmental process, and that the interaction of the students and its environment was the focus of such process (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011).

Cass (2002), D’Augellis (1994), and Fassinger (1998) present similarities in the process of acknowledgment of non-heterosexual desires and the eventual embrace of homosexual desires as part of an individual’s identity, but “the possible effects and contributions of other minority identities such as racial identity are completely absent in these models” (Lee, 2014, p. 7). Lee (2004) explains that for Queer individuals of color,

...sexual identity and/or gender representation intersect with their racial and ethnic identities and therefore, require careful negotiation and navigation of different social spaces, relationships, and marginalization. Thus, considering only sexual identity development in trying to understand one’s LGBT status and determine how one decides to come out is a rather inadequate and monolithic way of approaching LGBT identities and coming out experiences. Being subjected to racism and heterosexism, LGBT people of color are the ultimate Other among differently marginalized groups of Others. (p. 7)

Stevens Jr. (2004) states that,

...these models provide a broad understanding of the developmental process for gays and lesbians. However, current sexual orientation models do not readily address religious, cultural, ethnic, or racial dimensions as they relate to the development of a gay identity. A few studies provide insight into gay identity development among racial and ethnic populations. (p. 185)

### Homophobia on College Campuses

According to Haaga (1991), the word homophobia “has become popular as a descriptor of a wide range of negative emotions, attitudes, and behaviors toward homosexual people” (p. 171). The term homophobia was popularized in the 1970s by a psychologist by the name of George Weinberg. Weinberg (1972) referred to “heterosexuals’ irrational fear of homosexuals” (p. 4). Majied (2010) explains,

Homophobia is the fear, hatred, and disgust felt by homophobic individuals when they are confronted with anything considered non-heterosexual. Homophobic sentiment which is often fueled by anti-gay religious fervor contributed to such historical abuses as torture, imprisonment and killing of homosexuals and is the principal cause of contemporary anti-gay violence. (p. 155)

Cramer (2002) states that “homophobia and heterosexism are of concern in the academic community” (p. 3). The author adds that “for college students who are LGBT, homophobia and heterosexism can potentially create a hostile and unsafe environment. LGBT students may experience harassment, discrimination, and intimidation” (Cramer, 2002, p. 3). Cramer’s (2002) book addressed LGBT experiences to these potentially unsafe or hostile environments. The author addressed the experiences of lesbian students’ life on residence halls, to how eliminate homophobic and heterosexist practices in the college classroom. Cramer (2002) in this book intends to “challenge some beliefs about how to go about the business of addressing homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses (p. 5).



D'Augelli, author of the books on identity development and sexual orientation has, since the late 1980s, conducted and lead the charge of LGBT research on college students. D'Augelli is considered a champion for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students, “bringing visibility to the issues that most affect them and their experiences on college campuses” (Robison, 2011, p. 20). D'Augelli (1989) studied homophobia in resident assistant (RA) students. D'Augelli's findings showed that resident assistants harbored negative feelings against LGBT students in their halls (Robison, 2011).

DeSurra and Church (1994) found that Queer college students were marginalized in the classroom and that it was necessary to incorporate curriculum that was sensitivity to Queer issues. The authors also stated that they “believe that exploring gay/lesbian issues with more qualitative methods can access important details that cannot possibly come through quantitative measures. Expanding the tool box of research methods would indeed empower the voices we so faintly hear” (DeSurra & Church, 1994, p. 35).

### Campus Climate

School climate refers to the environment which affects faculty, staff, and students, and “reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010, p. 1). In this summary, researchers note that a consensus points to four components of school climate: safety, positive relationships, teaching and learning, and the physical school environment (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010). The summary details how the systematic study of school climate

...has led to a growing body of research that attests to its importance in a variety of overlapping ways, including social, emotional, intellectual and physical safety; positive youth development, mental health, and healthy relationships; higher graduation rates; school connectedness and engagement; academic achievement;

social, emotional and civic learning; teacher retention; and effective school reform. (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010, p. 1)

Academic and social success for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning individuals, is dependent on the campus environment at their institutions of learning. Gender and sexual minority individuals' success will be better achieved if they are part of a campus environment that embraces their singularities. According to Evans and Herriott (2004), "the college environment and the interactions that students have while in college are also important in increasing heterosexual students' awareness of LGBT issues" (Evans N.J. & Herriott, 2004, p. 317). Vaccaro (2014) comments that "learning in a heterosexist, genderist, or homophobic campus climate can negatively impact LGBT identity development" (Vaccaro, 2014, p. 130). Researchers at the organization Learning First Alliance, have found that a supportive learning and teaching community for Queer students is one a key element in creating a safe learning environment. The Learning First Alliance is formed as a partnership of prominent education associations in the U.S., such as the National Education Association and the National School Board Association. The Alliance works to ensure safe, supportive learning environments for all students in K-12 schools. According to researchers at the Education First Alliance,

The objective of creating a supportive learning community ought to be that everyone involved—staff, parents, and especially students—feels a strong sense of belonging in school, being concerned about one another's welfare, making significant contributions, having opportunities for ongoing learning and growth, and holding important goals and values in common with others. (Learning First Alliance, 2001, p. 3)

Harro (1996) studied the system of societal oppression and the system that unjustly targets LGBTQ individuals. Harro (1996) mentioned that as heterosexual students understood better their own privileges, intersectionality, work through their dissonance, and further explored

and understood privilege and oppression, they recognized how the system in which they live is inherently unfair to LGBTQ students. This new self-awareness can guide heterosexual students to realize that perpetuating stereotypes contributes to the alienation of LGBTQ students in their campuses and in society at large. Thus, it is important and imperative to create a more inclusive campus and a climate that positively affects LGBTQ students, meaningful contact and communication between individuals that identify as LGBTQ and their heterosexual counterparts is encouraged (Harro, 1996).

Herek (1987) theorized that positive attitudes grow towards minority groups when there are supportive attitudes from other family members, when personal values are drawn to compassion, equality, and justice, or when conflict resolution is experienced with the minority group. In an article, Hurtado, Carter, and Kardia (1998) stated that “assessing the climate for diversity becomes key for institutions that wish to create comfortable, diverse learning environments” (p. 53). Campus climate is an important piece of the puzzle, unfortunately, the definition of campus climate has not yet found consensus. According to Hart and Fellabaum (2008), campus climate studies focus on race, ethnicity, and gender, and are concerned with the experiences of students.

The creation of affirmative and inclusive campuses has not kept pace with other areas that have more rapidly adapted to the recognition of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Faculty, staff, and students in non-dominant categories of sexual identity may experience widespread harassment, bullying, hostility, and victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender identity and in many cases these sexual minority individuals stay in the closet and choose not to affirm their sexuality (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Vaccaro, 2014; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003; Waldo, 1999). Students who navigate unwelcoming,

racists, and homophobic campus climates can see their success and wellbeing affected in a negative way. Academic success and retention of students is affected negatively by a hostile campus climate (Vaccaro, 2014). “Absenteeism and school disengagement affects sexual minority students’ access to education and limits their social and educational opportunities” (Portnoy, 2012, p. 14).

According to Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003), “the climate of a campus is particularly relevant to the psychosocial development of lesbian students because of the pervasive nature of homophobia and heterosexism” (p. 845). In the context of community colleges, the interaction between heterosexual and LGBTQ students has not been studied thoroughly. Neither has been the campus climate for LGBTQ students at two-year institutions of higher education.

Community colleges are called such because they are considered schools for the people, given that students who would have not been able to pursue higher education have opted for community colleges to gain access.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2013) colleges have seen a substantial increase in annual enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). In the fall of 2009, approximately 1,100 two-year colleges enrolled almost half of all undergraduate students in the country (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). It has also been determined and studied that two-year institutions have enrolled a “higher percentage of historically marginalized students” (p. 527). Even if community college students only make about 45% of all undergraduate enrollees, enrollment of Latino students in community college makes about 56% around the country, 49% of all Black students are also enrolled in community colleges (p. 527). Community colleges also have a great number of students who live with their parents (61%), part-time students (44%), and students who are employed (20%), a higher

proportion than those enrolled at 4-year colleges and universities (p. 528).

According to Tingley (2012), policies enforced by campuses, the trainings that faculty and staff receive or not receive, all impact campus climate. In 2009, Lambda Legal and other institutions that work with LGBTQ youth released a brief on best practices to deal with LGBTQ homeless youth. A piece of information this document presented was that LGBTQ individuals made “somewhere between 4 and 10 percent” (Lambda Legal, 2009, p. 1) of the total population of the country. In 2013, researchers at GLSEN surveyed over eight thousand LGBTQ youth and reported that 64.5% of them had heard homophobic slurs or remarks on their schools, that 56.4% heard negative remarks about gender expression such as act like a man or be more feminine very frequently or often, and that 51.4% of students heard homophobic remarks from teachers and school staff (Kosciw, et al., 2014).

Findings on a 2002 study by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln revealed that 47%, or 119 out of the 254 participants, indicated that “great” or “very great” anti-LGBTQ attitudes existed on campus (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2002, p. 9). Student respondents also mentioned that the LGBTQ campus community was treated “with callous indifference,” passive-aggressiveness, and that campus is “not an environment where one feels comfortable coming out” (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2002, p. 9).

According to Schott-Ceccacci, Holland, and Matthews (2009), colleges and universities are where high school graduates are exposed to new and alternative social norms, as well as to subcultures with which they are not acquainted. The exposure and contact to the new can inspire a socialization, and in some cases a resocialization, of one’s core beliefs. The authors also declare that high schools are “the most homophobic institutions in American society” (Schott-Ceccacci, Holland, & Matthews, 2009, p. 36), consequently students may not have had any direct

and open dialogue or contact with LGBTQ students.

These reports were analyzed to highlight LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ individuals from elementary school to college, and then in the workplace, experience higher levels of victimization than heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Kosciw et al., 2014). Cisgender individuals are those who are considered gender normal (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 285) or people who have a match between their gender at birth and their sexual identity or also known as non-transgender.

According to researchers, heterosexual and cisgender individuals fair better than their LGBTQ peers; the mean reported grade point average for heterosexual students is 3.3, whereas the reported averaged grade point average for LGBTQ students was 2.8 (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 49). According to the GLSEN (2013) report, students claimed that the victimization they suffered at their schools included physical intimidation, physical violence, bullying, harassment, social isolation, and assault. Reports of student victimization are likely indicators of social marginalization (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. 49). Marginalization of Queer students may further affect experiences at school and attitudes toward school (Poirier, 2014). GLSEN's analyses of its survey data show that students who experienced higher levels of victimization in school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression also had higher rates of negative outcomes. LGBTQ students suffered from negative outcomes because of this victimization: truancy, drug use, depression, anxiety, suicidality, unsafe sex practices, and homelessness, among others (Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004; Kosciw et al., 2014). Also Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), declared that classroom interactions are important in a student's learning, achievement, and development. This declaration makes the classroom experience at community colleges much more meaningful, given that most two-year community colleges are commuter schools and

students' relationships will classroom based predominantly.

According to Portnoy (2012),

The experiences described by LGBT students negatively affected their access to education. For example, feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in school was associated with increased absenteeism and lower levels of school engagement among LGBTQ youth. Similarly, homophobia and victimization have also been linked to negative effects including increased risk for psychological distress, reduced self-esteem, increased rates of suicide attempts, heightened alcohol and substance use, and missed days of school. (p. 11)

A study conducted by Rankin (2005) for the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force surveyed fourteen colleges and universities across the country. The fourteen institutions consisted of private and public colleges and universities. The results from the survey revealed and reported that 36% of undergraduate students that self-identify as LGBTQ gave accounts of having experienced harassment on their campuses (Rankin, 2005). A staggering 51% of surveyed students reported having to conceal their sexual identity or orientation to avoid intimidation or harassment, about 20% expressed fear for their physical safety because of their sexual identity or orientation (Rankin, 2005). Within the colleges and universities surveyed, 73% of staff and faculty members, 74% of students, and 81% of administrators expressed that their campus showed homophobic tendencies (Rankin, 2005). The same study's results revealed that 41% of self-identified LGBTQ respondents commented feeling left out by their institution, indicating that issues such as harassment, intimidation, and homophobia were not addressed by campus administrators (Rankin, 2005).

Findings like these not only demonstrate a real need for more support of LGBTQ students, they also emphasize the pervasiveness of hostile and unsympathetic response to LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff on college campuses. It is for this reason that many of the LGBTQ community on these campuses reported the need to hide their orientation and identity.

