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The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Students in Social Work Programs. A Study Report from the CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression

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**SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS
SPEAK OUT!**

**The Experiences of
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,
and Queer Students
in Social Work Programs**

**A Study Report from the
CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and
Gender Identity and Expression**

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THE COUNCIL ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

The Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE), formerly the Commission on Gay Men and Lesbian Women, is a council of the Commission for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice. CSOGIE promotes the development of social work curriculum materials and faculty growth opportunities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and the experiences of individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or two-spirit. CSOGIE also works for the full participation of individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or two-spirit in social work education, facilitating mentorship of students and junior faculty and offering assistance and consultation to educators and students concerning issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (CSWE)

CSWE aims to promote and strengthen the quality of social work education through preparation of competent social work professionals by providing national leadership and a forum for collective action. CSWE pursues this mission through setting and maintaining policy and program standards, accrediting bachelor's and master's degree programs in social work, promoting research and faculty development, and advocating for social work education.



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Executive Summary

This online North American study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social work students ($n=1,018$) in bachelor of social work (BSW; 24%) or master's of social work (MSW; 76%) programs explored educational experiences in 126 programs in 44 U. S. states and 7 Canadian provinces. Forty-four percent of students reported limited inclusion of LGBTQ content in classes, yet 64% indicated some degree of support for their LGBTQ identities in their programs. One-third reported homophobic experiences in programs, yet many (63%) were aware of "out" LGBTQ faculty.

1,018 Students
51 States & Provinces

Overall, students reported fairly low levels of self-assessed practice readiness with specific subpopulations (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), with participants reporting the highest

1 in 3 Students Experienced Homophobia During Their Social Work Education

(somewhat prepared) self-assessed readiness with gay populations and the lowest (not well-prepared) self-assessed readiness with transgender populations. Participants suggested lower readiness for their non-LGBTQ colleagues. Implications for social work education are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Social work education is charged with the preparation of competent social work practitioners. As providers are increasingly called to attend to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues, it is critical for social work education to ensure the competency of students to deliver services to these populations. LGBTQ individuals may seek counseling services at rates up to five times greater than non-LGBTQ peers, yet many LGBTQ clients report experiencing discrimination and insufficient services during interactions with social workers (Bassett & Day, 2003; Grant et al., 2010; Rutter, Estrada, Ferguson, & Diggs, 2008). Given that social workers provide more mental health services than any other health profession (Center for Mental Health Services, 2006), it is critical for social work education to promote student competence with LGBTQ individuals, their families, and their larger communities (Craig, Dentato, Messinger, & McInroy, 2014).

Students are key stakeholders in social work education. Students' learning and performance are strongly influenced by their assessment of the features of their educational environment (e.g., curriculum, climate) as well as their own reflective self-assessments (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Student self-assessments are an important tool to assess learning from a key stakeholder group and also a means to understand the effectiveness of social work education (Craig et al., 2014; D'Eon & Trinder, 2013; Violato & Lockyer, 2006).

The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE's) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) state that schools of social work should engage with diversity and difference, including sexual orientation and gender expression (CSWE, 2015). Similarly, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE- ACFTS) mandates in its Principles Guiding Accreditation that social work programs address social justice and diversity in all program domains (CASWE-ACFTS,

2014), including diversity related to sexual and gender identity, specifically. Accrediting bodies, professional organizations, educational institutions, and social work programs should remain committed to ensuring the development of LGBTQ students and the preparation of all students to work with LGBTQ populations (Craig et al., 2014). Despite this awareness and previous studies focused on social work administrators and faculty (Martin et al., 2009), there has not been a national study of the preparation and experiences of students as key stakeholders in social work programs.

THE STUDY DESIGN

This study was designed to capture the breadth of experiences of current MSW and BSW social work students across the United States and Canada.

