Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations

Office of Graduate Studies

8-2024

First-Year Experiences of LGBTQ+ Students: Belongingness, Resilience, and Utilization of Resources on Campus

Sarina Sauceda

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS:

BELONGINGNESS, RESILIENCE, AND UTILIZATION OF RESOURCES ON

CAMPUS

———————————

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

———————————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Child Development

———————————

by

Sarina Sauceda

August 2024

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS:

BELONGINGNESS, RESILIENCE, AND UTILIZATION OF RESOURCES ON

CAMPUS

_____

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

_____

by

Sarina Sauceda

August 2024

Approved by:

Stacy Morris, Committee Chair, Child Development

Kevin Rosales, Committee Member

Amy van Schagen, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

Entering college brings independence; however, it also presents new challenges. Navigating young adulthood, with academic/social pressures, makes the first-year increasingly difficult (Alessi et al., 2017). LGBTQ+ students are at heightened risk of negative mental health outcomes (e.g., increased depression/anxiety levels; Alessi et al., 2017; Thacker Darrow et al., 2022). For LGBTQ+ students, the first-year of college poses additional issues, such as discrimination or lack of belonging (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022; Hood et al., 2018). Overall, there is little research of this population, and less is known about specifically the first-year. It is important to understand those experiences, so that universities can better support these students (Hood et al., 2018).The present study is an exploratory qualitative study, utilizing semi-structured interviews. Interviews focused on mental health, belongingness, and campus resource quality to understand LGBTQ+ first-year college students' experiences and identify ways to better support them through this transition. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), which highlights discrimination and prejudice as additional stressors for LGBTQ+ first-years, was used as a theoretical framework to guide interview development. The Listening Guide, as developed by Gilligan et al. (2003), primarily guided data analysis; this method is particularly useful for centering the voices of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ students, and uplifting their stories and experiences, as told in their own words. This study aimed to explore the first-year experiences of LGBTQ+ college students, assess

the effectiveness of campus resources, and identify any improvements to further enhance their college experience. Five LGBTQ+ students were recruited to reflect on their first-years at a Southern California university. Results of the study highlighted participants' difficulty with their transitions to the first-year. Participants shared their experiences with mental health challenges, while also navigating academics, struggling with identity concealment, family expectations, and more that negatively impacted their first-years. Positive adjustment to the first-year was commonly associated with finding peer support and belongingness on campus. In terms of campus resources, participants were satisfied, overall, with what was available, but also shared feedback that could inform practice on campus to better support LGBTQ+ students' adjustment to college. Suggestions for future research are shared as well, such as utilizing a quantitative approach to reach a larger sample size. Topics to explore include the role of third places in LGBTQ+ belongingness on campus (a concept mentioned by participants) and within-group differences of the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students, college, first-year, mental health, sense of belonging, campus resources

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In recent years, research surrounding sexual and gender minority youth (those identifying as LGBTQ+)[1] has grown substantially, with much of the work being focused on mental health outcomes (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022; Alessi et al., 2017). In particular, LGBTQ+ college students are at heightened risk of depression, stress, and anxiety (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022; Alessi et al., 2017). However, college can also bring about other issues, such as academic and social pressures (Alessi et al., 2017). The first-year of college can be particularly difficult, as many of these challenges are now faced on a new campus, while also navigating emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 29; Alessi et al., 2017). In fact, LGBTQ+ students are three times more likely to experience mental health issues in college, compared to their straight, cis peers (O'Neill et al., 2022). For this paper, mental health will be defined as one's overall psychological well-being; mental health issues will be defined as significant challenges experienced as a result of symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Stress will be defined as psychological responses to pressure and new changes such as starting college, handling multiple responsibilities, and more. Colleges do offer support to their LGBTQ+ students undergoing such challenges, but those resources may not

---

[1] The LGBTQ+ acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. The "+" allows for expansion of additional gender and sexual identities that belong in the community (e.g., non-binary, asexual).

always be efficient. Also, many LGBTQ+ students may not seek out these resources, in fear of being outed or discriminated against; some resources, such as counseling, may not even be accessible due to schedule conflicts (Hood et al., 2018).

Inequalities surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within an educational setting are not new. Given recent events though, this has become a growing concern for community members. With the passage of mandated reporting laws in some states, high school officials are required to disclose LGBTQ+ students' identities to family (Dolan, 2023). This can become a dangerous situation for students who come from less accepting families and unsafe home environments. As these students then enter higher education, the role of universities in providing a safe environment becomes even more critical. For some LGBTQ+ students, university may be the only space in which they find that safety and acceptance.

It is crucial to understand how universities can foster such an environment for their LGBTQ+ students. Although research about LGBTQ+ college students has expanded, little is known about how colleges can actually support these students, and even less is known about specifically first-year students. One study, conducted by Alessi et al. (2017), asked LGBTQ+ students to reflect back on their first-years, examining how LGBTQ+ students have manifested resilience in their first-year, such as how students responded to minority stress (e.g., did they seek out safe spaces on campus or made use of certain social supports?). This study, however, only utilized focus groups, so

many participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their thoughts in a group setting. Thus, the present study focused on one-on-one interviews with participants. This may provide a safer and comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences with the researcher. Likewise, Alessi et al. (2017) did not examine mental health outcomes during the first-year, nor were available campus resources taken into account. These additional factors, which are largely unexplored in prior research, can provide a more thorough overview of the first-year, and the current study explored these in-depth.

The present study utilized a qualitative design, with semi-structured interviews. These focused on mental health, belongingness, and campus resource quality to understand LGBTQ+ first-year college students' experiences and identify ways to better support them. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), which highlights discrimination and prejudice as additional stressors for LGBTQ+ first-years, was used as a theoretical framework to guide interview development and analysis. Analysis was guided by the *Listening Guide* method, which can highlight participants' stories, with the purpose of centering their voices and, in their own words, knowing what support is needed for this population. With the *Listening Guide* method, LGBTQ+ students can directly share their first-year experiences and provide insights into improving the first-year transition. This study aimed to explore the first-year experiences of LGBTQ+ college students, assess the effectiveness of campus resources, and identify any improvements to further enhance their college experience.