Thus, since the 1970s there has been an emergence of what is known as gender studies that has provided a theoretical base to explain the stages of sexual identity development. Articles like Bilodeau and Renn's (2005), have become tools to understanding sexual identity development. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) explained and addressed the implication of theories like Cass' (2002) identity model, D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity, and Fassinger's (1998) model of gay and lesbian identity development, for research and practice in the education field. In this article, the authors particularly tried to address the lack of research and the differences that women and people of color have when dealing with gender identity struggles. As Crenshaw (1991) pointed out in her article,

The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination -- that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different. (p. 1242)

Crenshaw (1991) claimed that the biological, social, and cultural categories of a person intersected and contributed to systematic injustice and social inequality. Crenshaw (1991) argued that this inequality and injustice allowed oppression to occur in different ways and to different degrees depending on specific intersections of a person's categories. Crenshaw's studies of intersectionality have been used by many researchers in the field of LGBTQ issues because her concept has been used to search and find differences and commonalities among people of different groups.

Like Crenshaw (1991), Evans (2013) has written extensively about social justice in higher education and student development. Evans particularly focuses on the experiences of non-dominant populations: lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and students with disabilities. In the article, Evans' (2000) goal was to call attention to the impact that students' sexual orientation has



on their ability to learn in the classroom. Evans (2000) argued that professors have to take a more active role in creating a welcoming and supportive climate for LGBTQ students in their classrooms. Evans (2000) relied on D'Augelli's (1994) model of identity development to support that if and when professors understand LGBTQ identity development it is helpful to students during the crucial process of coming out. Evans insisted that such understanding helped students do better in class. An inclusive classroom setting is important for students' academic development. Evans relied on DeSurra and Church's (1994) study on the continuum of marginalization and centralization, to argue for such inclusiveness. Evans also analyzed different models and argued that achieving explicit centralization in the classroom is the goal because it is the stage in which the greatest potential for students to learn exists (DeSurra & Church, 1994). Today, LGBTQ students start questioning their sexuality at a much younger age. According to information disseminated by West Chester University to their students, children as young as nine years of age can question their sexuality and come out to parents and family, but the "average LGBT youth now comes out at 16 compared to 21 in the 1970s" (West Chester University, 2019, p. 4). This information can help extrapolate results and conclusions from previous studies conducted in colleges to populations of LGBTQ students in middle and high school.

Under the same parameters as Evans', Ivory (2005) insisted that the transient and irregular nature of students attending community colleges made difficult the task student affairs professionals have of connecting and engaging with LGBTQ students. Ivory also pointed out that because LGBTQ students have an invisible presence on campus; thus, trying to provide services to this population becomes even more complex. Ivory (2005) proposed that it is the purpose of student services offices to work on the development of resources for students, but that resources for LGBTQ students are almost non-existent in two-year colleges. Ivory (2005) repeatedly stated

that the lack of research done about LGBTQ students in two-year colleges, specifically community colleges, has had detrimental effects in the wellbeing of LGBTQ youth on campuses around the country. Ivory (2005) used previous research on the harassment and violence against LGBTQ students at four-year colleges and universities, and implied that those same issues were present in community colleges but at a broader scale because of the lack of visible inclusion.

The need to target resources in different areas of the country and in various educational settings is also important. According to Chonody, Siebert, and Rutledge (2009), persons who are from the Midwest or the South have “higher levels of sexual prejudice when compared to those from other regions of the country” (Chonody, Siebert, & Rutledge, 2009, p. 500). According to Portoy (2012),

Findings showed significant regional and geographical based differences predicting school climate. Adolescents in rural communities and adolescents in the South or Midwest experienced more homophobic slurs, harassments, and assault than those in suburban or urban communities or those in the Northeast or West. (p. 15)

Chonody, Siebert, and Rutledge (2009) also insisted that the need for more acceptance and inclusiveness in helping professions was necessary, given that “once these students begin practicing, they will likely encounter gay or lesbian clients at some point, regardless of their particular practice venue” (Chonody, Siebert, & Rutledge, 2009, p. 500). The authors found that positive interactions with LGBTQ people and education about LGBTQ issues had a significantly positive effect on the attitudes of respondents to LGBTQ individuals. The authors gathered information for this study by conducting pre-test and post-test surveys at their institutions. According to the results “male respondents had a statistically significant decrease in negative

attitudes at posttest. Participants who were married or in committed relationships also had an overall decrease in antigay bias” (Chonody et al. 2009, p.501).

Chonody et al. (2009) also included information regarding the method of convenience sampling could present limitations to the generalization of the effects seen in the study, but other studies conducted by GLSEN, Evans N.J., Broido, and Wall (2004), and Madera, King, and Hebl (2012) have yielded similar results. Both these studies’ results demonstrate that education about, and positive interaction with, the LGBTQ population results in individuals that “held less homophobic attitudes” (Evans N.J., Broido, & Wall, 2004, p. 20) in college campuses. The authors also compared the homophobic attitudes of trained student affairs staff and faculty at large and found that student affairs personnel were less biased against LGBTQ individuals than the faculty at the same schools. Madera, King, and Hebl (2012) found that diversity training could positively be used to enhance training outcomes, in this case the homophobic tendencies of participants. Madera, King, and Hebl (2012) found that “participants who developed sexual orientation supportive goals reported more supportive behaviors and attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals than those who did not” (Madera, King, & Hebl, 2012, p. 79), further corroborating Chonody et al. (2009) and Evans N.J. et al. (2004) studies.

Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, and Lee (2007), conducted a research in the late 1980s that documented LGB students’ experiences in “unwelcoming, threatening, and unsafe campus environments” (p. 215). At Yale University, 26% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students surveyed “reported threats of physical violence, 50% reported two or more incidents of verbal assault, and 48% felt that future harassment was fairly or very likely to occur” (Longerbeam et al., 2007, p. 216).

In order to combat heterosexism, homophobia, and other negative behaviors against

LGBTQ students, research results support institutions of higher education putting in place ally programs, sometimes called Safe Zones. Safe Zones and other ally programs consist of workspaces, offices, and other gathering places around campuses where a supportive environment for LGBTQ individuals is provided, as well as for straight, cisgender, and other allies who care about their school's diversity, equality, and inclusiveness. Safe Zones are usually identified by stickers, posters, or other forms of advertising in the spaces' doors. Ballard, Bartle, and Masequesmay (2008) found that 78% of the LGBTQ students surveyed about Safe Zone programs on their campus "felt more comfortable in class with faculty who had taken the training;" 77% "expected to be treated more fairly by faculty" who displayed a Safe Zone or ally sticker or poster; 91% "believed the training reduces anti-LGBTQ bias" on their campus; 81% "would be more likely to come out to faculty who display a sticker"; and 90% "expected better awareness of LGBTQ issues from those who have taken the training" (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008, p. 14). Poynter and Tubbs (2007) found that at the two universities where Safe Zones were implemented, "their programs increased visibility, improved the environment, improved conversations, and increased the comfort levels of program participants" (Poynter & Tubbs, 2007, p. 129).

In the same fashion, Perrin, Bhattacharyya, Snipes, Calton, and Heesacker (2014) selected participants from a pool of behavioral health professionals and designated them to 1 out of 4 LGBT ally-development conditions; then participants were asked to complete a survey to measure prejudice and propensity for social justice behavior. Throughout the study, the authors found compelling evidence to suggest that interpersonal contact with LGBT individuals, an LGBT-supportive environment, and educational workshops and courses, like ally training programs and Safe Zone training, were effective in combating heterosexism and prejudice. In the

study, the authors presented information from Athanases and Larrabee (2003) and Waterman, Reid, Garfield, and Hoy (2001) that supported that “many heterosexual students were more interested in becoming LGBT allies after completion of a college course on LGBT issues involving multiple teaching modalities such as guest speakers and movies” (Perrin, Bhattacharyya, Snipes, Calton, & Heesacker, 2014, p. 241). Another study found that students enrolled in a Psychology of Homosexuality “left the class with significantly decreased homophobia” (Waterman, Reid, Garfield, & Hoy, 2001, p. 21). Athanases and Larrabee (2003) highlighted that “development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to support advocacy for youth who may face academic or social inequities” (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003, p. 241) is important in creating a better campus climate.

A similar result was presented by Evans (2000). Evan’s research compared and contrasted studies by Tiberius and Billson (1991), De Surra and Church (1994), and Connolly (2000) to support the claim that classroom climate and a professor’s behavior and attitudes toward LGBTQ students can have influence in the learning ability of LGBTQ students. Evans (2000) argued that “for learning to occur unimpeded, students must feel that they are safe, valued, and supported. Faculty can create such a climate by creating centralized classrooms in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues are routinely addressed” (Evans N. J., 2000, p. 86).

DeSurra and Church’s (1994) paper and presentation have been cited countless times as a source for topics ranging from education, social studies, LGBT issues, and even parenting. It addressed the invisibility of LGBT individuals and how public education has helped foster a heterosexist society. DeSurra and Church (1994) explained how the academic field has helped heterosexism and other forms of prejudice remain as part of the social norm by ignoring it. The authors declared that by not legitimizing the LGBT community, it has stayed as probably the last

minority group to be questioned, and it has jeopardized the wellbeing of the LGBTQ community at large. Prejudice has been made visible because of the fact that college years are where most individuals find their sexual identity, and it is the lack of support in the classroom that creates isolated and lonely students (DeSurra & Church, 1994). Tiberius and Billson (1991) claimed that trust and security were fundamental to mutually reinforcing social bonds in the classroom (Tiberius & Billson, 1991), and that those behaviours are fundamental for engaged student learning.

In an ethnographic study, Vaccaro (2012) found that undergraduate students have suffered homophobia, discrimination, and heterosexism at the hands of faculty members. Two of the students interviewed “talked about having professors who used antigay rhetoric” (Vaccaro, *Campus microclimates for LGBT faculty, staff, and students: An exploration of the intersections of social identity and campus roles*, 2012, p. 434) and that many of the bad experiences with climate in classroom and at the college as a whole came from “interpersonal interactions with peers” (p. 434). When the same students talked about positive factors experienced at their respective schools, “most described the support of a caring faculty” (p. 435). By analysing the studies by Evans (2000), Tiberius and Billson (1991), DeSurra and Church (1994), Waterman, Reid, Garfield, and Hoy (2001), and Athanases and Larrabee (2003), the picture is clear; a more tolerant and inclusive classroom and campus climate can create a better learning experience for LGBTQ students. A better campus climate can be accomplished by using the information gathered by Chonody, Siebert, and Rutledge (2009), Ballard, Bartle, and Masequesmay (2008), Madera, King, and Hebl (2012), and Evans N.J., Broido, and Wall (2004), in their descriptions of how ally programs and LGBTQ education can significantly lower homophobia.

Evans R., Nagoshi, Nagoshi, Wheeler, and Henderson (2017) stated

The university provides an environment that can either enhance students' education, life skills, and social involvement or can hinder and isolate students. Recent research has furthered the understanding of the campus atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance of college students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (transgender, transsexual), queer (LGBTQ), or along the non-binary gender/sexuality spectrum. (p. 426)

Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, and Hope (2013) stated,

When students feel the need to hide their identities and have experienced negative consequences based on LGBTQ bias, it is reasonable for them to consider the climate as less positive and less safe, and consider alternatives. Leaving families and friends to find an environment that is more welcoming and inclusive may or may not be an effective solution. However, leaving does provide an opportunity to find a more welcoming environment and develop new friendships, support systems and living situations. A campus whose climate includes policies, procedures, facilities, programs and services that are visibly welcoming and inclusive may make the difference in how these students adapt to college life. (p. 959)

#### The Initial Campus Organization

Informal, mostly secret, meetings between students of sexual minorities have occurred since the twentieth century. College students created social networks in order to meet other people attracted to the same biological sex, but formal campus organizations did not have a presence in college campuses until the later part of the 1960s (Marine, 2011). The first official campus organization to represent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) students was the Student Homophile League (SHL), on the campus of Columbia University. The creation of the SHL at Columbia can be attributed to Stephen Donaldson, who started the group in 1967 (Reichard, 2010). Donaldson had been a member of the Mattachine Society of New York City, one of the first gay rights organizations in the country. After arriving in Columbia, he was forced out of his residency hall because he was a bisexual man. After becoming acquainted with other LGBTQ students on campus, Donaldson convinced a group of them to form a sanctioned campus organization. For this, he used the assistance of

student leaders as straight allies to gain the acceptance of school administrators (Beemyn, 2003; Kaczorowski, 2004; Meeker, 2001; Reichard, 2010).

The SHL branched to other schools, among them Cornell University and New York University in 1968, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1969, and from there to colleges in cities like Boston and Sacramento (Reichard, 2010).

In the state of Tennessee, the first official LGBTQ group was formed at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) (MTSU Lambda, 2016). The organization called MT Lambda was founded on October 20, 1988. Lambda was created to provide a social outlet for its members. Lambda considers itself to be, in part, a political organization that has worked to create social equality for individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Lambda has, since 2014, organized events in which they provide information and education to other institutions about how to better deal with the LGBTQ communities on campus (MTSU Lambda, 2016).

