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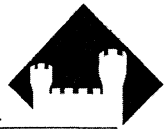
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The Recruitment of Sexual Minority Students

in Higher Education

(TITLE)

BY

Jorge El-Azar

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Recruitment of Sexual Minority Students in Higher Education

Graduate Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In a time when universities actively recruit diverse groups of applicants, some universities are seeing the need for a diverse student population and advancing their recruitment initiatives to recruit specific groups of students. The LGBTQ+ community has been perceived as an invisible community (Cegler, 2012) by some universities, but other higher education institutions are seeing the value of specifically recruiting students who identify as a part of this community. This study was designed to focus on the initiatives universities are implementing to effectively recruit students who identify as LGBTQ+. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher interviewed six participants who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community—and who varied in sexual orientation and experiences during the college search—and analyzed the data for common themes and trends. The participants were three women and three men who identified as cisgender sexual minorities in their first year at a mid-sized, Midwestern university. Their experiences varied as they went through the college search process. Participants shared specific factors that attracted them to the university in this study, including LGBTQ+ student support, an inclusive campus climate, and alumni recommendations.

Key Words: recruitment, LGBTQ+, sexual minority, campus climate, higher education

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since the 1980s, higher education institutions have researched the importance of diversity and inclusion on university campuses (Young, 2011; Ball, 2013; Benefits of Institutional Diversity, 2013). Diversity has now become a selling point for universities to recruit students from different backgrounds, cultures, races, religions, and socioeconomic statuses with the purpose of introducing students to difference for the betterment of their educational career and preparedness for the professional world (Cavanagh, 2002). The problem, however, is universities are not thinking about a key factor of diversity, sexual orientation and gender diversity, when it comes to recruiting students to higher education institutions (Einhaus, Viento & Croteau, 2008).

The population of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) students graduating from high school has become bigger and more visible, due to the fact that members of the LGBTQ community have been identifying as a part of this group at a younger age than before (Ryan, 2003; 2009). People are beginning to come out as part of the LGBTQ community in their early to mid teenage years (Ryan, 2003). Students are now going into higher education institutions “out of the closet,” identifying as LGBTQ, as opposed to coming out after graduating from these institutions (Cegler, 2012). The fact that young prospective students are part of the LGBTQ community has now become a factor that universities need to take into consideration when recruiting students from this specific population.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the mindset of students in the LGBTQ community when applying to a higher education institution. This study

researched if being a part of the LGBTQ community is a deciding factor for students when selecting which university they want to attend. Students in the LGBTQ community consider factors such as inclusion, safety, diversity, acceptance, and resources available for members of the LGBTQ community when researching a higher education institution (Ball, 2013). These factors are unique to the members of this population and, therefore, need to be addressed differently. The focus of this study is to identify what those factors are and how they influence the decision of LGBTQ students.

Research Questions

Students are becoming more self-aware of their membership in the LGBTQ community at an age that precedes their application for college (Ryan, 2003; 2009). I wanted to learn how being a part of the LGBTQ community affects the decision-making process of a student's university choice. The following research questions were developed for this study:

1. How do incoming students in the LGBTQ community make decisions in choosing which university to attend?
2. What factors are students in the LGBTQ community looking for in a university to help them with their university search?
3. What recruitment materials—including web browsers, brochures, and fairs—do prospective students in the LGBTQ community look into, to research if universities offer the resources they need?

Significance of the Study

Research on the recruitment of LGBTQ students into higher education institutions is scarce (Cegler, 2012), despite the fact that more and more individuals are coming out

prior to arriving at college (Ryan, 2003; 2009). Data that provides some insight into the decision-making process of LGBTQ students during the selection of an institution could be beneficial in determining how to best recruit and retain these students. This study sought to understand the experience of students in the LGBTQ community in their university application process to assess the importance of being a member of this community and how it pertained to students' university choice. This knowledge will help universities become more purposeful and intentional in the recruitment of students in the LGBTQ community. In addition, it will help university administrators and stakeholders understand how to make their institution attractive to LGBTQ students, and at the same time, implement resources and opportunities for students in the LGBTQ community to feel safe. One of the goals this study sought to reach is to gain a clearer understanding of the needs of LGBTQ students and what a university can do to address these needs to better serve this student group.

According to Chonody, Siebert, and Rutledge (2009), students at universities have misconceptions about the LGBTQ community. The study showed university students going through a university course, which tested their attitudes toward homosexuality before and after the completion of their course. A significant difference was found of how student perception changed because of the class. This study, which incorporated the exposure and recurring interaction of an unfamiliar group to students with biases, helped change the negative attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ community. With the presence of LGBTQ students on university campuses, all students will be more educated and mature college graduates, preparing them for the true diversity in the world outside higher education.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the nature of this study, one of the limitations was the number of eligible individuals comfortable enough to disclose their experiences with their university search and application process. As such, there might be differences between those willing to share and those unwilling to share, which might impact the trustworthiness of their responses. Qualitative research is likely to “experience threats to its reliability” (Perl & Noldon, 2000, p.45).

By focusing on first-year students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, this research did not study the experience of transgender, queer, or returning students, due to the choice of concentrating in on a more specified student population. Another limitation was the fact that the participants in the sample pool come from one institution. The transferability of this study will be an issue from institution to institution. The transferability is connected to the region, campus culture, and type of university of the research site. Results may differ at an institution that is urban, rather than rural; and private, as opposed to public.

Definition of Terms

Campus culture. “Confluence of institutional history, campus traditions, and the values and assumptions that shape the character of a given college or university” (Kuh & Hall, 1993, pp. 1-2).

Coming out. Disclosing of sexual/gender identity. (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014).

Diversity. “Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual

orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations) that can be engaged in the service of learning.” (Retrieved from Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005).

GSA. The acronym for Gay-Straight Alliance. Student groups found in high schools.

LGBTQ. The acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (Squire & Norris, 2014).

Recruitment. The seeking out of “students whose interests, values and beliefs match those of the institution” (Cegler, 2012, pp. 19).

Summary

Diversity with the student population on campus is a factor that higher education institutions should strive for and attain. Cavanagh (2002), discovered the more diversity on campus the better equipped the student population will be to tackle interpersonal issues in the real world. Unfortunately, if universities do not have the resources needed to appropriately help these diverse student groups, the recruitment and retention efforts will be in vain.

Recruiting students in the LGBTQ community falls under Cavanagh’s (2002) plan to diversify and enrich the college experience. It is essential that universities assess and understand what the LGBTQ population is looking for in an institution, and therefore, implement initiatives to recruit this unique population. The recruitment of students who identify as part of the LGBTQ community will bring positive changes to a university (Lipka, 2011). Chapter one provided an overview of the importance of diversity on campus, the significance of the study, and the limitations. The following chapter will

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provide a review of literature on the topics of college search process, environmental theory, campus climate, LGBTQ history, needs, recruitment initiatives, and a theoretical framework for this study.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

The literature review for this study on the recruitment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students will focus on five different areas: the history of the LGBTQ community, perception of campus climate from the perspective of LGBTQ students, needs of LGBTQ students while attending a higher education institution, steps universities can implement to effectively and ethically recruit students in this minority group, and the theory that can be studied to further identify LGBTQ students' developmental needs.

LGBTQ History

In 1967, Stephen Donaldson created the first LGB college student group, which led LGB students to meet in public locations, when it was prohibited before. Beemyn (2003) narrated the story of how the first student gay rights organization was created on a college campus at Columbia University. Donaldson, influenced by other gay civil rights organizations, fought against Columbia University's administration to create and charter the Student Homophile League (SHL). This event spurred headlines in the *New York Times* on May 3rd of the same year, giving the SHL more publicity, publicity that would inspire other students to create SHL-related student groups. The second SHL was created at Cornell University with more radical members. A fast growing organization, the SHL members at Cornell dropped their anonymity and pseudonyms to "speak publicly about their sense of pride in being gay" (Beemyn, 2003, pg. 223), which led to the development of larger-scale political efforts in the years that followed.

