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# Supporting Mental, Emotional, and Sexual Wellness for LGBTQ+ College Students: A Special Commentary

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This brief commentary addresses the importance of campus-wide sexual health initiatives for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexual and affectional identities (LGBTQ+) college students. LGBTQ+ college students in the emerging adulthood life stage are particularly susceptible to stigmatized, inequitable physical and mental healthcare, making the need for intentional and affirming support from college counselors, on-campus healthcare providers, and student affairs professionals essential. This article addresses LGBTQ+ friendly communication strategies, specific counseling modalities for work surrounding LGBTQ+ college student sexual health, implications for counselor education and supervision, as well as ongoing research priorities for college counselors. Because sexual health is relevant throughout the lifespan, we emphasize the importance of instilling strong foundational principles of consent, safety, responsibility, and joyful exploration during this phase.

*Keywords:* counseling sexology, lgbtq+, emerging adulthood, sexual health, sexual wellness, college counseling, commentary

## Introduction

The lifespan development theory of emerging adulthood describes common aspects of development among people aged 18-29 who live in industrialized countries (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). This period of development is characterized by five features: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities and optimism (Arnett et al., 2014). Specifically related to the feature of identity exploration, emerging adults think seriously about how they define their intimate and romantic relationships as well as their personal lives (Arnett et al., 2014). They develop sexual identities by exploring emotional and physical intimacy through engaging in multiple sexual and romantic experiences (Arnett, 2000; Maas & Lefkowitz, 2014). Additionally, they seek stable social networks and supportive others who may assist in navigating feelings of instability within relationships and overall identity development (Arnett et al., 2014). Many emerging adults navigate these challenges while attending college (Arnett, 2014), and while this developmental phase may prove challenging for most, it may be especially difficult for members of marginalized communities, such as those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, or other sexual and affectual identities (LGBTQ+). We believe this implicates college campuses in providing supportive and LGBTQ+-friendly resources which emerging adults may utilize as they learn and grow.

The American College Health Association's (ACHA,

2021) Spring 2021 survey of American college students indicated 74.9% of participants reported having vaginal, oral, or anal sex with at least one partner within the last 12 months. Sexual exploration can be fun and empowering, and it is critical for emerging adults in college to have access to resources which support safe and responsible exploration of their sexual identities (Anderson, Eastman-Mueller, Henderson, & Even, 2015; Butler, Mooney, & Janousek, 2018; Cassidy et al., 2018; Hovick & Silver, 2019). This includes education regarding sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual violence, and unplanned pregnancies (Cassidy et al., 2018) via campus health centers. However, some campus health services have perpetuated the stigmatization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexual minority (LGBTQ+) students on campus (Cassidy et al., 2018; Savitsky, 2021). Upon visiting on-campus medical

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health centers, LGBTQ+ students have reported healthcare providers ignored their preferred pronouns and assumed heterosexual preferences, despite repeat visits (Cassidy et al., 2018; Savitsky, 2021). Stigmatization experienced during these visits may contribute to LGBTQ+ students feeling unsupported by their universities on issues related to sexual/affectual orientation and gender identity (S. R. Rankin, 2005). These feelings, accompanied by the harassment and violence LGBTQ+ students often face on college campuses, may motivate LGBTQ+ students to seek support through college counseling services (McKinley, Luo, Wright, & Kraus, 2014; S. R. Rankin, 2005). College counseling centers are typically the most accessible services to students seeking mental and emotional support (Campbell & Mena, 2021), which directs our attention to the need for college counselors to maintain knowledge, skills, and awareness of sexual identity development issues affecting all emerging adults, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. For these reasons, we address the need for holistic and affirming physical and mental/emotional health services on college campuses by reviewing data related to LGBTQ+ sexual health and its implications for counseling. We also discuss training and research needs in order to encourage more dialogue regarding these issues.

Gender and sexual minorities experience health inequalities, most notably in sexual (physical) health, mental health, and substance use (Hegazi & Pakianathan, 2018). Good sexual health on a college campus is dependent on both physical and mental wellness for its LGBTQ+ students. The World Health Organization (2006) defines sexual health as:

A state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Findings from a Garcia et al. (2014) study emphasize the importance of collaboration between health service staff and broader campus staff, including student affairs representatives and on-campus mental health professionals, because students often turn to campus staff for initial questions and concerns about their wellness. For LGBTQ+ college students specifically, it is critical that campus mental and physical (sexual) healthcare providers emphasize mastery of basic LGBTQ+ concepts and terminology; openness toward and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people; and affirming responsiveness to culturally specific needs, sensitivities, and challenges

in order to achieve better overall health within this community (Keuroghlian, Ard, & Makadon, 2017). Lechner et al. (2013) found that college students believed it was the university's responsibility to provide sexual health resources, referrals, and a supportive community.