LGBTQ+ Students Entering College

First-year experiences of college students, regardless of demographic, continue to be of interest to researchers. This is a step in the right direction; however, researchers should begin to focus on specific aspects of the first-year experience, rather than examining it as a whole, as the first-year can present challenges that may negatively affect college completion rates (Keup, 2023; Sotardi et al., 2022). Further, some demographics of students are likely to face distinct and differing challenges in their first-years that are important to consider. LGBTQ+ students specifically are at higher risk of negative mental health outcomes, such as increases in levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, compared to their straight, cis peers (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022; Alessi et al., 2017); Students may find it difficult to ask for the resources and supports that their campus offers, as they explore how accepting (or not) their campus is, and determine how comfortable they feel disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity (Alessi et al., 2017).

A wide range of existing research notes that LGBTQ+ students report fearing their first-year of college as a result of potential discrimination against their identity (Alessi et al., 2017). These issues may be associated with lower sense of belonging at college for LGBTQ+ students, which may further impact mental health outcomes, particularly in this already sensitive period of transition (Sotardi et al., 2022). In the present study, I interviewed LGBTQ+ students about their transition into college to better understand their experiences associated with

this transition, their campus experience (i.e., resources, sense of belonging, and experiences of discrimination), and their mental health.

The purpose of this literature review will be to examine this existing research to get an idea of what needs still exist for LGBTQ+ first-years and how the current study could add to the literature. Reviewing existing literature on the topic of LGBTQ+ youth is necessary in order to assess what limitations exist, and where additional research would be most beneficial. For the purpose of this paper, youth will be defined as emerging adults, or those from ages 18 to 29. Colleges can benefit from future research so that they know how to support these students in their unique experiences. The literature review will open by stating the theoretical lens through which all research will be examined. The minority stress theory, developed by Meyer (2003), will serve as the primary theoretical framework. The past research will be grouped under three categories. The categories are as follows: mental health care in LGBTQ+ youth, navigating college as an LGBTQ+ student, and belongingness on college campuses.

Theoretical Framework

The minority stress theory is often described as an extension of social stress theories. Social stress describes the societal factors that are often the source of stress (e.g., family, institutions, and discrimination) rather than the individual factors (Meyer, 2003). Minority and marginalized groups are defined as those that have, historically, had unequal access to power and resources in society, as well as experiencing heightened identity discrimination (Mossakowski,

2014). Marginalized groups, such as sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ+) are more vulnerable as a result of societal disparities and having little resources or support available (Mossakowski, 2014). Intersections of identity can have an impact as well. In other words, forms of discrimination may overlap across an individual's identity groups that they belong to. For example, a gay person of color may be vulnerable to both experiences with homophobia and racism within their communities (Mossakowski, 2014).

Meyer (2003) uses the term *minority stress theory* to highlight these challenges and differentiate from other social stress theories, to convey its emphasis on prejudice. When discussing minority stress, there are three assumptions: it is (1) unique to marginalized groups, (2) chronic or ongoing, and (3) socially based or institutional (Meyer, 2003). For specifically LGBTQ+ struggles, there is another process of interest: that of concealing identity (Meyer, 2003). In other words, LGBTQ+ individuals, whether at home, school, or the workplace, are often forced to hide their sexuality to avoid rejection or harm. Additionally, many LGBTQ+ individuals report being hypervigilant or on guard in their interactions, so that they can assess if it is safe to disclose their identity (Meyer, 2003). Combined, these factors take a heavy toll on the individual (Meyer, 2003).

Discrimination, in particular, can be a daily occurrence for individuals within the community, hence the prevalence of minority stress for this particular group (Meyer, 2003). Fear of discrimination can also be one reason that

individuals feel the need to conceal their identities in the first place (Meyer, 2003). This can appear in a number of ways, from subtle to more overt forms. For example, microaggressions are defined as a form of discrimination which may be subtle, indirect, or unintentional (Seelman et al., 2020; Woodford et al., 2018). Microaggressions towards the LGBTQ+ community can include comments such as "you don't look gay" or "it's just a phase." Although these comments are not meant to be blatantly harmful, they can still be harmful, and are often associated with heightened stress and anxiety for the targets of these comments (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). In particular, for LGBTQ+ individuals, their identities can be minimized and othered through experiencing microaggressions. For trans and gender-diverse individuals, this can also come in the form of systematic inequalities, which includes the lack of gender neutral bathrooms. Likewise, while these actions are not directly meant to exclude such individuals, they can create an environment in which the victim does not feel welcome or safe enough to express themselves (Yost & Gilmore, 2011; Seelman et al., 2020). For trans individuals in particular, such environmental microaggressions can be linked with further isolation and, in some cases, suicidality (Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

More overt forms of discrimination (such as blatant hate crimes, harassment, and violence) are similarly associated with psychological distress and suicidality (Yost & Gilmore, 2011; Seelman et al., 2020). Overt discrimination is explicit in its intent to harm, victimize, or exclude an LGBTQ+ individual. Nonetheless, any type of discrimination is likely to have negative effects on one's

mental health. Minority stress theory provides a framework for understanding that these forms of discrimination are a major part of the LGBTQ+ daily experience but that they are also experienced alongside other stressors already present in these individuals' lives (including identity concealment, lack of resources, and so on).

Coping mechanisms of LGBTQ+ people are also important, and are addressed in the minority stress theory. Coping mechanisms can be used in response to discrimination specifically or as a means to cope with minority stress more generally. Coming out, or disclosing one's sexual or gender identity, is a unique event for LGBTQ+ people. This event is described as an example of overcoming adversity, or resilience (Meyer, 2003). Other examples of resilience include self-acceptance or pride in one's identity and seeking family support (Meyer, 2003). However, the theory distinguishes these examples as personal resources (Meyer, 2003). Marginalized groups commonly use personal resources to cope with stress, but group and institutional resources are also necessary for mental health benefits (Meyer, 2003). An example of a group resource is maintaining contact with those of similar identities; an example of an institutional resource is an organization or dedicated space provided by an institution, such as a college (Meyer, 2003). In some cases, like not disclosing one's identity, LGBTQ+ people may struggle with accessing these group and institutional resources (Meyer, 2003).