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The SHLs at Columbia and Cornell opened the door for other universities to create chapters at their campus, universities such as New York University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Beemyn, 2003). In the 1970s, gay and lesbian student groups existed in every major city and campus in the United States (Adams, 1987). In 1971, the University of Minnesota was the first to elect an openly gay student body president (*Alyson Almanac*, 1994-1995), and in the same year the University of Michigan was the first to open a LGBT affairs office (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2008-2010). The 1980s were a time when universities offered academic courses on homosexuality, recognized gay and lesbian student organizations, held gay dances, granted tenure to openly gay faculty, and established gay fraternities and lesbian sororities (Barol, 1984).

For the LGBTQ population, being part of a minority group has exposed them to social inequalities like “homophobia and antigay discrimination” (Lance, 2008, p. 1), on college campuses. Lance (2008) observed students in a Human Sexualities class from 1976 to 2006. Lance measured the changes in attitudes of college students as years went on and how they became more accepting of the LGBTQ community. In the early years of the study, Lance found that most students showed discomfort in the presence of someone in the LGBTQ community. This discomfort changed in the 1990s due to an evolution of American culture, where students eagerly participated and wished to know more about the LGBTQ culture and life. With this study of the evolving perceptions of college students towards the LGBTQ community, Lance found through education, students are able to become more educated and open-minded towards different groups of people, and hostility decreased towards the LGBTQ community.

LGBTQ youth have experienced discrimination and prejudice before attending college. “Stress related to stigma and prejudice against LGBT(Q) people causes adverse health outcomes, including poor mental health, decreased well-being, and suicide” (Meyer, 2003, pg. 1764; Saewyc et. al. 2006). Due to this, Meyer and Bayer (2013) studied the existence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in a high school that helps LGBTQ students reduce health disparities. Therefore, along with GSAs, Meyer and Bayer (2013) believed that when faced with prejudice in high school, school officials should intervene to “promote the dignity and status of LGBTQ students” (pg. 1769) instead of staying quiet. LGBTQ students may come from a background of little to no support, and the existence of a GSA-like organization or center is necessary for their well being.

LGBTQ Campus Climate

Campus climate is a term used to describe the campus environment for a specific campus population (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker & Robinson-Keilig, 2004). Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker and Robinson-Keilig (2004) assessed the campus climate for LGBT students at a Midwestern state research institution, and how the climate differed depended on the university’s demographics. Through a quantitative study, 80 LGBT students, 253 students who did not identify as LGBT, 126 faculty members, 41 student affairs staff members, and 105 residence hall assistants (RAs) provided their views on how their institutions served the LGBT community. The researchers discovered that “different groups within the campus community had different perceptions of the campus climate for GLBT students” (pg. 20). As the different groups were compared, the researchers found women were more accepting of LGBT students, and RAs and student

affairs staff were more accepting and supportive than the general population of students and faculty members. Overall, LGBT students perceived their campus climate to be more negative than other groups. Brown et. al (2004) recommended making the different perceptions public to the campus community through publications, forums, and workshops. After student affairs staff expressed more interest in LGBT topics, it was concluded that this population has the opportunity to be supporters and allies for the LGBT community to improve the campus climate. Another recommendation was that programming based on sex and academic class addressing the developmental stages of students would be helpful to teach them about LGBT topics and issues (Brown et. al., 2004). The researchers concluded that the view of campus climate for LGBT students is different across the board and that these incongruences need to be addressed so the entire community can better understand issues in the LGBT population on campus.

According to Strange and Banning (2001), a constructed environment refers to the “subjective views and experiences” (pg. 86) of a participant observer when it pertains to their feelings and thoughts of a certain environment. Understanding the personal perspectives of an environment is pivotal to understanding how an individual may react to that particular setting. “Whether individuals are attracted to a particular environment, or satisfied and stable within that environment, is a function of how they perceive, evaluate, and construct the environment. In effect, their perceptions are the reality of that environment for them” (Strange & Banning, 2001, pg. 86). Strange and Banning see the importance in understanding how individuals perceive and construct a certain environment to predict behaviors of participants. Constructed environments in college campuses can affect LGBTQ+ students in regards to the students’ perceptions.

A heterosexist campus climate has been proven to negatively affect sexual minority students in their academic and social integration (Woodford & Kulick, 2014) due to the prejudice, stress, and mental health issues students experience (Meyer, 2003). Woodford and Kulick (2014) surveyed 381 students at a large Midwest institution about their academic and social experiences as a sexual minority student, a student who identified between “mostly heterosexual,” to bisexual or “completely lesbian/gay” (Woodford & Kulick, 2014, pg. 15). During the research, participants reported experiences of hostile social environments and interpersonal discrimination. Findings indicated “heterosexism on campus is associated with decreased academic and social integration among sexual minority students” (pg. 20), affecting their overall institutional satisfaction. Inversely, the research found that academic instructors’ support and relationships with LGB friends helped participants create a better experience on campus.

Challenges faced by LGBT students can prevent them from achieving full academic potential or participation in the campus community. Susan R. Rankin (2004) studied how hostile campus climates affect LGBT students, faculty, and staff in their overall successes at academic institutions. By surveying 1,669 self-identified “queer members of the academic community” (Rankin, 2004, pg.18), Rankin analyzed the experience of the participants and how it shaped the perceptions of the university community where they lived. Rankin stated how the participants all attended one of 14 institutions with queer centers and hypothesized how experiences from less accepting universities may be more hostile. Rankin (2004) found that fear surrounded many of the participants’ lives while in college, whether it was fear of being harassed, discriminated against, or physically assaulted. Physical assault was a form of harassment that some

participants experienced, and “out of the eleven physical assaults, ten were reported by students” (Rankin, 2004, pg. 21). Rankin called for intervention strategies aimed at the non-LGBT student population to prevent such actions from happening. Rankin spoke on how to change the campus climate from heterosexist assumptions to ones of “diverse sexualities and relationships” (Rankin, 2004, pg. 22), by providing the queer community safety through gender-neutral restrooms, adding sexual orientation and gender identity in the institution’s non-discrimination clause, and including sexual orientation and gender identity issues in new student orientation programs, along with other suggestions.

“To counter heterosexism, homophobia, and gender binarism in higher education, ‘safe zone’ or ‘ally’ programs are efforts by American universities to create a welcoming environment” (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008, pg. 3) for LGBTQ students in the campus community. Safe zone training has been a nationwide tactic to better equip students and professionals in the understanding of the LGBTQ community. This training can be better utilized to educate the professionals who work closely with students in this community. Ballard, Bartle and Masequesmay assessed the impact of safe zone programs, ally training, and safe zone stickers and how they affected the campus climate in the eyes of LGBTQ students and faculty and staff members of the institution. A mixed-methods approach was used to collect information from the two participant groups. Survey responses were received from 41 LGBTQ student leaders and 19 faculty and staff members of the large, public university in California where the study took place. From the 19 faculty and staff members, three were a part of a focus group. Participants were asked to express their beliefs on the effectiveness of the five-year running safe zone training program and how it bettered the campus climate for LGBTQ students. The

researchers found that safe zone and ally training was “insufficient” (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008, pg. 24) in making the university campus climate warm and welcoming; it was a “bit more tolerant” at best, due to the existence of intolerance and hostility on campus. The establishment of a LGBTQ resource center was recommended, but it was not the only solution to the hostile climate. A larger institutional commitment with administrative support was stated as a necessity to improve the campus climate to diminish the remaining pockets of ignorance. Recommendations from this study were to provide targeted intervention and training to university departments with the “worst climate” (Ballard, Bartle, & Maequesmay, 2008, pg. 19) towards LGBTQ students, and further the safe zone and ally training by adding modules of specialized LGBTQ topics.

A study by Ciszec (2011) sought to determine how the campus climate of a university influenced the acceptance of the LGBT community, and the amount of resources and information available for this community at the universities’ libraries. Ciszec surveyed 259 university libraries across the United States to find more information about the campus climate and culture. The methodology to find this information was also paired with the universities’ score in the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, developed by Campus Pride, Inc. Recommendations from this study were for university departments to partner with on-campus LGBT organizations to collect resources, and for the libraries to assess their resources and channels of information with members of this community (Ciszec, 2011). Working together would better the resources and information libraries have to provide to LGBTQ students and allies, and better present themselves as supporters of the community, all to improve the campus climate.