### Gay-Straight Alliances

Queer students may feel a sense of disconnect from faculty and staff at college campuses because of biased language they have experienced. Heterosexist, genderist, or homophobic remarks and behaviors from adults may result in Queer students sensing they are not welcomed. Colleges have two ways to react to students' feelings of exclusion on campus: actively or proactively. Active approaches by college administrators may include safe spaces or Safe Zones, student organizations like Gay Straight Alliances, and campaigns which address Queer students' concerns about campus climate (Biegel, 2010).

A GSA is student-led organization on campus. GSAs are inclusive clubs because they accept all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. A



GSA members and advisors strive to provide safe spaces and environments for students to socialize, connect with supportive peers, faculty, and staff, a place to access resources and information, a safe space to develop a positive sense of self. GSA members also can address heteronormativity, heterosexism, and prejudice to make their colleges and communities a safer space for Queer students (GLSEN, 2012; Poirier, 2014). GSAs may often be the only place where students feel safe to discuss their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Having a safe space where students can safely speak about these issues may help develop self-esteem and social skills (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012).

Before there were GSAs, there was the Los Angeles's Project 10, which was recognized as the first organization to provide systematic support to Queer youth in public school. (Snively, 2004). Emerging in 1984, Project 10 was named after sexologist Alfred Kinsey who mistakenly claimed that 10% of the general population is exclusively homosexual (Snively, 2004). Project 10's primary focus was to provide support groups that work on "preventing or reducing at risk behavior, such as alcohol and drug abuse and high-risk sexual activities, among glbtq youth" (Snively, 2004, p. 1).

School-based groups who called themselves Gay-Straight Alliances were first formed in 1989 in Massachusetts at two private schools (Snively, 2004). According to Snively (2004),

The adoption of the GSA model by the State of Massachusetts Safe Schools Program in 1993 is one of three key events that spurred the development of the Gay-Straight Alliance movement. The other two were the 1999 murder of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay student at the University of Wyoming; and the 1999 Federal Court ruling in Utah--East High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Board of Education of Salt Lake City School District, 81 F. Supp.2d 1166, 1197 (D. Utah 1999)--which found that denying access to a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance was a violation of the federal Equal Access Act. (pp. 1-2)

Marx and Kettrey (2016) found that,

One promising approach to promoting the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students is the establishment of student-directed clubs and organizations for LGBTQ+ youth,

commonly known as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), although nomenclature may differ from school to school or district to district. (p. 1270)

Fetner and Kush (2008) documented the emergence of GSAs in public high schools in the U.S. and found a pattern in the location and regions of the country in which these GSAs were emerging. The authors found that the location and region are among the most influential social forces that promote the early adoption of GSAs in public schools. The authors found that students in rural America and part of the South were significantly less likely to have a GSA on their campus. The authors' findings show that,

LGBTQ and supportive straight high school students who live in urban or suburban settings and in a region of the country with liberal or progressive political leanings are more likely to start a GSA than their counterparts in rural areas, small towns, or conservative regions. We also find that school resources play a role in supporting the formation of these student groups. Larger schools are more likely to have GSAs, perhaps because there is room for a wider variety of social spaces than at smaller schools. (Fetner & Kush, 2008, p. 125)

Worthen (2014) finds that,

..the presence of a GSA in high school is a robust positive predictor of supportive attitudes toward LGBT individuals, even when considering many control variables. Such results suggest that the presence of GSAs in high schools may have significant positive and potentially long-lasting effects on college students' attitudes toward LGBT individuals. (p. 217)

In addition, Worthen (2014) found that her research “provides strong evidence of the association between the presence of GSAs in schools and lower reports of victimization among adolescents” (p. 1278). Fetner and Kush (2008) add that “the emergence of GSAs can be seen as an important act of not just resilience but creativity and leadership. With GSAs, young people have been leading LGBTQ activism in new directions” (p. 117).

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHOD

#### Introduction

By using a qualitative research method as phenomenology, the researcher pursues an understanding of an individual's perceptions of reality. Consequently, perceptions from different individuals may differ from person to person.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher aims to set aside preconceptions and assumptions concerning how humans respond to a situation and instead to study their feelings and experiences. A phenomenological method of research allows the researcher to explore the views of people who have actually experienced or lived the phenomenon: their perceptions, perspectives, assessments, and feelings. Hence, phenomenology may be defined as

the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced by people living those experiences. Phenomenological research is typically conducted through the use of in-depth interviews of small samples of participants. By studying the perspectives of multiple participants, a researcher can begin to make generalizations regarding what it is like to experience a certain phenomenon from the perspective of those that have lived the experience. (Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2019)

Understanding perception is, in itself, a challenge. Studying the phenomenon of perception of inclusiveness presents even more challenges. This study examined how the perceptions of inclusiveness impact Queer students' persistence to graduation.

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Queer students in community colleges, the faculty and staff's response to those experiences, and to identify if visibility of clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, create a more welcoming environment for Queer students.

Many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (Queer) students experience isolation and hostility, which forces them to be cautious in their approach to new experiences. When students feel validated by their faculty and peers, learning is better achieved (Evans N. J., 2000). Creating a supportive and welcoming climate for Queer students results in a better learning environment where students thrive in their education pursuits, and colleges benefit from the retention and graduation of such students (Evans N.J., 2000; Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Kuh, 2001-2002).

### Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding faculty and staff support at ABC Community College?
2. What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding the Gay Straight Alliance at ABC Community College?

### Use of Qualitative Design for the Study

Qualitative inquiry is a tool used by researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the lived, daily experiences of subjects and it tends to use small samples of participants. Because of the characteristics of this model, the gathered information cannot be generalized. This research method instead seeks an in-depth, rich understanding of the participants' experiences of an individual phenomenon. Qualitative design studies are useful for understanding the diverse groups and subgroups of the studied Queer community (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015).

Few college admission forms have questions for administrators or researchers to collect data on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression of students, and since providing such information is optional, data would not truly or completely exemplify or demonstrate phenomena. Because of the lack of data to analyze in regard to Queer students, qualitative

research has been commonly used to study phenomena in higher education. Qualitative studies are important when researching the Queer community on colleges campuses because researchers conduct in depth interviews with the subjects. Therefore, a qualitative design for this study is the most appropriate.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that examines human behavior and experiences. Through phenomenological studies, researchers describe experiences lived by the studied through thorough descriptive analysis (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Phenomenologists listen to subjective descriptions of day-to-day life, in an attempt to comprehend those experiences free of bias and preconceptions. Phenomenology filters the information gathered from interviews and discover what a phenomenon is in actuality (Al-Busaidi, 2008).

Phenomenological studies seek to “focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Phenomenology focuses on lived experience, as a “study of people’s conscious experience in their life-world” (p. 25). Phenomenological studies provide a detailed description of experiences and meanings. The findings of this study emerged from the conversations with the participants and were not imposed by the researcher. Care was used to maintain the interviewees’ descriptions as thus to be as faithful to the experiential raw data as possible. The researcher was ever mindful not to reword, or to change in any form, the participants’ words. The researcher also was mindful of presuppositions and biases that would change, maximize, or minimize the influence of the findings.

### Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (1998), the researcher decides which method of study is the best approach to use. If phenomenological study is the method chosen, then the researcher must differentiate between objective understanding and subjective experience (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (2013) also expands on the types of phenomenology, one being transcendental phenomenology. This type of phenomenological study “is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more of the description of the experiences of participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). As Steedman (1991) mentioned, it is not possible “to separate knowledge from the knower,” and “this is not a bad thing, that the situation which we face is one more to be welcomed than regretted” (Steedman, 1991, p. 53). This explains the purpose to the researcher throughout this study: to deeply understand and analyze the perceptions of participants regarding inclusiveness on campus.

### Ethics

Qualitative method researchers are required to be engaged in their research, but at the same time they are required to distance themselves from it to eliminate bias. Merriam (2009) stated that “critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229) need to be taken into account and explained. Thus, reflexivity is a skill researchers need to master. Reflexivity consists of the researcher’s awareness of the effect that bias and preconceptions can have in the process and outcome of the research. This premise may be explained by the statement that ‘knowledge cannot be separated from the knower’ (Steedman, 1991, p. 53; Conelly, He, & Phillion, 2008, p. 69). Reflexivity takes this into account and tries to minimize the effects of researcher involvement.

By federal law, researchers are required to protect the rights and privacy of human subjects. Researchers who involve human subjects, must assure that such research is reviewed and approved by the researcher's institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The ethical considerations for phenomenological studies are the safety and anonymity of the participants. Queer students, because of their sexual minority status and discrimination in the community, are considered a vulnerable population. The need for privacy and anonymity was a concern for, and during, the interview process. Ethical considerations of the research documents, interviews, and other information relating to individuals participating in the research, were treated with curacy of reporting and honesty. Given that the research was performed on an institution were the interviewed subjects study, and given the possibility of negative statements towards such institution, the names of faculty and staff members were also given privacy and anonymity. This was done in order to protect the participants from possible reprisals.

In order to follow IRB guidelines of informed consent participants were given a release form to sign that outlined the ethical considerations of the study. The release form addressed privacy concerns and information about respecting the dignity of individuals choosing to participate in the study. The release form also addressed the name of the institution, how the interview data, transcripts, and any other information gathered would be kept in the strictest of confidence, where it would be stored, the security of the location where the information would be kept, and the assurance that all the information would only be viewed by persons directly related to the compilation and composition of the research report. The participants were informed of their right to end the interview process at any time, and assured that this would not affect their participation in school events, grades, or have any form of reprisal. Participants were

also informed that their contributions to this research was of their own volition, and that no compensation or remuneration for their participation would be given.

The interviews were recorded using password protected computer-based software, thus allowing for the privacy of the students. The interviews were transcribed by a transcriber. A pseudonym of the students' choosing was used for each participant in order to maintain their anonymity.

### Sampling Procedure

#### Sampling Criteria

The sampling criterion for this study was purposeful in that the researcher chose ABC Community College as the center of research due to some particular qualities associated with the college. The first quality was that ABC has worked on the issue of inclusion of diverse students, faculty, and staff, and has drafted policies at the forefront of this issue. The Policies and Procedures Manual at ABC states, in part, that the institution,

...[does] not discriminate against students, employees or applicants for admission or employment on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, ethnic national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age, status as a covered veteran, genetic information or any other legally protected class with respect to all employment, programs and activities.

The inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in the college's non-discrimination policy suggests a positive atmosphere for Queer faculty, staff, and students. The selection of ABC as the focus of this case study is predicated in part on their stated intention of inclusion of the Queer community and the desire to discover the effectiveness of their inclusion attempts.

The second quality had to do with the location of the college. ABC Community College is central to an area known for its poor economic condition and its poor record of diversity.



Because the college is located in an area not known for promoting diversity, and because the college has a very progressive policy as regards to diversity, ABC is the perfect location for any study of sexual minority populations. The college's size, with approximately 5,000 students, and the fact that it is the only such institution in the state within a hundred-mile radius, precipitated the selection of ABC as the focus of this study, which in turn provides a destination for minority populations in the surrounding areas. ABC was chosen because of the progressive nature of the policy extant at the institution and the relative size of the Queer population attending the institution. The divergent policies of ABC provide a unique opportunity for study, and the relative diversity of minority representation on the campus provides a wealth of variation, especially when dealing with the Queer population.

The selection of the population in question, Queer students at the community college, was precipitated also by recent trends in the American political landscape and the presence of Queer issues in popular culture.

The rise in occurrence of Queer issues being discussed in college and high school classrooms, and its importance, prompted this research. The suggestion from the literature is that Queer issues in the college campuses is a topic that is only going to gain prominence as we go further into the twenty-first century, thus research on the experiences of Queer students will become of increasing importance in the years to come. Therefore, the experiences of Queer students at ABC are a logical starting place for the investigation of this particular issue of diversity. The findings of the study will shed light on the persistence to graduation of students, and further studies can help to do the same for other minority populations.

The selection of Queer individuals at ABC represents a phenomenological study as outlined in Creswell's (1998) study. A phenomenological study "describes the meaning of the

lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Although many other issues may be present, the experiences of Queer students are the primary focus addressed by this study, and the research centers on that primary issue.

### Recruiting Protocol

ABC Community College has had a Gay-Straight Alliance club since 2010. Queer students who participate in this club were recruited directly by the researcher. The participants were asked to provide a list of other possible contacts. Each further contact’s identity was kept in closest confidence until they accepted the invitation to participate. Contact information on individuals who chose not to participate was destroyed and not used in the study. This “snowballing” was used until the system was exhausted and the desired number of recruits was obtained. Because the study was dealing with Queer population, the sample size for the interviews was relatively small with eight participants. The texts of the interviews were stored in electronic format and hard copy form in a secure office. The researcher was the only person with access to the files, and the information contained within the interview texts was held in closest confidence in order to provide the utmost confidence in the results of the study.