## Clinical and Training Priorities

### LGBTQ+-Friendly Communication

Common presenting concerns among emerging adults who utilize college counseling centers include increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, feelings of unstable social support, self-doubt, lack of optimism for the future (Arnett, 2014), increased risk for suicide (Luca, Lytle, Yan, & Brownson, 2019), and an overall increased prevalence of the development of any mental health disorder, including substance abuse (Kessler et al., 2005). However, researchers have found college students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ population report higher levels of mental and emotional distress when compared with cisgender and heterosexual students, which is due to societal marginalization related stress (Effrig, Maloch, McAleavey, Locke, & Bieschke, 2014; S. Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014).

These feelings of social unacceptance are incongruent with emerging adults' developmental needs of finding stability and social support. Because college students, including those in the LGBTQ+ population, rely on university counseling centers to provide mental and emotional help, it is critical that college counselors attend to the marginalization and lack of social support experienced by their clients and consider the impact this may have on their sense of sexual health and wellness. Nevertheless, results of recent studies of college counseling centers suggest university counseling centers may be contributing to this issue. For example, many college counseling center websites exhibit a lack of LGBTQ+-affirming content (Campbell & Mena, 2021), as well as low frequencies of LGBTQ+-oriented group counseling services (Campbell & Mena, 2021; McKinley et al., 2014). Thus, we implore college counselors to enhance their LGBTQ+-friendly communication, outreach, and services in order to better position their offices as safe spaces where clients can feel accepted and supported, especially as students navigate this period of sexual and affectual identity development. This aligns with college counselors' professional imperative to provide affirming and culturally competent counseling services (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014), as well as scholarship from previous authors which demonstrate the need for culturally competent staff, particularly when it comes to supporting open communication regarding clients' sexual histories and enhancing clients' perceived experiences with services (Hegazi & Pakianathan, 2018).

## Specific Counseling Modalities

College counselors may also support LGBTQ+ students as they navigate emerging adulthood by employing counseling techniques which are relationship-oriented, empowering, and egalitarian. These include interventions based on relational-cultural theory (RCT) and narrative theory. Counselors who utilize RCT focus on social connections within their clients' lives in order to foster resilience (Flores & Sheely-Moore, 2020) and reformulate negative self-perceptions into self-affirming beliefs (Jordan, 2009). By processing relational images, examining individual isolation as a result of social injustice, and forming mutually empathetic relationships with clients, it is evident that relational-cultural counseling can be a largely beneficial modality for emerging adults (Jordan, 2009). Additionally, tenets of narrative theory can be used to assist LGBTQ+ clients in liberating themselves from internalized negative societal messages (Semmler & Williams, 2000), including what they experience within their college campuses relating to their sexual/affectional orientation or sexual behaviors. Because our relationships and interactions with other people often shape our perceptions of our reality, it is critical that LGBTQ+ students receive specialized, collaborative support as a protective factor against internalizing homophobia and/or transphobia. These postmodern, constructivist theories provide frameworks for college counselors to more effectively support LGBTQ+ clients as they navigate challenges associated with developing their sense of self, finding social support, and being part of minoritized communities on college campuses.

## Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

Because college students in the LGBTQ+ community experience unique developmental challenges, we encourage counselor educators to infuse in their curricula more training regarding emerging adulthood theory as well as emphasize the use of postmodern theories with LGBTQ+ clients. While this training is recommended within all counselor education programs regardless of accreditation status, it is especially important for counselor trainees enrolled in the student affairs/college counseling specialty area of programs accredited by the Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), as they have demonstrated an explicit interest in working directly with college students. Additionally, university and clinical supervisors of college counselors should directly address LGBTQ+ issues with supervisees to support positive clinical decision-making, facilitate appropriate referrals, and foster supervisees' client advocacy initiatives. This holistic approach to training college counselors supports developmentally-sensitive and LGBTQ+-friendly clinical work within college counseling centers.

## Research Priorities

For sexual and affectional minorities, it is important to allow research participants to remain anonymous in order to maintain a sense of confidentiality and, in turn, offer researchers larger, more diverse samples of relatively small populations (Graham et al., 2011). Providing LGBTQ+ college students with an opportunity to express their [dis]satisfaction with their school's attempts at affirmative mental and physical (sexual) healthcare via an anonymous survey at the conclusion of each academic year would allow individual colleges to make appropriate alterations to their sexual health services and resources.

## Conclusion

Though individual ideas about sexual health and wellness may develop rapidly during the emerging adulthood life phase, sexual health is relevant throughout the lifespan in social, economic, and political contexts (World Health Organization, 2006). For this reason, it is critical that college counselors and campus healthcare professionals provide LGBTQ+ students with appropriate, destigmatized care. Providing vulnerable sexual minority students with affordable, affirming healthcare and mental health counseling could ensure that students will graduate with foundational knowledge pertaining to maintenance of good mental and physical sexual health as they reach adulthood.

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