The survey was developed by a voluntary working group of the Education Committee of CSWE's Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE) and informed by the literature as well as previous research and educational activities of CSOGIE. The survey was reviewed by non-CSOGIE educators and current students ($n=12$) to obtain face validity. CSOGIE conducted the survey with the support of CSWE staff and resources. The final measure consisted of 82 open-ended and scale questions (with answer options ranging from 3-6). To clarify the difference between identities, separate sub-questions were asked for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Three major domains were included:

1. Individual (e.g., age, gender identity, sexual orientation, duration of self-identification as LGBTQ, age of disclosure (if relevant) race, ethnicity, parental education)
2. Institutional (e.g., country; state/province; religious affiliation; LGBTQ nondiscrimination policies; LGBTQ friendliness; LGBTQ student organizations, physical spaces, and mentoring; LGBTQ targeted recruitment; and gender neutral bathrooms)
3. Program (e.g., LGBTQ nondiscrimination policies; LGBTQ student groups, physical spaces, and mentoring; LGBTQ targeted recruitment; experiences in classroom and field practicum; responses to LGBTQ discrimination; LGBTQ disclosure by self and others; LGBTQ related support; means and quality of inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the formal curriculum; and readiness of self and others to practice with individual LGBT client populations)

The electronic survey was distributed online to all social work programs in the United States accredited by CSWE ($n=716$) and all programs in Canada registered with CASWE- ACFTS; $n=26$) with BSW or MSW programs offered in English. An e-mail containing a request for distribution and the survey link was sent twice to the deans/directors of each social work school, department, or program and directly to student electronic mailing lists. Invitations to participate were also posted on major disciplinary electronic mailing lists (e.g., the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors, the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, the

LGBT Social Work Caucus). Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) age 18 or older, (2) current enrolment in a BSW or MSW program in the United States or Canada, (3) identification as LGBTQ, and (4) fluency in English. Data was collected between April and June 2012. The study was approved by a University of Toronto Research Ethics protocol.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the study all identified as members of the LGBTQ community but were otherwise diverse in terms of demographic categories such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethno-racial identification (see Table 1).

Gender ($n=1,017$)	%
Woman	72.5
Man	21.3
No Gender Categories	4.8
Trans Man	2.9
Other Transgender	2.5
Trans Woman	0.8
Age ($n=1,017$)	
29 and Under	58.7
30-39	24.9
40-49	10.5
50-59	4.9
60 and Older	1.0
Sexual Orientation ($n=1,018$)	
Lesbian	30.0
Bisexual	25.2
Gay	17.1
Queer	16.5
Other	6.1
Pansexual	5.1
Race & Ethnicity ($n=1,012$)	
White, Non-Hispanic	75.0
White, Hispanic	7.6
Multiracial	5.5
Black, Non-Hispanic	5.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.7
Black, Hispanic	2.3
Hispanic, No Race Provided	1.0
Other	0.7

Institutional Factors

The majority of participants were from California (15%), Illinois (7%), New York (7%), Michigan (6%), Texas (6%), Pennsylvania (5%), Massachusetts (5%), and Ontario (5%). Response rates largely reflect states and provinces with the highest concentrations of accredited social work programs and largest BSW/MSW student populations, including Texas (7% of total U.S. social work programs), New York (7%), Pennsylvania (7%), California (5%), Illinois (4%), Michigan (4%) and Massachusetts (3%) (CSWE, 2012). Participants in Canada and the United States were distributed nationally (see Figures 1 and 2). Blue dots represent approximately one respondent and purple dots represent approximately five respondents).

Participants tended to be from urban (79.2%), public (74.9%), or schools with no religious affiliation (83.6%) located in the United States (89.4%). More than three quarters of participants (76%) were in MSW programs, with the rest of the participants (24%) in BSW programs (see Appendix 1).

