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**LGBTQIA+ UNDERGRADUATE ON-CAMPUS STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS
AND SATISFACTION ON ROWAN UNIVERSITY'S CAMPUS CLIMATE**

by

Emily C. Ohlson

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Education Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
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at
Rowan University
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Abstract

Emily C. Ohlson
LGBTQIA+ UNDERGRADUATE ON-CAMPUS STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND
SATISFACTION ON ROWAN UNIVERSITY'S CAMPUS CLIMATE
2021-2022

Stephanie Lezotte, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in Higher Education

The purpose of this study is to explore Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards campus culture. In a predominately heterosexual society, it is important to put an extra emphasis on providing a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ students. This study aims to address not only what the perceived impact of the Rowan University campus culture is on these students, but also investigates some of the perceptions LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students have on programs and services Rowan University offers to these students, and how it impacts their sense of belonging. This phenomenological qualitative study included seven interviews, which were then organized using a thematic analysis to find commonalities amongst the several interviews. After completion of the thematic analysis, the research was focused on three main themes including Non-Inclusive Housing, Lived Names, and Campus Experiences. Generally, this study found that there were more positives than negatives throughout the themes. This study discusses those findings and also provides recommendations for future practice not only for Rowan University, but for the community as a whole.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Attending a United States Public Higher Education Institution, I have noticed an influx of diversity among students, faculty, and staff as the years go by. Higher education professionals must work continuously to ensure they are supporting not one or two groups of students, but all groups of students regardless of the identities, cultures, and backgrounds they hold. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) students are just one of these populations that higher education professionals must work harder for, making programs and offerings more accessible and inclusive. LGBTQIA+ students face a high amount of barriers while pursuing their education, and should feel supported throughout their entire experience doing so. Researching this population is important as we are seeing an increase in LGBTQIA+ identifying students among college campuses. This research will help higher education professionals accurately recognize and understand these individuals' needs and find ways to effectively offer services that will best support them.

Research Problem

The United States education system continues to become more diversified and students that identify as LGBTQIA+ seemingly increase each year. While these numbers increase, these students face significant challenges while navigating higher education including harassment and increased health risks compared to those who do not identify within this group (Goodrich, 2020). Learning environments play an important role in promoting resilience and helping LGBTQIA+ students gain a sense of well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards campus culture. It also examined their perceptions towards the programs and services that were offered to them and the perceived impact on their overall sense of belonging. In a predominantly heterosexual society, individuals that identify within the LGBTQIA+ are some of the most victimized, harassed, unfairly treated individuals. Culturally, heterosexism is apparent in our non-inclusive hate laws, lack of benefits for partners, as well as blatant discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Hereck, 1996, as cited in Taylor, 2015). In the United States education systems, individuals outside of this norm suffer with struggles linked to cultural, political, institutional, and interpersonal policies that privilege heterosexuality and binary gender norms (Kullick et al., 2017). A phenomenological qualitative study design was used to explore current Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards the campus culture, how involvement, programs and services offered have impacted their perception, and how this culture impacts their overall sense of belonging at Rowan University. The research population for this study was self-identified LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students enrolled during the 2021-2022 academic year that reside on Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of Rowan University campus culture on LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students that live on campus?

2. What are the perceptions of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students toward their involvement in programs and offerings at Rowan University and the impact on their sense of belonging?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study will provide higher education professionals including administration the opportunity to improve the programs and services offered for the undergraduate, on-campus LGBTQIA+ community at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, NJ. Understanding the perceptions that these students have on the campus climate plays a big role in the retention for students that are part of underrepresented groups on campus. Research must be conducted to understand and find ways to better serve these groups of students. All underrepresented groups on campus should be provided with programs and services that best serve them and without this, and a low perception of the university, retention will be a reoccurring problem for this demographic of students.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study was limited to undergraduate on-campus LGBTQIA+ students at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Because this study used a qualitative research approach, with the use of interviews, the responses relied mainly on the extent of information they were comfortable providing in their interviews. When reaching this population, there may be a lack in the response rates, especially for individuals who are not "out" or comfortable with sharing experiences regarding their personal identities outside of the hetero world we live in today. While the

researcher identifies as someone in the LGBTQIA+ community, being a stranger to these individuals that are talking what can be very sensitive topics, may hinder the participants' willingness to share their experiences truthfully or as in depth. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic still being very wide spread today, students may feel checked out of virtual learning, which may also play a part in the response rate that is being aimed for, for this study to be successful.

Operational Definition of Important Terms

Below are important terms defined that are used frequently throughout this research study:

-Undergraduate Residential Student: Students who are studying for their bachelor's degree at an institution that reside in the institutions on-campus living spaces.

-LGBTQIA+: Individuals that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Questioning/Queer, Intersex, Asexual.

-Heterosexism: A discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals on an assumption that heterosexuality is the "norm" in terms of sexual orientation and identity.

-Campus Climate: The experiences that individuals and groups have on campus that affects their attitudes and behaviors towards the institution's campus.

-Heterosexual: Someone who may have emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to others of the opposite gender as them which often refers to a Woman and a Man.

-Pansexual: Someone who may have emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any or all gender but may not be at the same time or to the same degree. This term is often used interchangeably with bisexual.

-Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women.