In the present study, the minority stress theory can provide additional context for the experiences that impact LGBTQ+ first-years. With this theory in mind, it can be assumed that LGBTQ+ first-years are at higher risk of depression, anxiety, and stress. For example, entering college for the first time can be considered an additional stressor on top of minority stress. Also, personal and group resources (such as belongingness and on-campus support) are of interest in the present study. Examining these factors together can offer a cohesive picture of the LGBTQ+ first-year experience. This can share how these students cope with discrimination or prejudice upon entering college. This provides a crucial first step in practice and policy implementation, by understanding what is and is not working in terms of support.

Mental Health Care for LGBTQ+ Youth

By determining trends in LGBTQ+ mental health, it might be possible to identify best practices, especially as this population enters college. In other words, if colleges can identify where LGBTQ+ youth struggle most with mental health, then they can be prepared to provide adequate resources on campus in their early adulthood. Using the minority stress theory, we can already assume that LGBTQ+ youth are especially at risk for negative mental health outcomes.

The landscape has shifted for LGBTQ+ students over recent decades, but support is still heavily needed. One qualitative study conducted by Fish (2020) observes the growing support and affirmation for LGBTQ+ youth, with the age of coming out decreasing in the last decade alone. In other words, LGBTQ+

9

individuals are coming out earlier in their lives, such as in high school. Still, mental health issues persist for LGBTQ+ youth. They are more vulnerable to depression/anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Stigma from family and peers is a common issue as well (Fish, 2020).

As a result, mental health interventions are in demand for LGBTQ+ youth. Beneficially, U.S. high schools have introduced policies to provide safer environments for their LGBTQ+ students, such as establishing LGBTQ+ clubs (Snapp et al., 2015). Students at these schools report higher senses of belonging on campus, less stigmatization, and less depression/anxiety. However, larger-scale interventions are still needed (e.g., at the clinical level). As of 2020, only nine evidence-based interventions exist for LGBTQ+ mental health at U.S. colleges, to the author's knowledge. Prevention and intervention efforts can support LGBTQ+ students before mental health challenges escalate; colleges can play a role in this support as well. Additionally, even when resources for LGBTQ+ students exist, these resources may receive backlash and be pressured to withdraw from campuses (Coley & Das, 2020; Fish, 2020). The present study can learn more about the role of colleges in preventing negative mental health outcomes through, for example, getting feedback from LGBTQ+ students, which can be valuable in providing additional population-appropriate mental health resources and in protecting these resources that remain under attack.

LGBTQ+ students may have unique needs in comparison to their peers and are experiencing minority stress on top of any already-present mental health issues (Lothwell et al., 2020). This includes discrimination in the workplace, family rejection, peer victimization, and even legislation discriminating against them (Lothwell et al., 2020). Individuals and contexts supporting LGBTQ+ populations (e.g., educators, administrators, clinicians and mental health professionals) must be made aware of these risks so that they are equipped to handle LGBTQ-specific experiences. A longitudinal study by Painter et al. (2018) offers other recommendations for improving mental health outcomes in LGBTQ+ individuals. This study examined the effectiveness of treatment from the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children With Serious Emotional Disturbance (CMHI). The main philosophy of the CMHI is to offer individualized treatment plans, that scaffold that individual's strength and take into account cultural differences (Painter et al., 2018). One important finding from this study was that LGBTQ+ youth who received longer treatment plans (1 year) reported the most improvement in their mental health and wellbeing.

With that in mind, it is possible that intervention plans are more effective when they are long-term. Finally, as mentioned by both Fish (2020) and Lothwell et al. (2020), LGBTQ+ youth benefit most from treatment that is sensitive to their unique needs. Painter et al. (2018) noted that participants reported higher satisfaction when their clinician took their sexual or gender identities into account. Therefore, it is crucial to gather the perspectives from LGBTQ+

11

individuals, to ensure that mental health services are adequate in addressing concerns. Mental health services on college campuses could benefit from this knowledge as well, and the present study can provide those perspectives through the interviews.

Navigating College as an LGBTQ+ Student

Transitioning into the First-Year. As a major life transition, entering college can introduce new challenges as an incoming LGBTQ+ student. This can also be the case before attending their college of choice; LGBTQ+ students may put significant time into choosing their college, weighing factors such as perceived safety of a given campus, the available resources, LGBTQ+-friendliness, etc. (Glazzard et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that for some students it may not always be a matter of choice; students may have to attend a certain campus either for its location, financial reasons, or to help with family. This can also lead to some students remaining in unaccepting environments (Kirsch et al., 2015). Regardless of identity, transitioning to college can be frightening and unfamiliar; for LGBTQ+ students, when keeping minority stress theory in mind, this can also include fears of safety and dealing with stigma. Understanding these experiences and common concerns can inform how to make the process easier for future LGBTQ+ students, thereby supporting their mental health and well-being.

Even as students do commit to their college of choice, fears of potential discrimination continue to be felt and for some individuals, moving away from their hometowns can be all the more daunting (Glazzard et al., 2020; Kirsch et

al., 2015). Nearly half of incoming LGBTQ+ students already anticipate discrimination from students and others on campus, and so many will opt to conceal their identities until they can confirm their campus is safe enough (Seelman et al., 2020). These fears are not unfounded; according to research published by Kirsch et al. (2015), both heterosexual/cisgender and LGBTQ+ students experience levels of psychological distress throughout their first-year, and these negative effects are often attributed to the new environment, adjusting to college classes, and struggling to meet peers. Additional research from Debord et al. (1998) finds that although both populations do experience distress during this transition, LGBTQ+ first-years are particularly at risk of negative mental health outcomes and victimization. Compared to their straight, cis peers, LGBTQ+ students starting college are also at much greater risk of suicidality, lower self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Kirsch et al., 2015). This comes as a result of the challenges unique to this community, such as experiencing identity discrimination and safety concerns with housing accommodations.

