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Justin L. Schuch

*Eastern Illinois University*

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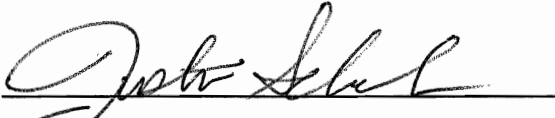
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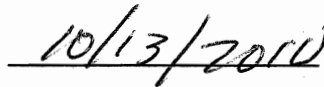
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A Queer Network: The Effects of LGBT

Student Organizations on Self-Acceptance in College Students

(TITLE)

BY

Justin L. Schuch

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2010

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A QUEER NETWORK:  
THE EFFECTS OF LGBT STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS ON SELF-ACCEPTANCE  
IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Justin Schuch

Thesis

Department of Counseling and Student Development  
Eastern Illinois University  
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October 2010

## ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education in the United States are experiencing the unique challenge of supporting their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual (LGBT) students at a time when their identity development has been well researched. Researchers have shown that the suicide rates among LGBT individuals are comparatively higher than those of their heterosexual counterparts. Many colleges and universities support their LGBT students via a network of other community members through LGBT student organizations on campus. To date, minimal research has been conducted to investigate whether membership in these student organizations is actually beneficial to LGBT members, as well as what participants actually gain from active involvement in these organizations. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of involvement in LGBT student organizations on self-acceptance for students at a small Midwestern university. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study sought to pinpoint factors that may affect a LGBT student's life, as well as identify what can be done to enhance the social, academic, and personal development experiences these students have during their tenure in higher education. Findings from the present study suggest struggling LGBT students turn to their campus' LGBT student organization for guidance before other resources; membership in a LGBT student organization gives members a broader understanding of institutional resources; and that membership in a LGBT student organization provides a comfort zone for participants.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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highlight of a countless number of days. I never thought I would be lucky enough to have a role model and friend such as you. Thank you.

DEDICATION

As Harvey Milk once proclaimed, "I know that you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living." In this spirit, this project is dedicated to the countless lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, and queer individuals who have been afraid to experience their identities most fully with the desire to offer hope necessary to live and love.



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## CHAPTER I

**Introduction**

In recent years, the importance of inclusion and support for diversity in higher education in America has been a celebrated topic. Smith and Schonfeld (2000) illuminate the idea that diversity remains an important imperative for the United States, and it is one in which higher education has an important role (p. 17) to play. During the next millennium, higher education is projected to face increasingly diverse student populations comprised of an array of races, ethnicities, religions, backgrounds and orientations (Dey, 2008; Mayhew, Gruwald, & Dey, 2005). Currently, colleges and universities are working to create measures that not only include but also provide a better understanding of the ever-changing student population. Recognized student organizations (RSOs) highlighting different student populations or departments focusing solely on minority groups or those underrepresented are frequently developed as institutional attempts to best accommodate student development and quests for acceptance.

Institutions are charged with answering many questions regarding their efforts to support these student organizations in their impact on the development of the students they have been created to serve. For example, institutional leaders have sought answers to the following questions: Are students growing and learning from participation in programs and events sponsored by these university entities? Are the resources made available having the desired impact? What additional needs might different minority groups feel should be met? Do institutions really have the responsibility to assess how they are best serving all of their students?

One emerging population gaining a foot hold on college campuses are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered/transsexual (LGBT) communities. Since the onset of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States (1969-1980), college and universities have been faced with the challenge of articulating support and services for this relatively new diverse group that self-identifies as LGBT. Until recently, the LGBT community had the status of being an “invisible population” in that many members were not picked out at first glance although “some self-identify privately but remain in the closet” and “others identify as being heterosexual even though they participate in same-sex behaviors” (Shankle et al., 2003, p. 160). The invisibleness of the LGBT community can present a significant number of issues for institutions of higher education because for many LGBT individuals, attending college represents freedom from parents and high school social networks. This time away from family and old social networks is frequently the first opportunity students have to explore and learn about their sexuality. The importance of this time is vital, knowing “developing a positive identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is complicated by the fact that from early childhood they have learned that a GLBT identity can be stigmatizing” (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007, p. 76). For some, the only exposure to any LGBT identity is portrayal in mainstream media sources and news reports of the political battles facing the LGBT community.

With this mind, the importance of the LGBT collegial experience cannot be underestimated. Many institutions across the country are home to student organizations that focus on the LGBT experience. Thousands of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students all over the county are active participants in their campus’ LGBT student organizations. These organizations range in names, size, creed, and missions, but

most share the common goal of improving life for LGBT students. While student organizations focusing on the LGBT collegial experience are offered at numerous colleges and universities, very little research has been conducted seeking to understand what how participation in these groups effect attendees. **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to guide the present study.

- 1) What is the overall purpose of a LGBT student organization such as Pride?
- 2) What are the experiences of students who are active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?
- 3) What are the experiences of students who are not active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?
- 4) How has activity or inactivity affected students' sense of personal self-acceptance?

### **Significance of Study**

Research on the major or lasting effects of being actively involved in LGBT organizations is scarce and the present study sets out to ascertain the experiences participants in LGBT organizations and those inactive to assess the impact these experiences have on their personal growth and development; specifically, their sense of self-acceptance. Findings from the current study advance understanding of the lasting effects of involvement in social groups such as LGBT organizations on students' self-acceptance, as well as provide framework for future and existing LGBT organizations as to what members should get out of their involvement experience. Popular themes provide a direction for leaders of LGBT groups to focus on while structuring their organizations' goals and events. This added knowledge also aids in a deeper understanding of the

struggle for self-acceptance that some LGBT individuals may face. Parallels are investigated between findings from this study and the phenomenon surrounding the LGBT population and elevated rates of attempted suicide. This knowledge can help direct numerous university entities in finding new ways to aid students that are struggling with their personal LGBT identity or experience.

### **Overview of Study**

Chapter I of the present study contains the Introduction, a statement of the research problem, significance of the study, an identification of the research methodology utilized in data collection, and a list of relevant definition of terms. Chapter II is comprised of an extensive review of current literature on LGBT college students and their experiences as members of student organizations, and institutional initiatives designed to support their LGBT populations. Chapter III has been devoted to an extensive presentation of the methodology for data collection and analysis, a description of the site, the population under study, and analysis of data to be collected. Chapter IV contains the findings for the present study presented in the responses of LGBT students who are active members of Pride and the responses of LGBT students who are not currently nor have ever been active members of Pride or any other student organization which has as its specific focus providing support to members of the LGBT community. Finally, Chapter V contains an analysis of the research findings and a discussion of conclusions drawn. A comparison between the findings of previous research and the findings in the present study will also be presented. In addition, this chapter will contain a list of recommendations for future research in this area along with recommendations for LGBT

student organizations and practitioners charged with the responsibility for providing institutional support for LGBT students.

### **Limitations of Study**

Due to the nature of the present study, one limitation is the number of available participants that were comfortable enough with their sexuality to be able to discuss their experiences with the primary researcher. This study set out to ascertain the experiences of an “invisible population” (Shankle et al., 2003), which meant participants had to be willing to self-identify and willingly step into a marginalized population. Additionally, by design, this study included only undergraduate students who are currently not nor have ever been members of an organization designed to provide support for individuals with LGBT sexual orientations. For these reasons, the voices of the participants in this study should not be interpreted as encompassing for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or transsexual students.

Another limitation of the present study is the size and location of the singular university campus where participants were enrolled. It is impossible to conclude that data from a similar study conducted at another institution would produce the same findings.

A final limitation is that while participants represented lesbian, gay, and bisexual voices, the present study was not able to include the experiences and perceptions of a participant that self-identified as transsexual or transgendered. Because sexualities are found across a broad continuum and individuals may move at any point across this continuum, the present study was only able to capture a small snapshot of sexualities.

## CHAPTER II

**Review of Literature**

The literature review for the present study on the experiences of LGBT students' involvement in LGBT student organizations and self-acceptance addresses two broad areas: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered/Transsexual Students along with Identity Development and Self-Acceptance. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered/Transsexual Students will address institutional role in the LGBT student experience in addition to the exploration of campus climates for LGBT individuals. This section also focuses on the purpose of LGBT student organizations and the organizations found throughout some of the public institutions in the state of Illinois. Identity Development and Self-Acceptance will detail literature on the identity development process for LGBT individuals and the link between identity development and self-acceptance.

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered/Transsexual Students**

With the importance of college and university roles in supporting their LGBT students becoming more evident, the campus climate for these students has also been brought to the spotlight. Lopez and Chism (1993) identified major factors influencing LGBT students when choosing an institution of higher education, noting that "some deliberately chose a large institution for the anonymity and cosmopolitan atmosphere it offered" (p. 100). For institutions throughout the Midwest, the importance of finding a positive balance of support for LGBT students comes down to a sheer fact of recruitment and retention.



As researchers have set out to ascertain the experiences of LGBT students and develop recommendations for implication, Rankin (2004) interviewed LGBT students to assess the challenges faced by LGBT students and found that “nineteen percent of the respondents reported that they feared for their physical safety because of the sexual orientation or gender identity, and 51 percent concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation” (p. 19). Students throughout colleges and universities are faced with numerous challenges finding themselves in the sexual minority.

Wall and Evans (2000) outline similar findings while detailing research conducted on the LGBT student population and their experiences in college. These researchers found “the vast majority of these students reported that they had been victims of some form of harassment, discrimination, or intimidation due to their sexual orientation” (p. 36). Later, Wall and Evans comment that findings suggest “the majority of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual students made conscious changes in their daily routines in an attempt to avoid harassment” (p. 36). Research clearly indicates the collegial experiences of LGBT students can be vastly different from their heterosexual counterparts.

The campus climate for LGBT individuals is often one of the main assessments of the overall experience for these students. Waldo (1998) explains the climate of a campus can “suggest the norms and contingencies that shape members’ perceptions and in turn, influence their behavior” (p. 748). Other researchers have shown negative campus climates and heterosexism have been prevalent in college and university settings for many years and linked to a lesser experience for LGBT students (Rullman, 1991; Underwood, 2004; Weiler, 2004). Lopez and Chism (1993) surveyed LGBT students and found students at institutions with negative campus climates “did not feel safe disclosing

their sexual identity in class and did not find gay, lesbian, or bisexual topics were being dealt with adequately in class or academic programs” (p. 97). Studies such as this provide more depth into the LGBT experience and offer evidence that a negative campus climate can affect every aspect of the collegial experience.

