

PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE: RURAL LGBTQ+ STUDENT
EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

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EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

To my dad, a true champion of all people. This dissertation, and all educational endeavors before it, would not be possible without his encouragement, wisdom, and inspiration.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
ABSTRACT	xi
SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Problem of Practice	2
Existing Gap in Literature	4
Purpose of the Study	4
Research Questions	5
Conceptual Framework	5
Stages	6
1. Identity confusion	6
2. Identity comparison	6
3. Identity tolerance	7
4. Identity acceptance	7
5. Identity pride	7
6. Identity synthesis	8
Figure 1. Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity	9
Key Variables	9
High school climate	9
Campus climate	10
College student development	10
Design of the Study	11

Setting.....	11
Participants	12
Data Collection.....	12
Data Analysis	14
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	14
Limitations	14
Delimitations	15
Assumptions	15
Definition of Key Terms.....	15
Significance of the Study	16
Scholarship	16
Practice	17
Summary.....	18
SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY	20
History of the Organization	20
Organizational Analysis.....	21
Leadership	21
Student Affairs	22
Figure 2. Office of Student Involvement and Development Organizational Chart.....	23
Diversity Equity and Inclusion.....	23
Figure 3 Organizational Chart for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	24
Structural History	24

New Directions.....	27
Leadership Analysis.....	28
Creating Community.....	28
Inclusivity Efforts.....	30
Leaders and Culture	31
Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting	32
SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY LITERATURE REVIEW	34
Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation	35
Stages	36
Relevance	38
Rural High School Campus Climate.....	40
Identity	40
Safety.....	42
Health	43
Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation	43
College Student Development	44
Identity	44
Safety.....	46
Health	46
Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation	47
College Campus Climate	48
Identity	49
Safety.....	50

Health	51
Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation	52
The Campus Pride Index	52
Summary	54
SECTION FOUR: CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE	56
Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution	56
Type of Document	56
Rationale for Contribution Type.....	56
Practitioner Document	57
SECTION FIVE: CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP	73
Target Journal.....	73
Rationale for the Target.....	73
Format of Proposed Article.....	73
Plan for Submission	73
Background of Study	75
Statement of the Problem.....	76
Problem of Practice	76
Existing Gap in Literature	78
Purpose of the Study	78
Research Questions.....	78
Conceptual Framework.....	79
Stages	80
1. Identity confusion.....	80

2. Identity comparison	80
3. Identity tolerance	80
4. Identity acceptance	81
5. Identity pride.....	81
6. Identity synthesis	82
Key Variables	83
High school climate	83
Campus climate	83
College student development.....	84
Design of the Study.....	85
Setting.....	85
Participants	85
Data Collection.....	86
Data Analysis	87
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	88
Limitations	88
Delimitations	88
Assumptions	88
Findings and Discussion	89
Isolation.....	89
LGBTQ+ Organizations	90
Visibility.....	92
Campus-wide Support.....	93

Implications for Practice and Future Research	95
Summary	97
References	98
SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION.....	104
Educational Leader	104
Scholarship.....	106
References	109
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT	122
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	124
VITA	125

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity.....	9
Figure 2. Office of Student Inclement and Development Organizational Chart	23
Figure 3. Organizational Chart for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.....	24

ABSTRACT

Rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) high school students face harassment, lack connection to their schools, and have low college aspirations (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). Studies focused on LGBTQ+ students in college do not address the needs of rural students, often painting a wide brush of campus experiences for all LGBTQ+ students. This study focused on LGBTQ+ college students from rural areas studying at a rural Midwestern university. The study included nine interviews, a document analysis, and a literature review exploring the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students and campus climate at Midwest University. This qualitative study addressed the gap in literature concerning perceptions of campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students in college and the impact of sexual identity development in college (Zubernis, Snyder, Mccoy, 2011). It is imperative institutions work to provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to connect with one another and offer a variety of inclusive events promoting the value of all students.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

The 1990s ushered in many changes for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) students on college campuses; the creation of LGBTQ+ resource centers, the establishment of nondiscrimination policies including LGBTQ+ students and staff, and an increase in programming for LGBTQ+ students (Zemsky & Sanlo, 2005). However, according to the Human Rights Campaign, while the state of Missouri issues marriage licenses to same-sex couples, the state offers no laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual identity with regards to housing, employment, education, or school bullying, and in May of 2017 adopted a bill limiting the rights of minorities to file discrimination suits against their oppressors (State Maps of Laws and Policies, 2017).

Environments perpetuating homophobia and offering no LGBTQ+ role models can delay student identity development in college (Paul & Frieden, 2008). Often, identity development and resilience to the stressors associated with being LGBTQ+ for college bound students are achieved by leaving home and attending school, if the school is seen as a safe space (Zubernis, Snyder, & McCoy, 2011). Cass (1979) developed a model of homosexual identity formation through a series of developmental stages. Progression through these stages can stall if individuals face a hostile environment. This stalemate adds to the stressors LGBTQ+ students face their straight counterparts do not, often hindering their academic success (Cass, 1979; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012; Windmeyer, Humphrey, & Barker, 2013).

University students attending college in states with progressive, inclusive LGBTQ+ state policies are more likely to cultivate a positive self-image when compared to students in states with overt anti-LGBTQ+ laws (Vaccaro, Russell, & Koob, 2015).

What is much less clear is how college campus climate impacts the identity development of rural LGBTQ+ college students (Zubernis et al., 2011).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at a rural Midwestern university concerning campus climate and identity development. The acronym LGBTQ+ is used as this is the supported term for the Human Rights Campaign, The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and GLSEN (formerly known as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Network). The plus at the end of the acronym is used to recognize the many other identities exist (Pride Center: Eastern Washington University, 2017). According to GLAAD CEO, Sarah Kate Ellis, adding the Q to the acronym helps the community to reclaim the term queer. Younger generations are using queer as way to move away from more limiting terms such as gay or lesbian (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, n.d.).

Statement of the Problem

Problem of Practice

While LGBTQ+ college students face similar issues as their heterosexual counterparts—homesickness, relationship stress, academic difficulty, etc.—LGBTQ+ students often have the additional stressor of coping with prejudice (Zubernis et al., 2011). Research shows a number of LGBTQ+ students encounter negative experiences on college campuses (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; Vaccaro, 2012). Due to intimidation on college campuses, half of all students, faculty, and staff hide their sexual identity (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). In turn, the lack of comfort with identity can hinder academic persistence, much like lack of preparation and underdeveloped study skills do (Windmeyer et al., 2013).

At-risk factors including first generation status, low socioeconomic standing, and minority status lead to a higher risk of dropping out of college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students report suffering with anxiety and depression at a much higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts, often leading to poor academic performance (Cortina, Konik, Magley, & Silverschanz, 2007; Craig, Han, Lim, Matney, & Woodford, 2014; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011).

LGBTQ+ students are more likely to drop out of college, feel alienated on college campuses, and attempt suicide (Fox & Ore, 2010). The risks associated with being an LGBTQ+ college student and the effects these risks have on college completion are mostly unknown because of a lack of data collected about this specific minority population (Cegler, 2012; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Einhaus, Viento, & Croteau, 2004; Windmeyer et al., 2013).

There are large discrepancies between colleges and universities nationwide concerning the amount of information collected about LGBTQ+ student populations (Cegler, 2012; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Einhaus et al., 2004; Windmeyer et al., 2013). In order to better serve this population of students and create a more diverse campus atmosphere, research focused on their needs and perceptions in the campus environment needs to be conducted (Cegler, 2012; “Lesbian, Gay,” 2014). To combat this lack of data, a national campus climate tool, Campus Pride Index, was developed by leading LGBTQ+ researchers and is currently utilized by six Missouri colleges (“Campus Pride Index: LGBTQ-Friendly Campus Search,” n.d.). This measurement of campus inclusiveness helps schools move forward on their path to diversity and inclusion by

providing a self-assessment and ranking of the institution's LGBTQ+-friendly practices related to academic life, residential life, campus wide policies, and retention and recruitment initiatives, among other factors ("Campus Pride Index: About Us," n.d.). Unfortunately, Midwest University does not utilize this tool and does not have an alternative comprehensive climate tool.

Existing Gap in Literature

While there is research providing information about LGBTQ+ students from rural communities during their time in high school (Palmer et al, 2012), there is a gap in the literature concerning perception of campus climate and needs of rural LGBTQ+ students in college. There is also literature addressing LGBTQ+ college students as a whole (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011), without delineating the special needs and experiences of rural students, along with a broader gap of knowledge about the impact of sexual identity in college (Zubernis et al., 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at a rural Midwestern university concerning campus climate and identity development. Knowing their needs, colleges and universities can use the information to provide intentional support to this particular minority population. For the purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005) definition of campus climate is used: "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential" (p. 17). Participants in this study were considered rural students if they come from a city or town with less than 2500 people (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students concerning campus climate at Midwest University? This question is broad, allowing for unrestricted participant views while focusing on one single phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). For the purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005, p. 17) definition of campus climate is used. Rankin defines campus climate as "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential." These sub-questions fueled the data-collection process:

1. How does this LGBTQ+ population formulate a self-identity as viewed through the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation Model (Cass, 1979)?
2. How does this population view their safety on the campus of Midwest University?
3. What are the perceptions of this population of students regarding equity and inclusion? More specifically, how do they perceive the actions taken by Midwest University to meet their specific academic, mental and physical health, and social needs?

Conceptual Framework

Identity development is influenced by social interaction, making experiences in college formidable to LGBTQ+ identity development (Cass, 1979). Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity is the conceptual framework guiding this study. This model is "a six-stage model based upon individuals' perceptions of their own behavior and actions within the Western culture's viewpoint" (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014, p. 230) and is the

most well-known and cited sexual identity development theory (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Zubernis et al., 2011). The Human Rights Campaign supports Cass's work for use in designing safe space programs on college campuses ("Establishing an Allies/Safe Zone Program," 2017). The stages within the model include: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

Stages

1. Identity confusion. This stage marks the beginning of the identity formation process. Recognition that homosexuality is relevant to oneself can cause incongruence with past perceptions of self as heterosexual. This incongruence can in turn cause confusion and alienation. Three common coping approaches are found in this stage: acceptance of this new perception of oneself, denial and avoidance of any behavior or information deemed homosexual, or create a different meaning for homosexual behavior such as labeling it an experiment or just "fooling around" (Cass, 1979, p. 224).

2. Identity comparison. According to Cass's (1979) research, if individuals reach the identity comparison stage, confusion has reduced and individuals agree they might be homosexual. Alienation plays a large role in this stage; alienation from family, peers, and society as a whole. Geographic location can intensify these feelings of alienation, making the study of LGBTQ+ rural experiences vital. This stage often includes hiding one's sexual orientation, avoidance of dating, and deliberately dressing stereotypically heterosexual. The search for meaning occurs during this stage, as expectations for their future now includes a new homosexual model. If extreme alienation occurs and the complete rejection of homosexuality, suicide could be committed.

3. Identity tolerance. If foreclosure does not occur in the identity comparison stage and individuals move into the identity tolerance stage, alienation is addressed by seeking out other homosexuals. This stage is marked by a tolerance, rather than acceptance, of the homosexual identity. Individuals in this stage withdraw from heterosexuals who they fear will not accept their homosexuality. If interactions with homosexuals and homosexual subculture is negative to an individual, self-hatred can develop and a lead to retreat from interacting with other homosexuals. If the experience is positive, a positive self-image is more likely and opens opportunity to meet partners and role models (Cass, 1979).

4. Identity acceptance. Individuals who move into the identity acceptance stage increase their contact with other homosexuals and begin to receive validation homosexuality is a normal way of life. Individuals in this stage also move from a tolerance of their identity to acceptance. Two groups emerge in this stage, one that legitimizes and accepts homosexuality in private and public settings and one that believes homosexuality is solely acceptable in private. Partial legitimization may involve further withdrawal from family to hide the homosexual identity. If strategies to hide in public are unsuccessful, some individuals reject this partial legitimization and move into stage five; if successful, there is a stalemate in the acceptance stage (Cass, 1979).

5. Identity pride. Cass's (1979) model marks this stage by a personal acceptance of homosexuality alongside society's rejection of this identity. Less weight is given to how heterosexuals view individuals than in previous stages. A strong group identity is formed, and a newfound commitment to the homosexual community is heightened. Individuals in this stage immerse themselves in gay culture, literature, and friend groups

and have a sense of pride in their identity. Anger and pride create an activist response to society devaluing homosexual identity or making it seem less than heterosexual identity. Conflict can arise when navigating public disclosure; individuals may selectively choose whom they disclose their identity to, sometimes opting to leave a job if disclosure causes problems. Negative reactions to disclosure can hinder progression to the next stage while unexpected positive reactions can propel an individual into the identity synthesis stage.

6. Identity synthesis. Individuals who enter this stage develop the realization not all heterosexuals reject the homosexual identity. Pride still exists, but is often less dominant in this stage as individuals begin to realize there is no need for an “us versus them” mentality among homosexuals and heterosexuals. Rather than the homosexual identity being an individual’s only identity, in this stage, the homosexual identity is seen as one of an individual’s identities (Cass, 1979).

Figure 1. Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity

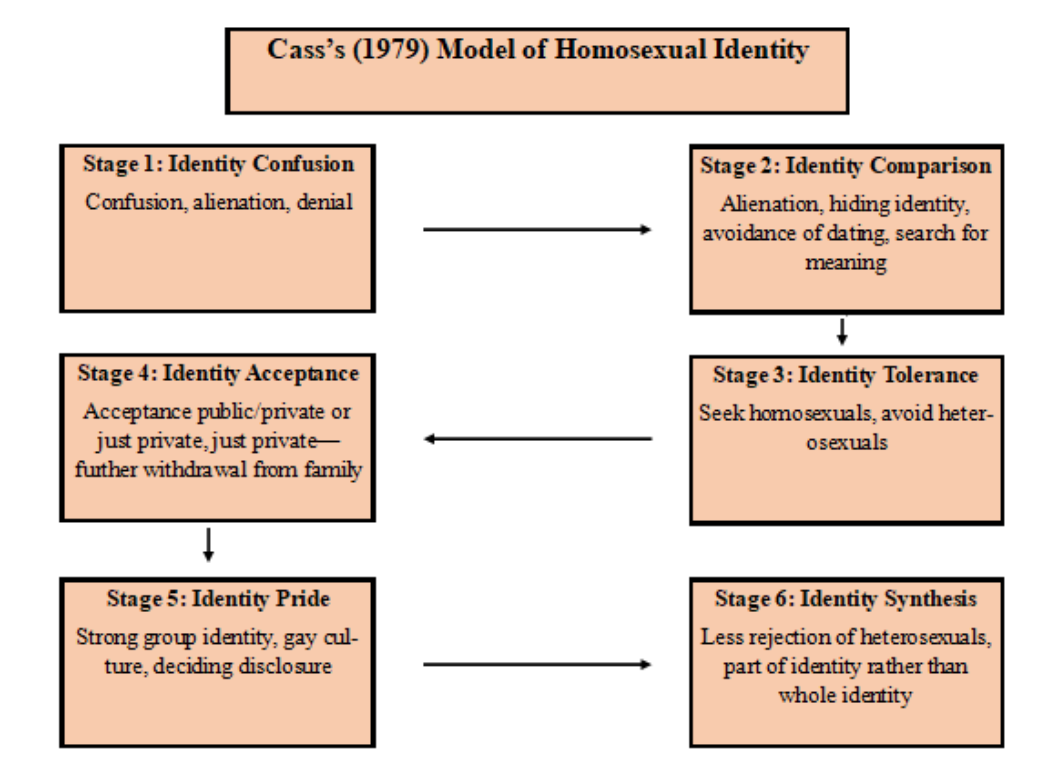


Figure 1. Homosexual identity model used to show an individual's progress in the process of accepting one's identity (Cass, 1979).