LGBTQ Needs

LGBTQ students have different needs, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Schaller, 2011). The United States still has laws, groups, and policies against the LGBTQ community, such as the Equal Protection Clause (Kwapisz, 2011); therefore, universities need to fill in the gap to provide equality to this community. Universities have the opportunity to adopt best practices to celebrate inclusion and equity on campus. Ball (2013) studied the best practices universities endorse by researching the non-profit organization Campus Pride. Practices such as inclusion in university policies, which “prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” (Ball, 2013, p. 3); training for university employees on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression; and campus safety programs that prevent hate crimes against the LGBTQ community, are some of the most effective practices that could be applied to attract LGBTQ candidates.

Some high school students go through the college search process by researching and choosing universities based on their name and ranking. In this “name-brand obsessed culture” (O’Connell, 2013, pg.11), it is likely for prospective students to flock and apply to universities with recognizable names (O’Connell, 2013). O’Connell (2013) states the importance of what a university has to provide in terms of education as opposed to just its name. When searching for a university to attend, prospective students need to research the experiences and opportunities a university will give to them, to further the growth of their skills and capabilities.

Hanson (2010) explored the needs of LGBT professionals by interviewing them to determine what they would need to see in an institution in order to feel comfortable,

accepted, and supported in their roles as professionals. During their higher education institution search, the professionals interviewed were looking for benefits that were comparable to heterosexual and cisgender employees: housing policies, health benefits, and social network needs. Hanson's (2010) information can just as well be used for students attending college. Students may feel more comfortable if universities offered inclusive/gender neutral housing rooms and bathrooms; universities could offer health benefits for students such as free HIV and STD testing, safe-sex initiatives, and counseling for LGBTQ students; and lastly, universities could use their website and social media presence to represent and make visible the acceptance of LGBTQ students. In his study, Hanson (2010) wanted universities to create an environment of equality to attract LGBTQ professionals to their workplace. LGBTQ professionals also serve as a need and appeal for students for universities to have a diverse staff and faculty for students to feel included.

To recruit this diverse group of students, students identifying as LGBTQ need to know the university they choose to attend is one where they have support from the whole institution. In an empirical study by Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, and Watson (2009), researchers studied how Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) advisors were educating their school to improve the school climate for all students, including the LGBTQ community. Through 22 semi-structured interviews, researchers found that teachers in these high schools were publishing antidiscrimination policies on their syllabi to establish a safe space for all students. Another practice found was that these advisors had the opportunity to teach their fellow colleagues how to deal with issues surrounding the topic of LGBTQ students, which educated the rest of the faculty in those best practices. Researchers were

able gauge the participants' experiences at their institution by asking the participants questions such as "What is the school climate like for LGBT students at your school?" and "What is your school's policy addressing discrimination towards LGBT students?" (Graybill et. al., 2009, pg. 4),.

Another need for LGBTQ students in a college campus was the existence and function of a "Queer Center" (Teman & Lahman, 2012, pg. 341), or a resource center geared towards the aid of the LGBTQ community on-campus. Through six interviews of students who attended the center, Teman and Lahman's (2012) research showed the center was pivotal in the development of the students. Students became more comfortable sharing their stories and accepting their identities. Students also became empowered because of the services the center provided to better the community and climate of the whole university. The availability of resource and support centers shows that LGBTQ students gain from additional resources allocated specifically for them. If universities are actively recruiting LGBTQ students, they need to be transparent about the resources they have to offer to this group of prospective students.

LGBTQ Recruitment

The recruitment of LGBTQ students to attend higher education institutions is not a prominent tactic (Almeida-Neveu, 2010). For example, university recruiters are trained to impart facts about "campus safety, stats, and resources" (p. 1), but are not educated on the needs of LGBTQ youth. Universities and their students can grow through LGBTQ recruitment; however, some institutions may not be able to easily recruit members if those institutions do not provide an inclusive environment.

There are some universities, for example the University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, which are taking the initiative to purposefully reach out to students in the LGBTQ community. In Lipka's (2011) study, universities have set plans to recruit LGBTQ students because they have researched the positive influence these students have on a college campus. Some of the tactics used to recruit students who have identified as LGBTQ are for schools attending LGBTQ-friendly college fairs, connecting students with LGBTQ students and/or advisors at the institution, or even subtly including rainbow flags in university advertisements (Lipka, 2011). Universities like University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis choose to intentionally recruit LGBTQ students because they enrich the university (Lipka, 2011). These students become campus leaders and show solid signs of campus connection, and as alumni, they can become passionate spokespeople to help recruit incoming students.

To further explore the ways the University of Pennsylvania advocates towards the recruitment of LGBTQ students, Jaschik (2010) studied how the university asks students about their sexual orientation when applying. Along with the University of Pennsylvania, Elmhurst College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Duke University, and University of California system will be adding the question to their applications (Jaschik, 2015). This uncommon question serves the purpose for the university to find another way to connect with the applicant. Once a student has answered yes to identifying as part of the LGBTQ community, a current student from the institution reaches out to the applicant and serves as a source of information, and further opens the opportunity for prospective students to ask and learn about the "gay life at the university" (Jaschik, 2010, pg. 1). On

the contrary, other schools do not believe in these tactics, let alone recruit LGBTQ students because the population is considered to be small and invisible (Cegler, 2012).

The Common Application, when asked to add the question to their systems in 2011, denied the request (Jaschik, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Cass's Model of Sexual Identity Formation will be used as the theoretical conceptual framework for this study. Through Cass's (1996) six stages of identity development, a student may range from denial and hatred of being LGBTQ in stage one of *identity confusion* to complete acceptance and celebration of one's self identity in stage six of *identity synthesis*. Universities that intend to actively recruit LGBTQ students should use this framework to better understand what stages LGBTQ students may be going through. A student may be going through Cass's second stage, where a person may feel "intense feelings of ostracism and pain" (Cass, 1996), so a university will need the appropriate resources like an LGBTQ center, or a student group to help this student reach a healthier stage in their development. Cass's Model of Sexual Identity Formation served as a guide in shaping the questions for this study.

Summary

In this chapter, the literature reviewed covers the history of LGBTQ students in the education spectrum, LGBTQ-related campus climate trends, LGBTQ students' needs at a higher education institution, the importance of and practices for the recruitment of LGBTQ students, as well as a theory that further delves into the development of this specific student group. The history explains how being part of the LGBTQ community may bring stress to members of this community due to outside prejudices. Therefore,

some of the needs mentioned are having support available on campus for students in this community because they may have come from a harmful home or school community.

LGBTQ resource centers on campus will aid the needs of these students and show support. Support for LGBTQ students is a strong tool used to recruit them, and it is a tool few universities are using as their tactics for recruitment. Research reviewed explores the relation between the history of LGBTQ students, their needs, and the selling points of a university. Overall, research suggests LGBTQ students need factors such as equality, safety, and support at colleges and universities (Rankin, 2004). The current study seeks to understand how the importance of institutional awareness and support is the selling point for the LGBTQ community. Chapter 3 includes the methods used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study sought to understand the college search process of the LGBTQ students at a mid-sized, midwestern, public university when choosing to attend a higher education institution. Qualitative interviews were used to understand LGBTQ students' college decision-making process. This section framed the design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and data treatment of the LGBTQ student experience. The participants, research, site, and interview protocol will also be discussed.

Design of the Study

The focus of this study was to emphasize the experiences of individuals who self-identify as part of the LGBTQ community. Qualitative research was used to obtain the information necessary from participants. Qualitative research was used to “illuminate voices that have previously been marginalized” (Perl & Noldon, 2000, p. 38); therefore, this method was appropriate for this study. Individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, within phenomenological research standards, to study the relationship between students who identify as LGBTQ and the recruitment efforts by universities. A phenomenological study, where the researcher studies participants' responses to find common themes and trends, was utilized in this study (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

Participants

The sample consisted of six first-year college students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or pansexual and who self-identified when applying for universities. The researcher interviewed three participants who identified as male and three who identified as female, to ensure a representation of the LGBTQ+ community and perspective.

