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**An Investigation into LGBTQ+ Programming and Climate at a Midwest Master's  
Comprehensive University**

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HNR 499: Honors Senior Project

Dr. Leifa Mayers

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### **Introduction & Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to explore how students at a mid-sized Midwest Master's Comprehensive University engaged with and perceived LGBTQ+-focused resources available to them. Previous research titled *Being Queer on Campus: An Investigation into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts on College Campuses* (Bonello, 2021) lay the groundwork for determining the types of resources available for LGBTQ+-identifying students. This project was completed as credit for the Honors Senior Project through the Frederik Meijer Honors College at Grand Valley State University and advised by Dr. Leifa Mayers of the Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies department. This project was granted approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Office of Research Compliance & Integrity at Grand Valley State University (**Protocol #22-061-H-GVSU**)

### **Sample & Participant Demographics**

In October 2021, a survey was distributed to students in the women, gender, & sexuality studies major and minor program and to students in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer studies minor program. These students were the primary target of the survey as they are groups of students who would generally use LGBTQ+-focused resources on their campus. While the survey was open to students of any sexuality, none of the participants indicated that they were straight. The survey yielded 38 responses but seven responses were omitted due to incomplete submissions. It is important to note that the demographic of the participants may not be representative of the queer student population at the university or queer students in general. I used data from the university's enrollment statistics and campus climate survey to compare my sample to the population of the university. **GENDER IDENTITY:** 61% of participants indicated women as their gender identity, 26% indicated non-binary/gender nonconforming as their gender

identity, 10% indicated transgender man as their gender identity, and 3% indicated cisgender man as their gender identity. The university reports that their student population is 62.4% female and 37.4% male<sup>1</sup> No participants indicated their gender identity as transgender women, meaning that the results cannot be generalized to the queer community, especially about the experiences of transgender students. **SEXUAL IDENTITY:** The sexual identities indicated by participants were more diverse including lesbian (22%), gay (13%), bisexual (29%), pansexual (10%), and queer (16%); 10% of participants chose not to disclose their sexual identity<sup>2</sup>. **ETHNICITY:** 94% of participants indicated white as their ethnicity, 3% indicated Asian, and 3% indicated Hispanic. The university reports that 81.6% of its student population identify as white, 2.4% identity as Asian, and 5.7% identity as Hispanic. The university also has a population of Black (4.4%), Multiethnic (3.4%), American/Alaskan Native (0.3%), Hawaiian<sup>3</sup>/Pacific Islander (0.1%), and International/Unreported students (1.9%) who are not represented in this sample. **STUDENT STATUS:** 3% of participants indicated that their student status was first-year, 32% indicated second-year, 20% indicated third-year, 29% indicated fourth-year, and 16% indicated fifth-year or higher. This sample is similar to the population of the university, except for first-year students. As the survey was sent in October of their first semester in college, it was expected that the participation of first-year students would be lower.

### **Theoretical Framework & Background**

The theoretical framework of this project was informed by the following concepts explored in Bonello (2021): Intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013), Heteronormativity in higher education (Matthyse, 2017), and the Traditionally Heterogendered Institution (Present &

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<sup>1</sup> The university uses the sex terms “female” and “male” instead of gender identity terms. Furthermore, the institution does not collect data about the gender identity of its student population.

<sup>2</sup> The university does not collect data about the sexual identity of its student population.

<sup>3</sup> The people of Hawai`i do not use the okina in the word Hawaiian.

Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2017). This framework allowed me to view the results through a lens that took into account the intersecting identities of college students and an understanding that the foundations of higher education are built on practices that support and emphasize traditional values of sexuality and gender identity. By understanding these concepts, the responses from students could be better evaluated in the context that their experience is not welcomed nor supported by the original intentions of the university experience.

Bonello (2021) found that universities provide two distinct types of resources for LGBTQ-identifying students: assimilative spaces and subversive spaces. Assimilative spaces seek to integrate students into the broader community through resources such as academic support, social support, and leadership skills. Subversive spaces seek to transform norms such as heteronormativity and the THI, among others (Hoffman et al., 2018). This project considered five types of these spaces at the university: its resource center for LGBTQ-identifying students, the programming and events offered by the resource center and other campus partners, the ability for students to indicate their preferred name<sup>4</sup>, the presence of gender-neutral restrooms in academic buildings, and the ability for students to reside in gender-inclusive housing in university-owned dormitories. It is important to note that in developing the project, I used the university's website and policies to determine that all of these resources were available to students at some capacity. Some participants, however, indicated that they wished the university had offered them, indicating that access and knowledge of these resources were not always available. These responses were kept as part of the findings and discussion as it is important to recognize when these services are not noticed by the students they are intended to serve.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "preferred name" was used in this project as the institution's system for indicating a student's name uses the words, "professional, personal, preferred, or display name". "Preferred name" was used in the survey so that participants could recognize the university policy being asked about.