-Bisexual: Someone who may have emotional, romantic, or sexual attractive to more than one sex, gender or identity but may not be at the same time or to the same degree. This term is often used interchangeably with pansexual.

-Queer: A term people often use to express a wide spectrum of identities and orientations that are outside of mainstream sexuality and identities.

-Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth but does not refer to sexuality.

-Cisgender: A term to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

-Gender fluid: A person who doesn't identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid or unfixed identity.

-Non- binary: An adjective describing a person who doesn't identify exclusively as a man or a woman.

-Polyamorous: To have open intimate or romantic relationships with more than one person at a time and is not directly related to sexuality.

-Dead name: Calling an individual by a name they no longer associate with. This is often the name on their birth certificate, or a common name that doesn't fit their current gender or identity.

Organization of the Study

Chapter II presents an overview of the literature related to this study. This chapter explores topics involving societal heterosexism and how bully victimization, harassment, and mental health are affected by hyper heterosexual behaviors. The literature also reviews campus culture and how programs and services offered impact the perceptions of climate on the campus. Chapter III, the methodology, discusses the plans for the research design and how the participants were recruited for the study. Chapter IV reviews the findings of the research study that was conducted, and finally, Chapter V summarized the study as a whole and provides recommendations for future practices.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

In the more recent years, higher education institutions have been increasing their services and offerings around themes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as they experience a continued growth in individuals that fit outside of the norm of a cisgender, heterosexual, and white individual. This includes an increase in individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, racially minoritized populations, as well as people with disabilities both visible and hidden. While DEI training and services in its entirety should be something that all universities should be required to have, the more recent events of police brutality and oppression towards minoritized populations during the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have made institutions refocus their efforts on DEI. Higher education provides individuals an opportunity to identify and express themselves differently than they could have in the past, including sexual and gender identities. Institutions should provide resources and services for all LGBTQ+ undergraduate students so they feel represented and safe while residing on campus. Studying this population and assessing the need for this group of individuals is vital for retention and success of the institution. A sense of belonging and positive campus culture is bound to increase retention rates of all minoritized populations. While retention rates are one of the most researched questions when studying college students, there is very minimal studies done on LGBTQ+ students (Sanlo et al., 2012). It is important that higher education professionals recognize that the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ students on their campuses require more focus and attention to ensure they are on the right track for success post-graduation.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how different aspects of campus culture and climate impacts LGBTQ+ identifying students' success and sense of belonging while navigating the predominately heterosexual higher education system. This literature review highlights findings from published research studies on students as it relates to the societal norms of higher education and how campus culture both positively and negatively impact LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging in higher education.

Societal Heterosexism

Since the beginning of time, heterosexual and cisgendered individuals have made the majority population within higher education institutions. Heterosexism is defined as the “cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma by denying and criticizing all non-heterosexual identities, and the behaviors and relationships within these groups” (Woodford et al., 2018). Cisgenderism follows the same guidelines as heterosexism, with the primary focus on gender identity and the denial of individuals identifying with a gender that does not align with the sex they were born into. Heterosexism occurs not only at an individual level, but also a cultural level (Taylor, 2015). Heterosexism at the individual level includes disgust, hostile feelings, and condemning of homosexuality. Culturally, heterosexism is apparent in our non-inclusive hate laws, lack of benefits for partners, as well as blatant discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals (Hereck, 1996, as cited in Taylor, 2015). In the United States education system, individuals outside of this norm suffer with struggles that privilege heterosexuality and binary gender norms and are often stemmed from cultural, political, institutional, and interpersonal policies (Kullick et al., 2017). For anyone, growing up in the LGBTQ+ community in a predominately heterosexualized country is not easy, and there are many lacking conversations and

training to support the needs of individuals that fall outside of this societal norm.

Blumenfield (2010, as cited in Collins & McElmurry, 2014) noted that societal heterosexism operates in a way that oppresses and marginalizes LGBTQ+ people as well as other identity groups that don't associate with heterosexuality. Institutional campuses are a place where all students should have the opportunity to live their true selves, but also a place where they should be provided the tools to help figure out their identities and become confident and comfortable with who they are, even if it is outside of the socially imposed.

Bully Victimization and Harassment

Bully victimization in college students has not been studied nearly as much as adolescent children, and for students in a sexually minoritized group, like individuals that are LGBTQ+, there is even less studies done (Moran et al., 2018). In a study performed by Rankin et al. (2010, as cited in Renn, 2010) 30% of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual students reported being bullied while Transgender respondents were at 40%. While college campuses provide opportunities for young individuals to explore and define what sex, sexuality and sexual identity means to them, there is routinely forms of heterosexist discrimination in various ways (Kullick et al., 2016). This discrimination, harassment, and bullying happens both overtly but also covertly. While overt discrimination is often much more noticeable and obvious covert behaviors are often less obvious or displayed. Researchers have suggested that gender and sexually minoritized students often face subtle discrimination, including slurs and negative comments, and less often physical violence. These sometimes unintentional forms of discriminations are only one piece to the often hostile campus climates for these groups of students (Woodford et al., 2018).

LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions of their campus climates directly impact their mental health, including both anxiety and depression and the bully victimization and harassment can easily play a role in these negative experiences (Szymanski & Bissonette, 2020).