Interview participants were contacted through their membership and attendance of the Gender and Sexual Minorities (GSM) group on campus and by snowball sampling through suggestions from advisors and fellow peers. Interview participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Participant 1 (James): James, Caucasian 21 year-old, was a junior sociology major who came to the university from a small town similar to the town surrounding the institution. James transferred from a community college before attending the university. James self-identified as a gay, cisgender male and had been active in the Gender and Sexual Minorities (GSM) group on campus since transferring from his community college. He believes that the university needs more resources to appeal to students in the LGBTQ+ community. James was in the fifth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Pride.

Participant 2 (Anne): Anne, Caucasian 18 year-old, was freshman psychology major who grew up in a smaller town than the one the university is in and enrolled in college following high school graduation. Anne identified as a bisexual, cisgender woman and had come out to her residence hall floor community during her first semester in college. Anne has been known in her community as a resource of LGBTQ+ knowledge and has often been approached by her floormates about questions on the topic. Anne had been involved in the GSM group, but does not attend as frequently as she would like. Anne was in the fourth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Acceptance.

Participant 3 (Morgan): Morgan, Caucasian 28 year-old, came to the university as a transfer student after transferring from two other institutions. A junior psychology major, Morgan self-identified as a gay and gender fluid male. Morgan was already familiar with the university before choosing to attend, as he had heard about the institution from the

admissions staff during a visit to the community college. Morgan was involved in the GSM his first semester enrolled, but does not attend meetings due to schedule conflicts. Morgan was in the fourth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Acceptance.

Participant 4 (Doris): Doris, Caucasian 21 year-old, was also a junior transfer student who majored in English and professional writing, and English Language Arts with a teacher certificate. Doris, who came from a small town, came to the university after transferring from two community colleges. During the interview, Doris identified as a pansexual/panromantic, cisgender female. During the time of the interview, Doris was on her second semester at the institution, and had secured a spot as one of the GSM group executive board members. Doris was in the fifth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Pride.

Participant 5 (Tina): Tina, Hispanic 18 year-old, was a freshman communications major who came from a large city where she attended an all-girls Catholic school. Tina had not been involved in the GSM group throughout the semester, but did attend a couple of meetings at first. She had given her time to be involved in her residence hall's community. Tina identified as a lesbian, cisgender female during the interview. Tina was in the sixth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Synthesis.

Participant 6 (Cameron): Cameron, Black 18 year-old, was a freshman student who came from a large suburb to study environmental biology and be a part of the Honors program. Cameron identified as a "queer/not straight," cisgender male, but did not want to be defined by any labels. Cameron had been a regular attendee to the GSM group meetings and has been happy with the support he has encountered there. Cameron has

enjoyed expressing himself and his identity throughout his time at the university.

Cameron was in the sixth stage of Cass' Identity Model, Identity Synthesis.

Site

This study was conducted at a rural, mid-sized, midwestern, public institution of approximately 9,000 students. The institution has 50 undergraduate degree programs and 29 graduate degree programs. The university also has 250 registered student organizations, one of them being the GSM student group. The university has recently opened an LGBT Resource Center on campus.

Researcher as Instrument

One researcher was used in the data collection process. The researcher worked in university housing and was a graduate student at the institution the research took place. The researcher identified as part of the LGBTQ community and took his identity into consideration when searching for an undergraduate university to attend. During his college search process, the researcher only sought out liberal arts universities in urban areas with the belief that those universities would have a positive campus climate towards the LGBTQ community. The researcher chose a small, private, liberal arts university after recommendations from current students at the university of the supportive environment towards LGBTQ+ students.

Data Collection

Participants were given the opportunity to choose a comfortable location for the interview. These locations reflected the ability to have private and uninterrupted conversations. The data collected came from open-ended questions. See Appendix A for interview questions. As part of the nature of the semi-structured study, questions may

vary. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure the transcription of the data is effective. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Treatment of Data

The audio recordings and transcriptions were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Physical copies of the transcripts and informed consent forms were submitted to project chair. As per Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies, transcript copies were stored with the researcher for a span of three years.

Data Analysis

The researcher coded participants' interviews after audio recorded and transcribed. The data consisted of a general description of the participants' experiences, and from this, key words and themes were identified from the participants' responses. Once themes were identified, the researcher compiled the transcriptions and coded the patterns related to the college search process experience. Coding was accomplished through a practice identified by Neuman (2011) which comprised of an open coding phase, which involved assigning themes to the data; an axial coding phase, which involved identifying significant and repeated themes within the data; and a selective coding phase, which involved choosing key examples within the data to build upon the themes chosen. To ensure trustworthiness and reliability, the researcher read and reread the transcripts of the interviews, and utilized a member of the research committee to verify themes and trends found throughout the interviews.

Summary

Through the collection and analysis of the narratives of undergraduate women and men from varying sexual orientations, backgrounds, and college experiences, the

researcher sought to gain insight into the college search process of the participants and how it was affected by the identities they held. This chapter presented the methodology of the study, along with the protocol used to analyze the data collected. The results of this study will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This chapter presents the experiences of six undergraduate students who identified as a sexual minority. Three females and three males shared their experiences of being part of the LGBTQ+ community on campus. Each individual discussed the diverse factors that encouraged them to enroll at the midsized, midwestern institution in this study. Through a semi-structured interview protocol, the primary researcher sought to understand the pre-college recruitment initiatives and experiences students engaged in and how these experiences affected the participants' college choice. Throughout the interview process and analysis of the outcomes, common trends and themes emerged from participants that aid in understanding the experience a sexual minority student has while going through a college/university search process. Themes are organized by research questions in this chapter.

Research Question #1: How do incoming students in the LGBTQ community make decisions in choosing which university to attend?

The first research question looked to create a full understanding of the participants' thought process in choosing which higher education institution to attend. In addition, it gives an insight of what participants thought of the university's campus climate during their visit to campus prior to enrollment. For the first research question, three themes were constructed regarding the participants' college search experiences:

- *Knowledge prior to visit*, which explains what participants knew about the institution regarding the research made by participants and what was communicated to them by alumni.

- *Knowledge and experience of campus visit*, which explains the effects a campus visit had on the participants as they went through their college search, and how much of a grasp participants had of the campus climate and atmosphere.
- *Seeking out LGBTQ+ student resources*, explains the knowledge participants had of the LGBTQ+ resources through their experiences before and after a campus visit.

Knowledge prior to visit

All participants, when it came to how they found out about the university, described how they knew an alum from the institution who helped them learn more about it, which encouraged them to apply to the institution. The participants who came from smaller rural towns had known and heard about the institution throughout the years, unlike the participants from bigger cities, who during their college search were introduced to the university as a college option by a high school counselor or alum. James, whose home was an hour away and considered himself a fairly local resident had “a lot of friends and relatives who came to [the university], so it was always something in the air.” Anne, who also came from a small rural town, was told by her family members about programs at the institution, and how it had been a positive experience for them and they recommended it to her.

Even though the school’s alumni connections reached all of the participants, only some of them knew people who were currently enrolled at the institution or recently graduated from the university. James, who knew of individuals who attended the institution, shared the following:

A lot of people said good things about it, but the number one thing that people said was that it was really easy to make friends there. Like everyone was always saying, it's not like a bigger university where you feel closed off. But one thing I noticed when I came to orientation here, there were a lot of people who were transferring here from bigger universities, and who lived in small towns, and they were all saying things like, "Yeah, I always felt alienated at this other school, and this feels like it has a nice small town vibe from it." I met a lot of people saying that.

Along with the knowledge James had about the university from what current students shared with him, other participants who knew current students were given similar information. Anne was assured that the campus would be a pleasant one to be in and stated:

They said that it's an open and friendly campus and that there is a lot to do here. Compared to where we are from, it's a total culture change. I come from a very small town.