Housing, such as on-campus dormitories or apartments, can often be a source of discrimination for LGBTQ+ students, with many citing unaccepting roommates (Glazzard et al., 2020). As minority stress theory states, this leads to many students feeling pressure to conceal their identities, even within their own living spaces (Glazzard et al., 2020). Some universities do provide LGBTQ-friendly housing, but spaces are limited and this may not solve the issue for off-campus students that may still experience discrimination while attending.

Adjusting to the first-year of college can, as a result, become more difficult for this population in general, as each of these different factors begin to pile up. Therefore, it is crucial for colleges to have systems or resources in place that can mitigate these issues for incoming students, particularly those most at risk of the negative effects.

Campus Support and Resources. The availability and quality of campus resources can play a critical role in easing LGBTQ+ students into their first-year of college (Kirsch et al., 2015). As mentioned, some prospective LGBTQ+ students may choose a university depending on what resources are available and what the climate is like on campus for LGBTQ+ identities. Merely having the support available is not enough, however; the quality of the campus resources is crucial as well. Minority stress theory already suggests that LGBTQ+ students are experiencing unique struggles; in that case, campus resources should also be specifically tailored to meet the needs that LGBTQ+ students have. Examples of such resources include LGBTQ-specific spaces, courses and workshops about LGBTQ+ identities or history, and counseling. Added attention should be made so that first-year LGBTQ+ students are aware of these resources and how to access them. Students are spending much of their first-years learning to navigate their chosen campus and may not know everything there is. Even if the support is available, LGBTQ+ students may not be informed (Kirsch et al., 2015; Woodford et al., 2018). Having resources and events catered to LGBTQ+ identities can be a way to reduce the risk of negative mental health outcomes and make the

transition into the first-year a more pleasant, fulfilling experience (Woodford et al., 2018).

In addition to providing support for LGBTQ+ students, campus resources can be key to creating a welcoming and inclusive climate, one that incoming students would feel comfortable choosing to attend. Coley & Das (2020) state that a way to create a safer college environment is to have LGBTQ+ organizations. 62% of U.S. colleges offer such organizations, and students who join usually report lower rates of depression (Coley & Das, 2020). Another qualitative study by Hill et al. (2020) interviewed LGBTQ+ students about their overall college experience. Thriving in college was most often indicated by involvement on campus, especially by joining LGBTQ+ organizations, befriending other LGBTQ+ students, and seeking counseling when needed (Hill et al., 2020). After all, a primary aspect of the first-year experience is the social component, such as meeting peers; for LGBTQ+ students, finding accepting peers and others from the community can benefit them significantly as they adjust to college.

Role of the "Third Place" on Campus. Community on campus does not have to come from LGBTQ-specific organizations. Some students may benefit from simply the existence of communal spaces on campus, where they can connect and relax with their peers, regardless of identity. There has been growing research on the concept of "third places," which can illustrate this idea. Third places are defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) as social spaces that are separate from either the home or workplace environment. Oldenburg

(1989) elaborates that third places exist as spaces for one to unwind and meet new or familiar faces. Furthermore, a society benefits from third places in that they foster a sense of community and belonging, as well as promoting acts of civic engagement (Oldenburg, 1989).

Recent research often examines the existence of third places within the context of the LGBTQ+ community, specifically for youth. For many young LGBTQ+ individuals, home may not be a safe and accepting space. This requires some individuals to go outside the home for a welcoming environment, and a third place can provide that opportunity. Third places can include locations such as libraries, cafes, or public parks, where individuals can participate in their communities, meet up with peers, and simply exist without the stress of identity concealment. Third places can also be beneficial when they explicitly present themselves as welcoming, such as the inclusion of pride flags, gender-neutral bathrooms, and other affirming messages (Garvey et al., 2019). Third places are already commonly found on many college campuses, such as libraries and study spots. For LGBTQ+ students, these spaces can be particularly valuable in perceiving their campus as inclusive and for allowing them to express themselves without feeling the need to hide who they are (Pryor, 2018; Garvey et al., 2019). Such campus spaces provide students the chance to be together with their peers and exist as a part of their campus community. Gaining this sense of belonging on campus is a milestone of the first-year transition, and LGBTQ+

students specifically may struggle with achieving this (Sotardi et al., 2022). So, third places may be an effective first step towards achieving belongingness.

Belongingness on a College Campus

For this study, belongingness will be defined as feeling that one belongs or fits into a given setting. In the context of a college campus, "belongingness" can also be defined as how connected, accepted, and welcomed students perceive themselves to be by the general campus community (Parker, 2021). These perceptions are of particular importance when thinking of marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ+ students. For example, whereas heterosexual or cisgender students might report that they feel supported by their peers on campus, LGBTQ+ students may not feel that same connection (Sotardi et al., 2022; BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Additionally, even within the LGBTQ+ community, there are differences of belongingness between different sexualities. Namely, students who identify as queer often feel less seen on campus compared to those who identify as gay (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021).

Belongingness can positively affect adjustment to the first-year in particular, as well as improve mental health for LGBTQ+ students (Sotardi et al., 2022; Blankenau, et al., 2022). Belongingness for LGBTQ+ students can be associated with lower levels of anxiety and psychological distress. LGBTQ+ students who report feeling that they belong at their campus often adjust much better to the first-year compared to those who report low belongingness; these students enjoy benefits such as feeling more motivated, reporting higher

self-esteem and self-worth, as well as overall better mental health and well-being, despite the challenges that the first-year may bring (Sotardi et al., 2022). This makes belongingness an important concept to consider when exploring the LGBTQ+ first-year experience, and universities can influence how LGBTQ+ students perceive their campus climate (Seelman et al., 2016). Understanding how LGBTQ+ students define and gain a sense of belonging can inform universities as they develop inclusive practices, curriculum, and more to anticipate their incoming students.