Mental Health

Mental health issues and struggles are very endemic to college life because of the normative stressors that college students face while navigating intellectual and identity development (Kullick et al., 2017). Majority of students that attend a higher education institution are living on their own for what might be the first time ever, and have to navigate how to live on their own without the physical assistance of their parents or caretakers. Depression specifically, is a particular concern for LGBTQ+ individuals attending college, with national studies suggesting that between 10-20% of students report experiences of depression, and even higher rates for women and racially diverse students (Kullick et al., 2017). While heterosexism and bully victimization on college campuses have a big factor in how not only an LGBTQ+ student views the campus climate, but it is also important to understand that differences seen in identity development and acceptance of one's self in this community may influence overall mental wellbeing (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Peterson & Gerrify, 2006, as cited in Kulick et al., 2017). Social policies not only mirror the environment, but they may compromise LGBTQIA+ mental health by generating a social context that threatens individuals in community (Hatzenbuehler, 2010).

Gay-Straight Alliances, and more recently Gay-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are student focused clubs that provide individuals with the opportunities to network and

support each other whether they identify in the LGBTQ+ community or they are an ally (Baams & Russell, 2021). In schools where GSAs are present, rates of suicidality and depression are much lower than schools without. It also goes without saying that the longer these GSAs were active, the likelihood of depressive symptoms and poor mental health was even lower (Baams & Russell, 2021). For LGBTQ+ students, mental health issues and depressive symptoms can be triggered by all of the same things that heterosexual, cisgendered students are going through. LGBTQ+ students unfortunately, however, must deal with environmental and interpersonal microaggressions that are significantly associated with an increase in depressive symptoms (Woodford et al., 2018).

Campus Culture

Campus Culture is the single most important topic regarding students attending a higher education institution. Students' perceptions of campus culture is affected by not only the policies fostered at the institution, but also the relationships they make, and the organizations they are involved in. Each student has their own perception of the campus environment they are attending, and for underrepresented students, it may be harder for them to have a positive experience. One of the first steps that should be made when attempting to foster a positive campus climate for students, is a presence of underrepresented groups at an institution (Hurtado et al., 1999, as cited in Hurtado et al., 2008). For change to occur in students' perceptions and behaviors, there must be obvious diversity present, and one way to understand a current culture is by studying and assessing the diversity on the campus (Hurtado, 2008).

While campus climate concerning LGBTQ+ students fluctuates very differently across institutions, especially geographically, a positive campus culture for all students is what will make students want to continue to attend and excel in their studies.

Understanding the perceptions of LGBTQ+ students' when they are deciding to attend a particular university is important to get a sense of what the culture is like for these students, but also find ways in which they can improve their offerings (Szymanski & Bissonette, 2020). Campus climates can become hostile for LGBTQ+ students because of homophobia or features and policies that affirm heterosexual people and their practices (Kauth & Bradford, 2012, as cited in Collins & McElmurry, 2014) . Students who are so worried about hostile campus environments are often unable to focus on their academics (Lucozzi, 1998, as cited in Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Not only does bully victimization and harassment play a huge role in how students view the institution, it is important that higher education professionals are offering the right services that their students need.

While LGBTQIA+ students do not make up a large percentage of the total student population, providing these underrepresented students with the best services and practices will allow them to perceive the institution's campus culture in a more positive light.

Best Practices and Retention

Providing students with the best policies, practices, and offerings, is what helps improve perceptions of campus culture and retention. As of 2012, there were 28 states that did not have a sexual orientation nondiscrimination policy, and fewer than 20% of the entire nations higher education institutions included sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Additionally, there were only about 200 institutions that had professionally staffed centers for LGBTQ+ students,

faculty, and staff that offered support services and programs (Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Professionals, 2011, as cited in Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). There are also 567 institutions that offer protection against discrimination, with 96 protecting gender identity and expression specifically, since 2009 (Messinger, 2009). However, the institutions around the country that are listed by the Human Rights Campaign, only make up 8% of the total institutions in the United States.

It is important that we recognize these numbers, and make ourselves aware of how small these numbers are in relation to the thousands of higher education institutions in the United States there are. If higher education professionals are not putting together policies and procedures for the minoritized groups that need it the most, how will they ever expect the retention rates to increase? There are many ways that college and university professionals can move towards a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. As Messinger (2009) stated, one size does not fit all, and what works for a specific institution in a geographical region, may not work for a differently sized institution in another region.

Larger, and often public institutions frequently use faculty, staff, and students to help change their policies in a formal shared governance approach (Messinger, 2009). These groups work together to extend outreach to various campus groups, events, programs, and social media. Small, and often private institutions typically use an informal approach involving key administrators and work to get one of the key administrators on board more low-key through personal connections, and communication (Messinger, 2009). Adversarial approaches, which is least likely to be used, gathers

advocates that attempt to use local human right ordinances, and create informal staff and student committees, which wound up backfiring, leading to an ineffective approach.