FIGURE 1 Approximate Provincial Distribution of Canadian Participants

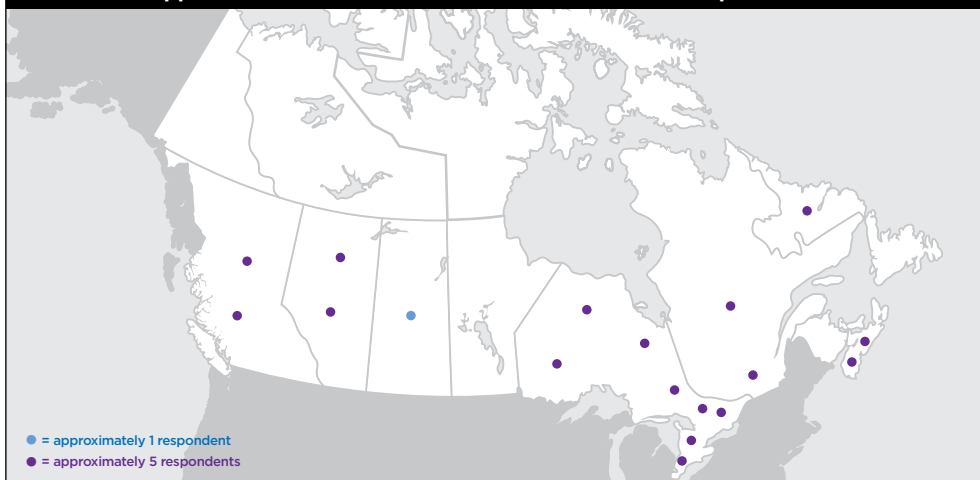
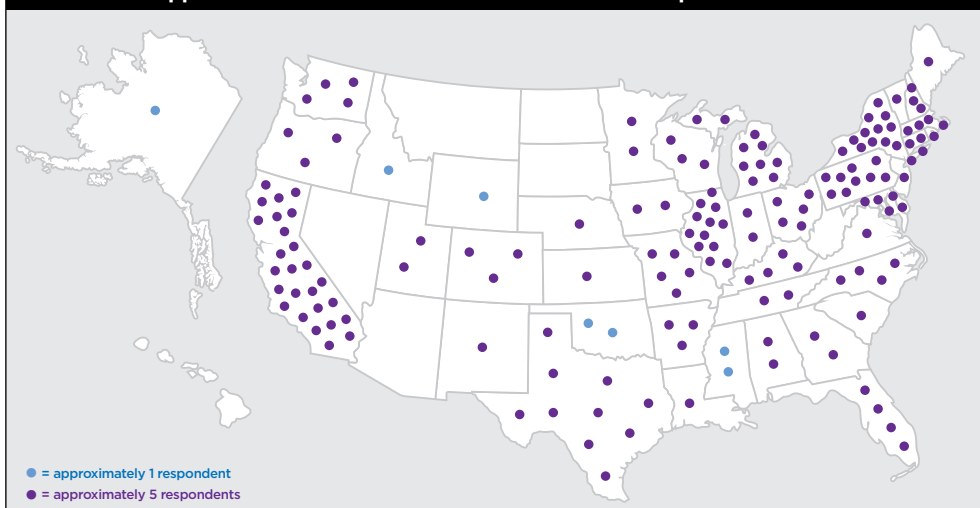


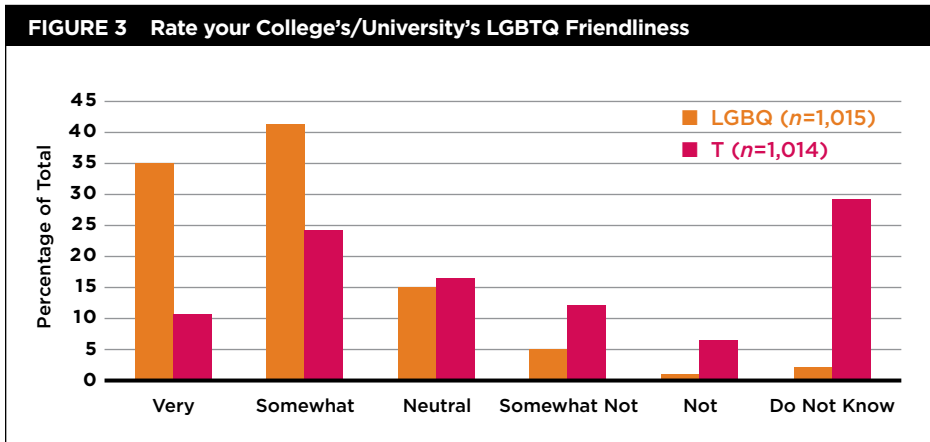
FIGURE 2 Approximate State Distribution of American Participants



Survey Results: The Student Experience

Participants were asked a variety of questions about their experiences as students in social work programs with a focus on institutional and program climates and interactions with faculty and peers.

INSTITUTION AND POLICIES



The majority of participants indicated that their educational institution was friendly toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people (LGBQ; 76.7%). However, when asked about their institution's friendliness toward transgender people, the proportion of friendly schools was notably lower (34.8%).

With regard to institutional nondiscrimination policies, 68.3% of participants reported a policy based on sexual orientation and 37.7% of participants reported a policy based on gender identity. However, in either instance large proportions of participants (30.5% and 53.5%, respectively) did not know whether their schools had such policies in place (see Appendix 2).