Key Variables

The key underpinnings guiding this study, viewed through the lens of Cass's (1979) model, are rural high school, because we know LGBTQ+ student experience in this environment is largely negative (Palmer et al., 2012); college climate; and college student development.

High school climate.

Unfortunately, anxiety with identity influences academic success and persistence in college (Windmeyer et al., 2013). The current literature pertaining to rural LGBTQ+ youth focuses on the experiences of high school aged students. Rural LGBTQ+ students feel less connected to their high schools and often experience harassment, earn low grade

point averages, and have low college aspirations (Palmer et al., 2012). Colleges and universities can influence the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students by providing support for identity development and coming out resources, especially because students are more psychologically healthy, even when victimized, if they are out in their environment (Cass, 1979; Palmer et al., 2012).

Campus climate.

Campus climate defined by Rankin (2005) is “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential” (p. 17). Campus climate can determine whether or not a student progresses through Cass’s stages of development (Zubernis et al., 2011). To understand identity development of LGBTQ+ students, it is necessary to examine campus climate experiences (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Historical policies and current structures influence LGBTQ+ students, and institutions with dedicated centers and inclusive mission statements send positive messages to LGBTQ+ students. Inclusive policies can be affirming and contribute to valuable meaning making for LGBTQ+ students and their campus. For example, integrating queer studies courses into the general education curriculum contributes to a holistic sense of self as it presents an opportunity for LGBTQ+ students to see a reflection of themselves (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

College student development.

College is typically a time for students to form serious relationships, with successful relationships positively contributing to a healthy sense of self (Zubernis et al., 2011). LGBTQ+ students often battle challenges straight students do not when forming

relationships with peers, causing an avoidance of relationships and a halt in progression through identity development, often getting stuck in the identity confusion stage (Cass, 1984). The more students get involved inside and outside of the classroom with their peers, the more effort they put into their academics (Tinto, 2010). One of Tinto's (1993) proposed reasons for students leaving higher education without a degree is failure to integrate socially. Specific "immediate happenings" on college campuses directly influence self-development, including homophobic slurs, LGBTQ+ identifying campus speakers, etc. (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 32). LGBTQ+ support groups on campuses help students have a positive view of their sexual identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Various developmental models, including Cass's (1979), state the importance of social supports in overcoming homophobic social interactions while contributing to a positive sexual minority identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016).

Design of the Study

Setting

The study took place at Midwest University; a moderately selective institution of higher education located in Missouri, serving approximately 6,500 students (About Midwest, n.d.; Apply online, n.d.). Midwest—a rural city of approximately 12,000 where close to 92% of residents identify as White (United States Census Bureau, 2013). The university's workforce imitates Midwest's mono-chromatic demographics, with 92.5% of all faculty in the institution identified as White (NCATE, 2013).

Midwest's mission to focus on "student success - every student, every day" (About Midwest: Mission, 2013) serves as a reminder to all employees on campus of their responsibility for student success and highlights the organization's purpose for

opening its doors each day: student success. Through this mission, Midwest encourages one-to-one relationships between faculty, staff, and students, helping to create an environment conducive to student success where students are readily provided with resources and services, both academic and personal. In addition, in an effort to be the college choice for a wide spectrum of students and to provide a comprehensive student experience, Midwest created a list of values and included on the list is intercultural competence (About Midwest: Mission, 2013).

Participants

Participants included LGBTQ+ students raised in rural communities of less than 2500 people (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). All participants were 18 years or older and attended Midwest University between the years of 2016 and 2019. The researcher used a purposeful sample by contacting the LGBTQ+ student organization on campus, Helping Everyone Regardless of Orientation (H.E.R.O), for a list of students willing to participate (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This led to snowball sampling for a larger participant pool. Once key participants were identified through H.E.R.O., the researcher asked for referrals for other potential participants. The researcher emailed students at their school email address about the opportunity to participate in the study.

Data Collection

This study is qualitative in nature and used a phenomenological approach via a bounded case study, with in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of current rural LGBTQ+ students at Midwest University. Data collection occurred through 90-minute interviews (Seidman, 2013), document analysis (Creswell, 2016), and a literature

review to gather perceptions of campus climate (Krueger & Casey, 2015). All data collection sessions were electronically recorded and rev.com utilized for transcription. Interviews were semi-structured, with a predetermined set of questions allowing for flexibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were useful to this study because “at the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language” (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). The interview process allows researchers the chance to understand how LGBTQ+ college students make meaning of their lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). According to Siedman (2013), phenomenological interviewing allows participants to address their experiences through their point of view.

“Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic...material” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Various documents assisted the researcher in discovering insights and meaning for the problem at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher analyzed documents found on the Midwest website as it pertained to support for LGBTQ+ students.

Validity and reliability are directly related to the ethics of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher secured permission to conduct this study from the University of Missouri and Midwest University. As recommended by Creswell (2014), the application included information concerning the participants involved in the study to report the potential risk associated with participation. The research study required signed informed consent forms; which informed participants of the purpose of the study, potential risks involved, confidentiality guarantee, and the availability of withdrawal from the study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The researcher used a pseudonym for the setting and for each participant to protect privacy. Validity, established through triangulation of data collected via interviews, document analysis, and a literature review and is reported using rich, thick description along with contrary information. Member check provided participants the opportunity to correct errors (Creswell, 2014). Categorization of interview information occurred through open coding from the electronic transcripts of each interview (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Use of axial coding determined the relationship between each transcript and established common themes.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection—the review of transcripts, coding for initial themes, and modifications made to future collection based on this analysis (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Frequent accuracy checks of interview transcripts and the coding process established reliability. Attention paid to the ease of “going native,” ensured reporting did not favor participant viewpoints, ignore data placing participants in a poor light, or focusing solely on positive results (Creswell, 2014, p. 99).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Limitations

This qualitative study relied on individual perceptions and experiences, making validity and reliability important as responses from participants do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of others. The study cannot be replicated, but can be generalized as this qualitative study replicated at other institutions may have varying results.

Delimitations

This study included a small sample size of 9 individuals due to the specific participants considered for the study, rural LGBTQ+ students. Consideration for participants is limited to students 18 years of age and current enrollees between the years 2016 to 2019 at one university, Midwest.

Assumptions

Responses to interview questions from participating rural LGBTQ+ students accurately reflect their attitudes and experiences and were not altered for this study. Participants are honest about their identification as LGBTQ+ students. Responses to interview questions are answered honestly without consideration to the topic being studied.

Definition of Key Terms

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ+). LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. LGB refers to sexual orientation or sexual attraction and can refer to an individual's identity based on that attraction. T refers to transgender, used when an individual's gender identity does not align with the sex assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). Gay Straight Alliances are school clubs working to promote a positive campus climate regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (GLSEN, 2017). Students attending schools with GSAs report lower numbers of homophobic slurs and less victimization based on sexual orientation (Palmer et al., 2012).

Campus climate. For the purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005, p. 17) definition of campus climate is used. Rankin defines campus climate as "the cumulative attitudes,

behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential.”

Identity Development. For the purpose of this study, identity development is seen as a process beginning with an individual perceiving themselves as homosexual. Identity development is also the interaction with other homosexuals and behaviors and strategies used to navigate daily life with this identity. The culminating experience of identity development happens when an individual incorporates the homosexual identity into the overall sense of self (Cass, 1984). Identity is built upon self-images, cognitive pictures concerning a certain aspect of self, for example, a homosexual self-image (Cass, 1984). Interaction with people and experiences influence identity development (Cass, 1979). Positive experiences within group identity, as in the gay community, can positively influence homosexual identity development (Cass, 1984).

Equity. Equity refers to students’ rights within education and the goal of all students realizing their full potential. Equity also includes institutions implementing campus initiatives that increase students’ chances of achieving this potential (UNICEF, 2007).

Inclusion. Inclusion involves addressing the needs of all students through offering opportunities for participation in learning and campus communities. The efforts to educate all students must guide strategies and structures (UNICEF, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Scholarship

This research contributes to the knowledge base university policy makers at Midwest University can use. Currently, the University does not collect information from

the LGBTQ+ student population, making it impossible to track academic success and retention. The institution is also located in a rural area of the state, attracting students from the surrounding rural communities. Results from this study provide the institution with data driven information to inform programming and policies benefiting a population of students drawn to this university. In a time of impending budget cuts across higher education, retention of students is priority (Li, 2017; McGuinness & Novak, 2011). Considering rural LGBTQ+ students struggle academically and perform better when they are in an environment conducive to being out, this research provides information to help initiate a campus climate conducive to academic achievement and open identity, which impacts retention (Palmer et al., 2012).

Practice

There are increasing numbers of studies examining campus climate for LGBTQ+ students; however, while national information is helpful, to understand a particular school climate studies must be done at the institutional level (Tetreault et al., 2013). Also, there is a lack of literature examining rural LGBTQ+ student perceptions of campus climate, especially considering the lack of opportunity to self-identify on college campuses (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Existing research about LGBTQ+ students is concentrated at large institutions of higher education, not smaller rural organizations (Vaccaro et al, 2015). Collecting climate information for diverse groups of students assists policy makers in setting educational goals specific to their environment and population, based on evidence (Hurtado, Arellano, Griffin, & Cuellar, 2008).

Marginalized students' experiences have been studied to determine if colleges and community colleges are addressing inequalities among student groups. However,

LGBTQ+ students are often left out of these samples, resulting in a lack of literature examining this marginalized group (Garvey, Rankin, & Taylor, 2015; Glider, Manning, & Pring, 2012). Higher education institutions value diversity and inclusion more and more, and, along those lines, have made strides in addressing inequality. Unfortunately, plans to gather data to support these efforts have rarely been adopted (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014). According to Rankin (2006), when data is collected through studies regarding LGBTQ+ students, the number of participants is extremely low, often limiting the possibility of generalizing the information gained to a larger population.

Summary

Rural LGBTQ+ high school students often face harassment in their schools, are not provided a diverse curriculum, and typically perform better when in an environment conducive to being out (Palmer et al., 2012; Windmeyer et al., 2013). Often, identity development and resilience to the stressors associated with being LGBTQ+ is encouraged by leaving home and attending college if it is seen as a safe space (Zubernis et al., 2011). Progressive and inclusive LGBTQ+ policies contribute to a positive self-image, even in states with hostile laws creating a barrier for positive student development (Vaccaro et al., 2015). An unwelcoming environment to LGBTQ+ students can hinder progress through the six stages of identity within Cass's model of homosexual identity (Cass, 1979).

There is a lack of literature pertaining to rural LGBTQ+ college students (Rankin, 2006). The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at a rural Midwestern university concerning campus climate and identity development. This research study provides Midwest policy makers with

vital information about the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students. Interviews conducted to collect data provide information about the experiences and perceptions of this population of students. Participants of the study are limited to current rural LGBTQ+ students at Midwest University. Midwest University does not currently collect this information, limiting the impact on programming and campus policies related to the specific LGBTQ+ population. This gap in data collection directly undermines student success, as studies conducted at the institutional level are crucial to determining the specific needs of students (Tetreault et al., 2013).

SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

The setting for this study is a small Midwestern university in the United States. Diversity, equity, and inclusion was added as a major focus of the University's strategic plan in 2015. This section will include a history of the organization being studied, an organizational and leadership analysis of the university, and implications for research at this institution.

History of the Organization

Established in the early 1900s, Midwest University is a moderately selective institution of higher education located in Midtown, Missouri, serving approximately 7,000 students. Midwest is a four-year college offering over 150 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. U.S. News and World Report recognized the University twice as the top moderately selective regional university in the state. Midwest is located in a city of approximately 12,000, where close to 92% of residents identify as White (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Midtown's workforce imitates Midwest's mono-chromatic demographics, with 92.5% of all faculty in the institution identified as White (NCATE, 2013).

Midwest was established as a Normal School, a school dedicated to teacher preparation. Midwest became a four-year institution still specializing in teacher preparation, eventually expanding to train other professionals. Midwest's current mission to focus on "student success - every student, every day" serves as a reminder to all employees on campus of their responsibility for student success and highlights the organization's purpose for opening its doors each day—student success. Through this mission, Midwest encourages one-to-one relationships between faculty, staff, and

students, helping to create an environment conducive to student success where students are readily provided with resources and services, both academic and personal. In addition, in an effort to be the college choice for a wide spectrum of students and to provide a comprehensive student experience, Midwest created a list of values and included on that list is intercultural competence.

In 2015, Midwest added diversity, equity, and inclusion to its strategic plan. The goal of this addition was to align actions with all strategy associated with improving inclusion on campus. A few of the first actions associated with this strategy included the creation of a core requirement called “Global Experiences,” the implementation of leadership competencies focusing on valuing difference, and an increase in support for multicultural student organizations and programming.

Organizational Analysis

Leadership

The most influential enactors of Midwest’s mission, “student success - every student, every day,” is the governing body for Midwest University as a whole. The governing body is a nine-member board of regents and one student regent, primarily responsible for policy making and resource management. The Midwest Leadership Team, which answers to the board, includes the University president and Provost, and the vice presidents of various campus departments. The Provost oversees policies impacting the academic realm of the University, including academic programs and academic support services, while academic deans and department chairs assist the provost in implementing policies within individual schools and colleges. The Vice President of Student Affairs oversees various departments on campus responsible for enhancing the

social and personal development of students and emphasizing respect for people who are different from oneself. The Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion aims to promote social justice on campus and throughout the community.

Student Affairs

The Office of Student Involvement and Development, under the Vice President of Student Affairs, offers various student organizations including Helping Everyone Regardless of Orientation (H.E.R.O). H.E.R.O.'s purpose is to bring straight allies and sexual minority students together in a safe space, promoting education and offering activities and social gatherings. The Student Activities Council strives to bring in guest lecturers that offer a well-rounded, culturally diverse experience for students. This is important, as rituals and ceremonies offer hope and “what occurs on the surface is not nearly as important as the deeper meaning communicated beneath discernible happenings” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 279). Black Lives Matter co-founder, Janaya Khan, who identifies as queer gender-nonconforming, spoke on campus in February of 2017. Chaz Bono and Laverne Cox, both transgender activists’, also guest lectured at Midwest, in 2012 and 2015 respectively.