Having LGBTQ+ support policies and procedures at an institution is one of the most important things a school can have, but also something not many people will look into, or even become aware of. Support services, LGBTQ+ centers, and media recognition are only a few of the things that may be more beneficial short term for these students, faculty, and staff. Safe zone programs, often sponsored by student activity departments or social justice offices, provide resources and training for the college and provide physical spaces for individuals to feel safe while talking about issues surrounding sexual minority concerns (Ottenritter, 2012). Additionally, single events are important to inclusifying the campus for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty. Some of these events can include National Coming Out Day which occurs every October, University Pride Months, and Drag Shows which are often planned by LGBTQ+ support groups on campus as well as student activities (Ottenritter, 2012). Being inclusive in programming across campuses not only demonstrates the institution's attempt at inclusivity and acceptance towards these students, but helps break down barriers surrounding heteronormativity and heterosexist behaviors.

Summary

Retention of students and student success are two very important issues we see in higher education (Ottenritter, 2012). While students and professionals navigate through the predominantly White and heterosexual United States education system, it is vital minoritized and underrepresented students are included in these efforts to increase

retention and success. Student success has moved away from getting students into college and getting them out with a degree and the job skills needed to get a job in the field they studied, but it is time to include LGBTQ+ and other minoritized student populations in the mix of who is defined as successful post-graduation (Ottenritter, 2012). As an oppressed group, LGBTQ+ students have a higher risk of depression and other deteriorating mental health, so offering services, programs, and events can decrease these risks, while increasing retention, and positive perceptions of campus culture (Kullick et al., 2017). Higher education is not expected to be perfect, but there should be more of an attempt to support all underrepresented students on their campuses.

Chapter III

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards campus culture. It also examined their perceptions towards the programs and services that were offered to them and the perceived impact on their overall sense of belonging. In a predominantly heterosexual society, individuals that identify within the LGBTQIA+ community are some the most victimized, harassed, and unfairly treated individuals. Culturally, heterosexism is apparent in our non-inclusive hate laws, lack of benefits for partners, as well as blatant discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Hereck, 1996, as cited in Taylor, 2015).

Privileges of heterosexuality and binary gender norms has the potential to impact individuals out outside of this norm greatly. Policies that were developed that privilege this way of life, can significantly impact those in the LGBTQIA+ community that live outside of that norm (Kullick et al., 2017). A phenomenological qualitative study design was used to explore current Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards the campus culture, how involvement, programs and services offered have impacted their perception, and how this culture impacts their overall sense of belonging at Rowan University. This research study aims to better understand the experiences, both positive and negative that these individuals face and work to find ways to improve future practices. The research population for this study was undergraduate

students enrolled during the 2020-2021 academic year that reside on Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey and self-identify as someone that is LGBTQIA+.

Research Questions

There are many questions surrounding LGBTQIA+ students and campus culture that remain unanswered, and unstudied. This research attempts to combine these two points and answer the following questions

1. What is the perceived impact of Rowan University campus culture on LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students that live on campus?
2. What are the perceptions of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students toward their involvement in programs and offerings at Rowan University and their impact on their sense of belonging?

Context of the Study

The study was conducted at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan University is a nationally ranked, public research institution that ranks 4th in the nation's fastest-growing research university (Fast Facts, 2021). Rowan University offers over 90 bachelors, 48 masters, 2 professional, and 8 doctoral degree programs across four campuses. The other campuses, which are known as satellite campuses, are in Camden, New Jersey as well as Stratford, New Jersey. Both of these satellite campus locations are the home to Rowan's Cooper Medical School and School of Osteopathic Medicine which makes Rowan one of three institutions in the nation with medical schools granting doctors of osteopathic medicine (DO) and doctors of medicine (MD) degrees. It is important to note that of the estimated 20,000 students making up the total

student body, 33% represent minoritized populations and other under-represented groups (Fast Facts, 2021)

In more recent years, the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution (SJICR) at Rowan University was developed on campus. This department has many sub-departments or centers within it, including an LGBTQIA+ center for students who identify in the community as well as allies. This center provides students, faculty, and staff with a safe space on campus to visit, and serves as a meeting area for LGBTQIA+ student organizations, events, and programs (Social Justice, n.d.). Additionally, the SJICR office has a plethora of resources on their website including Rowan resources, counseling services, a map of all-gender restrooms on campus and so much more. There are several clubs on campus that directly serve these groups of students which include Prism, Rowan University True Colors, and Out in Stem. These groups are student run organizations that have formed relationships with their members, and have provided students with a safe space to discuss all things queer.

Research Design

For this study to be done the most appropriately, I used a phenomenological research design approach. Defined by McMillan (2016), a phenomenological qualitative study is to fully understand a phenomenon, in any capacity the researcher is looking for. Phenomenological research designs usually start with a researcher that has a curiosity, question, or passion that helps develop a soon-to-be studied research question(s) (Finlay, 2012). These studies often are accompanied by interviews, which can be long and include a lot of different topics. Using a qualitative research approach provides insight or a better

understanding of the experiences that individuals endure and can be used as an informational tool to develop interventions to better understand the population a researcher is working with (Denny & Weckesser, 2018). By using this qualitative approach, I was able to interact personally with the respondents I interviewed, which helped get a better understanding of their views and thoughts as an LGBTQIA+ undergraduate student.