PROGRAM AND POLICIES

Only a third (30.1%) of social work programs had an LGBTQ-specific student group, and almost none had a LGBTQ mentoring program (5.9%), a targeted recruitment process for LGBTQ students (4.0%), or a LGBTQ specific lounge or space (1.7%). A third of students (32.9%) had experienced homophobia in their programs, but less than half (43.4%) of students were "very out" about their LGBTQ status. Many students (64%) felt their LGBTQ identity was at least somewhat supported in their social work program yet most (88.7%) felt pressure to educate their peers, faculty, or department and serve as LGBTQ role models.

33% of Participants Experienced Homophobia in Their Social Work Programs

Only 1% of Participants had Filed a Discrimination Related Grievance

With regard to social work-specific program nondiscrimination policies, 57.7% of participants reported a policy based on sexual orientation and 40.5% of participants reported a policy based on gender identity. However, 38.3% did not know whether their programs had sexual orientation policies, and 51.9% did not know about policies based on gender identity. Almost no participants used the nondiscrimination policy or filed a grievance based on discrimination due to sexual orientation or gender identity (see Appendix 3).

COURSE CONTENT

Content on LGBTQ populations was introduced into classes in a variety of ways. For LGBTQ content the most common means of inclusion were faculty-introduced topic (80.2%), student-led discussion (77.3%), and required readings (72.7%). Similarly, for transgender content the most common means of inclusion were student-led discussion (60.8%), faculty-introduced topic (56.0%), and required readings (42.7%). Unsurprisingly, LGBTQ content was notably more likely to be included in all ways when compared to transgender content.

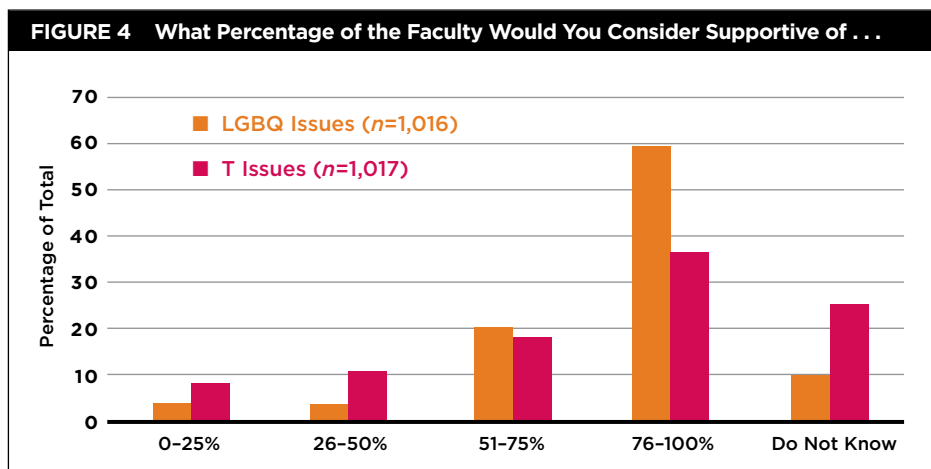
Additionally, although content may have been included, participants' comments indicated significant variation in the quality and depth of the materials provided. Only slightly more than two-thirds (69.6%) of students felt LGBTQ topics were handled well in their classes, and just over one-third (38.2%) felt transgender topics were handled well in their classes (see Appendix 4).

FACULTY, STAFF, AND PEERS

Although more than three-quarters of participants (79.6%) felt that at least 50% of their faculty members were supportive of LGBTQ issues,

only half (55.3%) felt that at least 50% of their faculty were supportive of transgender issues (an additional large group, 25.6%, did not know). The majority of students were aware of openly LGBTQ faculty (64.2%), and many also knew openly LGBTQ administrators or staff (31.6%). However, one-fifth (19.1%) thought that faculty behaved and spoke in ways that reflected their own homophobia and/or bias. Students also were often unsure (49.2%) whether faculty members intervened when students displayed homophobia, with only 35.1% of participants indicating they were sure their faculty members did. Nearly all (90.9%) participants knew openly LGBTQ students (see Appendix 5).