### Findings & Discussion

The results of the survey found that overwhelmingly, all five of the resources investigated at the university are either extremely important or very important to students. One participant indicated that the resource center was not important at all, one participant indicated that the preferred name system was not important at all, and one participant indicated that gender-inclusive housing was not important at all. No participants indicated that programming and the presence of gender-neutral restrooms were not important at all. These data demonstrate that these services were important to student success and inclusion on campus, but the data do not show whether the specific resources offered at the institution are working as intended. Therefore, three open-ended questions were added to the end of the survey to evaluate student perceptions and gain more knowledge about the experiences of LGBTQ+-identifying students at the university.

The opened-ended questions were: If you are currently utilizing LGBTQ+ resources and programming on campus, which resource is the most beneficial to you, and why; Do you experience any barriers to accessing and utilizing LGBTQ+ resources and programming on campus; and Are there any additional LGBTQ+ resources and programming that you think are beneficial to the inclusion and equity for LGBTQ+ students. These responses were coded into memos and translated into themes used to determine the general topics of each response. Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and contextual analysis (Leavy, 2000) were used to interpret the qualitative data of the responses. Themes were established through line-by-line coding (Kurasaki, 2000).

The results found four major themes in the responses for which resources were most beneficial: LGBT Resource Center <sup>5</sup>(4), gender-inclusive housing (2), staff who are

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<sup>5</sup> The name of the resource center was omitted in these results, but used in the survey distributed to students.

knowledgeable in DEI efforts and queer issues (2), and LGBTQ-specific counseling (1). These data show that the resource center on campus is the primary way that students engage with these efforts. When asked why these resources were beneficial, common themes were meeting other queer students and building community (2) and the ability to openly express gender identity (3). These data demonstrate that the resource center and affinity spaces, such as inclusive housing, allow for students to freely express their gender identity without fear of marginalization. A notable response to this open-ended question indicated that the resource center not only allowed the individual to meet friends, but that the support given prevented damaging mental health effects, “literally don't know if I would be alive if I didn't have their support and love.”

Responses for barriers that inhibited access to these resources indicated that 72.2% of participants faced barriers and the question yielded a major theme of a misunderstanding of identity. That is, many students feel like their sexual or gender identity is either “too specific” or “too broad”. It is worthy to note that while the resource center at this university is open to all students, the programming offered is limited to transgender, bisexual, asexual, and queer students of color. One respondent indicated that the needs of cisgender students and transgender/gender non-conforming students were different but that the resources offered did not take those differences into account. The respondent did not indicate specific differences. Another barrier for students was time conflicts; respondents indicated that while they would like to attend more programming and visit affinity spaces, their schedules did not align with the limited sessions and times available. Additionally, another respondent indicated that resources were not welcoming to older queer students, indicating that students with intersecting identities, such as age and sexuality, have limited access to the available resources.

Responses to the question asking participants to indicate additional resources that they would find helpful were overwhelmingly about additional programming opportunities. As indicated in previous responses, some queer students find that the available programming is either too specific, too broad, or it conflicts with their schedule. Similarly, some indicated that increased awareness through advertising and promotion of events would be beneficial in allowing them to engage with these efforts. A notable response indicated that “Queer and trans people are business majors, math majors, engineering majors, etc., and often get dismissed by their professors. Many LGBTQ+ people also struggle or are living with mental illnesses and learning disabilities, and getting accommodations without expensive doctors papers is hard in those fields as well.” This response is aligned with other themes that LGBTQ+-focused programming does not consider the identities of different queer people, including their majors. Another suggestion that was not provided by the institution was the ability to indicate pronouns in university systems, allowing faculty, staff, and administration to correctly address them. Preferred first name policies relieve stress and anxiety for LGBTQ-identifying students who may not use their legal name (Hope, 2016); in conjunction with this research, it can be concluded that systems and operations that acknowledge pronouns are beneficial to queer students.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this project found that queer students benefit from the five main types of resources offered by the university: the resource center, programming, preferred name system, gender-neutral restrooms, and gender-inclusive housing. This project confirms the notions of Preston & Hoffman (2015) that harmful power structures and discourses built upon heteronormativity continue to affect queer students as their experiences can be invalidated and systems in place make them feel ostracized and marginalized by the institution and their peers.



Additionally, this project demonstrates that even when resources are available and beneficial to some students, access and inclusivity must be evaluated through an intersectional lens to allow for students with multiple identities to reap the benefits. Further research could investigate specific ways to increase accessibility and evaluate if implementation of the participants' suggestions would be beneficial to the greater queer community on campus.

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