The Office of Equity and Compliance was the initial step in the examination of policies and procedures adopted by ABC as regards to Queer students. Further document investigation included interviews with the Vice-president for Access and Development, the Office of Student Affairs, and the Counseling Center. The documents were reviewed for specific language addressing the concerns of the Queer students on the ABC campus. The documents in question were chosen because they represented published statements regarding the policies of ABC towards the Queer community.

Because a purposeful sample was required in order to address the participants' own perceptions of inclusiveness, the participants were asked to provide specific examples of experiences on campus where they had perceived inclusion or exclusion, and whether the GSA had any effect on that perception.

### Data Collection

Personal interviews with Queer students were conducted utilizing a structured interview guide consisting of general questions that were intended to be addressed through the interview. Question number one prompted the participants to look at their experiences and the sense of inclusiveness at ABC as an overview. They were called upon to view their experiences at the College through incidents where and when they felt included, excluded, or discriminated against. They were also asked to identify their expectations of coming to ABC by thinking back to their first day on campus. The first question helped them to realize whether their expectations were met or if they were disappointed with the environment of the campus. The second question called upon the participants to examine their personal perceptions of ABC's Gay Straight Alliance, and whether the club had made a difference for them directly or indirectly in their experience on campus. Question three asked the participants to think about their classroom experiences, experiences with the different campus' offices, and experiences with their peers, and whether or not their identities as Queer students affected their ability to perform the tasks asked of them. The more focused third question asked the participants to explain whether their perception of inclusiveness on campus, including actions of the GSA or by the existence of an inclusive non-discrimination policy, had made them more or less likely to stay on campus and persist to graduation. This question spoke directly to the quality of environment given to Queer students on campus. This final question allowed the students to envision ways in which they themselves

would improve their experiences at ABC. This provided them with a sense of control that allowed them to identify areas of improvement for the school, as well satisfactorily or beneficially design programs, policies, and practices that could encourage Queer students to persist to graduation.

The initial guide opened the door to questions that followed the natural flow of the interview. The follow up questions were utilized to provide a richer, more meaningful experience to the participants by allowing them to explore areas of concern outside of the strict focus of the interview. The interview continued until the participant felt they had expressed everything that they were asked to address, and until the two primary questions were addressed. Each interview was concluded with the interviewer asking the participant if they had anything further to add to the discussion.

The document review centered on documentation that addressed the Queer community on campus directly. The documents were reviewed with the intention of identifying which documents were the primary references for the policies regarding Queer students on campus. Inclusion and persistence to graduation were areas specifically addressed. The final area of interest had to do with the predicted and actual results of policies implemented by the college in regards to the Queer community on campus.

### Data Analysis

Phenomenological inquiry is design to uncover the basic structure of a phenomenon. The descriptions by participants in this study were analyzed objectively, understanding the essence of such description. Intuitive insights by the researcher and observers play an important part of phenomenological studies. In order to analyze the interviews in a methodical manner, the researcher used a method described by Creswell (1998) and followed the same steps:

- The researcher described her own experience of the phenomenon.
- The researcher found statements made by the students about the topic, listed the statements, and developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements.
- Statements were grouped into units, then textural descriptions were written given verbatim examples.
- The researcher reflected on her description and constructed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced.
- The process was followed first for the researcher's account of the experience and then for that of each participant.

After these steps were followed, the researcher advanced two exhaustive descriptions of the essence of the experiences given (Creswell, 1998). The analysis of the interview data provided a strong context of the case and culminated in an overall impression of the experiences of the students at ABC Community College.

The document review data were analyzed for the intended purpose of identifying what the perception of Queer students was about the College, its campus policies, the GSA, and the impact on persistence to graduation. The interview data were analyzed using an approach that provided an indiscriminate overview of the campus experience and atmosphere. Patterns of conduct and reaction were identified in order to provide a general overview of the college's faculty and staff effectiveness in dealing with extreme minority concerns.

### Summary

This chapter explored the purpose, design, procedures, ethics, and data collection and analysis of the lived experiences of Queer students in ABC Community College. A qualitative method of inquiry was used to uncover the basic structure of a phenomenon. By conducting

interviews with the seven subjects of the study, the researcher examined the perceptions by Queer students and their lived experiences in a college campus. Phenomenology was chosen as the method of inquiry because it tends to use a small sample of participants but provides rich understanding of the participants' experiences. The qualitative findings that surfaced from the interviews will be presented in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This study examined the perceptions of inclusion held by Queer students at ABC Community College. A void in the understanding of the needs of Queer students in this geographical area compelled my interest in investigating their perceptions in regards to their feelings of inclusion on campus. Studying the feelings and perceptions of students revealed the importance of inclusion and openness for Queer students studying at the College.

Queer students encounter difficulties managing their visibility in the classroom and other study environments. Heteronormativity in the community college environment in which this study was conducted, is one of the reasons students struggle with visibility and with the choice to come out in class.

I used the research questions on Chapter 3 as a guide in developing interview questions (see Appendix A) that would prompt information pertinent to the research goals. The questions prompted pertinent information, although in some instances the conversations with the interviewees strayed to areas outside the realm of the study.

#### Summary of Participants

**Madelaine** – An alumna, who returned as third year student to the institution. Madelaine identifies as a non-binary student and prefers the pronouns they/them.

**Juan de la Cuadra** – A first-year, traditional student taking health related courses. He identifies as male, prefers he/him pronouns, and is bisexual.

**Joseph** – A second year, traditional student. He identifies as a transgender man, prefers he/him pronouns.

**Brandon** – A first semester, non-traditional student. He identifies as a gay man, prefers he/him pronouns.

**Daisy** – A non-traditional student. Daisy prefers the pronouns she/her and identifies as bisexual.

**Jamie** – A traditional student, Jamie was homeschooled until she graduated from the twelfth grade. She identifies as a lesbian, but prefers to use the term gay. Jamie prefers she/her pronouns.

**Jay** – A traditional student who was homeschooled for three years in high school. Jay identifies as a transgender male and prefers the pronouns he/him.

### Madelaine's Experience

Madelaine came to the college as a traditional student, directly from high school. When I conducted the interview, they had already graduated from the college, but decided to come back and take extra classes.

Technically, this would be my third year here. Technically I'm already graduated. I graduated this past year, but I took the year off. But I'm back for classes and to participate in different types of theatre.

Madelaine was a theatre major who previously had been part of the honors program. Even though they had been part of honors classes and had worked as the school mascot under the costume, Madelaine mentioned they did not feel as they were part of any single group.

I'm apart of the drama club and I'm in the theatre, but as specific organizations, I used to be in the honors program when I went here, ... And I loved the connections with student life, but officially apart of, not really.

I asked if they felt more included or excluded on campus and the answer was a two part one.



I would say included, but I feel like that's because I'm in the theatre department, and it's kind of like the land of misfit toys and there's lots of people like me there. But it's definitely a difference when I'm out. It's not blatant but there is a certain ideal set. [...] It's kind of like the theatre is my home, it's like safe, but whenever I leave there, there is different situations that could happen that I have to remind myself of and that I am more conscious of myself when I'm not there.

Madelaine also mentioned that asking others to use pronouns that are not heteronormative was a struggle and that they would not ask outside of the theatre classes. Madelaine was not asked by professors on the first day of class if they had different pronouns. They were asked to share their preferred pronouns in theatre classes, in an informal fashion. Madelaine shared about their experience on campus,

Well, like when I'm in the theatre I can be super open and like people know all my pronouns and its just super cool. But outside of there, being in class, and I specifically have social problems, so talking a lot about the LGBTQ community and stuff like that. I've never shared with a teacher outside of my theatre teachers about like my pronouns or anything.

When speaking about negative experiences on campus, Madelaine mentioned being catcalled on their way to class. "I've had people just like with a platonic friend that they would yell and call me stuff like, Lesbians!"

Madelaine stated that their education is not hindered "as much" because they identify as a Queer student. But that "there's a kind of atmosphere" in class, it is something "I am somewhat paranoid of."

I am trying to focus on my studies but that's also like an extra thing that I am also focusing on, is that I'm worried that they'll find out and how they'll feel. I have not told my professors anything except for my theatre professors.

Madelaine stated that they only talk to people they are close to. Opening up in class and feeling a sense of overall belonging is not something they feel: "there's not been any crazy

discrimination or like riots on campus or anything crazy like that but that's definitely not something that I would share with people outside." Madelaine added that they feel some anxiety on campus, "it could just be me because I'm crazy, but I don't feel as in control being like that part of me when I'm not in the theatre." Madelaine also stated,

...some professors have not blatantly said anything that like what they feel is right or what they feel is wrong but there's a kind of atmosphere. I mean it doesn't hinder my learning as much, but it's also something that I'm aware of and that I am somewhat paranoid of.

Madelaine added that they have not opened about their sexual orientation with many on campus. They mentioned, "I have not told my professors anything except for my theatre professors." Madelaine continued, "I am trying to focus on my studies but that's also like an extra thing that I am also focusing on, is that I'm worried that they'll find out and how they'll feel" about having to tell people on campus. Madelaine also mentioned "I won't share with people that I'm not close to" when asked about how open they are about their sexual orientation with fellow students.

Madelaine talked about how open they can be in their Theatre class,

Well, like when I'm in the theatre I can be super open and like people know all my pronouns and it's just super cool. But outside of there, being in class, and I specifically have social problems, so talking a lot about the LGBTQ community and stuff like that. I've never shared with a teacher outside of my theatre teachers about like my pronouns or anything.

Madelaine helped the college's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) for an event in the theatre, so I was aware that they knew about the GSA and that they knew some of the members. "There are people that are with like the Gay Straight Alliance, and that's cool. But there are some people who are open about their hate towards specifically people in the queer community."

Madelaine mentioned that depending on the subject of the class, either more or less was said.

Yeah, especially with social problems. One of the first subjects we talked about was a nine-year-old drag queen and to me I love drag and I think it's a beautiful art form but not everyone understands that or feels the same way. And they were calling him like a faggot and stuff... when we're talking about this young boy, I think it's beautiful and am a hardcore supporter in people doing what they love to do. And that was getting confused with him being like transgender, and like him just being gay, and that like all adult men are pedophiles, and stuff like that.

Even when professors are having these conversations in class, Madelaine felt that they were not fully engaging the class as a whole. Madelaine added that they questioned themselves staying in the class.

Should I change out of this class? 'Cause like I don't know where my place is because I want to say something and I want to help people. 'Cause I love helping people, but some people have talked about they're not open to learning about anything like this.

Madelaine added that the professor tried to real back the conversation in class.

She kind of quieted down. She was like, "Okay that's enough" to be respectful and she kind of saw that it was getting out of hand. But that, even though, it like was quieted down in class they were still riled up about it, and that's how they feel. And I don't think talking about social problems or anything like that is gonna change, you know I think it's different for everybody.

No resources for Queer students were given in class, no discussions about what it means or does not mean to be Queer happened. Madelaine stated that they "wouldn't even know where to start looking besides going to the guidance office" if they needed any resources for sexual minorities.

Madelaine talked about what their decision-making process is when coming out to professors, or in class and with new friends. Madelaine said,

Well, it did take awhile to disclose like to even my close friends, and some of them weren't accepting and stuff like that. But like, it just reaches that point, I don't know how to describe it, I just felt comfortable and I knew them enough that I knew that nothing was going to change besides like pronouns. So, that's really it. I would have to trust somebody 'cause even though that feels like a huge thing for me to admit to somebody, like after that it shouldn't be a huge thing, it's just like a new thing that they would know about me. But, most of the time I don't. I don't know if that's fear or what, but for this semester I thought, I was working here in the summer, and I thought that I was going to like email all my professors and be like "Hey, please respect me and know that I use these pronouns." And I didn't, I think I typed them up and they're probably still in my drafts now. I don't know if that was fear or what.

Madelaine added that their experience was a different between high school and college.

They stated,

I knew. For sexuality, I knew like for a while that there was something, that I wasn't completely straight. I was in a relationship that last year or so of high school with a transgender man, and like that never seemed weird to me, like it was just a relationship. He kept it a secret because he wasn't like fully transitioned and he was still trying to hide it. So, that was a big secret that was a whole thing because I didn't know. But, I've known for sexuality for a while that like I still to this day don't know what specifically. [...] It's a huge question for Christian women [...]. It actually happened in college, the discovery of my that I like different pronouns. 'Cause throughout high school, high schoolers can be [...] Yeah they were not good, there were people like fighting and friendships broken and people getting kicked out of class and stuff for bullying, just like being terrible people. Even if they weren't gay, just the thought of being gay was repulsive to them. So, I didn't disclose anything to anybody there. Some of my closer friends knew that I wasn't straight, but they never really thought it was a big deal. But, yeah, I had the epiphany in college of like different pronouns and [...] The "She" like it was fine, but it didn't like perfectly fit me like I didn't hate it, but like it doesn't make me hate myself, but there is still this agitation that that's not it. That's not fully right. And then I was like, Oh! you can use the they pronouns.