**Nearly 9 of Every 10 Participants
Felt the Responsibility to Educate
Others or Serve as Role Models**

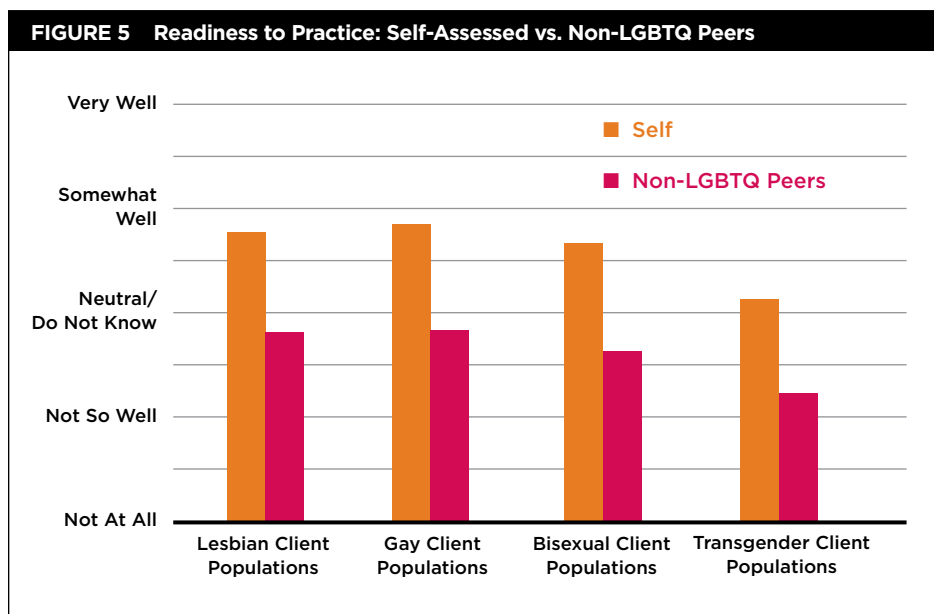


FIELD EDUCATION

A notable proportion of participants sometimes or often experienced conflict during their field practicums regarding their sexual orientation (19.6%) or gender identity (13.1%) (see Appendix 6).

READINESS TO PRACTICE

Participants identified low levels of self-perceived readiness to practice with LGBTQ clients and even lower levels of perceived readiness to practice for their non-LGBTQ colleagues. The specific contributors to readiness to practice are outlined in Craig et al. (2014).



THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT CURRICULUM

This study found that LGBTQ students in social work shared educational experiences that influenced their readiness to practice and may have shaped the ability of all social work students to provide competent service to LGBTQ clients. Both implicit and explicit factors emerged as important for social work educators.

EXPLICIT CLASSROOM COMPONENTS

Participants reported relatively low amounts of LGBTQ-specific curriculum content (e.g., readings or examples) in their programs. Quantitative findings demonstrated that LGBTQ readings or examples were only “often” included in classes for 12% of participants and “sometimes” included in classes for 44% of participants. Transgender readings or examples were included far less (“often” 2.1%; “sometimes” 19.3%). Qualitative comments provided by participants similarly indicated that lesbian and gay content was most commonly provided in classes, with substantially fewer participants indicating content related to other groups such as bisexual or transgender populations. Further, qualitative findings also suggested that faculty often conflated sexual orientation and gender identities without a clear understanding of the differences between them (McInroy, Craig, & Austin, 2014). Omissions, regardless of intent, could negatively affect practice with LGBTQ clients. Providing increased LGBTQ explicit curriculum content in social work education has the potential to positively affect the experiences of LGBTQ students in their programs and LGBTQ populations within social service contexts. LGBTQ content should be integrated across the curriculum and taught within the larger context of social justice and diversity.

IMPLICIT CURRICULUM FACTORS

Participants reported that the classroom culture regarding LGBTQ populations included formal curriculum content. Implicit factors also played a crucial role. Positive classroom culture (such as when instructors discuss their identities, offer support, and/or handle classroom conflict) has been found to contribute to significantly improved student learning (Browning, Meyer, Truog, & Solomon, 2007). In this study, classroom components that underscored supportive education on LGBTQ issues included the manner in which LGBTQ topics were handled in classes, classroom discussion of the challenges of being an LGBTQ social worker, and students feeling their LGBTQ identity was supported.

The ways LGBTQ content is managed in the classroom may be related to the training and comfort of faculty members. Faculty trainings that allow for open and safe discussion of strategies to respond to LGBTQ issues that emerge in the classroom, along with discussion surrounding appropriate avenues to integrate LGBTQ content, may be particularly useful. Even when students reported that faculty had generally supportive attitudes regarding LGBTQ issues, many reported low levels of explicit curriculum content and low overall readiness to practice with LGBTQ populations. Social work programs and faculty may consider strategies to link their supportive attitudes to increased student learning and competence.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. Because sexual orientation and transgender identities are not collected systematically by organizations or programs, it is not possible to assess the representativeness of this sample, and it may not be fully representative of all LGBTQ students in these programs. Participant demographics reflect the reality of underrepresentation of ethno-racial minority and male populations in social work education (Craig et al., 2014; CSWE, 2009). The study also is not representative of the experiences of students in doctoral or continuing education programs, who may have significantly different experiences.