Figure 2. Office of Student Involvement and Development Organizational Chart

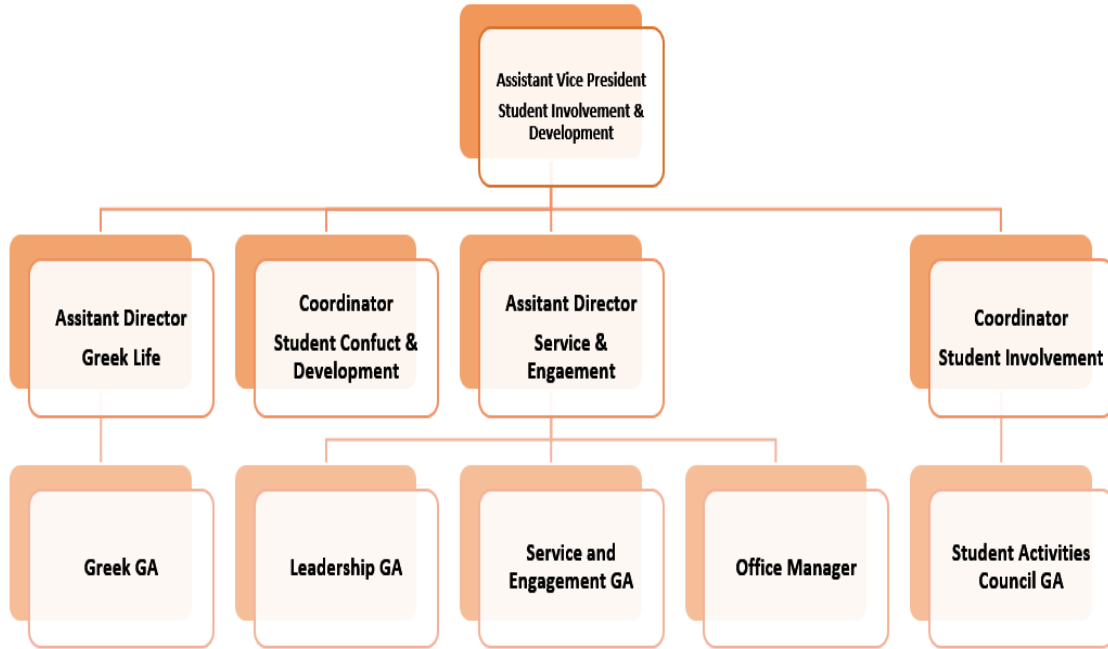


Figure 2. Student Involvement reporting structure and student services.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Organizations, especially those catering to young people, like colleges and universities, are often judged based on how they appear (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Similarly, Midwest may be judged by current and prospective students in terms of the LGBTQ+ campus climate. The Board of Regents created the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in 2016 to promote racial peace, diversity, and access for all students to achieve success while at Midwest. The establishment of this office also initiated the University’s first Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Mindbugs, or ingrained habits altering how we see something, can contribute to poor decision making (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). This new position is one way the university is overcoming these mindbugs and addressing a need not previously addressed. The department also includes two director level positions, one for diversity and inclusion and one for equity

and accessibility, and four coordinator positions. The overarching goal of this new department is to encourage a more inclusive campus environment. The three strategic goals include the following: access and success for marginalized student groups; teaching and learning with an emphasis on social justice education; and a respectful campus and community climate.

Figure 3 Organizational Chart for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

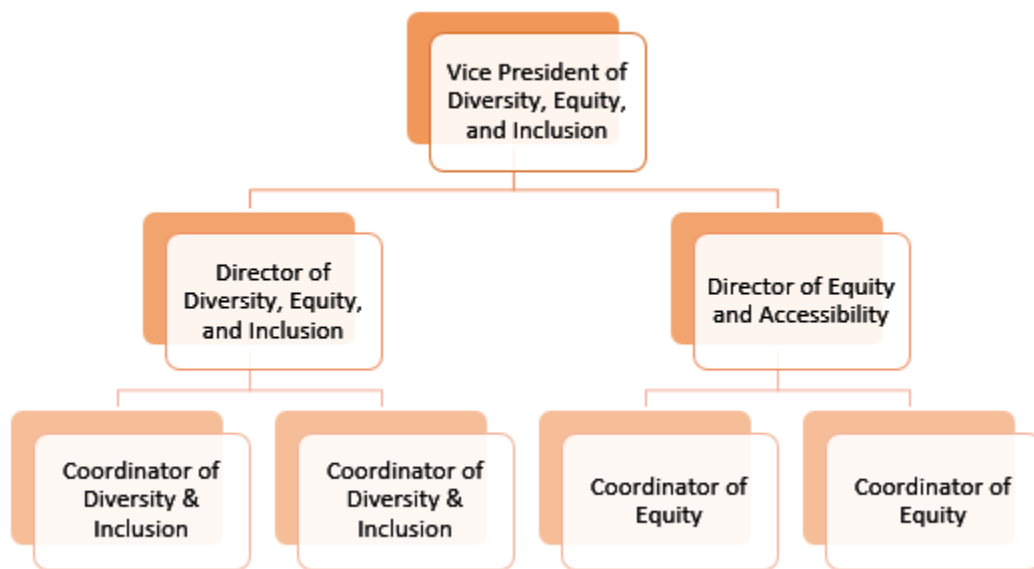


Figure 3. Reporting structure for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Structural History

Before the early 2000's, work on campus addressing the needs of any minority group was accomplished solely through student organizations. The Office of Minority Affairs was first created in the early 2000's and focused specifically on supporting and retaining students of color. At that time, there was no tool used to measure the success of the office on retention. Mentors Over Retention in Education (MORE) was created to focus on increasing the retention rates and supporting students of color from the urban core. Incoming students were paired with an upper classman or a faculty member to meet

with once a week. Monthly meetings as a large group addressed the needs and concerns of students of color at a predominately-white institution (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017). One problem with this new direction was the lack of “performance control” or a concrete way to measure if this program assisted in achieving the goal (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 53).

The level of support from the Office of Minority Affairs was limited to advising the LGBTQ+ student organization, at that time called Common Ground, and attending any events Common Ground produced (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017). According to a 2009 campus press release, the office changed its name to the Office of Intercultural Affairs and was a part of the University’s Intercultural and International Center. This area focused on supporting students from other countries, students studying abroad, and students of color, while striving for campus-wide development in the area of intercultural understanding. If organizations devalue particular groups, word of this typically spreads and alienates future customers, or in this case students (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This restructure did not include support for LGBTQ+ students.

In 2011, the office changed leaders, who reported to the Vice President of Student Affairs. This change initiated the expansion and strengthening of the MORE mentoring program, professional development for faculty and staff and students of color was added, an increase in celebration and awareness of cultural heritage events was a primary focus of the office, and individual student support meetings were established. At this time, Common Ground led Safe Space training for faculty, staff, students, and departments on campus who wanted assistance in supporting the LGBTQ+ student population. In a report outlining the importance of Safe Space training at a large university in California,

the majority of students interviewed noted the importance of having the program on their campus. LGBTQ+ students felt more comfortable taking a class with faculty who posted safe zone stickers on office doors, were more likely to come out to faculty who completed the training, felt like these professors would treat them better, and agreed the training reduces anti-LGBTQ+ bias (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008).

Around this time, this office began participating in LGBTQ+ History month celebrations during October. Common Ground ceased Safe Space training, so the office of International Affairs took over responsibility. This service was by request only, as the primary focus of the office was students of color. However, the additional celebrations and the restructure of Safe Space training illustrated one of the first steps made by the university to clearly assign the role of addressing LGBTQ+ student needs to International Affairs. This is important because without clearly assigning the responsibility to an office or staff member, efforts can get lost or overlap with other efforts across campus (Bolman & Deal, 2013). For the first time, a diversity assessment tool was sent out to students of color and the results used to shape the goals and focus of the office moving forward (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017).

In 2013, the university created a new position and hired the first Coordinator of Intercultural Affairs. This addition created an opportunity for group analysis, rather than all diversity and inclusion needs being addressed based on the experiences and knowledge of one person. This year also saw the creation of the Midwest Institute for Social Justice: Conversation on Race (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017). According to a University press release, this cohort-based program worked to increase intercultural competence among faculty and staff. Data showed a gap in inclusion; the

social justice institute program provided faculty and staff the opportunity to learn about the system of inequity and learn about themselves and how they contribute to this system (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017). This change marks a key component of successful structural changes, as recommended by Bolman and Deal (2013): creating the new structure based on changes in goals and environment.

New Directions

In 2015, this area saw another name change as the office became the Office for Multicultural Student Success, and staff reported to vice president of student affairs. This title change brought attention in a new direction, to show the focus on marginalized students because Intercultural implied the office served faculty and staff needs as well, which was not happening at the time. The name change was strategically carried out to show the university there was a gap; no office on campus was addressing faculty and staff development opportunities aimed at eliminating inequities in the classroom for marginalized students. This prompted the Office of Multicultural Student Success and the university administration to work together. This partnership eventually led to the groundwork for hiring two new coordinators to focus on diversity and inclusion, a director and a coordinator for equity, and a Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

One of the most important tasks of the leadership within organizations is to set long-term goals, action steps to reach the goals, and the reallocation of resources to help reach these goals (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The goal of creating this new structure was to foster inclusion and equity. Safe space trainings were not held during the 2016-2017 school year due to the large changes taking place in the new office of Diversity, Equity,

and Inclusion (Bryant, S., personal communication, fall 2017). Expanding the number of staff members tasked with diversity and inclusion also helped battle groupthink, or social conformity in the workplace, as before these roles were filled, the administration lacked a strong presence of women and women of color.

When organizations do not meet people's needs, both are negatively impacted. People may feel neglected and withdraw from the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ students, therefore, is critical. In 2017, the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity hosted a variety of events during the month of October, National LGBTQ+ History Month. The office celebrated National Coming Out Day on campus and launched promotions for all events via social media. Campus news releases from previous years list a variety of activities hosted to honor LGBTQ+ history during the month of October including vigils in honor of Matthew Shephard, student led lectures promoting suicide awareness and prevention, and pride marches. Also, in 2017, two new affinity groups were created for faculty and staff. The Ally Employee Affinity Group is comprised of allies to the LGBTQ+ community who strive to create an inclusive environment on campus. The LGBTQ+Q+ Employee Affinity Group was created for faculty and staff identifying as LGBTQ+, and offers a space to socialize and works to create a more inclusive campus and community environment for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff.

Leadership Analysis

Creating Community

“People and organizations need each other” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117). Students need knowledge and a sense of community, and universities need talented

people to take advantage of the learning opportunities the institution provides. In an effort to satisfy this need, Midwest has a goal of increasing retention rates and diversity at the university. When the university does not provide LGBTQ+ students with a safe community where they can feel of value, it is logical to deduce recruitment and retention efforts are thwarted. Effective leaders have the ability to listen and are open to a variety of voices (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). This encourages team members to think outside of the box, a habit that can create unexpected outcomes and inclusive spaces (Cueva, 2010). Leaders should be aware of the distribution of resources and analyze whether current policy is truly equitable, not just equal (Stone, 2012).

Higher education leaders who focus on retention and growing enrollment should understand the importance of creating a campus climate that supports learning for all student groups for a multitude of reasons (Ball, 2013). Often, members of the LGBTQ+ community fear for their safety because of their sexuality, carry the burden of wondering if group members will treat them with respect, and struggle to find people on campus who reflect their lives. LGBTQ+ students are frequently not afforded the privileges heterosexual students possess: inherent safety in their sexuality; acceptance; and reflections of themselves in most faculty and staff on campus (Johnson, 2006).

Currently, Midwest University addresses some, not all, of these issues. Social groups for LGBTQ+ students exist on campus, but there is a lack of staff members dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ students specifically, a broad and well utilized safe space training program for students and staff, and a diverse curriculum and set of course offerings.

Inclusivity Efforts

Burleson (2010) found LGBTQ+ students ranked a gay-friendly campus extremely high on their deciding factors when choosing a college to attend, higher than whether they would be awarded financial aid at the institution. Action in this regard can be found in the American business sector, where Raytheon recognizes efforts to create an inclusive environment for gay employees including donating money to the Human Rights Campaign and marching in gay pride parades. These efforts benefit individual businesses in terms of retention of employees and recruitment of new staff. One way universities today measure inclusivity on college campuses is through the Campus Pride Survey, a tool used by six other institutions in the state to measure climate for LGBTQ+ students. Midwest does not currently utilize this free service.

When organizations and the people associated with them are both valued, each can benefit and learn from the other. “Students in the LGBTQ+ community and their families and friends expect institutions of higher education to be assertive in enforcing policies that will ensure their overall well-being” (Ball, 2013, p. 23). The more LGBTQ+ students value their time at Midwest, the more they will contribute to creating a positive reputation for the university when they leave campus. Midwest stands to benefit from well-rounded alumni who can showcase their knowledge, but also recommend their alma mater to a diverse set of prospective students. Currently, there are no delineations when recruiting and retaining LGBTQ+ students, a one-size fits all approach is used at Midwest to recruit and retain students.

If organizations exist to successfully serve people and their needs, they should consider all identities being served, especially considering performance is better when

human needs are met (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Bolman and Deal (2013) reference Maslow, noting all people have a desire for respect and belongingness—it is logical to conclude being omitted from diversity initiatives at Midwest does not elicit a sense of respect among the LGBTQ+ community. If we compare students in the university setting to workers in an organization, we see it is in the best interest of the organization to promote diversity for all, so no one group is devalued and the university is not perceived as an organization alienating groups. Finally, students attend Midwest to earn an education, and students who are a part of an organization practicing organizational justice have been found to perform better in the classroom (Burns & DiPaola, 2013).

Leaders and Culture

“Culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise to accomplish desire ends” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 248). An organization’s culture is revealed through symbols and the lack of symbols—like safe space triangles placed on windows and doors denoting an ally’s space as accepting and able to support LGBTQ+ students; labeled unisex bathrooms; sexual-orientation inclusive discrimination statements; printed use of gender-sensitive language; and publicized housing for transgendered students. Midwest does not have a well utilized safe space training program and therefore lacks the symbols denoting a welcoming area of campus for LGBTQ+ students. Also, while housing options do exist for transgender students, those options are not publicized. 91 percent of students surveyed from a university participating in safe space training for faculty and staff reported the training reduced anti-LGBTQ+Q bias (Ballard et al., 2008). A university’s culture can be likened to a theatre, with leaders of the university serving as actors or builders of the institution’s culture,

positively influencing the belief systems and comfort of their audience—including the LGBTQ+ student population (Manning, 2013). However powerless the LGBTQ+ student body is in the organization’s subculture, leaders can promote acceptance and support to all subcultures in the campus community, combatting the tendency of one subculture being subordinate to another (Manning, 2013).

This problem viewed through the lens of the critical paradigm shows leadership at Midwest has the responsibility to challenge the social norms on campus and to recognize the privilege certain groups are afforded. Leaders who possess the power to enact a cultural change must reflect on the language they use and their actions marginalizing the LGBTQ+ community (ASHE, 2006). Unfortunately, “with regard to campus environments, language usage continues to be a problem. Language insensitivity creates an environment where LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe or respected” (Glider et al., 2012, p. 499). One tool leadership can use for creating greater acceptance within the culture of their organization is moving away from the “dominant discourse” so often found when its effects are not considered (ASHE, p. 22).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

In order to hold true to Midwest’s mission, leaders at the university must continue to encourage one-to-one relationships between faculty, staff, and students; helping to create an environment conducive to student success where resources and services, both academic and personal are available to all students (Stone, 2012). However, in addition to the work already being done, the university could tap into the campus perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community so every student is truly being served every day. Creating a campus climate tool for Midwest will add significance to the university’s declared value

of intercultural competence and be a logical next step following this study. Participating in the Campus Pride Survey tool assists in advertising services and support for LGBTQ+ students for prospective students and is needed to continue to strive to be the college choice for a wide spectrum of students and to provide a comprehensive student experience.

SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY LITERATURE REVIEW

Shortly after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled same-sex marriage legal (Liptak, 2015), the local newspaper in Dent County, Missouri reported government buildings in the area would begin lowering flags once a month in protest. The County Commission believed the court had made law “what God speaks of as an abomination” (Sheeley, 2015, para. 18). Angry at the animosity this message sent to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) youth across his home town, Jacob Wilson of Dent County established the Missouri Courage Scholarship. Now three yearly scholarships aimed at supporting emerging leaders with the potential to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people, with one set aside specifically for a rural LGBTQ+ student from Dent County (“Missouri courage scholarship,” n.d.; Moore, 2016). Mr. Wilson’s generosity toward the LGBTQ+ population in his small, rural town is atypical, as hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ students in rural communities is not uncommon and can negatively impact academic success (Windmeyer et al., 2013).

While the state of Missouri follows the ruling of the Supreme Court and does issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, the state has no laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual identity with regards to housing, employment, education, or school bullying (State Maps of Laws and Policies, 2017). Research shows this lack of policy can be detrimental to young people; university students attending college in states with progressive, inclusive LGBTQ+ state policies are more likely to cultivate a positive self-image when compared to students in states with overt anti-LGBTQ+ laws (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

The unique needs of rural LGBTQ+ college students attending small universities resulting from the environments described above makes the case for research centered around how these students perceive themselves, their own needs, and how rural universities are working to meet those needs. While there is existing research concerning rural LGBTQ+ high school students, LGBTQ+ students as a whole on college campuses, and identity development among LGBTQ+ students on college campuses, there is a clear gap in the literature pertaining to rural LGBTQ+ students and their perceptions of campus climate and their own identity development while attending rural universities.

Current research does not delineate the special needs and experiences of rural students. Studies of marginalized students' experiences determine if colleges and community colleges are addressing inequalities among student groups. However, LGBTQ+ students are often left out of these samples, resulting in a lack of literature examining this marginalized group (Garvey et al., 2015; Glider et al., 2012). The three underpinnings supporting this study are LGBTQ+ experiences in rural high schools, college student development, and college campus climate for LGBTQ+ students. The researcher chose these three underpinnings because of their documented influence on the LGBTQ+ college student experience (Garvey et al., 2015; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Palmer et al., 2012).

Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

The conceptual framework guiding this study is Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity, selected because "sexual orientation identity development is the process by which individuals come to understand, adopt, and express their sexual/affectional orientation" (Killam & Degges-White, 2017, p. 151). Identity

development is influenced by social interaction, making experiences in college formidable to LGBTQ+ student development (Cass, 1979; Hogan & Rentz, 1996).

Cass's model is the most well-known and cited sexual identity development theory (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Killam & Degges-White, 2017; Zubernis et al., 2011). While the model was first used in the clinical counseling setting, the fields of education and curriculum embraced its use (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). The stages within the model include: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979; Killam & Degges-White, 2017; Zubernis et al., 2011).

Stages

The first stage, identity confusion, involves the recognition of personal behaviors or thoughts as homosexual. This stage is often confusing and alienating for the individual as they realize their place in the majority is threatened. Stage two, the identity comparison stage, involves stronger feelings of alienation and a sense of not belonging to family, peers, or society as a whole. Geographical location can heighten these feelings of alienation. Individuals in this stage realize heterosexual guidelines for their future behaviors and expectations are no longer valid, furthering alienation (Cass, 1979). This stage often presents a crossroads; some will accept the newly understood homosexual identity, while others alienate themselves further and seek to change (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000).

LGBTQ+ students' decision to be open about their sexuality and gender identity plays a role in their academic success (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). The literature shows rural LGBTQ+ high school students are more successful if they are out, even considering

the increased victimization due to their openness (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Palmer et al., 2012). In the identity tolerance stage, stage three, individuals seek out other homosexuals to lessen feelings of alienation. If interactions with other homosexuals are positive, the individual can start to view homosexuality as more acceptable and if the experience is negative, the individual can create feelings of self-hatred (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Cass, 1979; Degges-White et al., 2000).

A report by Palmer, Kosciw, and Bartkiewicz (2012) for the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network found LGBTQ+ high school students experienced a better psychological well-being than students who hid their identity. Out students are more connected to the school community, one factor increasing the chances of academic success. Surprisingly, rural students were just as likely to be out when compared to suburban and urban students, even though victimization is higher among rural communities. While all LGBTQ+ students benefit in some way from being out about their identity, colleges and universities should recognize rural LGBTQ+ students are still more likely than their suburban and urban counterparts to experience depression, low self-esteem, and a lower connection to the school community.

In stage four, the identity acceptance stage, individuals develop friendships within the homosexual community, helping to normalize homosexuality. It is in this stage individuals feel they belong and know who they are as individuals (Cass, 1979). Perceptions of a supportive campus climate with visible role models encourage openness about identity (Evans & Broido, 1999). Individuals devalue the perception of heterosexuals in the identity pride stage, stage five, and place more weight in how homosexuals see themselves. Commitment to the homosexual community is

strengthened in this stage. Individuals in this stage also begin to reject ostensibly heterosexual values and anger develops when those values are assumed better than those in the homosexual community (Cass, 1979).

The last stage, identity synthesis, involves viewing some heterosexuals positively and acknowledging some heterosexuals do accept homosexual identity while continuing to devalue unsupportive heterosexuals. The similarities and differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals are accepted in this stage. The homosexual aspect of identity is integrated into all other aspects of the individual's identity, with the homosexual identity no longer being the primary identity (Cass, 1979).

Relevance

Cass (1984) revisited her own model to assess the validity of her original work and had a discriminate analyst review her work to control for bias. This analysis confirmed Cass's (1979) linear stage model: while some adjacent stages were blurred, all participants still followed the linear progression of the stages. Stages one and two and stages five and six were blurred for some participants, making the case for a four-stage model rather than six. However, the discriminate analyst recommended work on the scoring guide as it was not clear in the differences between stage one and two and stage five and six, rather than the elimination of any stages.

In a 2000 study revisiting the relevance of Cass's model, Degges-White and Myers studied the relevance of the six stages in a clinical counseling setting. This is significant for any researcher using Cass's model as it is over 40 years old. The study validated the multi-stage process for identity formation, but did challenge the need of each stage for all LGBTQ+ people and the strict linear progression through the stages.

Twelve clinical interviews with lesbians were used, with all participants experiencing feelings of confusion similar to Cass's first stage. Progression through the remaining stages varied in the number of participants and in completion in a linear fashion. For example, while all participants experienced the identity tolerance stage, it did not always come before self-acceptance. No participant identified with the identity pride stage, with all believing being lesbian was not their main identity and did not feel the need to wear jewelry representing this identity alone.

In a more recent review, Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) explored the relevancy of Cass's model. The authors found Cass's model is still useful, especially in environments with prominent heteronormative attitudes. Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) recommend the environment be taken into consideration when determining if this model is still relevant and make changes if necessary, also indicating the importance of considering multiple identities, including race, socioeconomic status, religion, etc., and how these identities fit within Cass's model. For example, Adams and Phillips (2009) found Cass's model does not take into account the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color.

The three underpinnings supporting this study are LGBTQ+ experiences in rural high schools, college student development, and college campus climate for LGBTQ+ students. The researcher chose these three underpinnings because of their documented influence on the LGBTQ+ college student experience. The role of identity, safety, and health on LGBTQ+ student experiences will also be addressed. Each variable is viewed through the lens of Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation.

Rural High School Campus Climate

The current literature pertaining to rural LGBTQ+ young people focuses on the experiences of high school aged students. Rural LGBTQ+ students feel less connected to their high schools and often experience harassment, earn low grade point averages, and have low college aspirations (Palmer et al., 2012). Some urban and suburban schools have formed gay/straight alliances (GSA) to foster a sense of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ students, something missing in most rural schools. Curriculum including LGBTQ+ perspectives and LGBTQ+ specific resources are also lacking in rural communities and are more accessible to their suburban and urban counterparts (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

Identity

While the instances of harassment are down overall, results from a national LGBTQ+ campus climate survey indicated that 84 percent of student respondents from Missouri reported hearing homophobic slurs on a regular basis in their high school. Also, 36 percent of Missouri respondents reported at least one incident of physical abuse due to their sexual or gender identity (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2017).

LGBTQ+ students from rural areas are more likely than their suburban and urban counterparts to enter college without having already come out, likely due in part to hostile school cultures (Palmer et al., 2012). Unfortunately, this anxiety with identity influences academic success and persistence in college (Windmeyer et al., 2013).

Colleges and universities can influence the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students by providing support for identity development and coming out resources, especially because

students are more psychologically healthy, even when victimized, if they are out in their environment (Palmer et al., 2012).

Kosciw, Palmer, and Kull (2015) found coming out is a vital developmental milestone for LGBTQ+ students, one that can contribute to a better psychological state. Using a national dataset of 7,816 LGBTQ+ high school students, the authors discovered openness about identity increased victimization mostly for rural youth. While there were still positive outcomes from being out, mainly less depression and a better psychological well-being, out rural youth were less likely to be academically successful. Colleges and universities have a role to play in assisting rural LGBTQ+ students by creating a healthy environment for identity expression.

A report for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network by Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer, (2012) identified a disconnect between rural LGBTQ+ students and their high school community. Talking to school staff about their identity is less likely in rural areas, as is their willingness to mention LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom setting. While LGBTQ+ students who choose to be open about their identity tend to engage more in the school community (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006), this benefit is often times lost on rural students (Palmer et al., 2012). Dessel, Kulick, Wernick, and Sullivan (2017) surveyed 934 high school students from Michigan. The survey focused on student experience within school, interactions with teachers and classmates, and wellbeing. The researchers found LGBTQ+ students from rural schools reported lower self-esteem than their urban counterparts. Relationships with teachers who intervened when oppressive language was used was found to increase self-worth.

Safety

Students attending schools providing access to Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) reported a lower number of victimization incidents, according to a study by Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2013). LGBTQ+ young people from rural communities experience more assaults than their suburban and urban counterparts, and they enter college with lower rates of academic success often due to large numbers of class absences (Kosciw et al., 2015). Knowing this, colleges and universities have a responsibility to seek data and information about these students and their needs to make informed decisions about policies and programs. Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, and Villenas (2016) found schools explicitly forbidding bullying of LGBTQ+ students in school policies often experience fewer bullying incidents among this student population. Verbal harassment and physical assault were reportedly lower when compared to schools who had generic antibullying policies, rather than specifically listing LGBTQ+ students. Students also reported feeling safer and more confident at schools with specific LGBTQ+ antibullying policies.

In a study analyzing the progression of school bullying in Massachusetts between the years 1995 and 2015, Olsen, Vivolo-Kantor, Kann, and Milligan (2017) compared the changes in victimization between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ students in the state. Researchers used the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey given to public high school students in Massachusetts alone. Results indicated bullying on school grounds has not decreased for LGBTQ+ students, while there was a decrease for their heterosexual peers. Generalizable only to Massachusetts students, this information is still valuable as a reference for research in other states.

Health

In a limited study about gifted LGBTQ+ high school students, 12 college age participants reflected on their experiences in high school and noted feelings of isolation, depression, and fear, often curtailed by engaging and participating in extra-curricular activities (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014). All participants expressed the desire to join and engage with the community through GSAs, but only four had a GSA at their respective high schools. Drama clubs were havens for these participants, a place where they could de-stress and be active in a supportive space. Participants also noted student organizations detrimental to their self-esteem, mostly organizations highlighting normative gender identities like Boy Scouts (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014). This study, while offering valuable insights, only focused on one group of the LGBTQ+ population, highlighting the need for future studies. Colleges and Universities should provide access to organizations on campus fostering an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students to participate in and benefit from engaging with supportive peers.

Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Rural LGBTQ+ students are at risk of being stalled in the identity confusion or identity comparison stages due to the lack of GSAs in rural high schools (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Palmer et al., 2012), an organization that can help eliminate the alienating feelings often associated with these two stages of Cass's model (Cass, 1979). It can also prove difficult to move into the identity tolerance stage when rural high schools lack inclusive and diverse curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2012). The identity tolerance stage requires access to other homosexuals and gay subcultures (Cass, 1979). LGBTQ+ students from rural high schools are less likely to come out before college. This can

prevent students from entering the identity acceptance phase, likely due to hostile school culture (Cass, 1979; Palmer et al., 2012). While victimization to rural LGBTQ+ youth often increases when open about sexual orientation, psychologically students are better off coming out and can also assist them in navigating into the identity acceptance stage, where being LGBTQ+ is viewed as acceptable (Cass, 1979; Kosciw et al., 2015). Progressing into the identity pride stage seems challenging as LGBTQ+ students from rural high schools struggle to mention LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom, speak to staff about their specific issues, and often do not engage with their school community (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2012). The identity pride stage would require students to accept their identity even when society does not and place less weight on what heterosexuals think about their identity (Cass, 1979).

College Student Development

Identity

College is typically a time for students to form serious relationships with others as successful relationships positively contribute to a healthy sense of self. LGBTQ+ students often battle challenges straight students do not when forming relationships with peers, causing students to avoid relationships, often stuck in the identity confusion stage (Cass, 1984; Zubernis et al., 2011). Involvement on campus and engagement with the campus community directly impacts a students' development through college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Environments perpetuating homophobia and offering no LGBTQ+ role models can delay student identity development in college. Often, identity development and resilience despite the stressors associated with being LGBTQ+ is achieved by leaving home and attending college, if campus is seen as a safe space

(Zubernis et al., 2011). When students experience social inclusion on their campus, there is an increase in academic success (Silverschanze, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2007).

When considering the average age an LGBTQ+ young person publicly shares their sexuality is sixteen, and the well-documented risks associated with identifying as LGBTQ+, the need for tracking these students' retention and well-being on college campuses is urgent for both the success of the student and the institution (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Glider et al., 2012; Windmeyer et al., 2013). University students attending college in states with progressive, inclusive LGBTQ+ state policies are more likely to cultivate a positive self-image when compared to students in states with overt anti-LGBTQ+ laws (Vaccaro et al, 2015).

Hays and Singh (2012) interviewed college LGBTQ+ students to explore identity development issues during the transition from high school to college. LGBTQ+ students reported a greater sense of connection to their college and peers once they self-identified as LGBTQ+. Participants discussed an increased sense of purpose and improved mental health associated with identity development. Participants with a lack of support from their family also indicated a sense of hope after battling through the identity process that often included an initial effort to change their homosexuality. Safety and control of their lives were the two most influential aspects that stalled identity development; many students were fearful of the loss of friendships and family if they accepted their identity as LGBTQ+.

Zubernis, Snyder, and McCoy (2011) examined LGBTQ+ college student development using Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors of college development, through the lens of Cass's (1979) model on homosexual identity development.

Chickering's seven vectors include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy to interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Zubernis et al., 2011). Both models view the importance of a challenge to preexisting notions of self to spur change. Cass and Chickering also recognize the importance of identity development to creating a positive sense of self (Zubernis et al., 2011). The researchers found students in the early stages of Cass's model struggled to move through Chickering's vectors of college student development, often experiencing additional stressors when compared to their heterosexual peers.

Safety

Specific "immediate happenings," such as homophobic slurs, LGBTQ+ identifying campus speakers etc., directly influence self-development (Vaccaro et al, 2015, p. 32). LGBTQ+ students are often prevented from achieving academically due to encounters with harassment (Rankin, 2005), while interactions with peers on campus, positive and negative, influence sense of self (Vaccaro et al, 2015). LGBTQ+ support groups on campus help students have a positive view of their sexual identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Various developmental models, including Cass's (1979), all state the importance of social supports in overcoming homophobic social interactions while contributing to a positive sexual minority identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016).