Institutions have begun to realize the importance of a positive campus climate and are beginning to embrace the responsibility of providing the same inclusiveness for LGBT students as provided other minority students. For example, “many college and universities have LGB student organizations that sponsor campus speakers and programs” (Waldo, 1998, p. 746). These and similar programs provide opportunities for networking among LGBT students during their time on campus. Institutions have gradually started taking more positive steps in the allowance of LGBT organizations and events on campus. Since the first LGBT student organization was secretly established in 1966 at Columbia University (Beemyn, 2003), students have gained considerable footing at their respective university campuses.

Today, there are a number of different LGBT student organizations throughout the country, ranging in name, creed, goals, and membership. Evans and Wall (1991) outlined “gay and lesbian student organizations, like student organizations in general, perform a variety of functions on college and university campuses” (p. 18). These LGBT student organizations serve members in a number of different capacities as social outlets, political vehicles, support networks, and educational advancement. Evans and Wall also state “there is very little consistency between gay and lesbian student groups at the various campuses” (p. 117). Every institution with a student organization dedicated to the experiences of LGBT students were created with different means in mind.

Evans and Wall's notion of little consistency is evident when looking at LGBT student organizations across the state of Illinois. Throughout the major public universities in the Illinois there are a number of different LGBT student organizations. In the southern part of the state, The Gay Liberation Organization, now known as the Saluki Rainbow Network, at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale was founded on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1971. The Saluki Rainbow Network provides campus with events such as the Bi-Annual Drag show, GLBTQA Awareness Week, and the GLBTQA History Month (Duncan 2008). Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville's LGBT student organization is known simply as the Gay/Straight Alliance or GSA. According to Southern Illinois University's LGBT resources webpage, GSA sets out to "create safe environments in schools for students to support each other and learn about homophobia and other oppressions, educate the school community about homophobia, gender identity, and sexual orientation issues, and fight discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools" (2010).

Unity, at Western Illinois University, located in Macomb, Illinois, "exists to provide a backbone of unity, support and strength and to work towards educational, social and political goals for the bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender population and their heterosexual allies" (Western Illinois University, 2008). Unity members actively support the Day of Silence, a day where members and allies of the LGBT community are silent to show support for the LGBT community.

In the central part of the state, Illinois State University, located in Normal, Illinois, is home to PRIDE, People Realizing Individuality and Diversity through Education. PRIDE's mission is to "provide a safe social atmosphere for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied people of Illinois State University and the

community” as well as to “provide services to students of Illinois State University regarding GLBTQA issues and concerns” as well as “to provide an educational forum...and to work against discrimination and oppression” (Illinois State University, 2010). The LGBT student organization at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is known as Pride as well. Pride at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is “dedicated to serving the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community and its Allies through political activism, educational awareness, and social events” (Perardi, 2010).

While there are many variations as Evans and Wall note, throughout the state many LGBT student organizations are driven towards the overarching purpose of providing LGBT students with the support needed during their tenure at the institution. However, because LGBT student groups focus on sexual identities and are relatively new in development, researchers have minimally assessed what LGBT student organizations are doing for the development of their participants.

### **Identity Development and Self-Acceptance**

Many researchers have developed and evaluated numerous models focusing on the milestones of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity development and their coming out processes (Cain, 1991; Cass, 1984; Floyd, & Stein, 2002; Rosario et al., 2006; Stevens, 2004). These models outline the progression LGBT individuals through the development of self in relation to the heterosexually dominated world. Cass (1984) detailed six stages of homosexual identity formation; identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. The fourth stage, identity acceptance is characterized by “increased contact with the homosexual subculture [which] encourages a

more positive view of homosexuality and the gradual development of a network of homosexual friends” (p. 151).

Submersion and interaction was also analyzed by Floyd and Stein (2002), who sought to examine the coming out process for LGBT youths argued “comfort with orientation is promoted by supportive social networks” (p. 186). Floyd and Stein also concluded lower levels of comfort were associated with disconnection from the LGBT community.

Researchers Wallace and Trump (2008) set out to better define and understand how LGBT students experienced their development as well as their decisions to come out to their fraternity friends and family. The coming out process has been well researched and developed, with many model and studies dedicated to this transitional stage in life.

Milestones in the coming out process frequently outlined revolve around self-awareness, sexual experiences, disclosure to others, and immersion into LGBT social networks (Floyd, & Stein, 2002). These milestones in development define the process of how an individual begins to explore their sexuality to better understand if it deviates from the sexual orientation and exploration undertaken by heterosexual individuals. A vital part most researchers outline in positive identity development is the coming out process.

Smith (1998) stated “Coming out is the process of deciding to accept one’s sexual orientation and to live openly as a gay or lesbian person” (p. 333). The coming out process often marks the point in time when a struggling LGBT person begins to accept their sexuality. Some researchers have outlined the coming out process is not only a vital point in the identity development process, but it is also the central factor in the development of a positive sense of self-acceptance.

In terms of acceptance, researchers have outlined the importance of accepting a queer identity as part of the process towards full identity development as well as its impact on the coming out process. "Identity integration includes acceptance of one's gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity and sharing that aspect of the self with other individuals" (Rosario et al, 2001, p. 135). Disclosure to others has been frequently linked to the development of a positive degree of self-acceptance.

Similarly, in a qualitative study assessing the experiences of eleven self-identified male college students, Stevens (2004) argues "self-acceptance of one's gay identity also led to disclosure to others" and "disclosure to others was never reported to have occurred before self-acceptance of a gay identity" (p. 193). Researchers have linked acceptance and coming out as a crucial point in the development of a positive LGBT identity.

However, researchers have also noted disclosure is not the final stage in the development of a positive personal identity. Acceptance of being homosexual allows for progression through complete identity development, but also implies the implications of finding oneself in a new sexual minority. "Having accepted the potentiality of a homosexual identity, the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-homosexual others becomes clearer" (Cass, 1984, p. 151). These differences are frequently what significantly challenge a struggling individual from full sexual acceptance and impact the continuation of positive identity development. While research has clearly shown acceptance of a queer identity is necessary to achieve a complete positive identity, further investigation on self-acceptance will aid in a more thorough understanding of the experiences of LGBT individuals.

Overall, self-acceptance can be viewed as “awareness and acceptance of one’s feelings, emotions, and personal concerns” (Motowidlo, 1984, p. 912). The perception one has of themselves as normal sexual beings is vital to everyday life functions. Mearns (1989) and Macinnes (2006) found a correlation between high levels of self-acceptance and positive self-esteem. Other researchers outlined connections between self-acceptance and acceptance of others (Fey, 1954; Rigby, 1986). This link between self-acceptance and the acceptance of others allows for a greater understanding of the importance of submersion into the LGBT subculture outlined by researchers previously stated. Higher levels of self-acceptance allow individuals to develop an improved level of self-esteem as well as the ability to better understand and accept others, which ultimately can lead to a more fulfilling overall life experience.

While looking in depth at the relationship between self-acceptance and self-esteem, Researcher Macinnes (2006) found, “self-acceptance scores were significantly lower between those participants who had high levels of anxiety, depression and psychological ill health” (p. 487). Macinnes’ research points to the notion that self-acceptance is directly linked to psychological states that lead to depression. This fact sheds more light on the importance of the development of a positive degree of self-acceptance in college students. For LGBT individuals, low self-acceptance may cause even more added stressors to an already challenging disposition, as many “may question their self-worth and wonder where they fit into society and the university community” (Evans & Wall, 1991).

In relation to acceptance, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) found “individuals who had difficulties accepting their own sexual orientation were more likely than others to exhibit

a pattern of high avoidance and high anxiety”(p. 490). High anxiety levels and avoidance of others may cause more separation and feelings of isolation that can ultimately lead to suicidal thoughts in LGBT individuals. Engin et al. (2008) found that among the risk factors influencing students’ suicidal thoughts were issues regarding anxiety, gender, school problems, and interpersonal sensitivity. As part of the LGBT identity development process, individuals may experience any number of these issues numerous times during the course of their development.

Supporting this notion, researchers have found an association between a homosexual or bisexual orientation and attempted suicide when compared to the general population (D’Augelli et al., 2005; Remafedi et al., 1998; van Heeringen, 2000). While exact reasoning is harder to pinpoint, the correlation between LGBT orientations and suicide attempts is startling and an important issue for the LGBT community. McFarland (1998) outlined risk factors that may contribute to an elevated rate of LGBT attempted suicide, detailing examples such as social isolation, family support, school factors, and self-esteem issues.

D’Augelli et al. (2005) found nearly one third of LGBT individuals reported a past suicide attempt. Of that number, “15% reported serious suicide attempts, about half of which required medical attention” (p. 657). The added stressors of developing a positive LGBT identity cannot be overlooked, as studies such as this examine. Understanding the total formation of a high degree of self-acceptance encompasses our understanding of the phenomenon surrounding attempted suicide rates in the LGBT population.



**Summary**

In this chapter, literature reviewed encompasses the LGBT student experience as well as LGBT identity development and self-acceptance. Research reviewed suggests a link between low degrees of self-acceptance and staggering rates of suicide attempts from within youth of the LGBT community. This notion in mind, presented literature on identity development suggests that immersion into the LGBT subculture aids development of a comfortable outlook on personal sexuality, thus laying the foundation for a high degree of self-acceptance. The importance of intuitional support and the role of LGBT student organizations were presented in this chapter as well. The current study seeks to understand institutional support and LGBT student organizations effect on self-acceptance during the collegial experience.

## CHAPTER III

**Methodology****Purpose**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of involvement in an LGBT student organization on self-acceptance in college students at a traditional four year Midwest comprehensive university. A secondary purpose of the present study is to build upon current knowledge of the importance of institutional LGBT inclusive climates, as well as to examine what the university could do to improve institutional LGBT inclusivity and support.

**Design**

The focus of the study centered upon the experiences of individuals who self-identified as LGBT. Perl and Noldon (2000) noted that “qualitative research values individual voices and is often used to illuminate voices that have previously been marginalized” (p. 38). Therefore, qualitative inquiry was utilized as the method of data collection and analysis. Qualitative inquiry requires in-depth analysis of data, including themes drawn from participant responses. Following the tenets of phenomenological research, this study sought to ascertain the experiences of LGBT students in relation to their involvement or lack of involvement in an LGBT student organization.

**Setting**

Research was conducted on-site at a mid-sized public university, founded in the late 1800’s. The institution being studied is home to nearly 12,000 students, but has kept the small-campus atmosphere. Comprised of roughly a 57% female population, students represent 38 different states and 40 countries. Caucasians make up the vast majority

(83%) of the student population. The institution was located in a rural, traditional Midwestern community of nearly 30,000, including students at the university. With national studies “estimating that approximately 3-8% of the [U.S.] population is lesbian, gay, or bisexual” (Shankle et al., 2003, p. 160), combined with a Midwestern community atmosphere, the institution’s LGBT population can be frequently forgotten.