Recommendations

1. Collect sexual orientation and gender identity demographic data to better understand student composition (through national organizations such as CSWE and CASWE, colleges and universities, and social work programs).
2. Educate all students about program/institutional policies dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity to promote inclusion, equity, and safety for students, because many students are not aware of the presence of policies.
 - Communicate existing institutional policies to incoming and current students through orientation trainings, physical postings, newsletters, school websites, and e-mails.
 - Include sexual orientation and gender identity in all diversity statements.
 - Clarify the process and impact of filing a grievance.
3. Purposefully recruit LGBTQ students to social work programs by creating admissions materials that are inclusive of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
4. Support LGBTQ students through on-campus and off-campus resources and services (e.g., LGBTQ student groups, celebrating national LGBTQ events, safe and inclusive restrooms).
5. Cultivate allies through inclusive models such as allied partnerships (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances), identifying staff or faculty liaisons, and/or using social media.
6. Train field instructors, faculty, and administrators on the delivery of competent education for LGBTQ students and clients.
7. Encourage active involvement of LGBTQ students in shaping their own educational environments through the formation of a national or international social work student association.
8. Increase the amount of explicit content throughout the curriculum. These faculty-led attempts to integrate the LGBTQ experience are critical and may lessen the burden on LGBTQ students to introduce such topics in classes.
9. Address the implicit curriculum by discussing LGBTQ issues on campus, involving students in LGBTQ community events and supporting faculty, staff and student disclosure.
10. Strive to capture student perspectives throughout the educational process, because students are key stakeholders and may experience the implicit and explicit curriculum regarding LGBTQ issues in ways that are different from what faculty members and administration intend.

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STUDY PUBLICATIONS

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Appendix 1: Institutional Factors

Institutional Factors	
Characteristic	%
Country (n=1,015)	
United States	89.4
Canada	10.4
Population Area (n=1,018)	
Urban Area (>50,000 people)	79.2
Urban Cluster (2,500-50,000 people)	18.0
Rural Area (<2,500 people)	2.8
Public/Private (n=1,017)	
Public	74.9
Private	22.9
Unsure	2.2
Religious Affiliation (n=1,016)	
No Religious Affiliation	83.6
Religious Affiliation	9.4
Unsure	7.0
Program Type (n=1,014)	
Bachelor of Social Work	24.0
Master of Social Work	76.0

Appendix 2: Institution and Policies

Institution and Policies	
Variable	%
Institution	
<i>Please rate your college's/university's LGBQ friendliness (n=1,015)</i>	
Very Friendly	35.3
Somewhat Friendly	41.4
Neutral	14.9
Somewhat Not Friendly	5.2
Not Friendly	1.1
Do Not Know	2.2
<i>Please rate your college's/university's T friendliness (n=1,015)</i>	
Very Friendly	10.7
Somewhat Friendly	24.1
Neutral	16.7
Somewhat Not Friendly	12.2
Not Friendly	6.9
Do Not Know	29.4
Institutional Policies	
<i>Is there an institutional nondiscrimination policy that protects based on sexual orientation?</i>	
Yes	68.3
No	1.3
Do Not Know	30.5
Yes	37.7
No	8.7
Do Not Know	53.5

Note: LGBQ=lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Appendix 3: Social Work Program and Policies