It is important to remember that belongingness is a general term, and LGBTQ+ students may perceive belongingness in different ways across different settings. Even within a college campus, LGBTQ+ students may report a sense of belonging with their peers, but not within the university more broadly (Sotardi et al., 2022). A need exists then for universities to better understand their student demographics regarding gender and sexual minorities, noting where support is lacking and ensuring that all students feel welcomed at the institution. Nonbinary students interviewed by Dolan (2023) emphasize that belonging goes beyond merely "fitting in" and that feeling accepted and even embraced for who you are is what's most crucial. This illustrates that, perhaps most importantly, gathering input from LGBTQ+ students can help universities make effective decisions when it comes to designing these affirmative spaces. It can be valuable to know how the students themselves are perceiving belongingness in certain areas, especially as this can vary. For some students, any space on campus that asks

for pronouns or preferred names were noted to be of comfort; for other students, certain campus organizations or even specific programs held on campus helped them feel a sense of belonging (Dolan, 2023). These experiences can vary from campus to campus, and even more so from student to student. Hearing each students' experiences with belonging can be useful in understanding what goes into making a given space feel safe and comfortable.

Gap in Literature

Upon reviewing past literature, it is encouraging to see that, in recent years, extensive research is being done with LGBTQ+ populations. There remains, however, certain points that need to be explored and gaps to consider that previous studies have not addressed. Notably, research does not often go in depth with its participants, such as through the use of individual interviews. This method is particularly valuable with this population, so that researchers can gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences as a marginalized group. Additionally, past research has not extensively explored aspects of the first-year specifically, instead looking at factors like mental health and belongingness as parts of the overall college experience. It is known that the first-year may present unique challenges, and it is important to examine it on its own. When it comes to campus resources, research is even more limited, with student feedback being needed to understand their quality. LGBTQ+ student feedback is also necessary in implementing changes that need to be made, and students themselves are crucial in laying out those changes since they are the target demographic.

19

<u>Present Study</u>

       The present study can contribute to these past findings by gathering input directly from LGBTQ+ students, getting an understanding of how the first-year experience is for this population, as well as how the campus can improve. Additionally, this can inform the campus for accepting future students and ensuring that it is an LGBTQ-inclusive space and can offer adequate resources for all LGBTQ+ students who may be planning to attend. The present study examines first-year experiences by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 5 LGBTQ+ students. Students were asked to reflect on their use of campus resources, perception of campus climate and belongingness, and any mental health challenges in the first-year.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to build upon existing research with LGBTQ+ college students, by specifically targeting their experiences upon first starting college and examining resources that could potentially be associated with their mental health. This exploratory, qualitative study recruited five LGBTQ+ college students who have completed at least their first semester, and asked them to reflect back on starting at their university. Students were invited to voluntarily participate in semi-structured interviews. They received monetary compensation for their time, in the form of $20 e-gift cards. The interviews explored participants' experiences as they navigated their first-year of college, with respect to their LGBTQ+ identity. Questions included experiences with discrimination on campus, mental health, usage of campus resources, and sense of belonging. The following research questions were investigated in the study:

- How do LGBTQ+ college students experience stress, anxiety, depression, and sense of belonging at their university in their first-year of college?
- How do LGBTQ+ students understand their experiences with campus resources and their association with their mental wellbeing?
- How do LGBTQ+ students understand their experience of discrimination/prejudice and the association with their mental health?

Population and Sample Selection

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix C), participants (n = 5) were recruited from a Southern California university campus. This campus is a public university with a high number of first-generation college students and students of color. I aimed to conduct interviews with 5-10 participants; in order to meet thesis submission deadlines, however, recruitment ended once five interviews were reached. Flyers were posted throughout campus. Purposeful sampling was the primary method of selecting participants, to ensure that the study gathers data about the LGBTQ+ population at the target campus. A social sciences department advertised the study by sending a department-wide email to undergraduate and graduate students in the program. Criterion sampling was also utilized, so that participants both identified as LGBTQ+ and already completed at least their first semester at the recruited university. This was achieved through an online recruitment form that was shared on the flyers (see Appendix A); this form asked students if they identify as LGBTQ+, what year they are in college, and if they are a transfer student. Students that fall under the selected criteria were contacted for times/dates that worked best for them. Consent forms were collected, and then the interviews were scheduled and conducted.

As this study is exploratory, its purpose is to first gather input from a small group of students to understand their first-year experiences and what the most pressing issues may be. Although a sample size of five is too few participants to

generalize to the wider LGBTQ+ community, this was not the aim of the present study. This study will lay the groundwork for a future quantitative study that can reach a larger number of participants and provide more extensive feedback for colleges to consider regarding supporting their LGBTQ+ students and can generalize more broadly to the population to address the gap in the literature.

Instrumentation

The study used an interview protocol to guide questions (see Appendix B). Resources were defined as counseling services, advising, LGBTQ+ clubs, and so on that are available on campus. Mental health was defined as anxiety, depression, and stress (stressors included academic stress, social stress, and any instances of discrimination during the first-year). Other questions asked participants about aspects of their first-year, such as concerns they had upon starting. Participants were also asked about their experiences with mental health and the potential impact during their first-year, sense of belongingness, and other self-developed questions.

Design and Procedure

The interviews were semi-structured, with predetermined questions from the interview protocol developed to guide participants to share their lived experiences in their own words, but allowing the researcher to flexibly navigate the interview process as needed (e.g., rearranging the order of questions during

the interview, if it helped the interview flow for a particular participant response).

Participants were reminded upon signing the consent form that participation is

voluntary and that their identities/names will be protected. Four interviews were

conducted online via Zoom and one was conducted in-person. Each interview

lasted, on average, approximately an hour. To further protect participants, the

in-person interview was conducted in a private room on the campus. Participants

who were interviewed over Zoom had the option to turn their cameras off or have

a pseudonym on screen. Due to the sensitive nature of some questions,

participants were given a debriefing information sheet with resources related to

mental health support. All interviews were audio recorded (with permission from

participants) and transcribed. Zoom automatically provided transcripts, which

were uploaded to Google Drive. I double checked transcripts for accuracy by

listening to the recordings and correcting as necessary (e.g., eliminating breaks

in the audio, correcting misheard words, etc.). Once data were transcribed and

organized, they were stored via cloud on Google Drive.