As a busy student, Madelaine felt that they did not learn about the GSA on campus until they saw a table for the GSA during one of the fundraisers. But Madelaine did not have any friends in the group, so they were not aware of other clubs on campus. Madelaine added,

“honestly if I didn’t have friends that were in it I probably wouldn’t have known besides like the fundraisers and stuff and seeing them there,” talking about the GSA.

When asked if Madelaine knew any students who had felt excluded on campus, they mentioned that a friend of theirs who “is transgender, he will like worry about things because he is pretty open about it, but there are people who still use the “she” pronouns. He doesn’t always feel like he fits in.”

Madelaine also asked that professors address issues of discrimination and harassment in class head on.

Like at the very first of the semester, like you can believe whatever you want and that’s cool and that’s what makes the world awesome with so many different beliefs and passions, but if you attack or outwardly harass somebody because of any difference then that’s your...That’s a huge no, and that’s just a pleasant atmosphere in that they are friendly and kind and when you say something they actually listen and want to hear what you have to say.

Madelaine’s experience was a pleasant one because they found a niche with theatre students. Madelaine stated that “those people actively care,” speaking about the theatre professors. “They actually care and they would help me if I needed it,” which has made them feel more comfortable at the college.

When asked about staff at different offices around campus, Madelaine mentioned that “everybody’s nice, but not specifically like going out of their way.” Madelaine clarified that they were never asked about their preferred pronouns or ever asked about their gender expression because the conversations with staff around campus were basic. That is another reason why Madelaine exalts their relationship with faculty in the theatre department; “they want to go a little bit extra” and relate to them in a more personal way.

Madelaine suggested that the college's faculty and staff could do a better job by providing "availability to resources," or events like Mental Health Week, and "having a section just about gender and sexuality." Madelaine mentioned that statements such as "This isn't straight, and I have no idea what this means" could provide answers during Queer-friendly events. Madelaine believes that such conversations "could help bridge some gaps" between Queer students and the general population of campus.

### Juan's Experience

Juan is a traditional student in his second semester at the College. He enrolled right after high school and feels "pretty well included" at the institution. Because this is only his second semester at the college, Juan mentioned that he has not "had too many professors" and for that reason he has not shared his sexuality with faculty. Juan also mentioned that sexuality is not an issue of conversation in class, "it's kind of hit or miss. I don't think most of them really care" he says. Juan also stated that he has not had an opportunity to open up to faculty members other than me, the researcher.

Juan has opened up to his friends, he stated, "it's not really a big deal" with them because they "don't really care," but that he has had some bad experiences as well. Juan mentioned that in his line of study and work "you will get crap for everything." When asked about how he shares his sexual orientation with others, Juan mentioned "I just straight out told them." He added that "in EMS, fire, law enforcement, you develop really strong bonds with the people that you work with, and I felt like it was important for them to know."

Juan related a negative experience he had with a faculty member.

One of my professors met with me and a few other students before class, and he said that he doesn't know how he is going to explain to his son that not everyone is straight. I just thought it was kind of a weird question, and I mean, it was kind

of obvious that he was against it. ... He just had a tone of voice and a look of disgust on his face.

Juan mentioned feeling included by his peers but added,

There hasn't been a particular experience where I have felt very included by my professors. You know, I'm just very thankful that everyone, almost everyone, in my classes that I have told because I don't really interact with my Spanish classmates that much. But I interact with my EMT students a lot and everyone that I have told has been pretty much very accepting and didn't think it was a big deal. So that made me feel included because, you know, I have a history of being bullied for it when I was in elementary and middle school.

Juan also stated that during his middle school years he "got bullied and excluded pretty hard" for being bisexual and speaking about it, but his "high school experiences were a lot better." Juan expanded,

I didn't really, when I was young, understand what it meant to be straight. Like, I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that someone's gender, you know, could play a factor in whether you'd want to spend the rest of your life with them, or whatever. That was just a foreign concept to me, and as a little kid, you know, I'm not capable of understanding that. So, I remember when I was in elementary school - you know how young kids kind of like to play boyfriend/girlfriend, play husband/wife? ... Well, I mean everyone was doing that, but I was doing it excessively to both genders of students. And I got bullied and excluded pretty hard for that.

About the college he mentioned "like everywhere, there are close minded people," but that college "gives you a platform to meet people with similar orientation and similar experiences to you." Juan added,

Because one thing that I really liked about our earlier schooling is that these counselors at our school would, you know, we would meet once a week and they would train us on, "Don't hate people because of skin color. Don't hate people because of gender. Do not hate people because of sexual orientation."

Talking about feeling comfortable sharing his orientation with professors, Juan stated that he felt safe speaking to his Spanish professor, the researcher, because he felt the researcher was “open minded” and “had experiences similar” to ones he had had. He added “I know that you support everyone having the same rights and being treated the same. And I know that you have probably had similar experiences both here and elsewhere.”

Juan suggested that educating faculty about Queer students’ sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression on campus would be “a good idea,” to provide a better sense of inclusiveness. But Juan’s overall experience has been positive. He added that if a Queer student were to ask about the College he,

...would recommend this campus to any of [his] friends that, you know, have different orientation or gender identity. You know, except for a few bad experiences, it’s generally a really open and accepting campus. ... you're going to get a mix of loving and accepting people and assholes, so that's really what it comes down to.

### Joseph’s Experience

Joseph is a sophomore in his last semester at the college. He went to college right after high school. He is not actively involved on campus activities, but he added that “technically I am enrolled in Phi Theta Kappa, but I never go to any meetings.”

He stated that, “I definitely think I’ve been lucky enough in the classes and the courses I’ve taken.” He mentioned that his double major has allowed him to take many classes and he “had a lot of really awesome professors who will, like, either mention queer history or queer topics on their own.” Even though Joseph is a member of an honors society on campus, he was not involved in many of the activities. He regrets not being more active in this society because it “would have given [him] more of a sense of community and force [him] to be more social.”



Joseph revealed that he had to “go back in the closet” when he started attending ABC Community College. He suggested that the country’s political environment and his position as a new student at the College were causes for this. “A lot of my friends came [to the College] but they didn’t have the same classes as me, like, I had no guarantee that I would know someone would be, like, nice to me about it.” But he also remarked about his professors,

They’ve been very wonderful. I was actually out in high school and with the election and all sort of seeing so many transphobic and homophobic attitudes. I went back in the closet for here because a lot of my friends came here but they didn’t have the same classes as me like I had no guarantee that I would know someone would be like nice to me about it. So, but my professors have been wonderful and so that’s why I’ve felt safe enough to come back out.

Joseph has been proactive about reaching out to professors before classes start. He emails professors as soon as the learning management system is available and informs them of his preferred name and pronouns. Joseph mentioned,

I generally try to, if I know who they are, as soon as D2L opens I’ll try to email them at least a day or so in advance and be like, “Hey this is the situation and this is my preferred name, my preferred pronouns. Just treat me like every other student. You don’t have to make exceptions.” And with me where I’m not on HRT yet I am going to get misgendered and that’s fine, you know, that’s why HRT exists.

He also adds “if you’ve misgendered me, just don’t make a big deal about it. If you really feel the need to apologize, you can do it later on in private, but just don’t call attention to it.”

That is how he feels more comfortable in class. During a discussion in one of his classes, Joseph mentioned he felt he had a good platform to speak about his identity.

I have had really supported and open minded people in my Philosophy Science in the Modern World class. We talked about the Moral Arc of Gay Science and they kind of gave me a little bit of a platform to talk about it, and wanted to know what I had to say. I’ve only had one negative encounter with a student, and I don’t think he knew that I was trans, he just thought I was like a...I don’t know, but I don’t think he knew I was trans unless he’s just a dingus. Because he would just constantly say like transphobic and homophobic things, like injecting himself into

other people's conversations. Like, a girl in my class and I would be talking about the Kardashians 'cause she's obsessed with them, and he would bring up Caitlyn Jenner and he would just start bringing up all of that. Like, No one asked you. Thank you. Go away.

Joseph indicated he was misgendered at the advising office. He mentioned that "it was important to [him] that [he] went to a place that was primarily open minded and one of the advisors was very nice" but that the advisor "recommended several all-girls colleges" to him. He then added that when he mentioned not being interested in colleges that were all-female, the advisor just moved on. Joseph retold the encounter,

I have in advising a little bit. Just because like it's important to me that when I go somewhere, 'cause I'm going to go to ETSU right after this, and I was looking at other places, it was important to me that I went to a place that was primarily open minded and one of the advisors was very nice, but [...] not knowing she recommended several all girls colleges to me. And I was like "Well, that's not... that's not" and she was like "Oh!" and I was like, "I'm just not interested in that," and she was like "Oh, okay," and moved on. But, other than that, I haven't really...

Joseph talked about opening up to professors about his transition and about the reaction he received,

I had a wonderful history professor on Kingsport campus, and I'm such a history nerd, so I would always be that person like "Oh is this like...?" and ask a lot of questions. I would always stay after class talking about stuff with him and you know we brought up and would talk about a lot of things from Alexander the Great to the president whose name starts with a "B" I can't remember his name, one of the presidents who never married, [...] and yeah just different things like that. I think he knew from my interests and clues, but eventually I did mention, like, I don't know. I told him face to face because I really like him and he's very much a mentor to me, and he was very nice.

Joseph then mentioned an awkward situation with another professor in class,

Well, there was one professor I had for my College and Lifelong Learning class that like he would misgender me occasionally and like it was fine. He apologized after a couple times, but then like he would, I think he didn't understand that like

me being trans and gay, I'm a trans man who likes men, that's not gay. But I think he just assumed that trans and lesbian were like the same thing, and he would try to be inclusive and he would be like, "Well, [...] when you marry a woman one day, you're going to want-" I'm like, "No, no, please, no. That's not what that means." And I think he was trying his best, but it was just cringey.

Because of interactions like the one mentioned above, Joseph remarks that "there's definitely a lot more education that needs to happen about trans students and what it's like to have a trans student. What you should and shouldn't ask a trans student." But overall, Joseph is happy he attended ABC Community College. He added "yeah I was really worried. I thought that I would be, I don't know, I really hoped I wouldn't be outright targeted, but I thought I would be sort of isolated for my differences." This has not happened, and he has found people with whom he can connect.

#### Brandon's Experience

Brandon is a new student at the College. He had two years of college experience in the past. Brandon returned to the area to be a caretaker for his elderly parents. Because of his age and his status as a new student to campus he is not involved in many activities.

During the interview, Brandon mentioned he preferred to be acknowledged as a gay student and not as a Queer student because "growing up at my age that was an insult." Brandon also added that he prefers only to be recognized as a student and not as a gay student.

I think I just identify as a student rather than my sexual identity, or my sexual preference, whatever you call it. That's how I survive school. That's how I survive work. That's how, that was none of nobody's business and I still feel that way pretty much.

"Although, I am very interested in people being able to live a life without fear of retribution because of it. That's why I'm here with you" he added.

When asked about his interaction in class Brandon mentioned,

Very positive. I have never felt any of the professors...I haven't any discrimination issues. I have, some of the students have made remarks of something about, you know, being queer or or that, but it was not malicious. [...] They all were just remarks for people of this area.

Brandon stated that his interactions with professors were positive. "Two of the professors were very direct" about not allowing any discriminatory language or behavior in class.

They do not tolerate abuse of defensive or offensive language to condemn or criticize to anyone or hurt them regardless of their...of anything. That they expect to conduct as a open, sort of a family unit, in the class.

Brandon mentioned that he never had to speak up about his sexual orientation in class because the topic was not one that naturally arose in conversation. He also mentioned that if it had been brought up in class he would have spoken up because he is "vocal enough to where I won't tolerate people being mean to other people regardless whether it's gay or whether it's religion" or any other differences.

I try to be very kind and I'm very perceptive of discrimination. Maybe because I work so much in my own church which is Pentecostal church, which I don't mind you, you know, which is very anti-gay. I have grown and had to learn the difference between ignorance of what gay means, someone not understanding, and someone just being hateful or mean.

Brandon mentioned that in his interactions with faculty and staff he "never sensed anything but kindness." Unfortunately, given that Brandon is a new student, he has not had many experiences on campus, he is not active with any clubs, and he is restricted to only one small teaching site. Brandon did not know that the Gay-Straight Alliance was an active club "except when I have been out at the [main] campus."

Brandon recommended having more information visible to students about activities and groups on campus but also having groups that do not need you to self-identify within a category to fit in.

### Daisy's Experience

Daisy is a non-traditional student who came back to college after years of working. She identifies as bisexual. Daisy is involved in various campus clubs, including Phi Theta Kappa which makes her an honor student.