Social Work Program and Policies	
Variable	%
Social Work Program	
<i>Does your SWP have social work-specific LGBTQ organizations or student groups? (n=1,018)</i>	
Yes	30.1
No	55.2
Do Not Know	14.7
<i>Does your SWP have social work specific LGBTQ student lounges? (n=1,018)</i>	
Yes	1.7
No	87.2
Do Not Know	11.1
<i>Does your SWP have social work specific LGBTQ mentoring options? (n=1,017)</i>	
Yes	5.9
No	67.4
Do Not Know	26.7
<i>Does your SWP have social work-specific a targeted recruitment process for LGBTQ students? (n=1,017)</i>	
Yes	4.0
No	55.8
Do Not Know	40.2
<i>How would you categorize your overall disclosure about your sexual orientation/gender identity in the SWP? (n=1,018)</i>	
Very Out	43.4
Somewhat Out	45.0
Not Out at all	11.0
Do not Know	0.6
<i>How would you rate others' overall level of comfort with your sexual orientation/gender identity in the SWP? (n=1,018)</i>	
Very Comfortable	39.9
Somewhat Comfortable	46.0
Not Comfortable	3.8
Do Not Know	10.3
<i>How supported do you feel in terms of your LGBTQ identity in your SWP? (n=1,016)</i>	
Very Supported	33.5
Somewhat Supported	30.5
Neutral	19.5
Somewhat Not Supported	8.5
Not Supported at All	4.2
Do Not Know	3.8
<i>How often do you feel responsible to educate your peers, faculty, department and serve as an LGBTQ role model?</i>	
Often	37.7
Sometimes	36.0
Rarely	15.0
Never	11.3
Program Policies	
<i>Is there a program nondiscrimination policy that protects based on sexual orientation?</i>	
Yes	57.7
No	3.9
Do Not Know	38.3
<i>Is there a program nondiscrimination policy that protects based on gender identity?</i>	
Yes	40.5
No	7.7
Do Not Know	51.9

Appendix 4: Course Content

Course Content		
Variable	%	%
<i>In what ways are issues introduced in your courses (check all that apply)? (n=1,006)</i>		
Faculty-introduced Topic	80.2	56.0
Student-led Discussion	77.3	60.8
Required Readings	72.7	42.7
Optional Readings	55.9	39.1
Optional Research Opportunity	46.3	32.3
Films or Videos	44.5	28.5
Guest Speakers	43.7	27.6
Course Content		
Variable	%	
<i>How well do you think LGBQ topics are handled in your classes? (n=1,017)</i>		
Very Well	27.6	
Somewhat Well	42.0	
Neutral	14.2	
Not Very Well	11.5	
Not Well at All	4.1	
Do Not Know	0.6	
<i>How well do you think transgender topics are handled in your classes? (n=1009)</i>		
Very Well	12.7	
Somewhat Well	25.5	
Neutral	23.5	
Not Very Well	18.5	
Not Well at All	13.2	
Do Not Know	6.6	
<i>How often are LGBQ readings/ examples provided in your classes? (n=1009)</i>		
Often	12.0	
Sometimes	44.3	
Rarely	39.4	
Never	4.3	
<i>How often are transgender readings/ examples provided in your classes? (n=1007)</i>		
Often	2.1	
Sometimes	19.3	
Rarely	50.6	
Never	28.0	

Note: LGBQ=lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Appendix 5: Faculty, Staff, and Peers

Faculty, Staff, and Peers	
Variable	%
Faculty & Staff	
<i>What percentage of the faculty would you consider supportive of LGBQ issues? (n=1,016)</i>	
0-25%	3.8
26-50%	6.9
51-75%	20.3
76-100%	59.3
Do Not Know	9.7
<i>What percentage of the faculty would you consider supportive of transgender issues? (n=1,017)</i>	
0-25%	8.4
26-50%	10.8
51-75%	18.6
76-100%	36.7
Do Not Know	25.6
<i>Do faculty members intervene when students display homophobia?</i>	
Yes	35.1
No	15.7
Do Not Know	49.2
<i>Do faculty members behave and speak in ways that reflect their own homophobia/bias?</i>	
Yes	19.1
No	65.7
Do Not Know	15.2
Outness	
<i>Are you aware of any openly LGBTQ faculty members? (n=1,010)</i>	
Yes	64.2
No	33.1
Do Not Know	2.8
<i>Are you aware of any openly LGBTQ administrators or staff members? (n=1,015)</i>	
Yes	31.6
No	60.2
Do Not Know	8.2
<i>Are you aware of any openly LGBTQ students? (n=1,013)</i>	
Yes	90.9
No	8.3
Do Not Know	0.8

Note: LGBQ=lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer; LGBTQ= lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer

Appendix 6: Field Education

Field Education	
Variable	%
Field Practicum	
<i>Have you ever experienced conflict during a field practicum regarding sexual orientation? (n=982)</i>	
Often	3.0
Sometimes	16.6
Rarely	19.3
Never	61.1
<i>Have you ever experienced conflict during a field practicum regarding gender identity? (n=968)</i>	
Often	2.8
Sometimes	10.3
Rarely	11.6
Never	75.3