Analytic Plan

Interview data were analyzed using the *Listening Guide* method, which will

be explained in more detail in the following section. Using the *Listening Guide*,

transcripts were coded across and between cases, with common themes in

participant responses being highlighted. Analysis was conducted on Google

Docs (such as utilizing the comments feature and color coding by theme), where

the transcripts were stored. The analysis will support understanding primary issues that exist for LGBTQ+ first-year college students, as well as what improvements can benefit this population as a whole.

Listening Guide

The *Listening Guide* is a method of analysis that is particularly useful for qualitative research. Specifically, this method can be of use for analyzing transcripts of interviews, such as in the present study's case. As developed by Gilligan et al. (2003), the *Listening Guide* is centered on curiosity, rather than judgment. Researchers who utilize this method are encouraged to pay attention to what is unexpected and to, above all, *listen* before anything else. This emphasis comes from going beyond merely reading, and instead, taking the time to truly listen and understand that there is much to learn from an individual's experiences. Furthermore, the *Listening Guide* finds its roots in feminist theories, which goes on to highlight individual experiences as complex and having multiple layers (Gilligan et al., 2003). For the present study, the *Listening Guide* can be helpful in understanding LGBTQ+ students' stories. It can highlight not only the individual stories themselves, but it can also help in determining common themes across participants, as well as any differing themes. This can lead to noting what needs exist, in general, for LGBTQ+ students, or in understanding how nuanced these experiences really are.

Active listening is an important tool for any interview, but this is especially true for the present study. It is crucial to listen to the individual (first and

foremost), but we also should know, as researchers, how to appropriately engage and make sense of their stories (Gilligan et al., 2003). For marginalized communities in particular, these individuals have, historically, had their voices silenced or ignored; even within the literature, marginalized communities may still see little representation or that their issues are not being brought to the forefront of research. The *Listening Guide* offers the unique opportunity to simply be heard, particularly for those who have been historically silenced. The narrative style of the *Listening Guide* specifically gives way for individuals to share their stories, in their own words, and these stories may give way to change.

The *Listening Guide* provides some general steps for researchers to follow for analysis, described in the following subsections.

Step 1: Listening for the Plot. This takes place during the first listening, in which the primary goal is to gather an understanding of the main storyline or plot of the participant's responses. Other elements to take into account include trends of repeated words or phrases, possible contradictions or omissions, etc…

Gilligan et al. (2003) warn researchers about letting their own values or biases inhibit their listening. To combat this, they suggest the use of the "reader response" during this first step, which includes the researcher being mindful and taking note of their own emotional responses, remaining questions, and other thoughts. Gilligan et al. (2003) also suggest that researchers go beyond simply noting these reactions, and instead exploring them alongside interpreting interview responses.

Step 2: Listening for the I. During the second listening, the researcher focuses on how the participant speaks about themselves, particularly paying attention to the use of first-person pronouns (i.e., "I" statements). The researcher can highlight each use of first-person pronouns, compiling them together (in order) and making sense of how the participant may view or describe themselves (Gilligan et al., 2003).

Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voices. The objective of the third listening is to now examine the transcripts within the context of the research questions. In this listening, the researcher should also be focusing on other voices in the participant's story, such as how they speak about other relationships or aspects of their lives (Gilligan et al., 2003). Voices in this story, however, may be either complementary or in conflict with one another (hence the name here of "contrapuntal"). The researcher should be sure to highlight these instances and write any additional reader responses. The research questions should shape this step in particular, such as guiding what pieces of the story the researcher will focus on. Once the third listening is finished, the researcher can use the identified contrapuntal voices and their research questions to reflect.

Step 4: Composing an Analysis. Finally, the researcher has ideally gone back through each interview transcript multiple times. Any themes should be noted, especially similarities and differences both across and within interviews. To make sense of these stories, the researcher should continuously revisit their research questions and examine the transcripts through that lens.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Results of the listening guide analysis will be presented in the following
section, first with an overview of interview participants and then by presenting
themes. After participants are introduced, this section will go into the themes
observed across and within each interview.

Introduction to Participants

This section will include brief introductions to each participant, in which an
overview of that participant's demographic information, their role on campus and
as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and other self-reported goals and traits
will be provided.

Daniel

Daniel is finishing up his last semester as an undergraduate student in a
social work program. After graduating, he will continue on for his Masters in
Social Work. He describes himself as a first-generation Latino college student,
and so he is the first in his family to attend college. He lives with his parents and
two younger sisters. Daniel emphasizes the importance of the relationships in his
life, particularly with family. Upon starting college, Daniel described himself as
feeling anxious and guilty. Although he still lives with family while attending
classes, he shares that he felt a sense of guilt about not having as much time for
them anymore.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Daniel identifies as gay. He uses he/him pronouns. He first began to question his identity when he was in 7th grade. To friends, he is fully out, and he came out to his parents at around age 21. After coming out to family, Daniel felt that his relationship with them has gotten stronger; his father, in particular, appears to be more open to Daniel's emotions and having these types of conversations. Daniel has a partner, whom he also describes as a great source of support and someone who he can go to when he is struggling. For his first-year, Daniel expressed his desire to get more involved with the LGBTQ+ community and meet new people. One of the first things he did when starting college was participate in his university's LGBTQ+ resource center. Throughout the interview, Daniel's passion for serving his community and speaking out against injustices was evident:

> …We belong here, I belong here, like I'm gonna make sure you know who I am…I think my thing is, like, being the person I wish I had when I was younger…because I feel like there isn't enough representation [of the LGBTQ+ community] . And, like, hey, we matter and I'm gonna make sure that I do my part.

Daniel also acknowledges his privilege as an individual at a higher education institution and with the positive relationship he shares with family, as he understands that not every LGBTQ+ individual may have the same. He hopes to use his status to uplift other voices and to do his part in helping those who are

not as privileged. Daniel is also active in volunteering at different LGBTQ+ organizations within his community and attending a variety of Pride events.