Population and Sampling

With approximately 16,000 undergraduate students at Rowan University, the institution houses their students in nearly twenty on-campus housing options. In a study conducted by Dr. Saadeddine (2015), 51% of enrolled students identified themselves as Male, while 49% identified as Female, however there was no inclusion of Non-binary individuals in this statistic. Of these students, nearly eleven thousand students enrolled at Rowan University identified as White Non-Hispanic, seventeen hundred African American, fifteen hundred Hispanic or Latino, one thousand Asian, and one thousand other races. While identifying as someone who is LGBTQIA+ is not something the University can accurately track, I used the University's emailing system to reach all students living on campus, which included individuals who identify within that community. The sample for this research design is a convenience sample, as it is very important that there is validity in the responses being received, and that the students participating in these interviews are in fact LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students. Convenience sampling constitutes non-random sampling, which is necessary for a research study to be successful, especially when working with a population that is very

specific and small, like the LGBTQIA+ undergraduate population living on campus at Rowan University (Sedgwick, 2013).

Data Collection

To recruit participants for my semi-structured interviews, I used Rowan University's emailing system to reach all undergraduate students living on campus, after the electronic institutional review boards (IRB) approval. After this approval from the IRB, I put in an information resources and technology (IRT) request, to retrieve all of the emails of current on-campus undergraduate students. This email included information about my study, informing all potential participants that their interest in completing an interview was completely voluntary, and could be ended at any time. Throughout the research process, I ensured participants' confidentiality through two signed consent forms, one for participation and one for recording the interviews, as well as confidential interview space. All of my interviews with interested students lasted about 60 minutes via Zoom and were recorded during, and transcribed afterwards. This semi-structured interview process allowed participants to have guided questions, but also share additional information about topics that were not included in the questions I provided.

The interview questions that are used for this study were put together with the help of several literature sources, as well as current programs, and offerings that Rowan University has for LGBTQIA+ students. This study utilized the semi-structured interview process, which combines specific questions and open-ended questions that allows the researcher to address the research questions, while being prepared for the conversation to go elsewhere due to the "lack" of structure or specific intentions (Hove & Anda, 2005).

These interviews started with basic demographic questions including sexual orientation and identity that I would use to break down my research findings. It is important to provide the participants with some findings based on the research I have studied, and give them a clear understanding of why I am doing this study. Following this conversation, I asked the participants a series of questions that helped me as the researcher get a better understanding of where these individuals stood based on my research questions and study purpose.

Data Analysis

Data received from my interviews were organized using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data, typically text, which can be pulled from the transcripts of the interviews I conduct (Caulfield, 2020). Using the transcripts from these semi-structured interviews has helped me code the provided data, to identify common themes and topics that the interviewees provided. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify themes found within a set of data which can then be analyzed and organized to produce insightful and important findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This thematic analysis helped me narrow down several main thoughts that the participants brought up, so I can further analyze how the University's current campus climate for LGBTQIA+ students is perceived.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards campus culture. It also examined their perceptions towards the programs and services that were offered to them and the perceived impact on their overall sense of belonging. In a predominantly heterosexual society, individuals that identify within the LGBTQIA+ are some the most victimized, harassed, and unfairly treated individuals. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative study approach to explore current Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards the campus culture in semi-structured interviews, adds qualitative research findings to existing literature on LGBTQIA+ college students, their sense of belonging, and overall opinions on the campus culture at Rowan University. This chapter includes a profile of the sample, an analysis of data from the interview questions, as well as a thorough presentation of the findings.

Profile of the Sample

The individuals in this study were selected through convenience sampling, in which I interviewed the first individuals to respond to my recruitment email. In order for participants to be eligible in this study, the student must have been a Rowan University undergraduate student living on campus, who identified themselves as someone LGBTQIA+. Because being LGBTQIA+ is not something that the university has access to, or something I myself could prove, I had to trust the word of each participant that expressed interest in my study. Through a request from IRT I was able to retrieve the

emails of all undergraduate students living on campus, which totaled almost 4,800 students. All of these students were sent an email requesting their voluntary participation in my study as long as they fit all of the criteria. The only criteria needed to participate was that the student must be a current active undergraduate student at Rowan University, lives in university housing, and identifies as LGBTQIA+. Of these emails, I received 22 initial responses. After the individuals agreed to participate, they were sent a follow up email asking for their availability as well as two consent forms, one that was a general consent to participate form, and the other which allowed me to record our interview for review and transcription purposes. Out of the 22 students who expressed initial interest, I was able to interview seven. Because this was a qualitative study, the sample size goal was 7-10 students. Being able to interview seven students meant that the sample size goal was met to be able to properly conduct a phenomenological study.

Sample Biographies

Before discussing the findings of my research, it is important to include general identifiers of each student that was interviewed. Below is a brief biography of each participant which includes their sexuality, gender identity, and preferred pronouns that were disclosed to the research team prior to the start of the interview. Each individual's real name was replaced with a pseudonym to keep their identities confidential during the duration of this research study.

Table 1

Biographies of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Preferred Pronouns
Kelly	Pansexual	Non-Binary	She/They
	Polyamorous		
Emma	Lesbian	Cisgender	She/Her
Haley	Pansexual	Transgender	She/Her
Cynthia	Bisexual	Cisgender	She/Her
Connor	Queer	Transgender	He/Him or They/Them
Delilah	Bisexual	Gender Fluid	She/Her
Holly	Pansexual	Cisgender	She/They

Analysis

The seven semi-structured interviews were completed using questions approved by Rowan University's IRB that can be found in Appendix A. The interviews began after the co-investigator introduced themselves, discussed some background information about the study, and answered any future questions about the study or consent forms that were required by each interviewee. With both the general consent form and audio and video consent form signed, each of the hour-long interviews were recorded and then transcribed via Zoom.