### **Pride**

Pride is a Recognized Student Organization (RSO) that provides an opportunity for LGBT individuals to come together to discuss issues as well as meet for socialization purposes. Pride is the main RSO on campus which had been chartered to provide support to students dealing with sexuality and sexual orientations concerns. Pride meets weekly and is organized with a traditional executive board who leads the organization. Board members include a president, vice-president, secretary/treasurer, action director, social director, and faculty advisor. Pride’s largest event throughout the academic year is the annual “Diva Drag-Show” which highlights local drag performers from a neighboring larger city, and allowed for audience participant to interact with performers while on stage. The “Diva Drag-Show” functions as Pride’s main source of income, being the major fundraiser for their operating budget. The “Diva Drag-Show” traditionally has fantastic attendance, being noted as the second largest event at the institution, next to commencement in the spring semester. In the spring of 2008, the organization started an annual “Sex Positive Fair,” with the hopes of breaking down some of the stigma attached with sex and sexuality. After being met with unpredicted resistance from institutional leaders and community members, the group pressed forward with the fair. The 2009 fair was met with less resistance, but was not attended with the enthusiasm group members

were hoping. Along with other activities throughout the year, the group recognizes the National Day of Silence (spring semester) and “Share Your Secrets” campaign on National Coming Out Day each fall.

### **Participants**

For the purposes of the present study, nine students who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered/transsexual, were asked to be participants. Of these self-identified LGBT students, some have been active while other participants were never active or were inactive in the Pride organization during the time of the present study. Active participants were identified by reaching out to current members of Pride through explaining the purpose of the study to members. Active members consisted of two executive board members, and two regular members of Pride. Additional participants were identified using the “snowballing method” of participant selection, which allowed active members of Pride to identify students who are not active in Pride but who are known to self-identify as members of the LGBT community. These so identified students were asked by the primary investigator to also participate in the present study. Of the inactive participants, three used to attend Pride events and functions and two had never been active in Pride in anyway. This approach allowed the present study the opportunity to compare the responses from two different groups: one group comprised of self-identified LGBT students that were active members of the LGBT student organization Pride and the other comprised of self-identified LGBT students who were no longer or have never been active in any LGBT organization.

**Data Collection**

All participants were given the opportunity to choose a comfortable location for their interview. Six of the nine participants met in the office of the primary researcher. This office setting allowed for confidentiality to be maintained in an inviting and professional setting. Two participants chose for the interview to be conducted in an area of their residential community that experienced extremely low traffic, allowing for a comfortable and semi-private setting with no interruptions. One participant chose to be interviewed in an outside meeting area. This outdoor area provided an open space that also allowed for a private conversation that could easily be recorded without capturing surrounding interactions.

Data for the present study was collected through 20 open-ended interview questions (Appendix A). Participants were again given the purposes of the current study prior to the interview and completed an informed consent form (Appendix B). The use of open-ended questions allowed for participants to share thoughts, experiences, and feelings, and also allowed the primary researcher the ability to ask additional questions as they arose. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, which were used throughout the present study.

**Data Analysis**

All participant interviews were audio recorded and the primary researcher also took field notes during the time of the interview. Audio recordings were transcribed and each participant was given the opportunity for member checking and offered the opportunity for clarification. Upon reviewing transcripts and field notes, common themes between participant responses were analyzed. Connections between themes were

discussed in regular meetings with the thesis advisor, and were then used in the development of understanding of the LGBT student experience and the effects of active participation in LGBT student organizations on self-acceptance.

### **Definitions**

*Gender:* Another system of classification that describes characteristics and behaviors that we ascribe to bodies, called “masculine” or “feminine” (Green, 2004).

*Self-acceptance:* Awareness and acceptance of own feelings, emotions, and personal concerns (Motowidlo, 1984, p. 912).

*Sex:* A system of classification that divides body types based on presumed reproductive capacity as determined typically by visual examination of the external genitalia (Green, 2004).

*Snowballing Method:* Utilization of existing study participants to identify additional participants through accountancies.

*Transsexual:* A person whose core gender identity is "opposite" their assigned sex.

Transsexuals may live as the opposite sex, undergo hormone therapy, and/or have sex reassignment surgery to "match" their bodies with their gender identity.

*Transgender:* Broad term used to describe the continuum of individuals whose gender identity and expression, to varying degrees, does not correspond with their genetic sex.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

This chapter is a presentation of the experiences of nine undergraduate students who all identified as being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Three females and six males shared their experiences of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual on campus. All had a different story to tell with varied life experiences. Through numerous interview questions, the primary researcher sought to ascertain the effect of campus climate and participation in a LGBT student organization on self-acceptance. Throughout the interview process and analysis of the findings, common threads emerged from participants that help shed light on the LGBT collegial experience.

### Participants

James was a sophomore education major who came to the university from a suburban town. Being comfortable with his sexuality, James self-identified as a gay male and had been extremely active in Pride since coming to college. James had also served as a member of the executive board for Pride during the time of the present study.

Ursula, a senior communication studies major, grew up in a larger city before attending a community college and transferring to the university. Ursula had never been a member of Pride and had not frequently attended Pride events. Ursula identified as a lesbian female and had just started coming out to those around her after transferring to the university. Ursula was comfortable with her sexuality, but was sure to underline the notion that she did not feel it was a defining part of who she is.

Scott came to the university from a midsized town. A junior education major, Scott had never been active in the campus' Pride organization. Scott was just beginning

to explore the depths of his sexuality and had just recently come out to his closest friends about being a bisexual male.

Trisha, also a junior at the institution, came from a small town. Identifying as a lesbian female, Trisha had close friends that were very active in Pride and had attended a couple of meetings upon first arriving at the university. Trisha had since stopped going to Pride and had not been attending functions the organization held.

Isaac was a sophomore student interested in business. Coming to the university from a suburban city, Isaac had been an active member of Pride for a year prior to the present study and planned to continue being active, with aspirations of serving on the executive board in the near future. Isaac identified as a gay male who had been completely comfortable with his sexuality.

Nathan, a junior also came from a large city. Nathan, a self-identified gay male, had been very active in Pride before serving a term on the executive board of the organization. Nathan was extremely comfortable with his sexuality, having a background of participation in other LGBT organizations while growing up at home.

Lance was a sophomore student who came from a small Midwestern town. Lance had been an active member of Pride for two years prior to the time of the present study and also identified as a gay male.

Ethan, a senior psychology major, hailed from a large city and was an older, non-traditional student. Ethan had an experienced view from serving in the work force before coming back to college to earn his degree. Ethan took time to mention both LGBT issues as well as issues with ageism on campus. Ethan identified as a gay male who had attended a few Pride meetings and had also been in attendance for some of Pride's larger



functions throughout the year, but did not identify as a Pride member, as he did not regularly attend meetings and events.

Ellen, a junior education major, also came from a suburb. Ellen too came from a background of being active in other LGBT organizations. At the university, Ellen had previously been very active in Pride, serving on the executive board, but was no longer active due to other time commitments. Ellen had been very comfortable with her sexuality and self-identified as a lesbian female.

**Research Question #1: What is the overall purpose of a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

The first research question sought to develop a complete understanding of participant views of LGBT student organizations. In addition, this research question encompassed participants' views on campus climate and the impact that LGBT student organizations have on campus. The first research question was explored through five initial sub-questions.

*What do you think or feel is the overall purpose of Pride?*

All participants, regardless of participation status, made similar comments that one of the main functions of a Pride organization is to provide participants with a network of individuals that share a common bond. Trisha, who was inactive in Pride at the time, commented she believed organizations such as Pride “exist to give students who are questioning, have no idea, or students who are just out loud and proud, an area of comfort, some sort of connection.” Ellen, who used to be active in Pride, had similar beliefs. She mentioned the purpose of a Pride organization is to “provide students both a comfort zone, somewhere where they can go to be themselves and somewhere where they

can go to express themselves.” Nathan, a member of the executive board for the organization seemed to capture many of the other participants’ views.

The reason Pride exists is [because] LGBT people have historically been discriminated against and I think it is important to create an area or a space, or a network, in which like discriminated individuals or people who feel like they are outside [the] mainstream can feel comfortable and feel like they have a place. A lot of time I have noticed here [in college], things tend to be very mainstream and there seems to be very few outlets for people who are not within the mainstream, however you want to classify that. So, it is important that those people have a group.

Both participants who had never been active in Pride mentioned the social and networking functions of an organization, but also mentioned that an LGBT organization should take on an activist role as well. Scott noted that “I think it is a good support network and maybe also an activist group or something like that.” Ursula, a transfer student who had in recent years come out gave voice to this as well.

I would say that for one it is to promote equality, to open up minds to different life styles; different types of people, different genders, different sexuality, everything. It should be very political, it shouldn’t just be [an] organization to come together to socialize. It should be more than that.

Later, Ursula revisited the notion that a Pride organization should be both a social group and a political group.

You need that social component to be close, to understand, to gain friendships, but that should just kind of be the first step; something that maintains the group.

You know, makes them passionate about the other parts; the educational and the political parts.

When speaking about the network that a Pride organization should provide on campus, Nathan also mentioned the struggles an organization can face due to the amount of people they tend to cater to.

Pride has had to deal with the question of having not only necessarily different sexual orientations involved but also different [people]. For instance, some people who were interested in like furry sex recently joined Pride. So, Pride has kind of had to field that. Because we are an LGBT group and we do appeal to people who have various sexual orientations, but then there is always the question of how far we should let people who like to do this too ... We really have to be sympathetic to everyone because as minorities or people who are discriminated against, it is important to reach out to everyone and not just people who are either becoming socially acceptable or more socially acceptable.

*How do you think or feel Pride represents the LGBT population?*

All of the participants who were currently inactive in Pride or who had never been active in Pride commented that Pride's representation of the LGBT community was not extremely positive. Trisha, who was no longer active in Pride but had close friends active, commented:

I think that Pride here is sort of a very minimal representation of the LGBT community. I think it is, just small. It doesn't, in my opinion, it's not very broad, and there are a lot of members of the queer community that are not represented in Pride.

When asked why he did not think Pride represented the LGBT population well, Nathan stated Pride needed to focus on “reaching out more, and not just reaching out to the youth, but reaching out to the adults as well.”