When asked whether she felt included or excluded as a queer student she stated, "it's kind of hard to say,"

I never really go out of my way to bring [that I am lesbian] up or anything, just 'cause I know I am in the south and it's kind of scary...But, when I, when it does come up, I usually feel pretty accepted.

She adds that participating with clubs on campus "helped me a lot. It's helped me get more comfortable around people who [have] social anxiety problems, so it's helped me not be so afraid to talk to people." Daisy commented,

I've only told like one professor that I'm bi, and it, it went pretty good. And I ended up like writing, that, that was in my Ed Psych class and I ended up writing a paper about like how teachers can prevent like homophobic bullying. And she gave me really good feedback on it, and she seemed supportive, so....

When asked about her experience with classmates, Daisy describes it as "okay," and adds that she "kind of keep to [herself], but the people that I do like to talk to, they're pretty nice." Daisy also mentions that she does not "want to graduate because [she does not] want to leave them behind."

Daisy addressed whether she has opened up about her sexual orientation with other members of campus. She mentioned being a student-worker on campus,

I don't really open up to any like, any like offices or anything. I work in the disabilities office and I don't think I would ever like try to bring it up there because I'm kind of scared 'cause both the Director and Secretary seem pretty Christian, so I'm kind of scared that I might like, I don't know...Not lose my job, but kind of like lose like the...

About being open with professors and classmates Daisy adds,

Not a whole lot. 'Cause like the reason I told that professor was like we were talking about student diversity so she like we got on a topic of like transgender students and then I just kind of spoke up and said something I don't remember and just got on the topic that I was bisexual and I guess in that class there's like fifteen other people or so, so there's those people that I told, and then I told a couple other close friends so maybe like I don't know, twenty or so people now.

Daisy opened up about her sexual orientation in a class of about fifteen students but has only told "a couple other close friends" that she identifies as bisexual because she "never really felt any reason to" open up about her sexual orientation to others.

Daisy opened up about being bullied in high school. She mentioned,

I was kind of bullied back then, so that's kind of what keeps me quiet for the most part. Because I know like times have changed, it's been like what? Eight years since I graduated, so I know that it's more like acceptable now to be out, but there's still a little bit of that fear that I'm just going to be like [...] it just kind of keeps me more quiet.

Daisy mentioned that knowledge about Queer issues is lot more mainstream now. She stated,

I feel like people are a lot less ignorant now. Like especially dudes, they don't say like, "Oh I can change your mind. I can make you straight." or whatever. I don't hear that any more and that might also have to do with like the people I choose to open up to like I know that they're not going to be ignorant or say something that is like hurtful on purpose to me. But also I feel like, if I wanted to, I could open up to more people. It's just a little bit of that fear I remember.

Daisy attended college in another state. When I asked her to compare the two experiences she remarked,

Back then I was kind of more...I kind of wanted to make more of a statement about who I am and I like told more people about it because I wanted to be proud of it. And I'm, I don't know, like I, I still feel like that sense of pride it's just I, I don't really like make it the center of everything I talk about now. And I don't know I feel like back then I kind of opened myself up to more criticism which discouraged me a little more just because I was in the Bible belt and I had like a lot of abrasive, well, I don't know. I feel like my opinions are pretty good, but I feel like said them in a pretty abrasive way back then.

She continued,

I'm just, I'm just kind of more picky about like who, who I say things to and who and how I word things. Like I try to keep an open mind and remember where I am and who I'm talking to and other people's background might be so that I kind of like let them know that I'm willing to try to understand where they are coming from, but also still standing my ground and being like "This is who I am too."

Daisy could not think of any pros about being an out Queer student at ABC Community College, but she did mentioned that she thought a con would be "being afraid of like how it's going to affect my job, afraid of how, of how it affects, like, my relationships with my teachers and how they're going to grade" her assignments. She added, "I feel like most of my teachers are pretty open minded, but there's still that fear they're going to think I'm being too, I don't know, too annoying and too liberal or whatever." A similar experience has been avoiding the use of pronouns when speaking about ex partners on papers and personal narratives. Daisy mentioned, "I was just scared of that teacher because she was Christian. She went to a Christian school, so I just didn't want to bring it up and be penalized for it."

Daisy also spoke about how professors do not ask about personal pronouns in class. "I've never had any professors ask about pronouns like at all." Professors have asked about going by middle names, but that is the extent of it according to Daisy.

About coming out to an instructor Daisy stated,

She just seemed really accepting and like the terms that she used, like when she was talking about like her experiences with transgender students and like gay students and everything like the terms she used weren't like necessarily perfect, like not something that I would hear from someone who like really studied like this sort of thing but I could still tell that she was trying and she was willing to learn. She was willing to learn like how to handle it properly.

When asked about receiving any information about Queer resources on campus, Daisy mentioned receiving some information about the Gay-Straight Alliance from myself, but added "I'm sure like there would be more there if I went more often or what-not, but that's pretty much all I've seen." She added, "I check the Facebook every once in a while" to find information about meetings on campus for the GSA.

About Queer students who stopped attending college Daisy stated,

There was this trans girl in my French class and she stopped showing up to class. A lot. And I couldn't tell if it was because she was having troubles with, like, other people giving her a hard time for being trans, or if she just had a bunch going on in her life and she just couldn't focus.

Daisy mentioned, "everyone was pretty accepting of her, but she did get, like, a lot of girls, guys talking to her and saying really, like, invasive and nasty things to her." Daisy added that she understood it to be on campus, but not in the class they shared. Daisy also commented, "I sat next to her and she would show me all this gross stuff that these guys had been talking to her about."

On her ending statement, Daisy mentioned,

Well, a thing that I really like is like how so many teachers have like the LGBT flag on their doors and things and that makes me feel like a little bit safer, but it would be really cool if they did ask if we wanted like what our pronouns were or something like that. Like maybe not, maybe figure out some way to do it in a sort of discreet sort of way, so like, I don't know. Students wouldn't really feel like they had to answer in a certain way just because they didn't want to feel bad in



front of other students or whatever. But, I don't know. I can't really think of anything else... And more meetings for the Gay-Straight Alliance would be cool.

### Jamie's Experience

Jamie, a college freshman, was homeschooled her entire life. She added she came to ABC Community College after graduating twelfth grade. She added that "family is super important" to her, and for that reason she finds it hard to get involved on campus activities because she does not have enough time.

...with my job and then just like family and stuff like that makes it hard for me to be able to, I guess, balance it out. You know? So...Family is super important for me, so I like to be able to have some time with them.

When asked about feeling included or excluded as a Queer student at the College, Jamie answered,

I've always felt pretty included. All of my friends know that I'm gay, so I've never like really have felt excluded. There has been like conversations in classes where like for example in one of my College and Lifelong Learning classes they were talking and like there is some kind of like snide comments from some of the boys and I just have ignored it because they're not really my friends. But besides that, I've never really experienced any like, like exclusion or anything like that.

She also mentioned being proud about a paper she wrote,

...one of my best essays that I've actually ever done was on LGBT and then like it was a persuasive essay for Comp and I got 100% on it, and so I was super proud of that because that kind of showed me that she wasn't like biased about it. Just from like the topic and stuff like that, and so that was really cool. Because that was one thing I was kind of worried about was like that topic. And I was like, "Oh is she going to like grade me differently because of the topic I chose?" And stuff like that. So, pretty...I mean, most of my teachers, I'm not sure how many of them really know. I'm pretty open about it, but I've never come across a teacher that like been not okay with it.

However, Jamie commented about encountering bias from classmates. “There is some kind of, like, snide comments from some of the boys and I just have ignored it because they’re not really my friends.” Jamie also mentioned that classmates “point out, like, other students who may not look, I guess, like gender conforming.” Jamie brushes it off, “I don’t take it to heart.” “It’s better than I expected anyways,” she added.

When asked about experiencing discrimination or biased on other offices around campus, Jamie stated, “I’ve never experienced anything where I felt excluded.” She mentioned that when she needs anything from offices on campus the topic of her sexual orientation has never come out. “I am there for a reason you know. We just kind of get to the point” she said.

Jamie adds that she has come out to her professors,

So there’s my speech teacher, my Comp teacher from last semester...I’m trying to think. Not my U.S. history teacher...My U.S. history teacher, she’s super cool, but she doesn’t like know the students very well. You know? I’m trying to think of like teachers that like I kind of, like they recognize me and know me. Maybe my Comp teacher. My Comp 2 teacher for this semester, he might know ‘cause I talk, sometimes I’ll relate things in essays or like reflection papers and stuff like that. So like, especially for like speech, there’s a lot of like different aspects in the book that we talk about and like how we can relate that in our own lives and stuff like that. And so, I’ve mentioned in that before so I know that he knows for sure. So probably like three or four professors.

Jamie pointed out that she is very outspoken in class, “I’ll relate things in essays or like reflection papers.” Jamie’s sexual orientation comes out “especially for like speech, there’s a lot of, like, different aspects in the book that we talk about and, like, how we can relate that in our own lives.” Jamie added that she has come out to “three or four professors.”

When asked whether she has come out to classmates, she remarks “all of my classmates in all my classes.” “But there is one in my U.S. History class, there’s a boy who goes to my

church, and I'm not out to the people at my church," she added. "I have to be really careful around him because I don't want him running his mouth to people at my church."

While explaining why she did not want this one particular boy to know about her sexual orientation, she answered, "my parents don't know either." "If my family finds out then I could be like in a whole world of trouble," she declared. Jamie added, "some of my really close friends, like, they know my family, but I know that they would never say anything" to them.

When asked to expand on when and how she decides to self-identify to professors other than writing, Jamie said,

I mean, it's never really came up in a conversation. I don't think. I mean, if it were to come up in a conversation, like, if they were to, I guess make a statement or something like that, then I would just tell them. You know? That I was gay or that I was lesbian. You know? I would have no issue doing that. I trust all my teachers.

Jamie mentioned that she sometimes feels excluded because,

A lot of the stuff we read and, like, the other stuff we study, a lot of times is kind of exclusive. Like, there's not a lot of representation in the stuff that we do. And so, I'm kind of used to it now, but it would be cool to be able to see like a, like maybe, like, learn other stuff besides just about like straight people.

Jamie also added,

I have a humanities class and my teacher, he, he is really good about including everybody. So, he talks a lot about, like, in ancient history, like, there was lots of, like, girl on girl poetry and stuff like that. He takes his time and goes over that. That's super cool and I really like that he does that because I definitely feel more included in that aspect when I am learning more.

Even though Jamie is very out on campus, she points out "I don't really feel like I'm treated any differently" at the College, but she added "I mean, there's still people that I'm not sure if they would treat me any differently if I were to tell them."

Jamie remarked that coming to ABC Community College and “being around people who are super accepting of it has definitely, like, grown my confidence in myself and made me accept myself more than I was, like, back in high school.” Concerning high school and being homeschooled, she states

It definitely was very difficult having to go through certain subjects, like, very avidly teach against, like, homosexuality and being gay, and so it was this huge struggle because I had to take, like, the Old Testament class and New Testament class.

Even after all the positive experiences and interactions Jamie has had, she commented

There’s probably, like, one teacher that I probably wouldn’t be comfortable telling. Just because I feel like he’s, just from the way he...just from the things I’ve heard him say in class and his teaching style. And he’s a lot, he’s a lot older. So, I feel, like, it’d be a lot harder to tell him. Because I’m afraid that he would maybe treat me differently in class.

Jamie also pointed out that none of her professors has provided her with resources for Queer students on campus. “No one has ever reached out” with material or information. She added “I could go looking myself, too, but I, I guess where it’s a smaller, a smaller, like, community college I guess I didn’t think there would be a whole lot of resources and stuff out there.”

Jamie addressed the questions about knowing if students had left ABC Community College because of discrimination and bias this way

I have a friend. I don’t know if I would say that he would’ve left for that reason, but he is gay and he did [leave] after, like, two or three weeks at Northeast. And I think his anxiety was part of it and stuff like that, but he is, like, the only person that I can think of that I know on a personal level that I would say maybe [being Queer] contributed to it.

“He still hasn’t come back yet and I don’t know if he’s going to come back here soon,” she added.

I asked Jamie if she would leave ABC Community College because of any bias or discrimination. She responded “Oh! Definitely not. No way.” But she added

Maybe I think it would be different if I was be going to ... Is it King? That’s Christian? Like if it was King. Definitely maybe. I think it’d be definitely a lot more difficult to be on that type of campus than this.

But Jamie also added, that one professor

He is very old fashioned and he’s never said anything direct, but just from what he said, that he was raised in a completely different time, and kind of blames our generation for a lot of things, and, so he is one person that I feel like would definitely, I would never probably tell him about me. Just for the fact that he has been like...I don’t want to say mean, but he has definitely offended a bunch of us in our class just from the things that he has said.