In order to ensure rich information was discovered from my interviews, a thematic analysis was done to identify and analyze common patterns/themes within my data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When this was finished, there were three important themes that were discovered which include a) Non-Inclusive Housing, b) Lived Names, and c) Campus Experiences. The three themes discovered are all very essential to better understand LGBTQIA+ students' sense of belonging on campus and how their experiences have shaped their views.

Non-Inclusive Housing

Higher Education for students often brings a lot of “firsts”. Often this is their first time being away from what they call home, away from their families and support systems, and learning how to navigate what it means to be an adult for some students, for the first time. Included in these firsts is moving away to school and living without the guidance, physical support, and easy access to their support systems. For some this may mean learning how to do laundry for themselves, how to clean properly, and how to grocery shop on a college student budget. Speaking from experience, this time in my life brought a lot of stress and worry, but if it weren't for the support system I developed at Rowan with those I interacted with, I wouldn't have made it through my undergraduate years as successfully.

Housing can play a huge role in the sense of belonging for individuals on campus. For the seven participants that were interviewed, they all were able to provide their own experiences as well as general feelings they had on the housing situations for on-campus students. Two participants lived in the LGBTQIA+ Learning Community located in one

of the newer freshman dorms and provided some real-life experiences they had while living there. Haley, a transgender freshman woman at Rowan, lived in the learning community at the start of her first semester. From the start, Haley had a difficult time navigating the housing department as someone who at the time identified herself as non-binary on some forms, and transgender on others. She states:

“The housing department offers options for people who are LGBT who want to room with other people who are LGBT but I feel like it’s not as foolproof as they think it is I guess for lack of a better term. If you’re a freshman and want to room with another trans person or non-binary person it’s difficult to ask for that in the system”.

Additionally, she talks about her experiences filling out roommate applications, and being roomed with a cisgender, gay man in the LGBTQIA+ learning community, someone they felt they had no similarities with. She shared that she “felt like the whole form I took about roommate matching was just thrown out when I said I’ll be in the LGBT dorms and they just found gay person to room me with”.

Connor, another transgender individual I interviewed had similar experiences in the LGBT housing community. Connor found that the majority of the individuals living in this section of the dorm were not actually those part of the community, which he didn’t expect. Connor mentioned “It was very specific right off the bat, they tell you they put you in the LGBT learning community and like I’m not even kidding like five people were and everybody else was straight”. He mentioned that he consistently did not feel comfortable or safe in that space where he thought he would feel the most of those two

things, and wound up spending a lot of weekends at his parents' house just to get away from those he didn't feel deserved or should've been allowed to live in that space.

Delilah, who is gender fluid, was uncomfortable with the lack of offerings they were provided with when searching for housing with mixed genders. She was placed in a women only apartment, which despite her queerness, has made her feel more separated. She added,

“I hear my roommates downstairs they throwing slurs around and it's like I don't feel super safe but I can pass as cisgender and straight and that's something that is a privilege for me, like I can pass and go about my day and feel fine, but in the back of my head it's like if they knew I would probably be in deep shit”.

It is important to mention that not all housing interactions were negative or involved poor experiences for the interviewees. Aside from what was already discussed, Cynthia did not have any specific stories about her experiences living on campus, but did add the uneasiness that comes with having to tell roommates about your sexuality when you're unsure of the reaction they may have. Overall, the individuals that spoke more openly about their experiences with the housing offerings on campus didn't always have the most positive experiences and Kelly believes that the housing department could improve the system for housing a bit more for LGBTQIA+ students living on campus.

Lived Names

Of my seven participants that were interviewed, nearly all of them touched on the topic of lived names, often known as “preferred names” and the importance of pronouns, especially in the classroom setting. Recognizing someone's pronouns in itself can make

someone feel entirely welcomed in a class, but this wasn't often the case for these students. Haley mentioned that while their professors have mostly been nice and accepting, that it is not uncommon for them to get their pronouns incorrect in class. She added that it boils down to the professor asking the entire class to announce their pronouns, or she'd awkwardly have to correct the professor when misgendered and "be like hello I'm trans don't make fun of me please". Holly agreed on the importance of asking pronouns on the first day of class and compared last semester where she was asked her pronouns in every class introductions to this semester, where she was not asked in any of them.

Emma, who holds an executive board position for one of the LGBTQIA+ organizations on campus, described a lot of the stories she's heard from her LGBTQIA+ friends on campus. When telling the experiences of a transgender friend of hers and their experiences with being dead-named in classes, she expressed how humiliating it must feel for some students to constantly be referred to by a name they no longer associate with. Haley mentioned that it seems as though there may be a disconnect in the systems that Rowan uses when inputting student data including name and gender. She mentioned that they had her in the housing system as a male because biologically she is but all of her forms that were filled out either noted that shew identified a non-binary or a transgender woman. Emma and others emphasized the importance of asking pronouns in class room settings and believe it should be a requirement that all instructors must follow.