Ellen commented that she did not think Pride represented the LGBT population well and stated “there are a lot of people that don’t go [to Pride] and there is a certain type of person that goes to Pride.” Ellen explained:

A lot of people end up in Pride when they are searching for a close social network. A lot of people already have really strong ties when they come to college and I don’t think [they] always search out for that kind of group. I know a lot of people that just, Pride is not their thing and they don’t do it, and that is fine. But, there is the larger gay community [who] is not there. So, I do not think it represents the full spectrum of the LGBT life here on campus.

Nathan, an executive board member for the organization, alluded to these notions, but elaborated further:

I think that if there were more people [who] were honest about their sexuality, Pride would be a terrible representation of LGBT people on campus. But, I think that as far as openness goes, as far as people who are open, or recognizable as LGBT, Pride is a fairly decent representation. I think that social groups like Pride tend to attract people who have maybe more difficulties making friends, and so, Pride kind of provides an outlet for people who don’t have such an easy time. Because, there are a lot of LGBT people who are on this campus that I know, that have no interest in going to Pride and a lot of times that I talk to them about it, it

is because they feel like they don't have a lot of problems making friends. They feel like they don't need that resource to make friends.

Both James, a current executive member as well, and Isaac, an active member, related Pride's representation to the executive board of the organization. Isaac noted:

I think [representation] is really good. [Pride] has fairly good sampling considering the fact that we have pretty much everybody in there. We have transgendered individuals, lesbian, gay, straight. I mean, just on the board now we have; I don't think we have a lesbian, but we have everything else. We have gay men, transgendered; the secretary that just got elected is straight. I mean, just in our board alone we have a pretty good sampling of people in the group itself.

Ellen, who commented on the lack of representation, also spoke about the dichotomy between the executive board and the general membership.

I think Pride is really split into two parts, the executive board is this really active and an outgoing group of people that are sometimes radical and um, the political "go get em" kind of views and the actual members themselves are more reserved and quiet. It is a weird balance.

Lance was the only participant who viewed Pride's representation in a different light. As an active member, Lance stated:

I feel that Pride represents that community because I feel like Pride is a strong organization and I feel like most of the people that are out on campus are inherently strong individuals in the first place and I think that Pride really represents that.

*How would you describe other's reactions to Pride?*

Almost all participants responded that others' reactions to Pride would fall somewhere in the negative category of explanations. However, both participants who had never been active, Ursula and Scott, noted that they would assume both positive and negative reactions. Ursula stated that she had heard people say Pride was "a fun organization with great people," she had also encountered reactions of people stating they did not understand the events that Pride would put on throughout the year. Scott's views were similar.

They just say it is just a bunch of people hanging out and it is kind of loud and obnoxious. However, I have heard other people that are not LGBT but support the LGBT community who have gone [to Pride] and who say it is awesome and it is fun times to just hang out and everything, and that they don't have a lot of people and they need to have more people show up.

Trisha answered that "they would think it is a bunch of gay people trying to shove it in their face." Ellen, who was also inactive in Pride at the time, noted that "people that are not involved in Pride don't really know that much about it." Ethan, the third participant who was currently inactive in Pride noted the first thought many individuals would have in regards to Pride would be "they would probably think of pride [in the institution]," again, alluding to the notion of a lack of understanding or exposure.

Lance, who was an active member in the organization, articulately elaborated more on the idea.

I feel like one of the things that they might say is that Pride is after attention, in a certain way. I feel like that is a stigma on the LGBT community in general anyway. The problem is that the LGBT community really challenges other people

unintentionally. I mean, we challenge other minority groups, threatening to undermine their strongholds. We challenge the patriarchal system, because we are different sexualities and have different beliefs about the role of gender.

James, an executive board member noted that “I think a lot of the perception is that we are just a bunch of losers that get together to talk.” Nathan, who also was serving as an executive board member, commented he thought that “they primarily view it as a social networking tool.”

*How do you think or feel Pride affects the campus climate for the LGBT community?*

Participants were split in terms of feelings as to how Pride affects campus climate. James and Nathan, both executive board members, stated similarly that Pride’s affect has been positive in some way. “I think it has been relatively static, in that it has been positive.” James went on to explain his views on how Pride has to be recognize how it functions in relation to the rest of the campus.

I think that a lot of times we, as civil rights group, and it has been done in almost every other one; we get put up on a high horse within ourselves and we start to judge people for not accepting or understanding us. I think that causes people to be more un-accepting when it is my opinion if we want acceptance, we have to accept all viewpoints whether they agree with ours or not.

The active members in the organization, Lance and Isaac, both spoke about Pride’s affect in terms of the awareness Pride brings to campus. Lance noted, “[Pride’s] events are designed to raise awareness about LGBT issues as well as other issues that people normally don’t talk about in society.” Isaac commented “I think it is [Pride’s

activities] that help make people realize that it is not something different and that gay people are not different from them and that everyone is the same.”

Trisha, Ethan, and Ellen, the three participants who were inactive in Pride, had three varying outlooks on how Pride affects campus climate. Trisha commented that Pride aids people in “becoming aware of individuals like [LGBT] and realizing that they are individuals and not a stereotype.” Ethan noted he felt the affect was “fair to poor,” relating his views to the fact he felt Pride meetings are not as open and inviting as they should be.

When you are coming [to Pride], you want to feel warmth and support, you know? Not coming in there going, ‘Whoa, what the hell did I just walk into?’ Like, that is how a lot of people have felt, that is how I have felt.

Ellen, who used to be very active in Pride and has since become inactive, took time to evaluate her response and reported she felt Pride affected the campus climate both “positively and negatively.” Seeming torn in her answer, Ellen continued:

Last year with the sex positive fair, it negatively affected the campus climate for a while. People did not take very well to [the fair] and it kind of made a lot of stereotypes come out and people were thinking that Pride was a bunch of promiscuous sex crazed people, and we are not. Well, at least I’m not. And then there are things like the Diva Drag-Show which is just a comfortable way to view something different and it just opens peoples eyes to other parts of the community and it is really fun. Um, I think for the most part Pride has had a positive impact on this campus because they do lots of things like panels and just trying to create open discussion and I think that is great.



The individuals who had never been active in Pride represented both of the thoughts Ellen had on the topic of the organization's affect on campus climate. Scott described Pride's affect through the lens of awareness, just as Isaac and Trisha had. "I definitely think they have created awareness, because students do know that they are on campus because they have activities and different events." Ursula, however, voiced concern about events and the affect they have on campus climate.

I feel like they are kind of like reinforcing some of the discrimination and marginalization that happens because of the events or activities that they do on campus, instead of opening minds in a different way. So, I would say overall, it is kind of a negative effect.

*How would you rate the campus climate for the LGBT community as poor, fair, neutral, good or excellent?*

In order to develop a full understanding of Pride's affect on campus climate, all participants were asked to rate the campus climate for LGBT individuals. James and Nathan, the two executive board members, chose "good" and "neutral." Both Isaac and Lance, who were active members in Pride, chose "neutral." Two of the inactive members, Trisha and Ellen, reported "neutral," while Ethan chose "poor." Finally, both participants who had never been active in Pride, Ursula and Scott, chose "good."

When asked to elaborate, Nathan's response echoed what many other participants had reported:

Excellent would mean I could go out in public with my boyfriend and if we are at a bar and there are people making out in one corner, then we can start making out in another corner and no one is going to say anything. Obviously, that is not the

case in any bar around campus and nowhere on campus... I don't think there is any place on campus where I could kiss or something and not get looked at and get treated differently. So, it is defiantly not excellent. Good would describe a campus, to me, where although maybe not all the students were on board, or accepting, that the school stood firmly behind the LGBT community and I don't think that is necessarily the case here either. And so, I would have to say it is neutral, because there are two opposing sides and there is a large amount of support for LGBT people here, and by large I just mean, comparatively to places around the world, which, you know doesn't say much.

Ethan, who was the only participant to respond "poor," related his explanation to the fact his view could be more generational as well as coming from within the LGBT community:

[Its] just the things you hear, like you know. I mean, I am so immune to so many different things, but for your generation it is different. You hear the word fag, people get offended by that. I don't get offended by it; it just bounces off of me...So, they have become like common terms now, people just use them for the hell of it. People say, 'oh that's so gay.' I do it too. But, I don't see it as bad, so basically, it is great to be politically correct, but at the same time we cannot be overly politically correct because that pushes people away. You have to have a good equilibrium and balance, and that is missing.

Some participants related campus climate to the community that surrounds campus to explain their responses. Scott noted:

For [a smaller community], I think the climate is pretty good for the campus overall. Everyone is pretty open-minded. However, we are in [a smaller community]. So, I think it is kind of 'iffy,' but I think that leans more towards good.

Lance, who reported that he felt the campus climate for the LGBT community was neutral, has similar feelings about the surrounding town.

It is harder, though, once you leave the [university] community. Say if you are going out in [town], it is not exactly a very liberal town, let's say. It is hard for me to hold my boyfriends hand or, I don't know, if I was walking around; say I wanted to wear a dress one day. People would confront me. I know that people in Pride have been confronted outside of the campus community.

**Research Question #2: What are the experiences of students who are active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

The second research question aimed to develop an understanding of the experiences of participants who were active in an LGBT student organization had during the time in college. Subsequent interview protocol sought to also ascertain the perceptions active members of Pride had on others' involvement as well as develop an understanding any discrimination members might have experienced because of their open involvement with Pride.

*What have you personally gained from your experience being active in Pride?*

Participants who were active members in Pride, both those who served on the executive board and those two did not, reported a number of varying personal gains from their activity. James commented:

I have gained a lot more understanding of the [LGBT] movement in general; mainly because I have to try and find this information to give to others. It is easier to understand what is going on politically. I have become much more political-science savvy, I guess. I understand what is going on with the present day world far more than I did before.

Isaac's response also alluded to the fact his activity in Pride brought him friendship and had instilled a greater understanding of the political side of the LGBT community.

[I've] gained the desire to do more socially, like a social action. Just like, finding causes and working for them. That is one thing that I kind of want to do... that is one thing I want to push for. Like, getting funding for AIDS research or doing charity work such as that. Pretty much anything like that.

Lance reported his activity in Pride had greatly affected the direction the rest of his college career had moved toward.

I have really come out of my shell. I mean, freshman year whenever I was not attending Pride or anything, there is no way I would have done an interview like this for instance. There is no way I would have done an LGBT panel that we have incorporated with the classrooms. You know, or tell other people that I am gay. I have really gained a sense of self and I feel empowered by Pride.