### Jay’s Experience

Jay is a traditional student. He enrolled in ABC Community College after being homeschooled for three years. He mentioned having medical issues. He also mentioned having anxiety issues that prevented him from attending the local high school to completion, though he attended until his sophomore year. He graduated earlier because of being homeschooled. Jay added,

I left sophomore year because I was really just anxious and I wasn’t feeling comfortable with myself. I didn’t know what was going on, so I got into a really bad depression. So, sophomore year I was going to school, I was skipping and doing everything to avoid school and avoid people and just not be there. And if I did go up, like my mom would drop me off in the mornings and I would get up to the doors and she would wait, and I would get sick and I would have to come right back. And she would be like, “What’s wrong?” and I would have to go home. And it basically made me fail all my classes because I started getting all F’s and that’s why I did go homeschool.

When asked if he was familiar with any student organizations on campus, Jay responded, “I know of the GSA now, but I don’t know where it’s at.” “I kind of disappeared from high school, then just randomly showed up in college and I’m kind of a new person,” he added. He also pointed out, “I just haven’t got out there yet. I’m scared to get out there still. It’s just me.” I asked Jay to explain why he was scared about reaching out on campus and searching for organizations. He stated “just people being, just being, I guess, more homophobic, transphobic” in this area compared to the west coast or more progressive areas in the country.

When Jay was asked to address whether he felt included or excluded on campus, he declared, “I feel included.” But he also added,

When I first started going here, which was in Fall of 2016, I wasn’t changed, and I emailed all of [the professors] like, a month in advance, two weeks in advance, and a week in advance, a day in advance, like “Hey, this is what’s going on. I’m medically transitioning. I haven’t changed my name. This is what I go by and pronounced.” And the first day of every class, they all messed up. Even though I sent them four or five, six emails saying “Please, don’t mess up. Please, get my name right. Like, I am Jay for a reason.”

Jay added that maintaining the privacy of his transition was important to him and “it’s annoying” that faculty members would not call him the correct name or use the wrong pronoun. “There are people in that class that know me [as a female] that I don’t want them to know it’s me.” “I don’t know if [the professors are] uninformed of what it does to trans people, or if it’s just they forget because there’s a lot of students,” he remarked. Jay also added that this is an issue he continuously encounters, even “eight weeks in” a semester. Jay mentioned about a faculty member calling him by his birth name,

Yeah! My heart literally went past the floor board. And we were talking in groups and I was just kept talking and my face got so red. I was like...and under her breath she was like, “Oh! Jay!” and I’m like, “Could you make it anymore obvious?” Like, oh my gosh.

Jay has gone great lengths to guard his privacy, even telling people who ask him if he is related to [his given name], and he has told them that he is [her] brother, “oh, yeah” he added. “I like being out there privately I guess, like if someone asks me I would be really open about it, but I don’t like being put out there because I guess I don’t like being labeled.” Jay stated that having a more inclusive trans curriculum in classes would help students be informed better about gender identity. When asked if academic content needs to be informative and informed, he answered “yeah.”

Jay revealed that in high school, “I didn’t identify as anything. I was a female. I was not knowing what was going on.” Jay added,

But in high school, they kind of just assumed I was gay. For the most part they assumed I was gay, which they weren’t wrong. But, I kind of had like weird remarks like for in high school I guess. Because my friend used to, my friend was really close to me, and she was definitely not gay. She was straight, and she just had like bad anxiety and just... she was close to me and she just had bad anxiety. So, during lunchtime, every time at lunch, she would...big crowds would just freak me out but they freaked her out really badly. And she would come and sit down and like lay her head on my lap just like as a friend, like I’m just comforting her. And I’ve had a few times where people would walk up and be like, “Oh you faggots,” or like, “Oh you...” Like just trying to start something. I just looked at them. I was like, “She’s my friend.”

One of Jay’s high school classmates told other students in the class he was trans. He was outed by a classmate to other students. These friends told Jay he was “damaging the body that [he] was given.” He added, “I’m not damaging it. I’m saving it. If I wasn’t doing what I was doing right now I would be dead.”

Jay mentioned going to offices on campus where he needs to fill out paperwork “for that it’s all legal name, so all the paperwork is obviously legal name. I don’t know if you can change it in the system if you haven’t legally changed it.” He also added, “but when I did say, “Hey, I go by this.” They were just like, “Oh, okay!”” Jay brought up another conversation.

Hey, I don't go by that name. Please don't call me that. I go by this and, like, different pronouns." And they were just like, "Okay, whatever." And they just went along with it, so I haven't had any issues with them.

### Summary of Findings

This research was guided by three questions. The findings are reported here for each question.

#### Research Question 1

*What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding faculty and staff support at ABC Community College?*

By the time Queer students enrolled in higher education, they have gone through years of practice navigating potentially hostile environments. The students interviewed already had developed a complex system of personal identity protection. These protective walls or barriers allow them to navigate new or unfamiliar situations without sharing their queerness. Queer students do not open up about their personal identity until a faculty or staff member makes it clear that they are welcoming of Queer students.

Madelaine mentioned feeling at home with the theatre students and in the theatre department, but not sharing much outside those classes. Madelaine also stated that even when having discussions in class about social problems, the faculty members did not engage the class and did not include information or resources for Queer students. Madelaine added that faculty would not know where to get those resources either. Madelaine explained that they were never asked about their preferred pronouns or was ever asked about their gender expression because the conversations with staff around campus were basic.

Juan mentioned that he has not had too many professors and for that reason, he has not shared his sexuality with faculty with the exception of one professor, the researcher. Juan did



mention having a negative experience with a faculty member because of some comments and faces the faculty member had made when talking about Queer people. Juan suggested educating faculty about Queer students' sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression on campus, to provide a better sense of inclusiveness. But he also adds that his overall experience has been positive.

Joseph mentioned that in his classes he has had professors who mention queer history or queer topics to the class. Joseph also mentioned he had gone back in the closet when he first started attending ABC Community College, but that his professors have allowed him to feel safe and come back out of the closet. Joseph added that he has been proactive about reaching out to professors before classes start by emailing them about his preferred name and pronouns. Joseph indicated that staff never asked him about his preferred pronouns and had mistakenly offered him all-female universities for transfer. He then added that when he mentioned not being interested in colleges that were all-female, that the advisor just moved on.

Brandon stated that his interactions with professors were positive; two of the professors addressed not allowing any discriminatory language or behavior in class. Brandon mentioned he does not speak about his sexual orientation because the topic was not one that naturally arose in conversation. Brandon commented that in his interactions with faculty and staff he never sensed anything but kindness from those helping him.

Daisy stated that she has only told one professor about her sexual orientation, but that the professor was open and seemed supportive when providing feedback on a paper about her experiences. On the other hand, Daisy mentioned that she is reserved about her queerness because she works as a student worker and people around her "seem pretty Christian," and Daisy would prefer not to have conversations about her sexuality with them.

Jamie mentioned getting a good grade on a paper about LGBT issues and feeling safe with that professor. “I was super proud of that because that kind of showed me that [the professor] wasn’t, like, biased about it,” Jamie added. Jamie commented coming out to other professors in whose classes she is spoken about her sexual orientation. Jamie stated not mentioning her sexual orientation with staff around campus because her orientation does not come out in conversation.

Jay is a female-to-male transitioning student, and he has had bad experiences with faculty members making mistakes on his name and his preferred pronouns. Jay emails professors before classes start to let them know about his name change and his transition, but he argues, “they all messed up” the first days of class. Jay did not mention interactions with staff.

#### Research Question 2

*What are the perceptions of Queer students regarding the Gay Straight Alliance at ABC Community College?*

Madelaine helped the college’s Gay Straight Alliance for an event in the theatre, so they knew some of the members. Madelaine felt that they did not learn about the GSA being an organization on campus until they saw a table for a fundraiser. But Madelaine did not have any friends in the group, so they were not aware of the meeting times or activities, and also they did not ask. Madelaine suggested that the College could do a better job by providing “availability to resources,” or events like Mental Health Week, and “having a section just about gender and sexuality.” Madelaine mentioned that the GSA could provide answers during Queer-friendly events. Madelaine believes that such conversations “could help bridge some gaps” between Queer students and the general population of campus.

Juan knows there is a club on campus but he has not attended any meetings. Juan also added he does not know what the organization does or where to find information if he were looking for it.

Joseph stated that he is aware that there is a GSA on campus, but his schedule and the GSA meetings never seem to line up. Joseph also mentioned that he would like to join and be more involved. Joseph was president of his high school GSA for two years. He would like to attend a club that is more social. Joseph finds GSAs a bit too political. Joseph would like a club where and with whom to gather and talk about culture, history, and “stuff like that.”

Brandon did not know that the GSA was an active club on all ABC Community College campuses. Brandon believed that the club only involved students at the main campus. Brandon is a new student, he has not had many experiences on campus, he is not active with any clubs, and he is restricted to only one small teaching site.

Daisy learned about the GSA because she saw posters for meetings around campus. Daisy was interested in attending because the GSA had promoted a trip to Washington D.C. with members of the College Democrats. Daisy also follows the GSA on Facebook. Daisy stated that the researcher, as advisor for the GSA, was the only person that provided her with information and resources for Queer students on campus.

Jamie, the homeschooled student, did not know that there was a GSA on campus. Jamie was on her second semester at ABC Community College.

Jay learned about the GSA through the researcher, when Jay visited the researcher’s office to ask about this interview. Jay mentioned that he would like to attend the GSA and have a place to speak openly with people. He likes the GSA as a club to meet more people like himself

and to hear “other people’s feelings, just thoughts, and knowing that I am not the only person that felt like that. And that there are different people out there and that they are there.”

### Summary

Chapter 4 presented the phenomenological findings of the lived experiences of Queer students at ABC Community College. The chapter examined the descriptions of the experiences the Queer students had at the College and summarized the themes encountered during the interviews. Chapter 5 will summarize the findings of this phenomenological study and will share recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

#### Background of the Study

To best assess the data gathered in this study, it is important to explain the shift of administrative campus climate, and the timing of when the data collection occurred. At the time this study was in its initial stages, the researcher was the advisor of an active Gay-Straight Alliance at ABC Community College. The club, which ran with the assistance of students, was active on campus putting several sales, movie showings, official meetings, and a yearly drag show. The club had at least twenty active participating members every semester, fund raised actively, and attended local and national conferences.

Due to internal administrative issues at ABC Community College, the GSA had not been an active club on campus for at least three semesters. This meant that active participants and members of the GSA had graduated and moved on by this point. It also meant that newly enrolled students, ones the researcher could interview, did not have the same knowledge of the activities in which the club had participated. The researcher also encountered resistance from new students to participate in the study because an advisor-advisee relationship, which existed with previous GSA participants, did not exist. In order to elicit their full participation in the study, the researcher had to create a trusting environment with these new students first.

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Queer students in community colleges, the faculty and staff's response to those experiences, and to identify if visibility of clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, create a more welcoming environment for Queer students. This study also provides qualitative research of the

experiences of Queer students and examine the effectiveness of inclusive policies on campus, all to delve the effects of visibility of the Gay-Straight Alliance on the perception of inclusiveness of Queer students on campus. This phenomenological study's goal is to provide a basis for further investigation on the effects of visibility of Gay Straight Alliances on Queer students' perceptions of inclusiveness.

In this chapter, I detail how throughout the interview process, I discovered that Queer students have created for themselves systematic ways to manage their visibility in the classroom environment. Queer students arrive to college with a sophisticated set of protection screens, like armor, which they use to conceal their queerness.

The analysis of the interviews revealed the difference in perceptions and experiences for Queer students at ABC Community College. Students in community college reach higher education after years of navigating antagonistic and potentially hostile environments. As the literature reveals, faculty, staff, and students in non-dominant categories of sexual identity may experience widespread harassment, bullying, hostility, and victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender identity and in many cases these sexual minority individuals stay in the closet and choose not to affirm their sexuality (Waldo, 1998; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Vaccaro, 2014). Students who navigate unwelcoming, racist, and homophobic campus climates can see their success and wellbeing affected in a negative way. Academic success and retention of students is affected negatively by a hostile campus climate (Vaccaro, *Campus Climate for Diversity: Current realities and suggestions for the future*, 2014). Given the potential negativity, Queer students approach interactions with unknown people; faculty, staff, classmates, with prudence.

Caution and guardedness compel students not be their true selves. In exchange, this constrains the students' college and classroom experiences. By not affirming their true selves, Queer students cannot engage fully and openly in class conversations. When and if students are unsure about the inclusiveness or openness of faculty members towards non-dominant categories of sexual identity, they may decide to not participate in classroom discussions. This non-participation may potentially hinder students' success in the classroom.