Perla

Perla is in her third year studying child development. She identifies as lesbian and uses she/her pronouns. She lived with her family during her first-year, but has since moved in with her wife and four cats. Perla took a gap year between attending high school and college, as she had been considering attending community college before settling on the university in the study. She expressed her anxiety about returning to college after her break and she worried that she would end up not being able to finish in four years. She is a first generation student.

Perla began to question her identity in high school and considered coming out to her family at this time. However, she described this as a confusing time for her, going back and forth about her sexuality and writing herself off as "confused". She ended up not coming out in high school, but Perla did eventually tell her parents when she started college and shared:

> My mom cried. They were upset. I feel like my mom wasn't upset at me. It was more of a society thing, like, what are people gonna say, or how are you gonna get treated? She was just very like, I don't want you to get treated badly or different. My dad was very blank, like, don't talk to me. I don't want to hear it. It was very scary.

Perla described her relationship with family as rough following this, but as of now, she feels like she is in a much better place and credits her wife and getting to move away from family. She remains in touch with her parents and feels that things are improving. She is also becoming more confident in her LGBTQ+ identity, whereas before starting college, she was worried about how others would react upon learning that she is lesbian. She now works at a daycare center on campus and has met several of her closest friends through this position. These are people that are in the same program as her and so she has also known them since starting college and often hangs out with them over weekends.

Alex

Alex is a second year student in a social work program. They identify as transgender and bisexual and use they/them pronouns. Alex attended community college after high school, before transferring to university. Alex was concerned about their first time at a four-year, especially as they felt that they were unprepared to attend a larger school and were unsure about being in an unfamiliar place and being accepted by peers. During their first-year orientation, they went on a tour around the campus that showcased the resource centers. They shared that they began to feel a little more comfortable about attending once they learned about the LGBTQ+ resource center.

Alex explained that they started to question their gender identity during the first-year at this university. They experience gender dysphoria at times, and describe that they are not always comfortable with their body. The first-year was

especially troubling with this, as they were wanting to dress more masculine but, at the same time, were worried about how family or others would perceive them. They expressed:

> I'm, like, okay, how will people perceive me? You know, like, do I come off as this sort of way? Or I'm worried about people being more judgemental towards me if they see me wearing masculine clothing. On one side, it's me being uncomfortable with myself, but on the other, it's me being uncomfortable with other people. I've already been told by my family, like, you're a woman, and you shouldn't be dressing like that, or like, do you think you're a man or something? That kind of thing.

With their gender identity, Alex described it as fluid and is unsure if they want to transition fully yet. One of their recommendations on campus is to have more information about gender-affirming care, such as surgery and hormones, and others' experiences with transitioning.

Claudia

Claudia is a third year student, majoring in child development. She stated that she is the oldest sibling in her family and she has three younger brothers. She comes from a Mexican background and is a first generation college student. Like Perla, she took a gap year after high school; Claudia opened up about her struggles during the pandemic and working as an essential worker. When describing her first-year, Claudia said:

I would say it was overwhelming. I definitely did not do well my first-year here. And I'm pretty sure it was, kind of like, lots of back and forth with going back home, helping my brother…he always had academic challenges. He graduated high school when I ended my first-year. So a lot of the time I was going back, and it was to help him with homework, meaning time away from my own homework. Didn't do my best then, but we're good now!

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Claudia describes herself as pansexual, but, recently, prefers to label herself as queer. She uses she/her pronouns. She has lived on campus since her first-year and has been assigned to the LGBTQ-inclusive housing.

She was excited about starting college, getting the full experience of living on campus, and of meeting new people. However, she stated that this was the first time she was living away from family and that she found herself visiting home more often than she thought. When prompted to discuss the LGBTQ-inclusive housing, Claudia mentioned that she looked into such an option before committing to this university. She felt that she never had much pressure to hide her identity due to this housing situation. Overall, at college, she feels that she is "very comfortable being out and being [herself]."

Vicky

Vicky is a fourth year student, majoring in child development and she is set to graduate the following semester. Vicky is Filipino American and comes

from an immigrant household. Before starting her first-year, Vicky had a mixture of anxiety and excitement about university. She wanted to have what she called the "authentic college experience", but she was intimidated by the size of the campus, as she transferred from community college.

She lived on campus for her first-year and chose the LGBTQ-inclusive housing. She did not receive a roommate at the time; someone was supposed to move in at the same time as her but never did, and so Vicky ended up living alone. She regretted not getting a roommate because she looked forward to having someone to come home to, but she instead started attending more campus events to meet other students (especially those put on by the LGBTQ+ resource center).

Vicky identifies as bisexual and uses she/her pronouns. She is out to only a few of her family members: her mom and siblings. She now lives at home and misses being her "unapologetic self" when living on campus. She shared that when visiting extended family, they have often made some negative comments toward the LGBTQ+ community. She expressed:

Yeah, I just worry about being at home sometimes and of family, like, perceiving me negatively, definitely. It can interfere with my success in life, and as a student, and just…who I feel like I am.

When compared to living on campus, she had more positive thoughts to share:

I think there is just this refreshing feeling about going into college. The idea that you can go to these institutions, and you are separating yourself

from family, your hometown, and you're able to kind of express your more

authentic, genuine self. It's very freeing and I think, meeting new people,

my classes, I can finally just casually mention things like, oh, I'm bisexual.

It's not like having to build up a friendship over days, months, to reveal this

about yourself. In college, it's like everybody is open-minded and

respectful and I really like that.

Vicky described the campus as an inclusive space and enjoys seeing what the

LGBTQ+ resource center has been doing. She has an hour-long commute now

while living at home, and laments that she is unable to take full advantage of

some of the resources on campus.

First-Year Experiences of LGBTQ+ College Students

In this section, I detail the experiences of participants as they first entered

college, including their concerns before attending, their perceptions of the

campus climate and belongingness, their use of campus resources, potential

barriers or setbacks throughout the first-year, and any other aspects of their

first-year that are important to note.