Doris, also interested in campus life, asked her family member who was a year ahead of her at the university what it was like to be a student there. Doris was also the only participant who was interested in talking to current students about academics as opposed to the social aspect. Doris said:

I knew a guy from my high school that is in the music department. He was a year above me. We were in the band together, and I was for a while considering music. I knew him, and I knew he came here, and I knew he liked it... My cousin came here; she is in the political science department. It's hard to keep track of them all.

I didn't talk to them a whole lot. They seemed happy about it. I didn't hear any specific complaints. But most of my knowledge about the university came from my family.

Similar to the trend from the previous question, the two participants who only heard about the institution during their college search years did not know of students who attended the institution. A theme found with the answers that participants gave was the how they swayed towards talking about campus life and the friendliness and acceptance one would receive on campus.

Knowledge and experience of campus visit

Five out of the six participants took a tour and were able to visit campus before their classes started. James, a transfer student, visited the university more than once. He started coming to campus his senior year of high school and after that to visit his friends before James attended the university. James described:

I took like four [tours]. Each of them was really different. I have friends from high school who went here, so I would come and visit them occasionally. The first tour that I had was during the dead of winter. So it wasn't very exciting or appealing. The second one I took was in the spring or summer, and I actually really enjoyed it, and it was really pretty. I really liked that tour. I came again to visit friends that fall. On campus tours they don't really take you inside buildings that much, but on this visit I was fascinated by Doudna.

Tina, a freshman student, came to campus with her parents during an admitted students function. During her visit, she was able to soak in and visualize how she would fit into the campus culture. Tina indicated:

I took a tour here when it was the Admitted Students day; it was my family and I... and my parents absolutely hated the school. They did not want me coming here. They despised the trip coming down. But I fell in love with it. They sat down during the visit and got a talk, and we got to walk and see the classrooms... I loved it the minute I stepped in. This is the school I want to go to. I did not go touring to other schools, because this was it for me.

Cameron, who also found campus life to be an important factor during his college search, when visiting the university, had a positive experience as well:

The freshmen orientation was my first tour. I liked it, and I liked going around. My tour guide was really cool. I like how the orientation was set up, because we could explore, and after registration we could explore some more. There, we talked about the clubs, and student life, so I got to know more about it than the people who spoke to me, who had been here a long time ago. So when I was here, I got more information that was up to date.

When coming to campus, overall, participants had positive experiences as they engaged in campus life. During those visits, they met students, faculty, and staff members, who molded their experiences and eventually motivated the participants to enroll. Tina was able to take a class during one of her visits to learn what the classroom experience would be like at the institution. Tina described her classroom experience as follows:

I met a couple of students. I know one was a philosophy student, and he was talking to one of the teachers, because it was a preview class. The philosophy class was really interesting and I took a philosophy class because of it. The

student was really helpful, because he asked questions that we wanted to ask, but we were all new so we did not.

When Doris and Cameron came to visit, they were able to meet faculty, who helped them explain the courses and programs they would be enrolled in. Cameron was a part of the Honors program; therefore, his faculty interaction was with Honors department. Cameron stated:

I met the Honors faculty first, and they were really cool. I was intimidated kind of, since we had to do a web seminar. It was a lot of information, and I didn't know, there was just a lot going on. But when I sat down at the meeting, before the tour and orientation, there was less going on, so I absorbed it better. The Honors faculty were funny. The tour guides were really nice and that helped a lot. Everyone was just nice.

The participants ranged in thought whenever asked about the location of the university. Most came from a small town and thought the town was the same size or bigger than their home. The participants, who came from a bigger city, found the town the institution was in simple and small. Anne came from a town with less than 3,000 people living there. She thought the university town was "homey" and similar to where she was from. She proceeded to say that to her, the town "feels busy, but I don't mind it." Morgan also had a similar small town background and had visited the town previous times to visit friends. Morgan said:

I was familiar and comfortable with the town. I know that there is some crime, every once in a while. I just make sure to lock my car and watch my back. I think that this is prevalent in each college community. I just watch out for my safety.

This is a community with lots of restaurants, and history, and I feel comfortable hanging out here.

Tina lived in a big city, around four hours away from the small town the university was located on. She had different thoughts regarding the town:

It was quiet and really different from where I am from. I heard a lot of people say the university was like in the middle of nowhere and that there was not much to do. I didn't mind that. When I actually came here, I didn't think it was bad. It was really different from my hometown, but it is more quiet and calm. It is really easy to get acquainted with your surroundings here.

For the participants who visited campus before attending the university, it was important for them to visualize themselves being a student at this university. Positive interactions with students and faculty helped the applicants gain an appreciation for the institution, which gave the participants' positive emotions and excitement to attend the university.

Seeking out LGBTQ+ student resources

When it came to the resources that the university provided that students saw during the visits, the majority of the participants came together in their consensus of how the institution provided a fair and positive amount of resources to the student body. Five out of the six believed that the university was open and forward in showing what it had to offer to students. Anne, the freshman student from a small town, came to campus during her scheduled visit for one of the university's admissions activities. Anne noted:

When I first came, the GSM had three booths open. And I thought that it was very interesting and that I wanted to be involved in it, and I am. It made me feel very welcome here, and that I could be myself, more than so elsewhere.

At this time, Anne was in the Identity Acceptance stage in Cass' Sexual Identity Development Model, as she sought out to find an environment where her identity would be supported.

Morgan, who had just transferred from a community college, compared the resources he had seen in his previous institutions from what he was experiencing at the university. He believed that there was "a lot more" offered at the institution he was currently attending compared to his community college. Like Anne, Morgan was looking to find support systems that would care for his identities, as he also was in the Identity Acceptance stage.

Doris also encountered the University's GSM during her time at a community college. The community college that Doris attended had a partnership with the university in this study; therefore, the university was able to hold recruitment events at the community college. Doris said:

The first time that I saw [the GSM], I think they were at a college fair at the community college. My parents were with me again, and I tried to stay away from it because I didn't want them to figure it out. I did like that it was there because I knew there was a club at my previous college, but it was a very small club so I didn't want to get involved in it. I liked that there seemed to be a community present for LGBTQ people here.

Doris, at the time of this experience, found herself in the Identity Acceptance stage. Doris was seeking out opportunities where she would become a part of a supportive group of

individuals like her. Doris proceeded to join the GSM and move towards the Identity Pride stage.

Cameron was one of the few participants who found out about the Cultural Center and the LGBTQ Resource Center the institution had, along with Pride. For Cameron:

... the biggest [resource] was the Cultural Center. It seemed like a lot to me, I liked it. It showed how important keeping everyone comfortable and safe is here. I feel like LGBT people don't have much of a priority, but I feel like with a house, it shows how important it is here, and that was a big factor.

Cameron was interested in the LGBTQ resources the university had to provide. In his stage, Cameron found himself in Identity Synthesis, where he appreciated the support the university had, but was not his top priority.

James, the only participant who believed that the university could offer more LGBTQ resources, explained the following:

[The resources] weren't really highlighted. I was thinking about this earlier. But aside from PRIDE, I don't really feel like there is a lot of visibility on campus. I know that there is the LGBTQIA Resource Center, at the Cultural Center, but if I weren't in PRIDE I wouldn't have heard of it.

James was in the Identity Pride stage, and wished for more resources for his community.

In one way or another, all of the participants took into consideration their sexual orientation when looking at higher education institutions to attend. This helped them seek out institutions, while also discouraging them from applying at others.

James looked at the institution and applied there, since he was looking for a town and community bigger than the one he was coming from. James mentioned how he knew

that the bigger the school, the more of a LGBTQ student population he would find. He took that into consideration, but at the end of his search he had to “compromise with cost.”

Anne had a similar desire to move to a bigger community than her hometown. Anne stated:

Well, I looked at how many people were in the community here. And I was like, “yeah, I could fit in there.” I feel way more open here than I do back home, just because nobody really cares here, which is nice.