Nathan, who had been very active in other LGBT organizations before coming to college, focused more on the fact his activity in Pride was simply the next stage, but alluded to the notion that the social movement was a driving factor:

I came to college, it just kind of seemed like natural; it was like, 'what else? I am in college, isn't this what I am suppose to be doing?' Like, protesting and

changing things, or trying to change things, you know? So, it just seemed natural to me to find that network and kind of work my way into it.

While no longer being an active member of Pride, Ellen reported similarly to Nathan. She had been active in numerous organizations while living at home and she “wanted to continue to be active in a group.” Ellen commented that she gained a better understanding of the LGBT community as well.

I have become a lot more open to diversity and I thought I was completely open to it [before] coming here. But, I have met so many people from different walks of life and different parts of the alphabet soup that I really never have been exposed to before. Um, the “T” [I] never had been exposed to it really. And, I just think that [involvement] has really helped me.

*What do you think or feel most individuals gain of their involvement in Pride?*

All of the active members in Pride shared similar responses stating the basic benefit of being involved in an LGBT organization such as Pride is the sense of community and network that is found. Nathan detailed “most people begin to develop that social network of people who are supportive and who are like-minded and I think that that allows them to build more of a sense of self and confidence.” Isaac’s view was similar to Nathan.

Friendship, I mean, I think that is obviously the big thing, the friendship. Then just becoming more comfortable with who you are because you get to go every week and see all sorts of different people. I mean, the people that go there are all different, we have people that are geeks, and video games, and Magic-the-

Gathering and stuff like that, the cool kids or whatever. So, you get to interact with different groups.

*In what way(s) do you feel you have experienced additional discrimination because of your activity in Pride?*

Both James and Nathan, who had been serving as executive board members, noted activity in Pride often came with many different types of stereotypical labels coming from others both inside and outside of the LGBT community. James stated:

There have been, there are individual within the LGBT community that are not active in Pride that almost label someone who is active as pushy, obnoxious, that kind of thing. I think that is the extent of my discrimination from me being active in Pride.

Similar to James' outlook, Nathan commented:

There is defiantly a stereotype of like; boozers go to Pride, or like people who need to make friends. I think that when you become very active in Pride, you can easily become a target for people.

Isaac was the only member to report not feeling any types of additional discrimination due to his activity in Pride, but related discrimination in terms of physical, rather than the emotional affects.

I don't think that we have had any problems. I mean, from what I have heard, we have had more problems in previous years, but it is not like we have had a lot of people protesting outside of our meetings or anything like that... I think people are getting to the point now where it is just like, it is just another group.

Lance voiced he felt there was additional labels and a stigma that is attached to membership with Pride and aimed to provide his interpretation of the phenomena.

Because we accept so many people in Pride, often times we get a lot of dissenting opinions and people who believe different things about what sexuality means to them and what they think sexuality should be for others. I mean, mostly Pride is very accepting of us, and we do welcome everyone no matter what, and it is hard for people to get involved because of this...But, the thing is Pride is a community and we do not all speak for everybody; we do not individually speak for everybody as a whole. And, as far as like a stigma from the campus community, I think it is just the same stigma that happens nationally, in society, that homosexuality or different sexualities or orientations or gender orientations is immoral in some way.

**Research Question #3: What are the experiences of students who are not active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

The third research question in the present study focused on participants who had not been active in Pride or who were no longer active in Pride. The three sub questions connected to the third research question aimed to explore the experiences of inactive individuals and how they perceived their time in college could have been altered had they have been active or remained active in Pride.

*Why did you choose to not/no longer be active in Pride?*

Ursula and Scott, who had both never been active in Pride, shared their reasoning behind choosing to not become members. Scott voiced timing and his outlook on the LGBT organizations were both factors in his decision:

Timing and I guess after that I mean, I know people in Pride, and it is something that I am interested in going so it is not like I am just completely standoffish and that type of thing. But, I feel like there are other organizations that I would I think I would rather be a part of, because I guess I want to be a part of something that is really moving and going places. I guess I do not feel like they are really there.

Ursula addressed the fact that during her first year of enrollment, she commuted from home. She went on to explain why she did not become active once she moved to campus.

Once I was living in town and was able to participant more, I decided not to be active, even though I was in town and had the opportunity too. Just by seeing some of the actions and how I kept hearing people just say over and over that, you know, everyone in Pride has dated one another at some point and it is just this sex pool of these individuals and it is like a dating network. I was not interested in a dating network or buddies to go out and drink with. I wanted to have that group where we talked about issues that directly affect us and then to do something about it. So, that is why I chose not to be a part of [Pride], because, I felt like that by being a part of it, I was just going to add to that negative representation.

Trisha, who had been to a few Pride meetings and events in the past, and Ellen, who used to be a very active member of the organization, both cited time commitments kept them from being active in Pride during the time of the present study.

Ethan, who acknowledged that his nontraditional status could have affected his outlook, voiced a deeper concern about the community he wanted to feel a part in. Ethan had been to Pride meetings and events in the past and felt there was no connection among other group members.



When I went there, I think I had expectations like a lot of people did, and it just wasn't what I expected... But you know little things like that, and it is kind of like, 'this is lame.' And I don't feel any kind of community spirit.

*How do you feel your experience has been different because of your non-involvement in Pride?*

Of the inactive members of Pride, Scott and Trisha both mentioned they felt as though their experiences in college could have been improved if they had had more interaction with the Pride.

Scott noted:

I think I am probably missing out. Because, again, I have no idea how many people go to the meetings. There are people there, I like making friends, and it is always fun to have more around that are like yourself.

Similarly, Trisha commented:

Honestly, I think that my experience has been lacking, just because, as I mentioned earlier, that it opens a door to a community. I did not really have that. Honestly, up until this year, I could have sworn I was one of the five lesbians on this campus because I was not aware of other individuals that were out there.

Ursula acknowledged that her experiences in college would have been different if she were active in Pride. She, however, did not feel as though her experiences were lacking because of this fact.

I am sure it was different, but I have enough good friends were I do feel like I have a network of people. None of my friends would make me feel inferior because of my sexuality. I definitely surround myself with people that you know,

do not look down upon me because of my sexuality, and they are comfortable with me talking about my girlfriend and different things where it just seems like a norm to them and it is not a big deal... So, yeah, I am sure my experience has been different because I have not been a part in Pride and participated in the events and such, or know the people as well, but I feel like I have had my own different experience, not with a title on it, but just with the people that I am around.

Ethan explained he has always felt outside of the LGBT community while in college, but also alluded to the fact this status could have been changed if he were a part of Pride. He commented, "I have always been on the outside, I am the outsider. I mean, I have had friends and stuff, but in terms of here, I just don't feel a connection."

*In what way(s) do you feel you would be discriminated against if you were active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?*

All of the inactive participants noted that being active in Pride comes with specific labels that follow members. Trisha explained the stigma as "nerdy."

Just that, hyper bubbly personality that is completely out loud and proud. Not that there is anything wrong with that at all, not by any stretch of the imagination, but I think that those individuals that are willing to be involved with Pride sort of have that student leadership personality already and that kind of comes off as bubbly already and just kind of in your face and that can be perceived as nerdy.

Scott commented along these same lines.

I mean obviously the people that do go [to Pride] are more open, or more comfortable, are like the word earlier, self-accepting. And, I think that there are the people that don't go because they are not ready to really come out and be open

with it. I mean you do have the people that are uncomfortable with it because they are more stereotyped. I mean, it could just be someone who is just an ally who wants to support the community, but they are afraid they might be called gay or something like that. So, I think that it kind of goes to say something for the people that do go because they are, they are proud of who they are.

Ursula shared similar thoughts and went into more detail about the stigma and labels involved with being active.

I guess maybe just because there would be that label, like 'oh you are a part of Pride.' Okay, then by saying you are a part of Pride comes all of those ideologies of how we come to understand what Pride is and you know, the people that are involved. So, I guess in a way it would just kind of showcase who I am in a way. You know, because maybe I am not as clearly visible to someone that doesn't know me, that I am a lesbian, but the people that are around me know. What I am trying to get at is, say that I was with members of Pride, where it is kind of overt; you know it is very obvious. Then, that could be projected on to me, versus, you know, you could label it as a safe zone. If I am with a whole bunch of heterosexuals then others might just assume that 'oh she is just heterosexual' as well, if they do not know me personally.

**Research Question #4: How has active participation or nonparticipation affected your personal sense of self-acceptance?**

The fourth and final research question in the present study brought attention to the topic of self-acceptance. Sub questions sought to develop an understanding of participant perception of self-acceptance as well as how their college experiences had affected their

degree of self-acceptance. Interview protocol also sought to connect self-acceptance to activities sponsored by the campus' LGBT organization and allow participants to report further on their experiences being involved or inactive in Pride.

*How has your involvement or lack of involvement with Pride changed your perceptions of yourself?*

James and Nathan, both executive board members for the LGBT organization, mentioned they did not feel as though Pride had had much effect on them personally during their involvement. However, both noted they had been more comfortable with themselves prior to coming to college. James commented:

It hasn't changed my own personal thought about myself, but I came out very early in high school, so I had much longer to accept myself than some individuals who are just recently coming out or coming to terms or find that new freedom in college.

Nathan responded similarly, but noted his activity has had more effect on his outlook towards others.

I really don't think [it has]. It has maybe made me feel a little bit more open and accepting to people who are different from me, or more different. I guess there is that, but I feel like I have always been pretty accepting.

Isaac and Lance, both active members, as well as Ellen, who had been an active member, explained they found great personal benefits from their involvement with Pride.

Isaac mentioned:

It defiantly did before, I mean before when I was going to the group, I would not tell my parents. I was out to all of my friends, but not to my parents. And then,

meeting the people that I meet in those groups and just like being more comfortable around people that were like me, allowed me to become more comfortable with myself. Then it allowed me to come out to my parents, which went fine. It was no big deal.

Lance spoke about finding more comfort with himself as well.

Pride has just made me so much more comfortable with myself in a way that, I don't know, that may not be, people might not agree with but it is good for me. It makes me confident, and I know that I have people that support me no matter what.

Lance went on to talk about how involvement with Pride made him feel "gayer."

I don't know if you saw me the day that we had the gay weddings, but, I was walking around in really short shorts and a tight t-shirt, I really 'gayed' it up. But there is no way I would have not done before. But it is because I have become really empowered that I can really embrace a side of myself that I suppressed for so long. Which people really think is kind of weird, like, I don't know. If anyone has sort of a feminine side, and if they are male, our society thinks it is so bad and so wrong and so weird, you know, but one of the things with Pride, that Pride breaks down are these sorts of barriers that society puts up around us.