Health

If students leave mental health issues untreated, various consequences arise; substance abuse increases, academic success is hindered, and participation in the

workforce post college is lower (Dunbar, Sontag-Padilla, Ramchand, Seelam, & Stein, 2017). The likelihood of mental health issues increases in the LGBTQ+ community, often associated with stressors such as the fear of discrimination. Identity affirming resources, such as LGBTQ+ student organization participation, are often used to cope with these stressors.

Dunbar, Sontag-Padilla, Ramchand, Seelam, and Stein (2017) surveyed 33,220 college students across California colleges and universities. One in 15 of the participants identified as LGBTQ+. The study asked students to identify the level of or lack of mental health service participation, perceived barriers to using these services, academic problems related to their mental health, and an overall perception of mental health climate on their campus. Participants also participated in the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) to measure their current psychological distress level. The study found LGBTQ+ students were more likely to experience severe psychological distress and academic hindrance due to mental health issues when compared to their straight counterparts. While LGBTQ+ students were more likely to utilize campus mental health services than straight students were, still, 61 percent of LGBTQ+ students in need of treatment did not utilize any mental health service. LGBTQ+ students experienced more barriers to mental health services, such as embarrassment and lack of confidentiality.

Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

For college students to successfully graduate from the identity confusion and identity comparison stages, interaction with peers, some homosexual themselves, is necessary (Cass, 1979). Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ college students face more challenges than their straight counterparts when trying to form these relationships (Zubernis et al.,

2011). Entering the identity acceptance stage can prove difficult when LGBTQ+ college students struggle to engage in their campus communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), as this stage requires moving past alienation and self-hatred (Cass, 1979). Assessing the needs of rural college student development and their progression through their identity development is important, as states with progressive LGBTQ+ laws produce more students with positive self-images. Students are at risk of being stalled in the identity tolerance stage if they cannot get past the self-hatred often associated with students in non-progressive states (Cass, 1979; Vaccaro et al., 2015). LGBTQ+ support groups contribute to students moving through the six stages of Cass's model as they often assist students in developing positive self-images, something necessary to move past the identity acceptance stage (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016; Cass, 1979). Mental health impacts progression through the identity stages as well, and unfortunately, LGBTQ+ college students are less likely than their straight counterparts to seek mental health services (Cass, 1979; Dunbar et al., 2017).

College Campus Climate

Campus climate defined by Rankin (2005) is “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential” (p. 17). Campus climate can determine whether or not a student progresses through Cass's stages of development (Zubernis et al., 2011). To understand the identity development of LGBTQ+ students, examining campus climate experiences is necessary (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Perceptions of campus climate also influence a student's academic and emotional development (Rankin et al., 2010).

In an ethnographic study completed at a midsized university, Vaccaro (2012) sought to understand LGBTQ+ perceptions of campus climate. He found undergraduate student participants noted most homophobic encounters occurred through interaction with their peers and accounts of homophobia ranged from vandalism on campus and verbal assault to exclusion from campus activities. When discussing factors positively influencing perceptions of campus climate, most students mentioned supportive faculty and staff. Unlike graduate students, faculty, and staff, undergraduates viewed campus climate as emanating from every aspect of campus, and hostility was found campus wide by this LGBTQ+ sample population. Graduate students, faculty, and staff mostly viewed campus climate within their specific area of campus.

Identity

Historical policies and current campus structures influence LGBTQ+ students because institutions with dedicated centers and inclusive mission statements send positive messages to LGBTQ+ students. Inclusive policies can be affirming and contribute to valuable meaning making for LGBTQ+ students and their campus. For example, integrating queer studies courses into the general education curriculum contributes to a holistic sense of self as it presents an opportunity for LGBTQ+ students to see a reflection of themselves (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Heterosexism on campus influences academic and social integration within the LGBTQ+ student community and acceptance on campus is positively related to LGBTQ+ openness about their identity (Woodford & Kulick, 2015).

Safety

LGBTQ+ students are less likely to feel comfortable on their college campuses and more likely to experience harassment when compared to their heterosexual peers (Rankin et al., 2010). Harassment on college campuses toward sexual minorities creates a disengagement with academics (Kulick & Woodford, 2014). Also, “while there are no statistics on the persistence of gay and bi-sexual African American men, it seems likely their dual minority status provides unique challenges for persistence” (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011, p. 1236).

LGBTQ+ students report suffering with anxiety and depression at a much higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts, often leading to poor academic performance (Craig et al., 2014; Oswald & Wyatt, 2011; Silverschanze et al., 2007), which leads to a higher likelihood of dropping out, feeling alienated, and attempted suicide (Fox & Ore, 2010). Social environments with prevalent homophobic discrimination can cause mental and physical problems for entire campus communities, not only LGBTQ+ students (Silverschanz et al., 2007). Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) found lesbian students who perceive their campus community to be hostile towards LGBTQ+ students are less likely to take advantage of campus resources such as advisement, hindering vocational development.

The LGBTQ+ student population is at risk when combatting unfriendly campus climates that can contribute to an increase in alcohol and drug use, mental health issues, and poor academic performance (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014). In a study by Glider, Manning, and Pring (2012), a link was found between campus climate for LGBTQ+ students and a higher use of drugs and alcohol, making data collection at higher

education institutions vital. Stress and violence also lead to an increase in illicit drug use among LGBTQ+ college students when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Reed, Prado, Mastsumoto, & Amaro, 2010).

Health

Smith, Cunningham, and Freyd (2016) surveyed 299 college students, 29 of which identified as LGBTQ+, from a university in the Pacific Northwest. This study explored sexual assault and the institution's response. Various tools were used to measure the study's variables: The Department of Defense Service Academies Sexual Assault survey for sexual harassment and assault, a personalized version of the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire for institutional betrayal, the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Civilian Version for post-traumatic stress disorder, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale for depression, and a modified version of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale for self-worth.

LGBTQ+ participants reported a higher number of sexual harassment incidents and sexual assaults than their heterosexual counterparts. In addition, PTSD and depression scores were higher for LGBTQ+ participants. Self-esteem was reported lower for LGBTQ+ participants. LGBTQ+ students were found to internalize prejudice and value their identity lower than heterosexual identity. Institutional betrayal was higher for LGBTQ+ participants and predicted depression. 62 percent of participants reported institutional betrayal such as an inadequate response to their report of sexual violence. For LGBTQ+ participants, this betrayal influenced and predicted depression and PTSD.

Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Campus climate, including perceptions of campus climate, at colleges and universities are critical in understanding the identity development of LGBTQ+ students (Rankin et al., 2010; Vaccaro et al., 2015). LGBTQ+ students often find supportive faculty and staff to improve perceptions of campus climate (Vaccaro, 2012), a factor assisting in graduating from the identity tolerance stage as this stage can often encompass a withdrawal from those who might not accept the LGBTQ+ identity (Cass, 1979).

An integrative curriculum incorporating LGBTQ+ themes campus wide allows LGBTQ+ students to reflect and interact with the gay subculture (Vaccaro et al., 2015); something necessary to move through Cass's stages (Cass, 1979). When campus communities are hostile to LGBTQ+ students, there is an increase in LGBTQ+ student drug and alcohol use (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Glider et al., 2012), which then can spur alienation, one of the deterrents from progress through Cass's stages (Cass, 1979). LGBTQ+ college students often report lower self-esteem and value their homosexual identity as less than do their heterosexual counterparts (Smith et al., 2016). This can stall a college student from ever reaching the identity pride stage, a stage that involves valuing the homosexual identity as much as the heterosexual identity (Cass, 1979).

The Campus Pride Index

Improving retention and diversifying student populations are both a focus of higher education institutions across the country (Li, 2017). Without the information needed to identify and track LGBTQ+ students, it is difficult to implement programming directed toward student success. Identity can contribute to academic persistence much like preparation and study skills, making information collected by a tool such as the

Campus Pride Index vital (Windmeyer et al, 2013). In order to better serve this population of students and create a more diverse campus atmosphere, research regarding their needs and perceptions in the campus environment needs to be conducted (Cegler, 2012; “Lesbian, Gay,” 2014).

To combat the data collection deficit, a national campus climate tool, Campus Pride Index, was developed by leading LGBTQ+ researchers and is currently utilized by six Missouri colleges (“Campus Pride Index: LGBTQ-Friendly Campus Search,” n.d.). This measurement of campus inclusiveness helps schools move forward on their path to diversity and inclusion by providing a self-assessment and ranking of the institution’s LGBTQ+-friendly practices related to academic life, residential life, campus wide policies, and retention and recruitment initiatives (“Campus Pride Index: About Us”, n.d.). Unfortunately, Midwest University does not utilize this tool and does not have an alternative comprehensive climate tool.

Climate information should be specific to each particular institution to address accurate needs of students (Tetreault et al., 2013). Among benefits of utilizing Vivienne Cass’s (1979) model of homosexual identity formation is its consideration of the influence of environment. However, before creating programs and policies influenced by Cass’s model, culture should be evaluated at specific institutions to guide creation and implementation, making research at the institutional level necessary (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

While progress has been made with regards to support for LGBTQ+ students on college campuses, there are still social and political barriers to their success (Sheeley, 2015; State Maps of Laws and Polices, 2017). Unfortunately, these barriers seem more

restrictive to LGBTQ+ students from rural areas of the country (Kosciw et al, 2012; Palmer et al., 2012; Windmeyer et al., 2013). This study provides Midwest University with vital information concerning this population of students, data collection important to do at the institutional level (Tetreault et al., 2013).

Summary

Individual institutions have much to learn about their current LGBTQ+ student population (Cegler, 2012; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Einhaus et al., 2004; Windmeyer et al., 2013). “Despite the increase in research about gender and sexuality in higher education, we have limited knowledge about the identities, demographics, and campus experiences of students with minoritized identities of sexuality and gender at various types of postsecondary institutions” (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 25-26). Laws, policies, and procedures at the state and university levels play a direct role in the development of LGBTQ+ students (Vaccaro et al., 2015), meaning rural LGBTQ+ college students are at risk of hindering their identity development when living in hostile, discriminatory environments, making research into this specific population of college student vital. There is a clear gap in the literature for rural LGBTQ+ students with regards to their perceptions of campus climate and their identity development while attending rural colleges and universities.

Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation guides this study, as it provides a framework highlighting the importance of social interaction on identity development, something a students’ college experience influences (Cass, 1979; Hogan & Rentz, 1996). While there is a lack of information concerning LGBTQ+ rural college students, what is known about rural LGBTQ+ high school students’ identity development is concerning;

rural LGBTQ+ students experience anxiety surrounding their identity that can influence success in college (Windmeyer et al., 2013).

A needs assessment of rural college student development and progression through the identity development process is crucial in states with laws not considered progressive for LGBTQ+ students. States with progressive LGBTQ+ laws help students develop positive self-images (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Without a positive self-image, students are at risk of being delayed in the identity tolerance stage if they cannot overcome the self-hatred often associated with students in non-progressive states (Cass, 1979). Finally, LGBTQ+ students attending school on a hostile campus are more likely to participate in substance abuse (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Glider et al., 2012), which then can increase alienation, one of the preventions of progress through Cass's stages (Cass, 1979).

SECTION FOUR: CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution

The researcher plans to submit an application to present at the February 2020 The Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC). Applications are submitted via the MBLGTACC website.

Type of Document

MBLGTACC encourages presenters to host workshops. Presentation specifications are provided once the proposal is accepted. The conference released location and proposal application details in February 2019. The proposal process consists of an online application reviewed by a committee of students, faculty, and advisors.

Rationale for Contribution Type

The MBLGTACC conference is held each year to “connect, educate, and empower queer and trans+ college students, faculty, and staff around the Midwest and beyond” (About MBLGTAAC, n.d.). Presenting the results of this study to the attendees of the MBLGTACC conference provides an opportunity for faculty, staff, and administrators at Midwest universities to learn how their institutions can better serve rural LGBTQ+ students. To fit the interactive nature of the workshops at MBLGTAAC, the researcher included opportunities for the participants to brainstorm ways their institutions can best support their rural LGBTQ+ students and will provide best practices based on the research study.

Practitioner Document

PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE: RURAL LGBTQ+ STUDENT

EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary for Conference Presentation

The Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Asexual College Conference

Wichita, Kansas

2020

By Ashley Strickland

A vertical rainbow bar on the left side of the slide, with the colors transitioning from purple at the top to red at the bottom. The bar is wider at the top and tapers slightly towards the bottom.

**PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE:
RURAL LGBTQ+ STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT A
RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY**

Ashley Strickland
MBLGTACC Conference 2020





Acronyms

- **LGBTQ+**: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
- **GSA**: gay straight alliance
- **H.E.R.O**: helping others regardless of orientation
- **DEI**: diversity, equity, and inclusion



Statement of Problem

- **LGBTQ+ college students more likely to:**
 - Drop out
 - Feel alienated
 - Attempt suicide (Fox & Ore, 2010).
- **Gap in Literature:**
 - Information about LGBTQ+ as whole and rural experience in high school, no information on rural students in college (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Zubernis, Snyder, & McCoy, 2011).



Purpose

- Perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at Midwestern university
 - Campus climate
 - Identity development

- The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at a rural Midwestern university concerning campus climate and identity development.
- For the purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005, p. 17) definition of campus climate is used: "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential."



Research Question

- What are the perceptions of rural LGBT college student needs concerning campus climate at Midwest University?