Morgan was not only looking for an accepting school, but also a field he would feel comfortable being himself:

If I were to pick a field that is more male dominated, I probably would feel a resistance or aggressiveness from the other classmates. But since I am choosing psychology, in a field that is more female dominated, I probably am going to be okay. There won't be a problem with my sexuality.

Doris' search was location bound and intentional when it came to researching the universities she desired to attend. Doris indicated:

It definitely shut out every college in the Deep South. For a while, I wanted to go further away for college, and I asked myself where I could go. Not the Deep South because I would die. I knew that if I stuck with the Midwest I would be pretty safe... I did do a little bit of research; there was an aggregator site for college climate for LGBTQ students. I tried to look for this university, but I did not find it there. I was mildly worried about that. I haven't heard anything bad, but I haven't heard anything good as well, so I was probably going to be safe.

Tina had come from a religious educational background; therefore, her college search only included non-religious institutions. She was also able to find online resources about the institution that she was not able to find for others.

A lot of the schools didn't really explicitly say, "Hey, we have an LGBT community" but on Facebook there was a Pride page [for this university]. I thought it was pretty cool. I am sure other schools have it, but the university's was the first one I saw. I thought it was cool.

Like Cameron, Tina was also in the Identity Synthesis stage and expressed her interest in the LGBTQ+ resources, but was not her main drive during her search.

Cameron was not an exception; he was looking for universities and considered his sexual orientation when it came to his search:

I looked for schools that would probably be more accepting. With [one university] I was a little wary because of how religious it is, and I feel like a lot of religious schools don't cater to LGBT people very well, but I didn't know how much that would factor in, but that was one of my concerns about [that university].

Research Question #2: What factors are students in the LGBTQ community looking for in a university to help them with their university search?

The second research question aimed to acquire an understanding of the experiences of participants into what factors influenced their college search process. To seek out this information, participants used a ranking sheet and stated what factors were more important to them during their search, and what factors received less importance.

Table 4.1 expresses factors participants deemed relevant while searching for colleges. It

is ranked from greatest importance, symbolized as a one, to least important, symbolized as a six or seven.

Table 4.1
Important factors during college search

	James	Anne	Morgan	Doris	Tina	Cameron
Academics	2	3	2	3	5	3
Financial	3	1	6	2	1	1
Student life	5	4	3	6	6	2
Campus visit	1	2	4	7	4	4
Services	6	5	5	5	3	5
Recommended by others	4	6	1	1	7	6
Other reason	N/A	N/A	7	4	2	N/A

When asked for “other reasons” on the ranking sheet, participants were able to express if any other factors swayed their university search. For Morgan, the seventh factor that weighted on him was the fact that his sister attended the same institution and earned a masters degree. Doris’ fourth reason of importance was the close proximity to home and the job she had back at home. For Tina, one of her most important factors when looking at the university was also its location, it was “far, but reasonable” of a distance from home.

The themes that emerged from the second research question included the importance of alumni recommendation and the importance of financial help.

- *The importance of alumni recommendation*, which explains how participants valued the recommendations, anecdotes, and experiences alumni shared with them about the university that was being considered.
- *The importance of financial help*, which explains how much financial assistance weighed on the choosing of which institution to attend.

The importance of alumni recommendation

The importance of the institution being recommended by others was a theme that emerged among the participants' answers. A pattern that was noticed was the smaller of a hometown a participant came from, the more highly recommendations from others were valued, and the bigger the hometown of a participant, the less recommendations from others were valued.

Morgan and Doris both came from small towns and expressed how having a university recommended to them was of highest importance to them, while Tina and Cameron who came from bigger cities chose "recommended by others" as their least important factor.

Morgan had known about the institution for some time, since his sister attended the university.

My sister went to EIU, so I have always known about it when I was a kid. But when I got out of high school I kind of didn't know what direction I was going to take with my education. So went to a community college first, and I kind of went back and forth, and after seven or eight years I got my Associates. At that point, it was time to look for a university to go to, and I decided Eastern. I had heard a lot of good things about the college here, and I decided to come here.

For Doris, the transfer junior, the institution was one she had known for most of her life due to the different bond relating her family; she stated: "both of my parents went here. So I have been showing up here off and on for various events since I was an infant." For both Tina and Cameron, who came from bigger cities, their knowledge of the university was limited until high school, when they went through the college search process. But

even for them, they had been surrounded by the institution's alumni communities, who were family friends, mentors, and college counselors. Cameron talked about the different channels of knowledge that he encountered and how they spoke about the institution:

I first heard about it from a friend from church. He was like my mentor; it was like a mentorship program through his internship. So he went here. So that is when I first heard the name of EIU. One of the admissions people came to my school, and they did the thing where you talked to them if you are accepted or not, and I got accepted, so I decided to come here.

Cass' Sexual Identity Development Model presented itself when participants were choosing which factors they deemed most important. The participants who chose alumni recommendations may be in the fourth stage of the model, identity acceptance. This expresses what the participants were experiencing during their college search; they were looking for an accepting university that would help them develop.

The importance of financial help

A theme found between the participants' answers when identifying was that participants placed most importance on financial status, whether participants received certain aid or the affordability of the institution. Cameron understood the importance of the financial cost of attending a private institution versus a public university. When researching universities during his college search, his top choice was a religiously affiliated private school in a metropolitan city. Cameron stated:

I was kind of stubborn because I wanted to go to [the private school], and I visited that before I came here. I was almost set for that, but being here, financially, I

would be better off. I liked it here, I may have a little less than [the private school], but I am glad that I am here now.

Participants had the opportunity to rank seven different factors that expressed what they found important during their college search. The two factors that received more importance were alumni recommendation and financial help. Participants who came from a small town valued alumni opinion more, while participants from a bigger hometown valued the financial aid package offered by the university.

The participants who chose financial assistance as an important factor in their search may be in the fifth or six stage of the model, identity pride or synthesis. This communicates that these participants have already accepted their identity and are looking to develop other identities within themselves, during their college search process. These participants are not considering their LGBTQ+ identity as closely as the participants from rural areas.

Research Question #3: What recruitment materials including web browsers, brochures, and fairs do prospective students in the LGBTQ community look into, to research if universities offer the resources they need?

The third and final research question in the present study gave attention to the forms of advertising used to recruit LGBTQ students. The third research question sought to develop an understanding of the reach advertising tactics had in attracting participants to the mid-sized, rural, public institution studied. The theme that surfaced from the third research question was the following:

- *Impressions gained from advertising*, explains the knowledge gained by participants of the institution they attended through the viewing of a variety of advertising and social media tactics.

Impressions gained from advertising

The participants covered the gamut of what advertising tactics they were exposed to during their college search, which ranged from online resources to print publications to interactions with staff. James had looked at the university's website during his first college search process, before choosing to attend community college, and while attending community college, he encountered some print publications:

The most exposure I probably had was to the website itself. And at that time, the website was archaic, until they updated it recently. It did a good job in painting the school from what people told me. Looking at the webpage at that time, nothing really stuck out to me, especially when you compared it to other universities. The fliers did a pretty good job at highlighting student life, and made it seem slightly more interesting.

Anne, who is a freshman student, found social media pages from the university and pursued her research through those channels. Anne reviewed:

...their Facebook page and YouTube page, I watched a lot of their campus tours on their website, and YouTube. So that made me interested in them. I also looked at other people's personal reviews of them.

Morgan, who had already attended a couple of institutions before enrolling at the university, met admissions staff, who gave him positive feelings into applying:

When I worked at the Counseling Center at the community college I was at, there was a lot of literature about the university, and posters as well. I actually met one of their admissions counselors two or three times before I actually applied. There were a lot of positive things I was always hearing about the university she worked at. And a lot of people I was friends with at the community college went here. I was pretty much sold that this was the most logical step for me to take. Because of proximity, for a lot of people, it is a natural transition. The acceptance level, if they have been to the community college I was at, they probably have the level of education to do well at the university.