Ellen who was not active during the time of the present study and had had time to reflect on her involvement with the organization, mentioned:

I have become a lot more publically open. When I came out I was always, I mean all my closest friends knew and my family knew, but as far as holding hands in public it just never happened. But a lot of the friends I made in Pride made me

feel a lot more comfortable about, not publically making out, but just being a little bit more publically affectionate, which I think is great. It has really helped me and I have always been hesitate to come out to new people, it would take me forever sometimes a year, a year and a half, to tell someone and it was always a big pain to hide, you know, that part of myself and now it tends to come pretty quickly.

Both Ursula and Scott, who had never been active with the organization, felt their perceptions on themselves would not have changed had they been active in Pride. Ursula spoke about how she felt the process of becoming comfortable with herself needed to be more personal.

I think for me, it was better for me to just do it on my own. It was just definitely something that I needed to start internally and then project it outwardly. Not that you cannot do that with Pride, but I think it would have been more of a cushion if I were in Pride. Because, you know it is easy to be out around people in, you know because they are facing the same thing. But to be out around other heterosexuals by myself, I think was more terrifying, but a better choice for me. Scott noted, "I don't think that it really has changed [my perception]. I guess personally for me whether I was attending a meeting or not, I guess I don't feel I would perceive myself any differently."

Ethan, having been to a few meetings but not finding the community he was hoping for, mentioned involvement for him would have "completely changed my mind about the group...I would have probably been a different person."

*How would you define self-acceptance?*

All participants defined self-acceptance and what the term in itself meant. James reported that self-acceptance is “just being comfortable in your own skin.” Ellen mentioned something similar as well:

Self-acceptance is being comfortable in your own skin with who you truly are and being able to, not necessarily always jump out and voice that and be like, ‘this is me’, but, just being able to be honest on a daily basis of who you are and being okay with that.

Ethan also mentioned the notion of being honest stating, “Self-acceptance is accepting yourself on the inside and out; just being honest with yourself, being genuine, being real. Not being afraid to stand up and be who you are.”

Other participants commented on the idea of being comfortable as well. Scott mentioned self-acceptance meant, “being comfortable with who you are and not being afraid to express that to someone else.” Similarly, Isaac stated self-acceptance means “being comfortable with who you are. Not really internalizing any prejudices.” Lance reported, “I guess that would mean that I am proud of myself and comfortable enough in what I believe about myself that I can respect other people’s differences and beliefs too.” Nathan defined self-acceptance as “being comfortable with who you are and also exploring that and being okay with the fact that that changes.” Trisha elaborated:

I think it goes hand-in-hand with self awareness. You know yourself and you are comfortable with who you are. It starts with self awareness, you have to know enough about yourself to accept who you are, and I think that there are levels of it.

Ursula shared her thoughts on what self-acceptance means and related it to the process of development.

I would say that it has to do with finally just acknowledging who you are and understanding your identity and then being okay with the fact that others might not agree or conform to that. So, self-acceptance, I would say, first you have to come to the fact, you know who you are, whether that means your sexuality, your race, your religion, just everything that you hold to yourself and then just being okay displaying that and being open about it to others. It is definitely something that starts out very private and intimate but then needs to be public.

*How has your involvement with Pride affected your sense of self-acceptance?*

Isaac and Nathan were the only two participants that articulated the connection between Pride and their sense of self-acceptance. Isaac responded:

It helps in the fact that if you are constantly reminded that you are not alone in the world. Because, if I didn't I would not necessarily be hanging out with the people that I would, or know the people that I would, because I met them through there, because you can kind of feel isolated.

Nathan responded:

[Involvement with Pride] has helped me in my personal life, I am not sure if it has helped me accept myself as far as an LGBT person, but it has defiantly made me, the events that I have done with it and the work that I have done through Pride, has made me more confident.

*Were you ever afraid you may harm yourself in relation to views on your sexual orientation?*



The vast majority of participants responded they had not had personal thoughts of harming themselves, regardless of involvement status. All participants did speak of their knowledge of other LGBT individuals struggling. Ursula described:

Anytime you are messing with, well, not messing with, but trying to accept your identity, any characteristic; you definitely have some confidence issues where you want to fit in but you want to be true to yourself. I mean, it affects your confidence and self-acceptance. But, it is like you have to get to that low point to build yourself up, it is necessary. [I] never [had] any drastic measures like suicidal thoughts or anything, but definitely the thought of always being alone or no one is going to understand. You know just those thoughts where it is kind of depressing, where no one else feels this way. It would just be easier to conform and live a straight lifestyle or something like that. Then you realize that that is just insane, so you just don't do it.

Nathan was the only participant to report that he had previously had thoughts about harming himself:

Definitely, when I was younger, I don't know if it was; I think it might be a combination of things, but definitely being LGBT was a major factor in my own youth depression and you know, problems. And definitely there were points and times where I would try to or did hurt myself because of my own insecurities and fear of whom I was.

Participants were asked where LGBT students turn to when they are experiencing thoughts such as these. Lance responded:

Based on personal experience, they turn to members of Pride. Honestly, I have had several people message me on Facebook... asking me how I came out, how they can tell their parents and tell their friends. I try the best that I can, but I mean, situations vary person to person and it is something that I might tell somebody might not work. You know it worked for me, and it is probably not going to work for the next person. But, I can offer some general advice, but people who are thinking about hurting themselves; they don't really have a place to go.

James commented:

There are always going to be cases where we are going to be the support network regardless if there is a resources center or not or the counseling center offers resources or not because we are the ones that sit there every Monday at eight-o'clock with that individual that is having that crisis and we very well could be the only people they have to turn to.

Lance, too, mentioned that LGBT individuals struggling frequently have turned to Pride members, specifically, the executive board.

People from Pride deal with this stuff quite often. Usually, members of the executive board, and I feel like we are more versed in the coming out strategies and you know, acceptance policies and stuff. But, I don't know, we should not have to deal with these sorts of issues in the first place. I feel like, I am glad that we can be there for people but it is so personal and it is such a huge part of a person's life that having to go up to a random person or somebody you don't know very well is just kind of insane, it doesn't make any sense.

Trisha, Nathan, Isaac, and Ellen also responded Pride would be the first place that most LGBT individuals who are struggling would turn.

Ethan commented:

Nowhere. I mean, where do the closet ones turn to; their friends? Probably the closest ones they turn to their friends, and if they don't have their friends, some just go into a deep, deep depression.

*Are you aware of the support and resources for LGBT individuals offered at the university?*

All participants were asked about the resources they were aware of that focused on the LGBT community. James, an executive board member for the organization, listed:

I know that the counseling center has sexuality groups, they have the library has those resources; I know there is the LGBT committee for the resource center. I know that Health Services hired, a few years ago, a doctor that specialized in LGBT concerns. Those are the general resources. There are always Health Studies, Family and Consumer Sciences does some work with disadvantaged families through one of their classes; that kind of thing.

Nathan spoke about Project Safe Zone's history at the institution.

Well, we did used to have Project Safe Zone, which actually the university tried to take credit for...it turns out that Pride was the ones that used to put on Project Safe Zone out of funding that they raised as students and the university has never done anything like that...All it involves is a sticker and some training and just putting it on your door or desk, so students know to come there. Other than that, Pride is the other resource.

Isaac responded similarly to James.

I know there is a website that was designed, other than that; I don't think that there is much. I mean, I know that the library has some books and I know that some professors have equality signs on doors so they are some safe zones. I know that they are going to be starting the Safe Zone Program starting in May so professors and RAs can deal with the issues.

Lance commented:

Well, we have the website. And I think that there are, there are certain professors who have the safe zone, but it is still a little weird... We have a doctor at the Health Service, I believe who, you know, deals with LGBT issues. Or, you could, if you were a member of the LBGT community, you could go there and get treatment without discriminations. Aside from that, I can't really think of anything else.

Trisha, who was inactive noted, "I don't know actually, the most I can say is that there are a few signs that are posted around... I don't think there is much information for them out there." Ethan, who was also inactive, mentioned the lack of resources he was aware of and mentioned legal protection. "Besides the law? That is about it. Besides we have the anti-discrimination law and that [discrimination] will not be tolerated on this campus. Ellen, who was also currently inactive in Pride, commented, "I don't know of any. Well, Safe Zone technically exists here, but it is not very active."

Ursula and Scott, both who had never been active in Pride, had even less to say on the topic. Ursula, finding the question amusing at first noted:

Um, I don't. When I first started looking here, I remember looking online to try and find resources and it was really difficult. I think the only thing I remember seeing was how they were passing around stickers for Safe Zones and that was pretty much the information I could find.

Scott simply stated, "I am assuming the Counseling Center. I think that is it. I guess, besides being able to talk to an RA."

*What are some of the programs that Pride puts on throughout the year?*

Participants were asked to list programs that Pride provides throughout the year.

Nathan, an executive board member, highlighted many that had been touched upon.

Pride puts on panels in different people's classrooms, weekly. Sometimes twice a week, sometimes not for a couple of weeks, so, quite often we put on a number of LGBT panels to come and talk to classes. We host regular movie nights. Through a social chair we host regular bowling nights at Charleston Lanes. We have social nights where we will just do fun activities as a group.

Nathan also detailed some of the larger scale programs the group puts on.

We have the campus wide panel where people from across the university are invited into to talk. We do Pride week, which is a week's worth of events all focused around Day of Silence and this year the Sex Positive Fair. We do the Sex Positive Fair which has been a lot of fun... We do the Diva Drag-Show, obviously the big one. We also do LGBT History Month and we are the only History Month to do our own events and get no help from the school, which is interesting....I mean we do Gays-in-the-park, we do BBQs. sometimes we have

just like parties that are kind of like unofficially, so yeah. I think that as a group we are probably more active if not one of the most active groups on campus.

When describing the Sex-Positive Fair, James noted:

I think open ups a lot of doors for people in that they can give their own presentations on what their sexuality is or what they find sexually appealing and they get to put it in a positive light which, when they do that may not always happen when they bring up what they are into.

Most participants brought up the Diva Drag-Show, which traditionally occurred in the fall semester. The Diva Drag-Show had evolved to one of the most popular events, and Pride's largest function and fundraiser of the year. When talking about programs, specifically the Diva Drag-Show, Lance commented on his views as to why the show was so popular.

I feel like some people go to [the drag show] for the wrong reasons. Like just to see some men dressing up in a dress and be like, 'oh that's weird.' It is hard for me to kind of understand how people I don't know, its, I don't think anything bad about it because I feel like it gives our group a lot of awareness and it brings the campus together in a way that a lot of our other events don't. But, one of my issues with actual drag-shows is the fact that we are getting the Queens money for being themselves and having them put on this performance for us.