Sub-questions

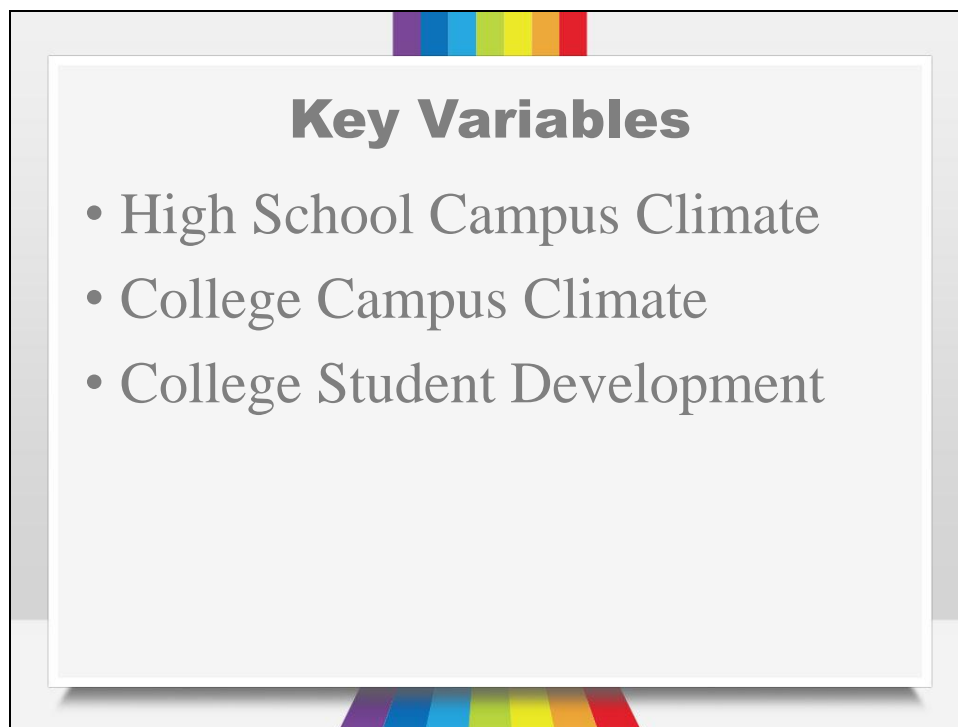
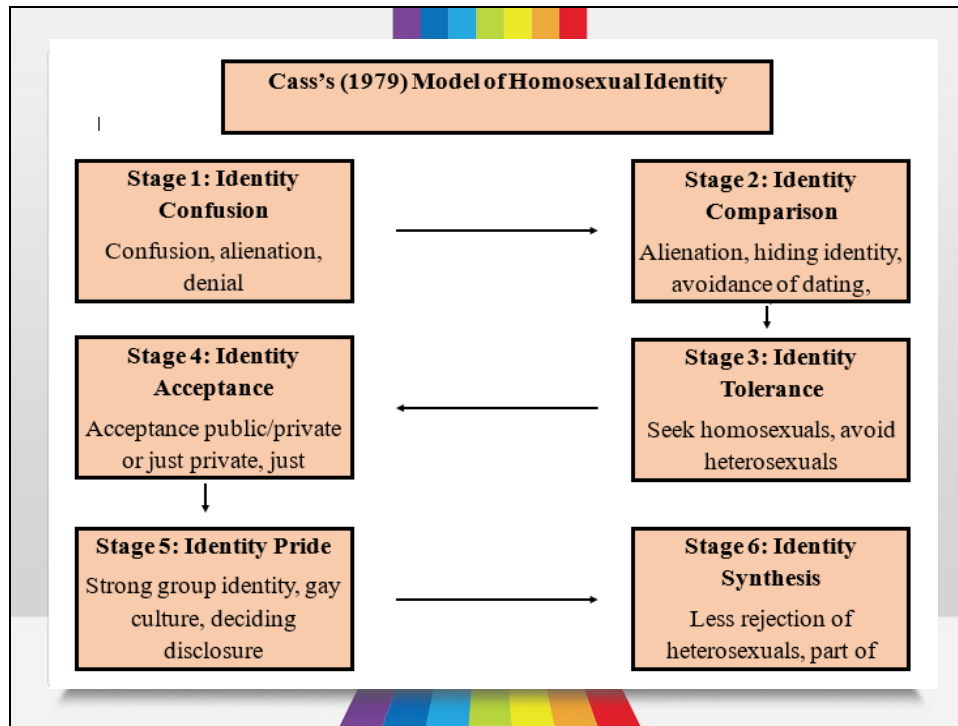
1. How does this LGBTQ+ population formulate a self-identity as viewed through the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation Model (Cass, 1979)?
2. How does this population view their safety on the campus of Midwest University?
3. What are the perceptions of this population of students regarding equity and inclusion? More specifically, how do they perceive the actions taken by Midwest University to meet their specific academic, mental and physical health, and social needs?



Conceptual Framework

- Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity Development
- **6 Stages:**
 1. Identity Confusion
 2. Identity Comparison
 3. Identity Tolerance
 4. Identity Acceptance
 5. Identity Pride
 6. Identity Synthesis

- Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity will be the conceptual framework guiding this study.
- Identity development is influenced by social interaction, making experiences in college formidable to LGBTQ+ identity development (Cass, 1979).





Design of the Study

- **Setting:**
 - Midwest University
- **Participants:**
 - LGBTQ+ Students from rural areas
 - 18 years or older
 - Student between 2016-2019
- **Data Collection:**
 - Interviews
 - Document Analysis
 - Literature Review
- **Data Analysis**
 - Triangulation
 - Open Coding: Interviews



Limitations/Delimitations

- Relying on individual perceptions and experiences
 - Not necessarily reflective of entire population
- Not generalizable, but could be replicated at other institution with varying results
- Small sample size due to rigid participation requirements (LGBTQ+/rural)



Findings

- **Theme 1:**

- **Isolation in high school** (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012).

- Lack of GSAs in rural areas
- Lack of role models
- Afraid to come out
- Bullying/Shaming when did come out

“The community I grew up in, there was no one around like me in other words, no representation, so I was pretty ignorant growing up.”

- Participants shared stories of isolation, bullying, and the daily struggle of growing up in an area and attending high school in a place that verbalizes hatred towards their identity.
- Most participants mentioned being the only LGBTQ+ person they knew in their small town, having no role model to guide them in their identity development.
- Participant experiences in high school reflect the characteristics often found in Cass’s (1979) identity comparison stage. This stage is comprised of feelings of alienation and hiding of ones identity, things Cass mentions are intensified in rural areas. Even participants who were out stayed to themselves and did not feel comfortable discussing their gender or sexual identity with peers.
- One lesbian participant mentioned that she dated males in high school to cover her true feelings.

- Negative comments with regards to marriage equality increased feelings of isolation for participants. Most participants did not come out willingly before college, some were unwillingly outed, and others lived in fear of the repercussions of confiding in someone.
- One participant noted that coming out in college was a ‘life changer,’ explaining the relief they felt after sharing their authentic self.
- Others mentioned how coming out in college allowed them to find a community, seeing an end to the years of isolation experienced at home. When visiting their hometowns’, which most do not enjoy, participants mentioned removing rainbow gear from their person out of fear of violence and experiencing invasive questions about their identity.



Findings

- **Theme 2:**

- **LGBTQ+ Organizations**

- Lower victimization at HSs with GSAs (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013).
 - Movement through Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Development impacted by engaging in gay community (Cass, 1979)
 - HERO pivotal
 - Safety
 - Sharing ideas/experiences
 - Friendship

- Only one participant had access to GSA and they had to start it with the help of their principal. Other participants knew about the organization through friends at other schools and mentioned in their interviews their desire for a chapter in their school.



Findings

- **Theme 3:**
 - **Visibility**
 - Openness linked to role models (Evans & Broido, 1999)
 - Faculty acceptance valued
 - Symbols are powerful
 - Lack of consistent Safe Zone Training for Faculty/Staff/Student
 - Reduces incidents of victimization (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008)
 - Visibility of out faculty/staff

“Specifically, my advisor through my undergrad was one of the most supportive and pro-LGBTQ+ people I have ever met in my life. College is hard but having someone who doesn’t help you along the way is even harder, but that was not the case.”



Findings

- **Theme 4:**
 - **Campus Wide Support**
 - Largely feelings of acceptance offered relief
 - Vast difference between HS and college experience
 - Counseling services widely known/LGBTQ+ friendly
 - More DEI events
 - Impact of UPD work

- A student's identity development, as negative happenings such as homophobic slurs and positive happenings such as LGBTQ+ guest speakers both directly influence identity development (Vaccaro, et al., 2015).



Findings

- **Web Presence:**
 - Difficult to find any information on HERO
 - DEI events calendar included 1 LGBTQ+ event for the semester
 - New Association of LGBTQIA Employees webpage with pictures/contact information of participating staff
 - LGBTQ+ search:
 - No HERO, DEI support information
 - Career Services

Recommendations for Midwest


- Additional support and resources:
 - LGBTQ+ students from rural areas identity development might be further behind their urban counterparts
- Assuring HERO has the support
- Increase the visibility of the Association of LGBTQIA Employees
- Diverse events on campus
- Improving the visibility of LGBTQ+ events, student organizations, and LGBTQ+ faculty staff on the Midwest website
- Utilizing/Participating in Campus Pride Index (<https://www.campusprideindex.org/>)

Questions?






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SECTION FIVE: CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Target Journal

The researcher will submit an article to the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. This journal was chosen because of the history peer-reviewed articles published offering new approaches to increasing inclusivity in higher education institutions. Manuscript guidelines are outlined and submissions are accepted at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/dhe/?tab=4>.

Rationale for the Target

One goal of the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education is to guide higher education institutions in developing inclusive practices. Study results published in this journal provide higher education professionals with practical solutions to serving their LGBTQ+ populations. This journal values empirical research, and seeks articles inspiring practitioners making an effort to improve the inclusivity of their institution.

Format of Proposed Article

Submissions for the journal are typically 10-35 double spaced pages, must follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.), and include an abstract with no more than 250 words.

Plan for Submission

Who: *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*

When: Spring of 2020

How: Electronic submission through the Manuscript Submission Portal at

<https://www.editorialmanager.com/dhe/default.aspx>

PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE: RURAL LGBTQ+ STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

Rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) high school students face harassment, lack connection to their schools, and have low college aspirations (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). Studies focused on LGBTQ+ students in college do not address the needs of rural students, often painting a wide brush of campus experiences for all LGBTQ+ students. This study focused on LGBTQ+ college students from rural areas studying at a rural Midwestern university. The study included nine interviews, a document analysis, and a literature review exploring the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students and campus climate at Midwest University. The conceptual framework that guided this study is Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity Development. This bounded case study addressed the gap in literature concerning perceptions of campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students in college and the impact of sexual identity development in college (Creswell, 2014; Zubernis, Snyder, McCoy, 2011). It is imperative institutions work to provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to connect with one another and offer a variety of inclusive events promoting the value of all students. This study was viewed through the lens of Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity formation.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, campus climate, identity development, inclusion

While some progress can be seen in the inclusivity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ on college campuses, still very little is known about campus climate for LGBTQ+ students from rural areas (Zemsky & Sanlo, 2005). What is known, is students coming from rural high schools are leaving an environment of harassment and

isolation (Palmer et al., 2012). Often, identity development and resilience to the stressors associated with being LGBTQ+ for college bound students are achieved by leaving home and attending college, if it is seen as a safe space (Zubernis et al., 2011). This makes studying the campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students vital.

Background of Study

The 1990s ushered in many changes for LGBTQ+ students on college campuses: the creation of LGBTQ+ resource centers, the establishment of nondiscrimination policies including LGBTQ+ students and staff, and an increase in programming for LGBTQ+ students (Zemsky & Sanlo, 2005). However, according to the Human Rights Campaign, while the state of Missouri issues marriage licenses to same-sex couples, the state offers no laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual identity with regards to housing, employment, education, or school bullying, and in May of 2017 adopted a bill limiting the rights of minorities to file discrimination suits against their oppressors (State Maps of Laws and Policies, 2017).

Environments perpetuating homophobia and offering no LGBTQ+ role models can delay student identity development in college (Paul & Frieden, 2008). Cass (1979) developed a model of homosexual identity formation through a series of developmental stages. However, progression through these stages can stall if individuals face a hostile environment. This stalemate adds to the stressors LGBTQ+ students face their straight counterparts do not, often hindering their academic success (Cass, 1979; Palmer et al., 2012; Windmeyer, Humphrey, & Barker, 2013).

University students attending college in states with progressive, inclusive LGBTQ+ state policies are more likely to cultivate a positive self-image when compared

to students in states with overt anti-LGBTQ+ laws (Vaccaro, Russell, & Koob, 2015). What is much less clear is how college campus climate impacts the identity development of rural LGBTQ+ college students (Zubernis et al., 2011). The study took place at Midwest University, a rural University in the Midwest. The institution includes cultural competence and respect in the list of values guiding the University. This study will contribute to their ongoing work of understanding and teaching the tenants of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Problem of Practice

While LGBTQ+ students attending college face similar issues as their heterosexual counterparts—homesickness, relationship stress, academic difficulty, etc.—LGBTQ+ students often have the additional stressor of coping with prejudice (Zubernis et al., 2011). Research shows a number of LGBTQ+ students encounter negative experiences on college campuses (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; Vaccaro, 2012). Due to intimidation on college campuses, half of all LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff hide their sexual identity (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). In turn, the lack of comfort with identity can hinder academic persistence, much like lack of preparation and underdeveloped study skills do (Windmeyer et al., 2013).

At-risk factors including first generation status, low socioeconomic standing, and minority status all lead to a higher risk of dropping out of college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students report suffering with anxiety and depression at a much higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts, often leading to poor academic performance (Craig, Han, Lim,

Matney, & Woodford, 2014; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2007). LGBTQ+ students are more likely to drop out of college, feel alienated on college campuses, and attempt suicide (Fox & Ore, 2010). The risks associated with being an LGBTQ+ college student and the effects these risks have on college completion are mostly unknown because of a lack of data collected about this specific minority population (Cegler, 2012; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Einhaus, Viento, & Croteau, 2004; Windmeyer et al., 2013).

There are large discrepancies between colleges and universities nationwide concerning the amount of information collected about LGBTQ+ student populations (Cegler, 2012; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Einhaus et al., 2004; Windmeyer et al., 2013). In order to better serve this population of students and create a more diverse campus atmosphere, research focused on their needs and perceptions in the campus environment needs to be conducted (Cegler, 2012; “Lesbian, Gay,” 2014). To combat this lack of data, a national campus climate tool, Campus Pride Index, was developed by national LGBTQ+ researchers and is currently utilized by six Missouri colleges (“Campus Pride Index: LGBTQ-Friendly Campus Search,” n.d.). This measurement of campus inclusiveness helps schools move forward on their path to diversity and inclusion by providing a self-assessment and ranking of the institution’s LGBTQ+-friendly practices related to academic life, residential life, campus wide policies, and retention and recruitment initiatives, among other factors (“Campus Pride Index: About Us,” n.d.). Unfortunately, Midwest University does not utilize this tool and does not have an alternative comprehensive climate tool.

Existing Gap in Literature

While there is research providing information about LGBTQ+ students from rural communities during their time in high school (Palmer et al, 2012), there is a gap in the literature concerning perception of campus climate and needs of rural LGBTQ+ students in college. There is also literature addressing LGBTQ+ college students as a whole (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011), without delineating the special needs and experiences of rural students, along with a broader gap of knowledge about the impact of sexual identity in college (Zubernis et al., 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students at a rural Midwestern university concerning campus climate and identity development. Knowing their needs, colleges and universities can use the information to provide intentional support to this particular minority population. For the purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005, p. 17) definition of campus climate is used: "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential." Participants in this study are considered rural students if they come from a city or town with less than 2500 people (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study was: What are the perceptions of rural LGBTQ+ college students concerning campus climate, as defined by Rankin (2005), at Midwest University? This question is broad, allowing for unrestricted participant views while focusing on one single phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). For the

purpose of this study, Rankin's (2005, p. 17) definition of campus climate is used.

Rankin defines campus climate as "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential." These sub-questions fueled the data-collection process:

1. How does this LGBTQ+ population formulate a self-identity as viewed through the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation Model (Cass, 1979)?
2. How does this population view their safety on the campus of Midwest University?
3. What are the perceptions of this population of students regarding equity and inclusion? More specifically, how do they perceive the actions taken by Midwest University to meet their specific academic, mental and physical health, and social needs?

Conceptual Framework

Identity development is influenced by social interaction, making experiences in college formidable to LGBTQ+ identity development (Cass, 1979). Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity is the conceptual framework that guided this study. This model is "a six-stage model based upon individuals' perceptions of their own behavior and actions within the Western culture's viewpoint" (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014, p. 230) and is the most well-known and cited sexual identity development theory (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Zubernis et al., 2011). The Human Rights Campaign supports Cass's work for use in designing safe space programs on college campuses ("Establishing an Allies/Safe Zone

Program,” 2017). The stages within the model include: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

Stages

1. Identity confusion. This stage marks the beginning of the identity formation process. Recognition that homosexuality is relevant to oneself can cause incongruence with past perceptions of self as heterosexual. This incongruence can in turn cause confusion and alienation. Three common coping approaches are found in this stage: acceptance of this new perception of oneself, denial and avoidance of any behavior or information deemed homosexual, or create a different meaning for homosexual behavior such as labeling it an experiment or just “fooling around” (Cass, 1979, p. 224).