Doris saw flyers from the university when she searched for universities with her high school guidance counselor, but they did not call her attention as much as other schools. During her time at her second community college, she found advertising tactics that caught her eye more than any other publication:

I know at some point in my career at the community college, I had started seeing stuff from the university, specially because of their transfer work out, and strangely enough, the thing that remember the most vividly were the Skittles that PRIDE was giving. Getting a package of those Skittles and thinking that the university had an LGBTQ organization, and that stuck with me. I carried around that Skittles package in my pocket for a long time, because I forgot it was in there, and I pulled it out one time and remembered they existed!

Cameron was interested in finding communities in the university he would chose that he would be comfortable in. His research about the university did not go into detail, but he found factors that interested him about the institution:

I explored the website, but I did not go too in depth. I looked at campus life, because that was big for me. I liked the clubs that they had, like the feminism club and the GSM group, I'm glad they had these on campus. It just seemed like a good school that had diversity, I liked that.

Participants viewed online resources to educate themselves more on the institution they were considering attending. Some of the participants gained information from these resources and other forms of advertising, which helped the university broadcast its name to its audience. The online information was not valued as much as the experience participants had while visiting campus.

Summary

This chapter has displayed the experiences of the six participants who contributed to the present study. Students of varying sexual orientations, gender identity, class standing, race, hometowns, and years in higher education brought their perceptions and experiences of the tactics used to influence their decision to attend a university, factors that influenced their college search, and the advertising and marketing tools that attracted them all to the same university. The next chapter will expand on the participants' experiences in order to develop recommendations for higher education professionals and future studies.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to examine the impact of recruitment on undergraduate students who identify as sexual minorities, and the experiences students went through during their college search process. This chapter will discuss how the findings of this study relate to prior literature on the higher education recruitment of students in the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, the chapter will provide recommendations for student affairs professionals related to recruiting and supporting students who identify as a sexual orientation minority, as well as directions for future research.

Significance of Findings

Decision-making

An important factor found during the research was that prospective students become comfortable with an institution if information is provided to them about the university. For our participants, it was unanimous how alumni had affected the participants positively and encouraged them to pursue the university in this study. Alumni encouragement was one of the first characteristics that pushed participants towards the university and a characteristic missing from prior literature.

For students who are going through a college search process, opportunities are provided for them to visit universities as a recruitment tactic to help see themselves enrolling at a visited school. These visits help students understand the college environment they are entering. Strange and Banning (2001) expressed the importance of how individuals perceived environments and how these perceptions could be molded to predict the behavior of the individual. Participants were asked to describe the experience

they had while visiting the university in the study, in order to see how they perceived the institution's environment. Five out of the six participants took a campus tour, which helped them in deciding which institution to attend. Tina spoke about taking a tour during an admissions event and how she immediately fell in love with the institution so much that she did not want to visit any other schools afterwards. Cameron described his visit experience as a time where he would do more research on the university, and how talking to faculty and staff was helpful for him to see himself attending there. Campus visits helped the participants get more information about the university, giving them an insight on how their experiences would be in that campus environment.

When participants attended campus visits, their eyes were open and searching for clues that would determine the university to have a positive campus climate, where they, as LGBTQ+ students would be able to thrive in. Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker and Robinson-Keilig (2004) studied the perceptions of students in the LGBTQ+ community related to their feelings about the campus climate. Brown et al. (2004) described how having allies in the campus community would improve the climate towards the LGBTQ+ community. When visiting the university, participants were seeking those signs of "allyship" that would identify the campus to be a supportive environment. All of the participants had learned about some of the resources through their visit or previous research, creating a correlation that finding these resources helped in creating a positive perception of the university's campus climate. Examples of allyship that participants encountered through their college search at the institution were the mentioning of a cultural and LGBTQ+ resource center, Safe Zone stickers, and the GSM on campus.

Important Factors

Identifying important factors and characteristics of universities during the college search process is essential for prospective students so they can sort through their options. Participants identified, through the use of a ranking system, that alumni recommendations of the university was an important factor in choosing which university to attend. This factor was most important to the participants who came from small, rural communities. Morgan and Doris expressed how they valued alumni of the university speaking positively about the academic programs and student life experience. O'Connell (2013) mentions how students migrate towards institutions with recognizable names, and through this study, it is found that this is also the case for the participants. Cameron, who came from a larger hometown, mentioned how he was interested in a high-achieving private school with name recognition before learning about the university studied. For James, Anne, Morgan, and Doris, the university was one they had grown up hearing about, met many alumni, and because of the name recognition, were comfortable applying to and attending the institution.

Financial help was also ranked as an important factor during a college search for the participants. Tina and Cameron, who came from larger communities, identified that financial help was the most important factor during their college search. This finding was unique to what previous literature had reported. This result shows how families are prioritizing cost and becoming conscious of the financial effects of higher education, and how topics like sexual orientation are exerting less influence on families.

Recruitment Initiatives

Prior research relating to recruitment initiatives focusing on the LGBTQ+ student population in higher education has found how universities are taking the next step in

intentionally recruiting specific student populations to show the support for these underrepresented groups. Lipka (2011) studied universities' intentional initiatives towards recruiting students in the LGBTQ+ community because of the benefits in diversity that they would bring to campus. Lipka found how universities like the University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis intentionally recruit LGBTQ students. These universities attend LGBTQ-friendly college fairs and intentionally include rainbow flags and information on GSM student groups on campus. The university in this study has shown their support to the LGBTQ+ community during recruitment events on campus, but has not intentionally recruited this student population. During the participants' college search and visits, symbols of support were found at the university, speaking to the support that is provided for LGBTQ+ students. Booths showcasing LGBTQ+ support on campus were included during admissions events for prospective students. While attending campus visits, some participants were educated on the LGBTQ+ resource center that was available on campus and other participants saw how staff members of the university had been Safe Zone trained and could be support systems to the participants. Participants understood how the university was showing the resources they provided, therefore, attracting them to an institution that would support them as an underrepresented population.

Jaschik (2015) found how universities like the University of Pennsylvania, Elmhurst College, and Duke University ask students about their sexual orientation during their admissions applications, in order to connect the applicants with support systems and resources prior to their arrival. The university in this study maintained a broad application process and did not take advantage of this process to provide support to the specific

group. Almeida-Neveu (2010) studied how higher education institutions may be intentional in not recruiting LGBTQ+ students or showing support for the community because of the university's comfort. The university in this study has expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community and demonstrated intentionality in recruiting by including LGBTQ+ support departments in admissions and recruitment events.

Recommendations

The following recommendations stemmed from the research's results, are made specifically to aid in the recruitment initiatives for the LGBTQ+ student population.

Have LGBTQ+ resources visible for prospective students. Participants spoke about how seeing LGBTQ+ resources, such as tabling during admissions events, helped them see how the university valued and supported the LGBTQ community. As incoming students, the tables with information on LGBTQ services helped the participants understand that they would receive support. Most participants were out to themselves, but not out to their families during the college search process; therefore, they were not comfortable asking about the available resources. It is important to show the support the university has for the LGBTQ+ community through tabling at admissions events and speaking about resources during campus tours; even if prospective students are not asking about them, they are looking for them.

Have a strong online presence. Prospective students have done their research through online resources such as looking at the university's website and social media pages for student organizations relating to LGBTQ+ support. It is important for universities to have a strong presence on their webpages supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Participants were cognizant if these online resources were hard to find or

hidden in the website. It is important for student affairs professionals to also find ways to show their support outside of the university's website. Two participants looked at third party websites that showed if the university had support specific to the LGBTQ+ student community. Using resources like Safe Zone training and the Campus Pride Index would increase the online recognition for the university as a supportive campus for said community.

Create a supportive community on campus. If the university creates more initiatives to create a safe and developmental environment for LGBTQ+ students and the rest of the student population, prospective students' perceptions of the university will be more positive and the community they would become a part of would match those perceptions. Participants noticed Safe Zones to be a comfortable location where they could talk to a student or full-time staff member who had taken training to be more knowledgeable in supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Student affairs professionals can continue to build awareness and establish a safe space for students to seek support when needed. This recommendation also encompasses the need for institutions to educate professional staff members on the needs of the LGBTQ+ student population.