*What are some specific examples of events or programs that have helped you gain a better degree of self-acceptance?*

Many participants reported that the underlying advantage for LGBT individuals in attending programs was the sense of community. Trisha noted:

As far as self-acceptance, I think that being involved in [programs] could defiantly help, because it is much harder to accept yourself thinking you are the only one out there. Then to go and be part of the community, I think that is a valuable part of it.

Nathan commented:

I think when people come to these events; I think it more than just, wanting to see the movie that we are playing. It is about like wanting to feel like you have a place to go and then wanting to be around people who are within your own subculture and feeling like you have a community and a place to go. Cause, often times you know, people don't necessarily have that if they are different.

Lance too noted the community that is found through programs.

We put these programs together ourselves, everyone is involved. We all have our roles to play. And it, it established a really interesting kind of community where everyone really works together to accomplish a goal.

Ellen also mentioned the community aspect of being active in Pride events, along with a number of other benefits.

Depending on the event; sometimes [they gain] new information, a new perspective, the social aspect, just having fun with the community and building relationships within the community. A lot of times members get out of it being more open and brave for themselves. I have seen a lot of people come out of their shells at some of our big events and just do things that they never thought that they would be comfortable doing.

James detailed his view that sometimes programs allow for LGBT individuals to think of themselves differently than usual.

The Diva Drag-Show is a very large [program] that shows the drag queens, they are a very interesting group of people in that they can be whoever they want to be both in drag and outside of drag. I think they provide almost a comical relief or a figurehead in that people can say, 'if they can do it why can't I?'

The two participants who had never been active in Pride had a harder time articulating the advantages gained from attending events and programs sponsored by Pride. Scott spoke about his feelings towards some of Pride programs.

Some of the things, I guess I feel might not be really helpful for someone who maybe hasn't come out yet, or struggling with it. Because, you have Pride and then you have the events that they are doing; they are all comfortable, and I feel like they are. Some of the things, like a drag-show, that can be pretty extreme for some people. And, just like kind of throwing it out there, just like kind of throwing it in people's faces. It is just like, 'we are here.'

Scott continued:

And, some people are not as accepting as others. And, I think, when you are really open about things, that it might cause a lot of discomfort for the people that are simply not ready for that in the community and out of the community. So, I think maybe to tone it down a little bit, I mean, I guess it is good to be open, like that and to be that comfortable, but you also have to take into consideration the other people.



Trisha voiced similar concerns in regards to some of the programs sponsored by the organization.

I think the in-your-face attitude is something that I personally feel can be toned down. I mean, don't get me wrong, I am very proud of who I am, but I am also not the type of person who is going to share my beliefs in some others persons face. If they have a problem with it, I am defiantly going to voice my point of view. But I think that for individuals who are not to that point yet, when they see other students being like that, I think it is a bit of a turnoff, in my opinion, and I think that pride can strive to do things that were a little bit less of 'let's be loud and fantastic and rainbow' and more like, 'these are legitimate issues that we are trying to address.'

After thinking about her statement, Trisha went on to give an example of how some programs, in her opinion, are working against the LGBT community.

The whole marriage in the quad thing really did urke me because I think that it is kind of making a mockery of something that the gay community is really legitimately striving to do. Because it is like, 'let's go get fake married and pretend like everything is okay,' when in reality it is not something we have achieved yet and I think it is kind of a joke.

*What types of events or programs do you think would help you in developing a better sense of self-acceptance?*

After reflecting on the current programs that Pride offers the campus community, participants were asked what types of programs they felt would be the most beneficial for the LGBT community. Given that money was not an issue, many participants noted they

thought bringing in an outside speaker or performer would be beneficial. Ursula stated “bringing in a guest speaker; someone that’s got the celebrity status where is would bring a large crowd.” Trisha also mentioned bringing in a speaker and explained the reasons why she felt a speaker would aid in the development of greater self-acceptance for some individuals.

I think that having an individual come and speak specifically [being LGBT] would connect on a level here, like in a college environment...Especially for freshman who are looking to get involved. I also think it would be good because it is kind of like someone to look up to, because if they have gotten to that point. Whatever rough experiences I am going through right now, I may eventually get to that point too. It may be hard, but if they can do it I can do it type thing.

Isaac also mentioned bringing in a performer, specifically a comedian.

I would love to get some gay comedians into this place. Maybe for Pride week, it ends in the Day of Silence if you participant and then Night of Noise at the end. I would love to do stand up comedians. Like, two or three of them could do a show, and it would be like, you are quite all day and then you have someone up there that is like talking, and then you can like have a party or something like that.

Isaac went on to detail how he thought a comedian series would aid in the development of greater self-acceptance in attendees.

I think that, first off being allowed, being able to laugh at yourself, being a part of it, I think that is really important when you are accepting any part of yourself. You have to be able to laugh about it or else you are really not being able to accept that. Because it is such a serious subject, when you are quite and

contemplative about it all day, and then you get to go and just have fun and you don't really have to think about it anymore. And, you know, the fact that you see someone on stage, just like telling jokes, making a career out of it, someone that is great.

Both James and Nathan, executive board members, mentioned the need for an LGBT Resource Center on campus. Lance, who was an active member, also connected ideal self-acceptance development to a physical place on campus where LGBT student could go. Additionally, Ellen and Ethan, who were inactive, mentioned the need for a center. James commented, "I wish we could put on more of a counseling aspect in that we had an actual resource center where people can come." Similarly, Nathan noted:

I think that if money weren't the issue, having an LGBT resource center as a permanent program would be the most important thing...Having an open, available, public resource center would be the most important thing.

Ellen commented on how an ideal resource center would function.

It would have a lot of faculty support, a lot of physically resources in it, it would just be safe place for students to go, a physical place that students can go anytime to just feel safe or just be themselves. I don't know. I just really wish that existed. A lot of colleges have them; I just wish we would have one. It is hard often for [Pride members] with their own schedules and lives and things they are dealing with to pull it off completely, that is what this campus needs.

Ethan, who had seen resources centers at other institutions, also detailed what an LGBT resource center would have for students.

They have like a recreational area. They have got people who bring in books... People could donate their own books, they could donate their videos, or people could come in and do a movie night there. They have got their own room; they have got their own resource center with their own little private area lounge... They have lounge area, they have a little recreation area, like a little a place where you can just kind of like lounge, but they have like coffee makers and stuff like that. I mean, you can just come in and get away from all the campus stuff and relax.

Lance also detailed that an ideal resource center would have a full time professional staff member available to assist LGBT students in ways that Pride members cannot.

[It would have] somebody there because they will be willing to work with people to, come out more easily. Maybe have a program like the National Coming Out Day, where people will have counselors or somebody there available. Maybe not out on the quad where most of our events are held, but you know, somewhere where we can just let people know that today is the day where you can come out and here is somebody that can walk you through it.

Both Nathan and Ellen commented Pride's role with an LGBT resource center would be to "work with the center and collaborate on events."

*What are some ways that Pride has assisted you or do you think Pride could have assisted you during your time at the University?*

James, an executive board member, and both Isaac and Lance, who were active members, noted they gained more knowledge about the LGBT community through their involvement with Pride. James commented, "I have become much more articulate when it

comes to LGBT concerns.” Nathan stated his involvement has given him “some great friends and some feelings of accomplishment.” Though no longer active in Pride, Ellen commented on the leadership skills Pride allowed her to have.

It has given me a really good opportunity to have an experience running an organization and having to, I don't want to say deal, but work with different personality types and work as a community with just lots of different people and that is just a skill that you know, it takes some work.

Both Ursula and Scott, who had never been active in Pride, reiterated they want for Pride to have been a more politically active group that focused on informing others about the LBGT community and struggles.

I wanted to find a very proactive political group that was not afraid to put controversial subjects out there, but in a manner where it is more effective and productive versus activities like we have discussed like Gays-in-the-Park. For example, they had the Gay Marriage, have a Gay Marriage but then have information to hand out or have someone talking about same-sex marriage rights, you know; have that educational component. I think Pride could have benefitted more on having to focus on activism.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented the interview protocol and the voices of the nine participants who partook in the present study. Executive board members of Pride, active members in Pride, inactive members of Pride, and individuals who had never been active in Pride brought their experiences and views dealing campus climate, LGBT student organizations, self-acceptance, and how to institutions can work to improve campus

climate. The next chapter will expand upon these experiences and views in order to develop findings and conclusions, as well as recommendations for professionals and future research.

## CHAPTER V

**Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The research conducted in the present study was designed to explore the experiences of LGBT students and the effect of participation in a LGBT student organization on their personal degree of self acceptance. In this chapter, themes that emerged from the interviews of nine lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are presented and discussed. This chapter also contains recommendations for further research and recommendations for student affairs practitioners.

**Discussion**

Upon reviewing the interview transcripts for all participants, several themes emerged. The following discussion outlines common themes found from data collection and findings from relevant literature regarding the LGBT student experience.

Zubernis and Snyder (2007) noted the importance of LGBT individuals developing “supportive relationships with accepting adults and peers” (p. 78) when struggling with their sexual identity. Active members in Pride each commented that other LGBT individuals struggling with their personal degrees of self-acceptance have reached out to current Pride members for help. Participants noted that during these moments, their concerns ranged from questions about the coming out process to struggling with thoughts of suicide or harming themselves in other ways to inquiring about opportunities to be more active in Pride. Active members and executive board members voiced hesitation in detailing with issues they were not equipped to handle based on their own personal development. For example, Lance was reluctant to offer advice in fear that his experience was too different for others to relate to: “situations vary person to person and it is

something that I might tell somebody might not work. You know it worked for me, and it is probably not going to work for the next person.” Active members expressed concern that they were not professionals equipped to aid someone through such a delicate time. However, members also recognized, as Zubernis and Snyder pointed out, “the extent to which students find supportive relationships to buffer the discrimination in the larger society and develop positive coping skills can determine their successful identity development and quality of life” (p. 78). Pride members recognized the limited nature of the organization and their positions to assist struggling LGBT individuals, but acknowledged that alternatives are needed in terms of options to provide assistance.