2. Identity comparison. According to Cass’s (1979) research, if individuals reach the identity comparison stage, confusion has reduced and individuals agree that they might be homosexual. Alienation plays a large role in this stage; alienation from family, peers, and society as a whole. Geographic location can intensify these feelings of alienation, making the study of LGBTQ+ rural experiences vital. This stage often includes hiding one’s sexual orientation, avoidance of dating, and deliberately dressing stereotypically heterosexual. The search for meaning occurs during this stage, as expectations for their future now includes a new homosexual model. If extreme alienation occurs and the complete rejection of homosexuality, suicide could be committed.

3. Identity tolerance. If foreclosure does not occur in the identity comparison stage and individuals move into the identity tolerance stage, alienation is addressed by seeking out other homosexuals. This stage is marked by a tolerance, rather than

acceptance, of the homosexual identity. Individuals in this stage withdraw from heterosexuals who they fear will not accept their homosexuality. If interactions with homosexuals and homosexual subculture is negative to an individual, self-hatred can develop and lead to a retreat from interacting with other homosexuals. If the experience is positive, a positive self-image is more likely and opens opportunity to meet partners and role models (Cass, 1979).

4. Identity acceptance. Individuals who move into the identity acceptance stage increase their contact with other homosexuals and begin to receive validation homosexuality is a normal way of life. Individuals in this stage also move from a tolerance of their identity to acceptance. Two groups emerge in this stage, one that legitimizes and accepts homosexuality in private and public settings and one that believes homosexuality is solely acceptable in private. Partial legitimization may involve further withdrawal from family to hide the homosexual identity. If strategies to hide in public are unsuccessful, some individuals reject this partial legitimization and move into stage five; if successful, there is a stalemate in the acceptance stage (Cass, 1979).

5. Identity pride. Cass's (1979) model marks this stage by a personal acceptance of homosexuality alongside society's rejection of this identity. Less weight is given to how heterosexuals view individuals than previous stages. A strong group identity is formed, and a newfound commitment to the homosexual community is heightened. Individuals in this stage immerse themselves in gay culture, literature, and friend groups and have a sense of pride in their identity. Anger and pride create an activist response to society devaluing homosexual identity or making it seem less than heterosexual identity. Conflict can arise when navigating public disclosure; individuals may selectively choose

whom they disclose their identity to, sometimes opting to leave a job if disclosure causes problems. Negative reactions to disclosure can hinder progression to the next stage while unexpected positive reactions can propel an individual into the identity synthesis stage.

6. Identity synthesis. Individuals who enter this stage develop the realization not all heterosexuals reject the homosexual identity. Pride still exists, but is often less dominant in this stage as individuals begin to realize there is no need for an “us versus them” mentality among homosexuals and heterosexuals. Rather than the homosexual identity being an individual’s only identity, in this stage, the homosexual identity is seen as one of an individual’s identities (Cass, 1979).

Figure 1. Cass’s (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity

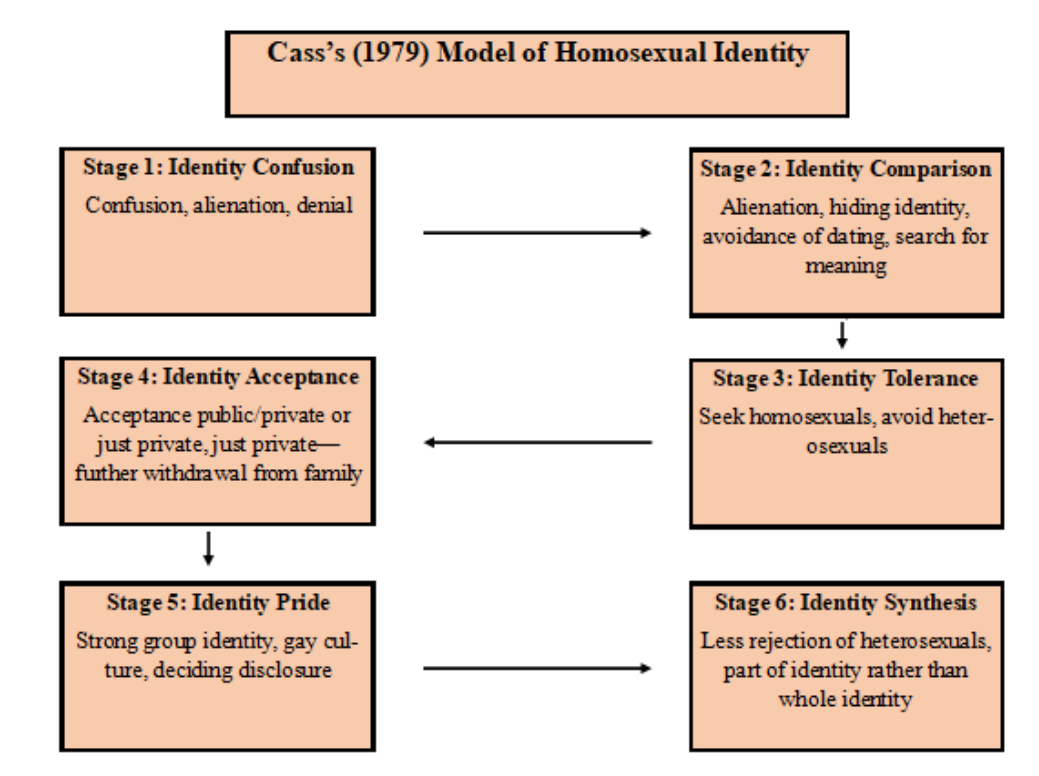


Figure 1. Homosexual identity model used to show an individual’s progress in the process of accepting one’s identity (Cass, 1979).

Key Variables

The key underpinnings that guided this study, viewed through the lens of Cass's (1979) model, were rural high school, because we know LGBTQ+ student experience in this environment is largely negative (Palmer et al., 2012); college climate; and college student development.

High school climate.

LGBTQ+ students from rural areas are more likely than their suburban and urban counterparts to enter college without having already come out, likely due to hostile school cultures (Palmer et al., 2012). Unfortunately, this anxiety with identity influences academic success and persistence in college (Windmeyer et al., 2013). The current literature pertaining to rural LGBTQ+ youth focuses on the experiences of high school aged students. Rural LGBTQ+ students feel less connected to their high schools and often experience harassment, earn low grade point averages, and have low college aspirations (Palmer et al., 2012). Colleges and universities can influence the experiences of rural LGBTQ+ students by providing support for identity development and coming out resources, especially because students are more psychologically healthy, even when victimized, if they are out in their environment (Cass, 1979; Palmer et al., 2012).

Campus climate.

Campus climate defined by Rankin (2005) is "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential" (p. 17). Campus climate can determine whether or not a student progresses through Cass's stages of development (Zubernis et al., 2011). To understand identity development of LGBTQ+ students, it is

necessary to examine campus climate experiences (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Historical policies and current structures influence LGBTQ+ students, and institutions with dedicated centers and inclusive mission statements send positive messages to LGBTQ+ students. Inclusive policies can be affirming and contribute to valuable meaning making for LGBTQ+ students and their campus. For example, integrating queer studies courses into the general education curriculum contributes to a holistic sense of self as it presents an opportunity for LGBTQ+ students to see a reflection of themselves (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

College student development.

College is typically a time for students to form serious relationships, with successful relationships positively contributing to a healthy sense of self. LGBTQ+ students often battle challenges straight students do not when forming relationships with peers, causing an avoidance of relationships and a halt in progression through identity development, often getting stuck in the identity confusion stage (Cass, 1984; Zubernis et al., 2011). The more students get involved inside and outside of the classroom with their peers, the more effort they put into their academics (Tinto, 2010). One of Tinto's (1993) proposed reasons for students leaving higher education without a degree is failure to integrate socially. Specific "immediate happenings" on college campuses directly influence self-development, including homophobic slurs, LGBTQ+ identifying campus speakers, etc. (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 32). LGBTQ+ support groups on campuses help students have a positive view of their sexual identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Various developmental models, including Cass's (1979), all state the importance of social

supports in overcoming homophobic social interactions while contributing to a positive sexual minority identity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016).

Design of the Study

Setting

The study took place at Midwest University; a moderately selective institution of higher education located in Missouri, serving approximately 6,500 students (About Midwest, n.d.; Apply online, n.d.). Midwest—a rural city of approximately 12,000 where close to 92% of residents identify as White (United States Census Bureau, 2013). The university’s workforce imitates Midwest’s mono-chromatic demographics, with 92.5% of all faculty in the institution identified as White (NCATE, 2013).

Midwest’s mission to focus on “student success - every student, every day” (About Midwest: Mission, 2013) serves as a reminder to all employees on campus of their responsibility for student success and highlights the organization’s purpose for opening its doors each day: student success. Through this mission, Midwest encourages one-to-one relationships between faculty, staff, and students, helping to create an environment conducive to student success where students are readily provided with resources and services, both academic and personal. In addition, in an effort to be the college choice for a wide spectrum of students and to provide a comprehensive student experience, Midwest created a list of values and included on that list is intercultural competence (About Midwest: Mission, 2013).

Participants

Participants included LGBTQ+ students raised in rural communities of less than 2500 people (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). All participants were 18 years or older

and attend Midwest University between the years of 2016-2019. The researcher used a purposeful sample by contacting the LGBTQ+ student organization on campus, Helping Everyone Regardless of Orientation (H.E.R.O), for a list of students willing to participate. This led to snowball sampling for a larger participant pool. Once key participants were identified through H.E.R.O., the researcher asked for referrals for other potential participants (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher emailed students at their school email address about the opportunity to participate in the study.

Data Collection

This study was qualitative in nature and used a phenomenological approach via a bounded case study, with in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of current rural LGBTQ+ students at Midwest University (Creswell, 2014). Data collection occurred through 90-minute interviews (Seidman, 2013), document analysis (Creswell, 2016), and a literature review to gather perceptions of campus climate (Krueger & Casey, 2015). All data collection sessions were electronically recorded and rev.com utilized for transcription. Interviews were semi-structured, with a predetermined set of questions allowing for flexibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were useful to this study because “at the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language” (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). The interview process allows researchers the chance to understand how LGBTQ+ college students make meaning of their lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Phenomenological interviewing allows participants to address their experiences through their point of view (Siedman, 2013).

“Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic...material” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Various documents assisted the researcher in discovering insights and meaning for the problem at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher analyzed documents found on the Midwest website as it pertained to support for LGBTQ+ students.

Validity and reliability are directly related to the ethics of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher secured permission to conduct this study from the University of Midwest and Midwest University. The application included information concerning the participants involved in the study to report the potential risk associated with participation (Creswell, 2014). The research study required signed informed consent forms; which informed participants of the purpose of the study, potential risks involved, confidentiality guarantee, and the availability of withdrawal from the study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The researcher used a pseudonym for the setting and for each participant to protect privacy. Validity was established through triangulation of data collected via interviews, document analysis, and a literature review and is reported using rich, thick description along with contrary information. Member check provided participants the opportunity to correct errors (Creswell, 2014). Categorization of interview information occurred through open coding from the electronic transcripts of each interview (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Use of axial coding determined the relationship between each transcript and established common themes.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection—the review of transcripts, coding for initial themes, and modifications made to future collection based on this analysis (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Frequent accuracy checks of interview transcripts and the coding process established reliability (Creswell, 2014). Attention paid to the ease of “going native,” ensured reporting did not favor participant viewpoints, ignore data placing participants in a poor light, or focusing solely on positive results (Creswell, 2014, p. 99).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Limitations

This qualitative study relied on individual perceptions and experiences; responses from participants do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of others. The study cannot be replicated, but can be generalized as this qualitative study replicated at other institutions may have varying results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Delimitations

This study included a small sample size of 9 individuals due to the specific participants considered for the study, rural LGBTQ+ students at one rural Midwestern university. Consideration for participants was limited to students 18 years of age and attendance at Midwest University from 2016 to the present. Future studies could compare rural LGBTQ+ experiences at rural colleges to urban institutions.

Assumptions

Responses to interview questions from participating rural LGBTQ+ students accurately reflect their attitudes and experiences and were not altered for this study. Participants are honest about their identification as LGBTQ+ students. Responses to

interview questions are answered honestly without consideration to the topic being studied.

Findings and Discussion

The study looked at the perceptions of campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students at Midwest University. Participants' high school climate, college campus climate, and identity development were explored. The data analysis, through axial coding, revealed four themes: home-town isolation, LGBTQ+ organizations, visibility, and campus-wide support.

Isolation

Urban and suburban high schools often create gay/straight alliances (GSAs) to improve inclusivity for LGBTQ+ students. However, most rural schools do not have these in place (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Participants shared stories of isolation, bullying, and the daily struggle of growing up in an area and attending high school in a place verbalizing hatred towards their identity. Most participants mentioned being the only LGBTQ+ person they knew in their small town, and having no role model to guide them in their identity development. One participant said "The community I grew up in, there was no one around like me in other words, no representation, so I was pretty ignorant growing up." Another participant, when trying to describe the climate of his hometown said that "a lot of people compared the passing of gay marriage federally as a tirade against love." Participant experiences in high school reflect the characteristics often found in Cass's (1979) identity comparison stage. This stage is comprised of feelings of alienation and hiding of one's identity, things Cass mentions are intensified in rural areas. Even participants who were out stayed to

themselves and did not feel comfortable discussing their gender or sexual identity with peers. One lesbian participant mentioned she dated males in high school to cover her true feelings.

Negative comments with regards to marriage equality increased feelings of isolation for participants. Most participants did not come out willingly before college, some were unwillingly outed, and others lived in fear of the repercussions of confiding in someone. Interestingly, even with increased victimization after coming out in rural areas, coming out can contribute to reduced anxiety and is an important milestone for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). Participants reported increased bullying and family shaming after coming out in their rural high school. One participant noted coming out in college was a “life changer,” explaining the relief they felt after sharing their authentic self. Others mentioned how coming out in college allowed them to find a community, seeing an end to the years of isolation experienced at home. When visiting their hometowns, which most do not enjoy, participants mentioned removing rainbow gear from their person out of fear of violence and experiencing invasive questions about their identity.

LGBTQ+ Organizations

High schools with GSAs report a lower number of victimization incidents (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013). Only one participant had access to this and they had to start it with the help of their principal. Other participants knew about the organization through friends at other schools and mentioned in their interviews their desire for a chapter in their school. Similarly, when college students experience social inclusion at their institution, academic success increases (Silverschanze, Cortina, Konik & Magley, 2007).

LGBTQ+ student organizations contribute to a more positive view of sexual identity (Brandon-Friedma & Kim, 2016). According to Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity, reaching the pride stage is easier if a strong group identity is formed; this stage is often marked by an immersion in gay culture, literature, and friend groups and a sense of pride in their identity.