Alumni support as a recruitment tactic. Through the study, participants spoke about the value added towards a university after the recommendation by alumni. Admissions departments could use this knowledge to further increase and utilize alumni experiences as recruitment tactics for LGBTQ+ prospective students.

Suggestions for Future Research

The recruitment of gender minority students. This study was designed to gain an insight on the recruitment possibilities and tactics universities can use to intentionally

recruit students in the LGBTQ+ community. This insight was intended to educate student affairs practitioners on the importance of LGBTQ+ support and the resources prospective students are looking for to identify universities as having a supportive campus climate.

Future research should be carried out to examine the specific needs of students who identify as gender minorities when embarking on the college search processes, also including the boundaries public versus private universities have in their recruitment initiatives. This would continue to display insight onto the initiatives higher education institutions can take to successfully recruit student groups that will bring diverse experiences to the campus population.

Current support for LGBTQ+ students. Because this study focused primarily on the recruitment of sexual minority students, and their perceptions on what support looks like during their pre-enrollment stage, it does not present a thorough portrayal on the support needed while attending the university. Future research should explore the present support universities can provide to LGBTQ+ students and how being advocates to current students can serve as a recruitment tactic. This study affirmed that prospective students in the LGBTQ+ community take their identity into consideration as an important factor when searching for universities to attend.

Exploring intersections of the GSM community. Throughout this research, connections were found among participants' experiences. These connections were made because of the similarities in participants' race and socioeconomic status. A recommendation for future researchers would be to focus on the intersecting identities in the LGBTQ+ community and how it affects their college search.

Expansion of research. This study sought out to understand the recruitment experiences students went through at a mid-sized, midwestern institution. A recommendation for future researchers would be to expand this study to different institutional types. A quantitative study would also increase the number of participants and generalizability of the research.

Summary

The experiences and reflections of the six participants within this study shed light on the connection between a prospective student's sexual orientation and their decision-making process of university to attend. Recommendations found through this study were to have LGBTQ+ resources visible to students through campus visits and online presence and to maintain a supportive community on campus for the LGBTQ+ community.

Despite the steps forward universities have taken in supporting diverse student populations, student affairs departments need to progress in their student support in order to effectively recruit LGBTQ+ students to campus. Fortunately, the participants made a choice to attend a university that has provided important resources, not only to ensure academic success, but also personal success. It is the responsibility of student affairs practitioners to take steps forward in providing multiple resources to support LGBTQ+ students and to develop the campus climate into one where these students can safely thrive.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Important Factors During College Search

Please rank, in order of importance (1 being of most importance, 7 being of less importance), what you believe were the most important factors that affected your college visit and choice.

___ Academic

___ Financial

___ Student Life

___ Campus visit

___ Services

___ Recommended by others

___ Other (explain why)

Demographic Questions

- Age
- Major

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- Year in school
- Are you a freshman or a transfer student?
- What are your involvements on campus?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your gender identity?

Why did you decide to come to Eastern Illinois University?

- How did you first hear about EIU?
- What recruitment publications (flyers, web browsers, social media pages) did you look at from the university? What were your initial impressions of the university?
- Did you know someone attending this university before enrolling? What did they say to you about the institution?
- Did you take a tour of the university? What was that experience like?
 - Did you meet faculty, staff and/or students? What were those interactions like?
 - What did you think about the town surrounding the university?
 - What did you think about the resources specific to the LGBTQ community during your visit?
- Did you visit other institutions during your college search? If so, which ones?
 - If so, how did you feel during those visits?
 - What services/resources during your other university visits did you see?
- In what ways was your sexual orientation a factor in your college search?

Describe the university culture/climate?

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- When visiting the institution on your college search, how did you feel the climate was towards LGBTQ+ students?
 - Did you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community when doing your college search?
- What resources or services provided to the LGBTQ+ student population?

LGBTQ+ Identity

- What services do you use that support you as a student who identifies as LGBTQ+?
- What do you know about...
 - EIU Pride
 - The Cultural Center
 - Campus Pride Index
- Would you say there is any rejection by the cisgender (when your gender matches the sex you were born as) heterosexual students of the LGBTQ+ students on campus?

Your Experience

- How do you classify your sexual orientation and gender identity?
 - In the closet to everyone
 - Out and everybody knows
 - Out to a few people
 - Out to most people but not my family
- What was your sexual orientation and gender identity when you first started here on campus?

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- Do you feel welcome by fellow students? Faculty? Staff? Tell me more about this...
- How do you feel supported by fellow students? Faculty? Staff?
- How do you think your experience different/similar than someone else with the same identity? Different identity?
- Where there certain factors you looked for in university housing?
- What was your housing experience like, if you lived on campus?
- Tell me about your coming out process. What has your experience been like when coming out to...
 - Fellow students
 - Coworkers on campus (if you held a job on campus)
 - Staff
 - Faculty

Wrap Up

- If you did the college search process again, would you look at other factors?
- Is there anything else you wish to share?

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

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October 22, 2015

Jorge El-Azar
Counseling and Student Development

Thank you for submitting the research protocol titled, "The Recruitment of LGBTQ Students in Higher Education" for review by the Eastern Illinois University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has approved this research protocol following an expedited review procedure. IRB review has determined that the protocol involves no more than minimal risk to subjects and satisfies all of the criteria for approval of research.

This protocol has been given the IRB number 15-118. You may proceed with this study from 10/20/2015 to 10/19/2016. You must submit Form E, Continuation Request, to the IRB by 9/19/2016 if you wish to continue the project beyond the approval expiration date. Upon completion of your research project, please submit Form G, Completion of Research Activities, to the IRB, c/o the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

This approval is valid only for the research activities, timeline, and subjects described in the above named protocol. IRB policy requires that any changes to this protocol be reported to, and approved by, the IRB before being implemented. You are also required to inform the IRB immediately of any problems encountered that could adversely affect the health or welfare of the subjects in this study. Please contact me, or the Compliance Coordinator at 581-8576, in the event of an emergency. All correspondence should be sent to:

Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
Telephone: 581-8576
Fax: 217-581-7181
Email: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

Thank you for your assistance, and the best of success with your research.

Richard Cavanaugh, Chairperson
Institutional Review Board
Telephone: 581-6205
Email: recavanaugh@eiu.edu

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONCENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Recruitment of Sexual Minority Students in Higher Education

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jorge El-Azar and Dr. Dena Kniess, from the Counseling and Student Development department at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a first year student at Eastern Illinois University who is a part of the LGBTQ community. The approximate number of participants ranges from 6-8 students.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand the mindset of students in the LGBTQ community when applying to a higher education institution. This study will research if being a part of the LGBTQ community is a deciding factor for students when selecting which university they want to attend.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Attend a 45-60 minute one-on-one interview where you will be asked questions about your college choices and how that relates to you being a part of the LGBTQ community. Interviews will be held in a private location where the interviewer and you can have a conversation with minimal interruption.

The interview will be audio recorded and will be saved in a private computer owned by the interviewer.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks or discomforts to participating in this study.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The benefits to you as a member of this research study are limited to none; however, your insight will assist the student researcher in providing timely feedback to various areas of campus about the undergraduate student experience.

• INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

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You will receive a \$5 gift card to Starbucks for completing the interview.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of coding, this coding will assign each participant with a Letter and Number representing the researcher (Letter) and participant (Number). Only the interviewing researcher will know the name of you as the participant. In reporting results the coded letters and numbers may be changed to names that are not identifiable back to you as the participant.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. Reasons for withdrawal may include student leaving the institution or moving off campus.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:
Dena Kniess, Ph.D.(217-581-7240, drkniess@eiu.edu),
Jorge El-Azar (217-581-5431, jjelazar@eiu.edu), Principal Investigator

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the

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University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

I hereby consent to the participation of _____, a minor/subject in the investigation herein described. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my child's participation at any time.

Signature of Minor/Handicapped Subject's Parent or Guardian

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator

Date