Campus Experiences

Diversity, equity, and inclusion has started to take priority in many institutions, and Rowan University, where this study was conducted has continued to work diligently on DEI practices in most departments across campus. While speaking with the seven participants about their general experiences at Rowan University so far, all of them had pretty good experiences overall, however it seemed to get more complicated when gender identity and sexuality were brought into the mix. In one of my questions, I asked about what it meant to belong on a campus and the responses I received were all generally positive which included making connections with individuals with shared interests, having friends, and being happy. Haley, however, explained that she wasn't too sure what she believed it meant to belong on a college campus. When I asked the follow up question about if it feels easy to feel that sense of belonging as someone who is LGBTQIA+, that's where some of the responses got dicey. Haley, as well as others had the general idea that it is not as easy to feel that sense of belonging as it is for someone who is a cisgender, heterosexual student at Rowan. Haley continued to mention that she notices there are a lot of resources on campus that offer services and events for LGBTQIA+ but she feels most of them take initiative from the LGBT students to get the benefits of them and you almost have to "out" yourself to the campus or those on campus just to get the resources you need.

Fortunately, enough, the majority of the participants in this study do or have utilized the Rowan University wellness center, specifically the counseling services. I found it quite interesting that at least three of the interviewees participated in group counseling and found this experience to be overall helpful, although it wasn't necessarily

what they had signed up for. Both Emma and Haley mentioned that they believe a lot of individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community may have rougher home life and familial experiences than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, and there can be a lot of trauma that needs to be unpacked. While Emma did not think group counseling was the best route for her, the majority of my participants that did use the counseling services, whether group or 1-on-1 were thankful this service was offered to them during their time at Rowan.

Chapter V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations

The final chapter of this thesis will discuss the research questions that help guide the questions for the interview process as they relate to the findings of the study.

Additionally, the study will be summarized, and recommendations will be made on how not only Rowan University, but all higher education institutions can work towards better serving LGBTQIA+ students.

Summary of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of LGBTQIA+ on-campus undergraduate students at Rowan University. The purpose of this study was to explore Rowan University undergraduate LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions towards campus culture. It also examined their perceptions towards the programs and services that were offered to them and the perceived impact on their overall sense of belonging. Using a phenomenological study approach and an interview process, I was able to interview seven undergraduate students which all provided me insight into their own experiences. I was able to determine that there is a general difference between experiences of those that often can be identified as "straight-passing" as opposed to those that may not be, in terms of their gender identity and expression.

Because being LGBTQIA+ is not something the university accurately tracks, the way I was able to reach this group of students was by sending a recruitment email to all undergraduate students living on Rowan University's main campus. After an initial 22 responses, I was able to have a final sample size of 7 participants which meant I reached

my goals of 7-10 participants. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded, transcribed, coded, and I used that information to retrieve direct and indirect quotes from the participants. These quotes were used to help theme my data and provide the readers with real life experiences that these individuals as well as individuals they share relationships with have faced as someone who is LGBTQIA+.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1

1. What is the perceived impact of Rowan University campus culture on LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students that live on campus?

Campus culture is one of the most important topics regarding students' experiences at a higher education institution. Not only is the culture affected by the policies fostered at the institution, but the relationships students form, and the services and organizations they are involved with. The first step to ensure an environment is fostering a positive campus culture for all students, is the presence of underrepresented groups at an institution (Hurtado et al., 1999 as cited in Hurtado et al., 2008). While LGBTQIA+ students do not make up a large majority of the total population, having a positive campus culture for these students is important as it relates to their college experience and sense of belonging on the campus.

Overall, the perceptions of Rowan's campus culture were rather positive for the cisgender participants. While these perceptions were overall positive for Rowan's general culture, the culture for LGBTQIA+ students were not as positive and self-explanatory. There were mixed opinions on this culture and how the culture effects the LGBTQIA+

populations at Rowan. Generally, the more negative experiences were told by the two transgender participants, and those that had stories to tell about their transgender friends. Many of these negative experiences were very similar and focused on the lack of effort to support LGBTQIA+ students including limited all gender restrooms, absence of pronouns asked in classrooms, and the lack of uniformity of identities on university websites and databases. While these things may not be important to most Rowan University students, ensuring LGBTQIA+ students are provided a campus they feel safe to be their true selves is very important.

Research Question 2

2. What are the perceptions of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students toward their involvement in programs and offerings at Rowan University and their impact on their sense of belonging?

Sense of belonging can be tied very closely to the campus culture and how welcoming the culture is for LGBTQIA+ students may reflect on their sense of belonging on the campus. Campus Culture can affect students' sense of belonging in different ways, but when a student does not feel like they belong, many negatives can come from this. For students don't feel that sense of belonging on campus and are worried about potential hostile campus environments are often unable to focus on their academics (Lucozzi, 1998, as cited in Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). This is extremely important to think about because students' primary reason to go to a higher education institution is to be a student and continue to learn in a field, they are interested in. If an LGBTQIA+ student is in

constant worry and feeling like they don't belong to a campus, there may be risk with their mental health and ability to achieve academic success.