Participants mentioned Midwest's LGBTQ+ student organization, called Helping Others Regardless of Orientation (H.E.R.O.), as pivotal in their experience on campus. H.E.R.O. offers participants a way to meet other LGBTQ+ friends, creates a safe space to discuss shared experiences around campus, and leadership opportunities to bring diversity events to campus for all students. According to Cass's (1979) homosexual identity model, the interactions between people who identify as LGBTQ+ impacts identity development. This interaction can validate gender and sexual identities. Most participants met their current roommates and closest friends through the group and indicated this made them feel safer on campus having a group of friends experiencing similar things. Two participants mentioned having no friends on campus before joining H.E.R.O.

To find H.E.R.O. using a general search on the Midwest homepage, using LGBTQ+ does not retrieve a link to the organization's page and if H.E.R.O. is used, which is not known to all, a link to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion page is the second result, but not a page specifically for H.E.R.O. Using the search bar in the student organizations page dedicated to student's finding a group that meets their needs, the search term LGBTQ+ or related terms do not retrieve any organizations. If a student is

looking for H.E.R.O., they must know the name of the organization to find relevant information.

Visibility

Perceptions of a supportive campus climate with visible role models encourage openness about identity (Evans & Broido, 1999). To move through Cass's homosexual identity model, interaction with others who identify as LGBTQ+ is vital. This includes access to LGBTQ+ role models (Cass, 1979). One participant valued his faculty member's positive reaction to his speech about his sexual orientation. The participant mentioned the positive feedback shared with the entire class made this experience even more powerful. Participants felt open to write about their identity for graded assignments when appropriate. Two participants mentioned the need for more diverse course offerings addressing gender and sexual identity. It is vital students see themselves reflected in the courses offered at Midwest. The absence of this can make LGBTQ+ students feel devalued (Garvey, Rankin, & Taylor, 2015; Vaccaro et al., 2015).

Participants validated the importance of welcoming symbols, mentioning the powerful impact LGBTQ+ friendly faculty had on their experience at Midwest. Most participants were comfortable sharing their gender and sexual identity with faculty members on campus, often times because they noticed a sticker or sign in their office making them feel welcome. One participant expressed her appreciation of her academic advisor's support through college, noting "Specifically, my advisor through my undergrad was one of the most supportive and pro-LGBTQ+ people I have ever met in my life. College is hard but having someone who doesn't help you along the way is even harder, but that was not the case."

An organization's culture is revealed through symbols and the lack of symbols (Bolman & Deal, 2013)—like safe space triangles placed on windows and doors denoting an ally's space as accepting and able to support LGBTQ+ students; labeled unisex bathrooms; sexual-orientation inclusive discrimination statements; printed use of gender-sensitive language; and publicized housing for transgendered students. Midwest does not have a well-utilized safe-space training program and therefore lack the symbols denoting a welcoming area of campus for LGBTQ+ students. The only information retrieved when searching the Midwest website for safe zone training is an announcement for a one-time training event held in March of 2018. Also, while housing options do exist for transgender students, those options are not publicized.

One participant mentioned the need for out faculty and staff to have a stronger presence on campus. The Association of LGBTQIA Employees was formed in 2017, an organization that "...serves to foster an inclusive, open campus community, advancing equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual people" (Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, 2018). In the Fall of 2018, the association added member pictures and contact information to serve as a resource for students and other LGBTQ+ staff not already a part of the group.

Campus-wide Support

All participants mentioned feelings of relief from the acceptance of their identities campus-wide. This acceptance came from roommates, staff, faculty, and the university as a whole. To reach the final stage of identity development in Cass's (1979) model, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ realize not all heterosexuals reject or disapprove of members of the LGBTQ+ community. With this realization comes the acceptance gender

and sexual identity do not make up an individual's entire identity (Cass, 1979). While participant concerns were mentioned, such as the need for gender-neutral bathrooms and more LGBTQ+ events on campus, all participants noted a vast change in the environment from their hometown to Midwest campus climate. University police received praise for their support and dedication to keeping all students safe. One participant spoke about how his perception of campus safety positively changed after an officer came to a H.E.R.O. meeting asking for feedback and ensuring the group that their needs were important to the officers on campus. Another student said "The University Police Department, the UPD, they have been very open with working with [H.E.R.O], and creating more of a safe kind of place on campus for us."

Most participants noted the value in counseling services on campus through the on-campus clinic. Participants who had not used the service mentioned the positive impact of their outreach. Knowing the services were there when needed proved to be a calming effect for students. Participants who used the services had positive experiences discussing their needs, especially those related to their identity.

A search for LGBTQ+ on the institutions main webpage does retrieve resources; Career Services has a page dedicated to the job search for LGBTQ+ students ranging from job boards to interview tips. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office includes a glossary of inclusive language on their page. The events calendar for this office lists one event related to LGBTQ+ identities for the entire semester; a movie viewing and discussion of Philadelphia.

One criticism the participants had concerning H.E.R.O., is the University's reliance on the group for most things related to LGBTQ+ issues. Participants expressed

the desire for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to work to sponsor more of these events with the help of H.E.R.O., not vice versa. This is critical to a student's identity development, as negative happenings such as homophobic slurs and positive happenings such as LGBTQ+ guest speakers both directly influence identity development (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Participants also mentioned the need for educational events concerning gender and sexual orientation and a formal safe zone training program so inclusive symbols are more prevalent across campus.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a strategic focus at Midwest University. Midwest can utilize the findings from this study when working to improve campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, especially those from rural high schools. Addressing the findings allows Midwest the chance to improve climate for current students, and assist in recruiting future LGBTQ+ students from rural schools. Further research, in particular a comparison of campus climate in urban schools, would address further gaps in the literature and give Midwest even more resources and ideas to improve campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students.

The researchers recommendations based on the findings of this study are:

- The Admissions Office should begin tracking LGBTQ+ students through a voluntary question on the admissions application to provide targeted support and programming, and track academic success.
- Provide additional support and resources for LGBTQ+ students from rural areas, as their identity development might be further behind their urban counterparts.

- Assure H.E.R.O. has the support needed to serve all LGBTQ+ students, as most participants attributed their comfort on campus to the support received through this organization. Provide funding for the organization, with an advisor's oversight, to enable the group to hold educational and social events that are open to the campus community. Provide a physical location for this group to meet and house resources.
- Increase the visibility of the Association of LGBTQIA Employees as role models for rural LGBTQ+ students, as mentors are vital in their identity development and comfort on campus. Utilize this group for collaboration with H.E.R.O to form mentoring partnership, especially considering the feelings of isolation rural participants noted.
- Student Affairs or the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should work to improve availability of diverse events on campus, something all participants mentioned was of concern.
- The Marketing and Communications office should increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ events, student organizations, and LGBTQ+ faculty staff on the Midwest website, as this impacts current and potential students.
- The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should join the Campus Pride Index to gain more knowledge about LGBTQ+ campus life at Midwest and learn more about improving LGBTQ+ educational experiences
- Benchmark other institutions resources for best practices.

- Two participants mentioned resources at larger institutions they wished they had access to at Midwest. Some of those included LGBTQ+ housing options, easing anxiety about roommate selection, LGBTQ+ Greek organizations, and more safe-zone training with stickers prominently placed around campus.
- A future study should address rural LGBTQ+ campus climate at urban institutions.

Summary

Budget cuts to higher education are a reality making retention a high priority (Li, 2017; McGuinness & Novak, 2011). When LGBTQ+ students are not in an environment conducive to developing their identity, academics suffer and often departure from college follows (Cass, 1979; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012; Windmeyer, Humphrey, & Barker, 2013). Institutions of higher education have a moral responsibility to rural LGBTQ+ students who choose their campuses as a second home, especially considering this population experiences mental health crises when their environment is hostile (Fox & Ore, 2010). Colleges and Universities should focus on tracking the academic progress of their LGBTQ+ students, gathering institutional climate data, preferably through Campus Pride Index, support student run organizations established to provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ students, and work to create an open climate where faculty and staff feel comfortable sharing their identity; creating the space for role models and mentorship to form.

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SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Reflecting on my participation in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis degree (EdD) through the University of Missouri has been ongoing. Now at the end of my tenure in the program, I am able to see the impact this program had on my development as a leader in higher education. This section focuses on how the dissertation process influenced me in the context of the field of education and in the context of scholarship.

Educational Leader

“Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). I think about this often when working with my student staff—how can I articulate the best way to address our common goal of student success for our student clients? The primary benefit of this program and the dissertation in practice over the many others offered around the country is the opportunity to apply what is learned immediately within the context of our work. The topic I chose is something influencing my daily work in higher education. While completing the needed research for the dissertation, I learned skills that assisted me in a new position at my institution. I simultaneously used what I was learning, even if less officially, to prepare myself and my new student employees for this new journey.

“The university can serve as a social compass—a place in which convergence and collaboration are the norm” (Chun & Evans, 2009, p.10). This dissertation would not be possible without the leadership skills learned and opportunities built into this program for collaboration with colleagues. This cohort-based model was transformative to my learning. Now in a leadership role with over fifty student employees, I am able to

incorporate collaboration amongst them, knowing their learning and service to other students will be more powerful with these experiences. Training and professional development for these student leaders is now completely collaborative and interactive.

I try to “listen first, speak last” to cultivate a team culture where input from student employees is valued (Drucker, 2011, p. 36). Conducting interviews positively influenced my ability to do this. The importance of actively listening was highlighted through the dissertation process and has already influenced my leadership style. It is very easy to project individual feelings and bias in conversation with other higher education colleagues, but this process has taught me to give others a voice and the value of teamwork. This process also highlighted the need for citizenship. I would not have called it that before this course, but my team and I are working to understand our student clients, and working on empathy and compassion for their barriers to academic success (Roland, 2008).

This entire experience has taught me the need for a safe space for students to learn from each other’s experiences, even journeys and struggles within higher education (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). This study expanded my understanding of this and influences how I make decisions about services offered in my area. Taking the whole student experience into consideration when working with college students is important. Everyone is given the chance to speak, providing a learning opportunity for all in the room. Bennis and Thomas (2011) believe leaders engage others in shared meaning; creating a space where student staff feel free to share their experiences allows us to continuously alter our goals and create an atmosphere best suited for our students and their individual needs.

Mezirow (2009) believes “transformative learning may be defined as learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). Since starting this EdD journey, I offer more understanding when working with students and fight to have a variety of student voices heard across campus. The findings of my study only intensified this. I look at each job duty through a different lens; when hiring employees, I check I am being equitable and working to hire a diverse group. When teaching, I stop and adjust curriculum now I know content can be alienating for some groups of students, and when I work in a team setting, I strive to include all voices in decision-making.

Scholarship

The dissertation process improved my written communication and research skills. Communicating with various stakeholders in higher education is critical, especially when speaking up for marginalized student populations. This process has already spurred a list of research topics specifically related to my new role that can better myself professionally, but also assist me in expanding my professional development opportunities through proposals for presenting at conferences.

Further qualitative research about marginalized college students is something I am passionate about, and offering the opportunity for stakeholders to voice experiences is important to higher education institutions as it opens dialogue and allows others, not just myself, to offer solutions (Gill, 2010; Kotter, 2011). The culmination of this research process has taught me to continue asking the right questions and to allow for storytelling (Bensimon, 2010). Stone (2012, p. 41) believes “equality often means inequality, and equal treatment often means unequal treatment.” I struggle articulating this idea to

decision makers at my institution who often stop policy from moving forward when it does not offer the exact same benefit to every student on campus. Some leaders do not understand various student populations have varying needs.

According to Bolman and Deal (2013), reframing is necessary to work through a problem when previous methods are not working. As generations of students attending higher education institutions change, services and support offered need to change with them. This research process was vital to my new role as my work cannot remain stagnant. Research for best practices is a necessary ongoing process. When looking for approval from administration, detailed research can strengthen my proposal. As our unique take on serving students evolves, sharing our experiences with other scholars becomes imperative.

Mindbugs, or ingrained habits altering how we see something, can contribute to poor decision making (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). I have been a part of organizations struggling with change and continue processes simply for the sake of it being how it was always done. Fortunately, my current workplace continues to analyze information about our students, teaching, programs, and more, on a regular basis. Having completed a dissertation related to a problem in higher education, my confidence in contributing to scholarship addressing these mindbugs has improved.

I plan on partnering with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office at my current institution to bring about change, necessary trainings, and informative and cultural events to campus. As one participant in the research study mentioned, events promoting education and acceptance make all the difference for a rural LGBTQ+ student. “Events like these not only help LGBTQ+ students, they normalize it for non-LGBTQ+ so that

those of us in the gay community feel more normalized and accepted.” This particular student was hesitant to reveal his identity when first arriving to campus, “especially given the environment [he] came from, [he] elected to keep it secret and see how people were first. Clearly promoting services and support of the LGBTQ+ student population is vital to identity development and should be the first issue Midwest addresses (Cass, 1984).

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE: RURAL LGBTQ+ STUDENT

EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

You are invited to participate in a research study that to investigates rural LGBTQ+ student perceptions of campus climate at Midwest University. This form will explain your rights regarding study procedures so that your decision to participate is well informed. If you have any questions concerning the content of this form, please ask the researcher.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to inform University decision makers with regards to the perceptions of campus climate for rural LGBTQ+ students. This study will also address campus climate in terms of identity development, equity, and academic, health, and social needs of rural LGBTQ+ students. University officials can use the results of this study when making informed decisions about how best to serve the LGBTQ+ population.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is **voluntary**. The choice to participate in this study is up to you and refusal to participate will not affect you negatively in any way. If you do chose to participate, you may stop at any time throughout the study with no consequences.

STUDY FORMAT/CONFIDENTIALITY

Participation in this study will include an interview. These will last no more than 45 minutes. The interview will be recorded, if you chose not to be recorded, please inform

the researcher. All data gathered will be kept in a safe and confidential site which will then be destroyed upon the completion of the research. All participants must be at least 18 years of age. There are no risks associated with this study and there will be no experimental procedures. All information gained from the study will remain confidential and your identity will be concealed by assigning you a specific code that links you to the information you provide.

COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for participation.

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If questions or concerns arise during your participation in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

You may ask questions of the researcher at any time during the study. To contact the researcher, call Ashley Strickland at ashleyp@nwmissouri.edu

A copy of this informed consent will be given to you prior to participation in the study.

You may also review the information collected from your interview to correct any errors or misinterpretation.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What words would you use to describe your personal identity?
2. How do you feel about revealing your sexual/gender identity with
 - a. Campus peers?
 - b. Faculty/staff/administration?
3. How would you compare your sexual/gender identity on campus compared to your high school experience?
4. How do you view your safety on campus based on your sexuality/gender identity?
5. What sort of relationships, if any, have you formed with your LGBTQ+Q+ peers on campus?
6. What are your views or experiences in regards to access to university services based on your sexual/gender identity?
7. How does the University meet your needs concerning your sexual/gender identity (or does it not)?
 - a. Academic needs?
 - b. Mental and Physical needs?
 - c. Social needs?
8. How could the University improve campus climate for the LGBTQ+Q+ community?

VITA

Ashley Strickland, born in south Louisiana, is a two time graduate from Louisiana State University. She completed her Bachelor of Science in Education in 2007 and a Master's in Library and Information Science in 2012. Prior to beginning her Master's degree program, Mrs. Strickland taught high school English and History in a suburb of Baton Rouge. Following her Master's degree completion, she worked as a Learning Specialist for the Cox Communications Academic Center for Student Athletes at Louisiana State University. Mrs. Strickland is currently the Assistant Director of Academic Support at Northwest Missouri State University where she supervises over 50 tutors and Supplemental Instruction leaders.