### Policies, Procedures, and Practice

ABC Community College has an extensively inclusive non-discrimination policy as part of its Policies and Procedures Manual. The policy states that discrimination may occur by

Treating individuals less favorably because of their race, color, religion, creed, ethnic or national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age (as applicable), status as a covered veteran, genetic information, or any other category protected by federal or state civil rights law. (ABC Community College, 2019)

Practices have not caught up to this progressive policy, though. Queer students still feel targeted by classmates, transgender students cannot change their legal names on class enrollment lists, the use of preferred pronouns is not widely practiced, and the college has not instituted official Safe Zones for Queer students. The work of finding safe spaces has fallen into the students themselves, who navigate unknown spaces until they found inclusive classrooms, offices, and trusted faculty members.

### Discussion

Madelaine, the non-binary student who had the most knowledge of the Gay-Straight Alliance's activities on campus mentioned they felt most included in the Theatre program and with the professors and students therein. The Theatre department has been a long-time collaborator and supporter of the GSA. As a matter of fact, the Theatre department's chair is the

co-advisor for the GSA. The professors in this program have assisted the GSA putting events together, choreographing the drag shows, promoting events, and in general, creating a welcoming and inclusive space for Queer students on campus.

The Theatre department requires students to work backstage for plays and events. Moreover, the faculty in the department put together a play every semester. The cast and crew of these productions become a tight knit group throughout the semester and even throughout their years at the college. Because of the time students spend together and the closeness of the relationships, the Theatre faculty and staff need to make their expectations regarding personal relationships clearly known. Students are expected to maintain professional, cordial, and respectful relationship with other students always. Students are expected to bring up any conduct issues to the faculty and staff, and harassment, disrespect, and bullying are not tolerated. According to Evans (2000), “to ensure that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are afforded opportunities to learn equivalent to those of other students, faculty must take an active role in creating a supportive climate” (Evans N. J., 2000, p. 82).

As Madelaine indicated, “the theatre is my home, it’s like safe, but whenever I leave there, there is different situations that could happen that I have to remind myself of, and that I am more conscious of myself when I’m not there.” They added, “some professors have not blatantly said anything that, like, what they feel is right or what they feel is wrong, but there’s a kind of atmosphere. I mean, it doesn’t hinder my learning as much, but it’s also something that I’m aware of and that I am somewhat paranoid of.”

The Theatre faculty have created a welcoming and inclusive environment for their students. The Theatre Department has provided a safe space where Queer students can share



their true selves with other students. This environment has also strengthen the bonds between Queer students and between those students and their faculty.

Juan de la Cuadra, the bisexual, health professions major, has had a different experience from the one Madelaine had in the Theatre department. Juan explained “is kind of the nature of being bi in EMS that you will get crap for everything.” Juan also added, “I felt like it was something important to share. I mean in EMS, fire, law enforcement, you develop really strong bonds with the people that you work with, and I felt like it was important for them to know.”

Juan believes it is important to share his sexual orientation with his coworkers and classmates, but he also does not find it to be an inclusive space. He explained that he had not have bad experiences on campus besides “sly remarks,” but he does not feel “fully included” either. In class, Juan describes, “I’m generally included because they don’t know about it, but you know, they have certain times gone off on a topic that could be considered homophobic.” It is times like this when he does not feel included and he does not find school to be an inclusive and welcoming space.

Juan also remarked on an exchange with a professor,

one of my professors met with me and a few other students before class, and he said that he doesn’t know how he is going to explain to his son that not everyone is straight. I just thought it was kind of a weird question, and I mean, it was kind of obvious that he was against it. He just had a tone of voice and a look of disgust on his face.

Juan sees a difference between how students and professors interact with him. He finds his professors not to be as inclusive as his classmates. He remarked,

everyone that I have told has been pretty much very accepting and didn’t think it was a big deal. So that made me feel included because, you know, I have a history of being bullied for it when I was in elementary and middle school.

Juan's elementary and middle school experience is consistent with reports from GLSEN where students claimed that the victimization they suffered at their schools included physical intimidation, physical violence, bullying, harassment, social isolation, and assault (Kosciw J. G., Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

Joseph is a transgender male student who was out in high school. Joseph explained that when he started at ABC Community College he had to go back in the closet because he did not know if he was going to be in an inclusive environment. He mentioned that many of his high school friends attended the College with him, but that he was not sure if others in class were going to be as accepting and welcoming.

I went back in the closet for here because a lot of my friends came here but they didn't have the same classes as me like I had no guarantee that I would know someone would be like nice to me.

Joseph remarked how he is very proactive about informing his professors about his preferred name and gender pronouns by emailing them in advance. By doing this, Joseph expects faculty members to take into account the identity of the students and minimize issues of misgendering in class, which can call negative attention to transgender students. "If you've misgendered me, just don't make a big deal about it. If you really feel the need to apologize, you can do it later on in private, but just don't call attention to it," he added. Misgendering has negative effects on students. According to Garvey, Mobley, Summerville, and Moore (2018), students that receive validation from faculty members, administrators, and peers find it integral to the undergraduate experience. Students feel more affirmed in their Queer identity when the institution they attend offers LGBT and queer studies programs, and when faculty members address topics related to race, sexuality, and gender in classes.

Joseph mentioned that he felt not included only one time at ABC Community College, and it was when an advisor kept offering “several all-girls colleges” as an option for transfer. Joseph mentioned that once he asserted that he did not want to go to such schools that the advisor moved on. This experience highlights the need for student affairs staff on college campuses to ask identity questions of students during the advising process. In a study by Steinour (2008), the researcher found that “in order to adhere to the heteronormative structures of college campuses, distinct characteristics of the trans-subject had to be identified in order to apply trans-friendly, supportive and protective services, programs and academia for the inclusion of transgender students” (Steinour, 2008, p. 21).

As stated above, ABC Community College has in place an inclusive policy that specifically mentions gender identity and gender expression. Unfortunately, there are no steps in place to address the needs of transgender or gender non-conforming students when it comes to preferred pronouns or their names.

Brandon, a non-traditional student who came back to college after 20 years of working as a truck driver, mentioned that he does not bring out his sexual identity at all on campus. He prefers to be considered just a student and not a gay student. This reluctance to be out on campus is common. Students who have navigated heteronormative, and in the case of Brandon, closed off groups like the trucking business, where his personal safety could have been at risk because of his sexual orientation, are very reluctant to open up in unfamiliar spaces. Brandon emailed the researcher repeatedly before the interview asking how the researcher knew he was gay. The researcher responded that the email Brandon received inviting students to participate was shared with the campus at large, but Brandon believed it was a targeted email and that he had been

outed on campus. After a long conversation on who the researcher was and how the interview would be used, Brandon finally agreed to participate.

Brandon mentioned he was a caretaker for his parents, but that he was not out to them. Brandon seemed reluctant to participate in the research and to be out on campus. His hesitation to be acknowledged as a gay student could be explained by research by Ivory (2005) which explains,

The first barrier to sexual minority students forming connections on campus is due to the invisible campus population. On an informal basis, it can be difficult for LGBT students to identify other sexual minorities on commuter and community college campuses. Even when sexual minorities are visible on campus—such as at a program addressing LGBT concerns—some students may wish to avoid “the risk of public association in their own community” (Leck, 1998, p. 377). This hesitation is especially true for those students who have yet to disclose their sexual orientation to friends and family of origin.

Daisy, the bisexual student who is a student worker feels that she would lose her job on campus if the staff in her office learn about her sexual orientation. She added, “I don’t think I would ever like try to bring it up there because I’m kind of scared.” Queer students who are not empowered to be their true selves on campus could miss having a fuller undergraduate experience. The anxiety of hiding their true identity in addition to the other stressors in college, can lead students to not be successful in their studies.

This is notable because Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) found that campus climate was the strongest predictor of both vocational purpose (i.e., vocational competence, commitment, and organization) and psychological vocational development (i.e., career indecision, decision-making self efficacy, and vocational identity), over and above the influence of sexual identity. Because discrimination can have a profound impact on LGBT individuals’ lived experiences, understanding how perceived discrimination affects LGBT students’ college adjustment and career development seems particularly important.

Jamie was homeschooled until she graduated twelfth grade. She mentioned that she is very open in conversations in class and she writes papers about her experience being gay. She added that she is not out to people in her church or to her parents. Jamie remarked, “if my family finds out then I could be like in a whole world of trouble.” Statistics show that Queer youth make the highest percentage of homeless youth in the country.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth had a 120% increased risk of experiencing homelessness compared to youth who identified as heterosexual and cisgender. These findings reinforce growing evidence on the heightened risk of experiencing homelessness among LGBT youth. This often stems from a lack of acceptance that young people experience both in and outside of the home. (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017)

Jamie does not know this exact statistic, but when she mentioned “being in a whole world of trouble” if her family finds out her sexual orientation illuminates the type of anxiety Queer students face at home. Nevertheless, Jamie mentioned having a good college experience so far. She took six classes the semester she was interviewed, and that kept her busy at school. She did not participate actively in any clubs on campus because she is very active with her family and wanted to find time for her regular activities with them.

Jamie suggested professors having more inclusive teaching materials in class. Examples of such inclusive material are Queer literature, Queer history, advances in technology by Queer scientists, inclusive vocabulary in class, among others. Jamie also added that she would like to see more advertisement for clubs on campus and learn more about opportunities to participate in campus activities from her professors.

Jay is a male transgender student who was homeschooled for three years because of severe anxiety and other medical issues. He has shown to struggle the most when faculty misgender him or when they call him by his given name. Even though Jay emails his professors

before the first day of class and his professors acknowledge his request, he is still misgender and misnamed in class. For a student who already suffers from anxiety, this is excruciating. Jay adds, “it’s annoying. I don’t know if they’re uninformed of what it does to trans people.”

### Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological study indicates the need for further study of this topic. The findings of this research can springboard new research for examining potential implications of inclusion of Queer students in higher education.

This study found that Queer students enter college having developed systematic ways to manage their visibility in the classroom environment. These sophisticated ways to conceal their queerness could be studied more in depth in order to find ways in which to dismantle those barriers and help students be more themselves in college. Much of the literature focused on Queer students highlighted the struggles these students have faced during the high school years. The literature about Queer students and their struggles has led researchers to view this population from a deficit perspective; however, as presented by the findings and the conversations with students, they have the ability to overcome many obstacles in college.

Further research should also focus on any college initiatives put in place to promote inclusion of Queer students, as these initiatives tend to also promote inclusion of other minorities, as detailed on the literature review.

### Recommendations

These recommendations serve as a guide for current leaders to develop practices to create a more inclusive and welcoming campus climate for Queer students at ABC Community College, as well as for other researchers exploring this line of inquiry to develop further recommendations.

1. Facilitate the use of students' preferred name in class roles and in the Learning Management System (LMS) used by campus.
2. Train faculty and staff about asking identity questions from students. Ask, "what do you like to be called?" "what are your preferred gender pronouns," when dealing with students in order to reduce misgendering and misnaming.
3. Train and encourage faculty to create inclusive curriculum.
4. Train faculty and staff about resources available on and off campus for Queer students.
5. Have more visible campus clubs, like the Gay-Straight Alliance, and encourage student participation.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

##### Engagement Questions:

1. How long have you been a student at ABC Community College (ABC)?
2. What did you do before enrolling at ABC Community College?
3. Are you involved in any activities or with any student organizations on campus?
4. In general, do you feel more included or excluded as a Queer student on campus?

##### Exploration Questions:

1. How has participating on campus activities or not participating on campus activities, help you acclimate to college campus life?
2. How has your experience been with your professors?
3. How has your experience been with your classmates?
4. How has your experience been with other offices and staff on campus?
5. How many of your classmates and professors are aware that you self-identify as a Queer student?
6. How do you decide whether to disclose your identity or not within the classroom?
7. How have you opened up to them?
8. How do you feel you are included and supported in the classroom or do you feel you are not?
9. How is your experience at ABC Community College similar or different to your experience in high school as a Queer student?
10. What are the pros and cons of being a Queer student at ABC Community College?



11. How is your experience at ABC Community College similar or different to your experience as a Queer student on a community college campus?
12. Describe your experiences interacting with faculty members at ABC Community College.
13. Is there a specific professor with whom you have been completely open about being a Queer student?
14. Why did you feel safe opening up to this professor?
15. Has the professor given you any resources that are helpful to you as a Queer student?
16. Are you aware that there is a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) on campus?
17. Describe the on-campus activities that make you feel included and explain what it is about these activities that make you feel included.
18. Are you aware of Queer students that have left ABC Community College because they did not feel included?
19. What do you know about why they left?
20. If there is somewhere or somebody at ABC Community College with whom or where you feel totally included and safe, what makes them safe?

Exit Questions:

1. What suggestions would you make to ABC Community College to be a more inclusive campus?
2. Is there anything else you would like to say about being a Queer student at ABC Community College?

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