It was refreshing to hear that majority of the participants felt like they belong to the campus. Most felt like they found their fit somewhere specific on campus, whether that was a club, job, or academic program, but there were still a few who struggled to navigate where they felt they fit. The use of group counseling was very popular among the study population, and

Conclusion

Based on the literature that was review in chapter two, that the sense of belonging and general ideas surrounds campus culture for LGBTQIA+ are highly important for retention of these students. While these students have had to navigate through a predominately white and heterosexual United States education system, it is vital that all minoritized and underrepresented students are given the same resources and included in the same efforts to increase retention and success.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

There are several recommendations that have been made based off the findings of this research study and the already existing literature on LGBTQIA+ college students:

Recommendations for Research

Future studies on LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students should be more focused on specific experiences that these students face. In the literature that has already been published, we know these students face far more discrimination, harassment, and bully

victimization, but more focus on the effects of the services offered for these students at an institution will help find further recommendations for best practice.

Recommendations for General Practice

While this study was focused just on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students at Rowan University, other Universities are the country should make a conscious effort to better serve these students on campus. Having groups on campus specific to serving LGBTQIA+ will help with dialing in the focus to provide better services and experiences to this group.

Recommendations for Rowan University

Similar to recommendations for general practice, Rowan University should make a dialed in effort to better understand and serve the LGBTQIA+ students. It is important to understand the needs and wants of this group of students on campus so their sense of belonging is enhanced and their Rowan University college experience is overall more positive.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

Review Complete

Initial
 PRO-2021-598 - LGBTQIA+ Undergraduate On-Campus Students' Perceptions and Satisfaction on Rowan University's Campus Climate

View
PDF ▾
 Delete

PI:
Stephanie Lezotte

Review Type:
Expedited

Current Analyst:
Katelynn Huff

Review Board:
Glassboro/CMSRU

Decision:
Approved

Policy:
Post-2018 Rule

Approvals
Task History
Letters
Attachments

Click to search

Filename	Uploaded By	Date Uploaded	
*** Emily.pdf	Emily Ohlson	11-30-2021 8:32 PM	Stamped
*** electronic-informed-consent_sber_adults_10.27.20 (1).docx (1).pdf	Emily Ohlson	12-21-2021 11:43 AM	Stamped
*** guidance_audio_videotape_addendum_final-10.26.20.docx	Emily Ohlson	12-21-2021 11:45 AM	
*** Interview Protocol.docx.pdf	Emily Ohlson	01-16-2022 11:27 PM	Stamped
*** Emily Ohlson Recruitment Flyer (1).pdf	Emily Ohlson	01-18-2022 10:11 AM	Stamped
*** IRB protocol.docx (3).pdf	Emily Ohlson	01-18-2022 10:14 AM	Stamped

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Modification Approval



DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00007111
IRB Chair Person: Dr. Ane Johnson
IRB Director: Eric Gregory
Effective Date: February 15, 2022

Notice of Approval - Modification

Study ID: PRO-2021-598
Title: LGBTQIA+ Undergraduate On-Campus Students' Perceptions and Satisfaction on Rowan University's Campus Climate
Principal Investigator: Stephanie Lezotte
Study Coordinator: Emily Ohlson
Study Expiration Date: January 17, 2023
Sponsor: Department Funded

Submission Type: Modification
Submission Status: Approved
Submission Approval Date: February 15, 2022

Review Type: Expedited

Expedited Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Description/Summary of Modification:
Minor change to interview protocol.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. What pseudonym would you like me to replace your name with when discussing my results in my published thesis?
2. What is your sexuality, gender identity, and preferred pronouns?
3. What is your academic year?
 - a. If not a Freshman, have you been enrolled at Rowan since your first year?
 - b. Have you lived on campus all the years you've been enrolled at Rowan?
4. How did you decide that you wanted to attend Rowan University?
 - a. Did you expect to find your fit anywhere specific on campus? (student employment, athletics, academic programs, etc.)
 - b. How did your expectations match up to the reality of where you've decided you fit on campus?
5. How does your initial opinion of the campus reflect your current opinion?
6. How well do you think you interact with those on campus? (Personal relationships with friends, coworkers, romantic relationships, classmates, etc. Also relationships with staff including bosses, professors, advisors, etc.)
 - a. What are some positive interactions?
 - b. What are some negative interactions?
7. How has your support system changed from entering college to now?
 - a. Does this support system share similarities with you in terms of the identities you hold? (i.e. racial or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) explain.

8. What programs, or services have you utilized at Rowan University? (i.e. events, health services, academic services, etc.
 - a. How fulfilled were you with these programs or services?
9. What does it mean to you to “belong” on a college campus?
 - a. What at Rowan University has made you feel like you belong?
 - b. Do you think it is easy for you to feel like you belong as someone who is LGBTQIA+ at Rowan?
 - c. If applicable - what has made you feel like you don’t belong?
10. Please describe to me how you feel about Rowan’s overall campus climate towards students
 - a. Does your answer change when I ask how Rowan’s campus climate is towards LGBTQIA+ students? Explain.
11. If applicable, please provide a time when you feel as though you were a target of harassment or discrimination because of your sexual orientation or identity.
 - a. What was the outcome of this situation and how did it affect you personally?
 - b. Do you know anyone who has been through something similar to this?
12. Is there anything you think Rowan lacks to offer to students that identify in the LGBTQIA+ community? (Can include programs, resources, accommodations, etc.)
13. Lastly, is there anything that I have not asked you in this series of questions that you think is important to include in your interview?