Participants in the present study who were currently or had been active in Pride were exceedingly more successful at detailing the resources available for the LGBT community at the institution. This fact reflects the Student Involvement Theory which asserts that students learn more when they are involved in the social aspects of the collegiate experience (Astin, 1999). Though not identified by participants as one of the added benefits of active participation in Pride, it is clear that active members had a better understanding of what the institution currently offers students. Most listed the Counseling Center, Health Services, and library as resources on campus where an LGBT student could gain more assistance. James summarized the active members’ views: “I know that the counseling center has sexuality groups, they have the library has those resources; I know there is the LGBT committee for the resource center. I know that Health Services hired, a few years ago, a doctor that specialized in LGBT concerns. Those are the general resources. There are always Health Studies, Family and Consumer Sciences.” Active members also emphasized that the institution once offered, and was currently working on



reoffering, a Safe Zone Program which develops and identifies allies of the LGBT community.

Evans and Wall (1991) suggested that one of the roles of a LGBT student organization is to act as a political platform for its members. Inactive members of Pride noted a desire to have the organization take on more of a political role. Both inactive members stated that a LGBT organization, such as Pride, should “be more than social.” Evans and Wall indicated that ways LGBT student organizations can achieve this mission is to strive to develop campus services more responsive to LGBT student needs, as well as by “providing a means for gay and lesbian students to become involved with and influence political candidate election campaigns, ballot initiatives, and legislative actions” (p. 119).

Inactive members of Pride perceived the campus climate for the LGBT community to be better than did active members of the organization. These findings are supported by Gortmaker and Brown (2007) who suggested “out students perceived the climate more negatively than closeted students” (p. 612). Although students were not particularly concerned for their physical safety, they were acutely aware of possibly being judged by their peers visually. While a third of the participants in the present student ranked the current campus climate as “good,” all participants noted that additional institutional support for the LGBT community would elevate the climate. Participants identified monetary support for Pride, greater institutional awareness initiatives, and the creation of a LGBT Resource Center as ways the institution could better support the community.

When participants were questioned as to whether they had thoughts of harming themselves due to struggles with their sexual orientation, the vast majority hesitantly responded that they had not entertained such thoughts. Whereas all other interview areas of concern had been responded to much more enthusiastically, participants hesitantly alluded to feeling a degree of discomfort when considering self harm. Findings from the present study do not reflect rates of suicide attempts suggested by D'Augelli et al. (2005). However, all participants in the present study noted knowledge of other LGBT individuals who had struggled with their sexuality to the degree of harming themselves.

### **Conclusions**

Based on participant responses in the present study, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. The prevailing purpose of the EIU LGBT student organization was to provide LGBT students with a support network and sense of community as sexual minorities and a place to “feel comfortable.”
2. Inactive members of Pride felt that Pride’s representation of the LGBT community was not positive because of the spectrum of sexualities that are not represented on campus and the notion that there is a divide between the executive board and general membership of the organization in how to address this phenomenon. Given the aforementioned perception of differences in what sexualities members expect should be active in Pride and what executive board members feel to be their responsibility, greater effort should be exerted to address this phenomenon.
3. Due to the perceived connections and friendships established, inactive participants in the present study acknowledged that their overall college experience would have been different, if not improved, had they been active in the organization. It can therefore be

concluded that active participation in Pride had a perceived positive influence on LGBT student experiences.

4. For both inactive and active members of Pride, social stigma labels were associated with Pride membership. It can be concluded that negative social stigmas had an impact on their membership/affiliation decisions.
5. It can be concluded that the overarching benefit of participation in Pride is access to the network of other LGBT individuals who are active members.
6. Two additional benefits of participation in Pride were the development of feelings and perceptions that allowed active members to be more comfortable with their sexuality and the added knowledge of what support resources the institution currently offered.
7. Both active and inactive members of Pride felt that the LGBT community would benefit from programs and events that bring in outside performers, speakers, or authors. Therefore, it can be concluded that LGBT students feel that having successful role models brought to campus could help them develop greater feelings of pride and enthusiasm for their sexual minority status.

### **Recommendations**

#### *LGBT Student Organizations*

1. It is recommended that LGBT student organizations consider new ways to reach out to the LGBT student population at their given institutions, giving particular attention to how they articulate the opportunities membership offers (e.g., speaking before other student organizations).

2. Leaders of LGBT student organizations should consider educational moments found in all events and programs. Having information available to attendees of programs regarding the LGBT community, Gay Rights Movement, etc. will facilitate awareness and understanding.
3. With limited funding from institutions, LGBT student organizations should consider an array of fundraising events and initiatives that would allow for a greater support network if one main event is unexpectedly changed or less successful.
4. LGBT student organization leaders and members should regularly discuss and evaluate the goals and mission of their organization to better define the balance between social, educational, and political roles for the organization in their campus community.
5. Leaders of LGBT student organizations should consider planning events that allow Pride members to travel and interact with other LGBT student organizations at other campuses. With increased interaction and communication between student organizations, leaders will be able to better ascertain how other LGBT student organizations are serving their members and LGBT community.

*Student Affairs Practitioners*

1. Student Affairs Practitioners both directly involved and indirectly involved with their campuses LGBT student organization should work to develop new ways to articulate the institutional support available for LGBT students. Practitioners should work with LGBT leaders to develop information via flyers, the internet, and other avenues that detail support that can be found throughout campus such as Counseling Services,

Minority Affairs, etc. Specifically, this information should be presented and provided to the institution's non-LGBT student organizations.

2. It is vital to openly show support for leaders of LGBT student organizations. Advisors of LGBT student organizations should consider taking steps to exhibit positive support through the articulation of campus resources. In addition, advisors should consider having all executive board members of LGBT organizations successfully complete a Safe Zone training, which would equip leaders with both knowledge and resources when a student in crisis is looking for assistance.
3. Institutional leaders should develop a comprehensive inclusivity and diversity statement to help guide the institution as a sign of commitment to all diverse individuals, especially those separated by sexual orientation.
4. Advisors for LGBT student organizations should consider programmatic ideas that include bringing to campus individuals that LGBT students are able to admire because of their achievements as an LGBT individual (viz., speakers, comedians, musicians, writers).
5. Institutional leaders should evaluate support provided to LGBT students and how they can best serve this minority population. LGBT resources should be considered and evaluated, such as those offered through an LGBT Resource Center, Safe Zone Programs, and institutional virtual resources.

#### *Future Research*

1. Future research should include a broader sample of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or transsexual found on college and university campuses.

2. Qualitative and quantitative studies on the experiences of LGBT students who are active and/or inactive in LGBT student organizations should be conducted. This research would allow parallels to be drawn in regards to university support for all members of the LGBT community.
3. Researchers should also consider LGBT students at various stages and ages in their college experience to ascertain whether age and basic life experiences play a larger role in student development.
4. Conducting a similar study comparing students on the basis of sex or gender identity would allow for a greater analysis of responses, needs, and views of members within the LGBT community.
5. A comprehensive, longitudinal study of student participation in a LGBT student organization would provide a framework for our understanding of the development students undergo throughout their college experience.
6. Future research should include analysis of students who identify with more than one minority group beyond being LGBT. Ascertaining the experiences of LGBT students who fall outside other hegemonic norms would allow for a better understanding of these students' and how they place priority on their identity development.

### **Summary Statement**

Whereas this entire research project has focused on the experiences of LGBT students both involved and not involved in a university based LGBT organization. Findings suggest the need for institutional support and direction for said students and their overall experiences on college and university campuses. Whereas it is hoped that future research will add to our understanding of the support needed for the LGBT community on college

campuses, voices presented in the present study affirm the importance of addressing LGBT student experiences and provide insight to those working with LGBT individuals. Educators and student affairs practitioners should aim to comprehensively understand the LGBT student experience, giving particular attention to the implementation of services, programs, and organizations that are needed to bring further support to an otherwise invisible student community.

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APPENDIX A  
Consent to Participate in Research

## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

### **A Queer Network:**

#### **The Effects of LGBT Student Organizations on Self-Acceptance in College Students**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Justin Schuch and Dr. James Wallace from the Counseling and Student Development Department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This research project is an investigation of the effects that campus LGBT student organizations have on individuals here at EIU.

### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a confidential one-on-one interview during which we will explore issues revolving around the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college experience. The confidential interview would last between 45 minutes to 1 hour and can be conducted in any accessible location in which you feel most comfortable on-campus. The interview will be recorded via voice recording equipment.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no outstanding risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study. Potential risks or discomforts may include possible emotional feelings associated with your responding to questions that address being a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender student.

There are no other foreseeable risks associated with this study. Participants who later feel discomfort for any reason may have their data/comments removed from the study materials.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender while in college.

Societal benefits from this study include additional understanding of how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students experience college and what institutional support is

needed for these students, as well as provide a framework for administrators as to how they can work to improve our campus climate and the overall experiences of our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the principle researcher who will have complete ownership of all information shared by the participants. Only pertinent findings of the research will be shared with the thesis committee members.

The researchers will be the only persons who will have access to the video files of the interview. All interviews will be transcribed and the original tapes will be destroyed after the approval of the master's thesis by the committee members.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

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

### **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Justin Schuch  
90 Weller Hall  
1921 4th Street  
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600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
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### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

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

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576

E-mail: [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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

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Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

Date

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

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Signature of Investigator

Date



APPENDIX B  
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Questions

**RQ 1- What is the overall purpose of a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

1. What do you think or feel is the overall purpose of Pride?
2. How do you think or feel Pride represents the LGBT population?
3. How would you describe other's reactions to Pride?
4. How do you think or feel Pride affects the campus climate for the LGBT community?
5. How would you rate the campus climate for the LGBT community as poor, fair, neutral, good or excellent?
6. What other student organizations are you active in?

**RQ 2- What are the experiences of students who are active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

7. What have you personally gained from your experience being active in Pride?
8. What do you think or feel most individuals gain of their involvement in Pride?
9. In what way(s) do you feel you have experienced additional discrimination because of your activity in Pride?

**RQ 3- What are the experiences of students who are not active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?**

10. Why did you choose to not/no longer be active in Pride?
11. How do you feel your experience has been different because of your non-involvement in Pride?
12. In what way(s) do you feel you would be discriminated against if you were active in a LGBT student organization such as Pride?

**RQ 4- How has active participation or nonparticipation affected your personal sense of self-acceptance?**

13. How has your involvement or lack of involvement with Pride changed your perceptions of yourself?

14. In what way(s) do you think or feel involvement with Pride would change your perception on yourself?
15. How do you define self-acceptance?
16. Were you ever afraid you may harm yourself in relation to views on your sexual orientation?
17. Are you aware of the support and resources for LGBT individuals offered at the University?
18. What are some specific examples of events or programs that have helped you gain a better degree of self-acceptance?
19. What types of events or programs do you think would help you in developing a better sense of self-acceptance?
20. What are some ways that Pride has assisted you or do you think Pride could have assisted you during your time at the University?