Mental health challenges (stress and feelings of anxiety and/or

depression) were, as expected, common for each participant, with the first-year

often being described as "when things were at their worst." (Perla). Additionally,

the top contributors to mental health challenges were often similar across

participants; family was a primary contributor for most participants, with identity

concealment, academics, and societal expectations also being mentioned. More on mental health will be described in the next section. During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences with discrimination on campus. In general, participants shared that they did not experience any violence or harassment on campus because of their identity.

Overall, participants felt that their campus is relatively inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities and is heading toward the right direction in terms of available resources and events. Each participant, however, had their own opinions on how the campus could improve and what potential changes should be implemented (this will be shared in a later section). They felt that although the university is on the right track, LGBTQ+ representation and visibility is still lacking on campus. During the first-year, participants also came in having varying levels of knowledge of the campus. Some students did more extensive research before attending and were aware of what LGBTQ-specific resources would be provided; others did not become aware of resources until later in the first-year. Claudia, for example, emailed housing when applying about their LGBTQ-inclusive options and states that she "made [herself] very aware" of resources before attending so that she felt prepared. Daniel also joined a group chat that the LGBTQ+ resource center has and set goals to find LGBTQ+ classes, since "one of the first things" he wanted was to get involved on campus. Other participants had various reasons or barriers as to why they did not seek resources, to be discussed in a

later section. Additionally, concerns that participants had prior to starting college will be shared later.

Specific themes will be described below. Despite the small sample size, the interviews do highlight the diversity in first-year experiences that students may have, even within the same identity group. Similarities and differences will be noted in my analyses.

Mental Health (Before, During, and After the First-Year)

Participants were asked about their mental health journeys throughout the first-year, as well as how it compares to before starting college and after finishing the first-year. For four participants, the first-year was stated to be the worst in terms of stress, depression, and anxiety. For three participants (Claudia, Alex, and Vicky), that anxiety primarily came from anticipation of starting the first-year, sharing that they were unsure of what to expect and that they were anxious about the transition from high school into higher education. Perla described that she fell into a period of depression shortly after starting the first-year of college.

> I was nervous about everything before my first-year…Then when I started
> attending, I did not work. I was [living] at home, but I was going to school
> full time. I did get into a state where I was depressed. I mean no one's
> fault, but it was just like, you know, myself getting to my head and stuff like
> that.

Impostor syndrome was another concept often described by participants as a major challenge of the first-year. Impostor syndrome is defined as the belief that

37

one does not deserve their success or that they do not belong where they are (Seelman et al., 2020). For Vicky, this came from transferring from a community college; she saw a four-year university as somewhere where other students had "everything together and were more successful than [her]".

Daniel shared similar sentiments regarding the first-year, noting how constant self-questioning was associated with challenges:

> And getting into that, you know, I feel like as a first-generation, you know, like college student, it's scary…and I feel like a lot of the impostor syndrome, you know, like…Are people lying to me right now? Are people just saying things to me that make me feel better about myself? That [kicked] in a lot, you know, and I think especially that first-year of not feeling good enough, not feeling capable enough, not feeling smart enough. Not feeling enough was a very common theme in that first-year…Constantly questioning, and I think that's what was contributing to a lot of stress and mental health issues.

Self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression varied from participant to participant, but (as Daniel brings up above) stress was emphasized similarly for all five participants. Perla, Claudia, and Vicky attribute most of their stress to academics (such as keeping up with larger workloads and maintaining their grades).

Academics were not the only source of stress. Perla felt that she was most stressed about whether or not other students will be accepting of her identity.

38

Similarly, Alex was worried about how other students would perceive them, particularly when it came to gender identity and their preferred pronouns. Finally, Daniel described simultaneous family events, as well as aforementioned feelings of guilt, that affected his stress levels during the first-year.

In the interviews, participants were asked about what the contributors to their overall mental health were. All five participants list family as a contributor. There is nuance here too, as for some participants family issues were due to pressures to do well in school, while others felt that family issues were more linked to their LGBTQ+ identity and acceptance. For the former (family pressure), Vicky highlights pressure from family to earn a college degree. Daniel remarked that he felt guilty about not being able to spend more time with family in his first-year; like Vicky, he also mentions his family's expectations for him to do well in school. And, as mentioned above, academics were another contributor. For the latter (identity-related factors with family), internalized homophobia came up, which is described by Alex who grew up in a conservative family; other contributors were life challenges in general, such as earning enough money, working full-time, and expectations from society (such as conforming to one's assigned gender and heteronormativity). Both Alex and Vicky are mostly closeted around family; they both share that some family members make negative comments about the LGBTQ+ community and that they feel a strong need to conceal their identity even more when at home.

Compared to the present day, all but one of the participants felt that their mental health had improved since the first-year of college. Four participants (Daniel, Perla, Claudia, and Vicky) felt that they gained a thorough understanding of themselves as they navigated college; part of that meant being aware of their mental health issues and what might need to be done to combat negative feelings.

Perla, Claudia, and Vicky specifically credited their increasing self-awareness on their mental health. Claudia highlighted that she has grown more self-confident since attending; before college, she felt that she was too preoccupied with what others would think of her but she now takes pride in who she is "without stressing about being judged." Vicky shared that she was doing "a lot better mentally than in high school" and attributes this to feeling that she is simply "enjoying life more" and looks forward to seeing her new classmates and attending events. In high school, Perla states that mental health was simply something she never thought about. It was not until attending college that she became more aware of negative feelings and how to prioritize her well-being alongside academic and other stressors. Of the five, only Alex expressed that their mental health had gotten worse. To reiterate, Alex began questioning their identity when first starting college and are not currently out to family members; they continue to feel pressured to conform to their assigned gender at birth, both at home and on campus. Nonetheless, Alex does share similar notions as other participants, in that they have grown more aware of their mental health state and,

since the first-year, have learned or utilized new strategies to cope with challenges.

Participants use different mechanisms to support their mental health. To cope with challenges, Perla shared that she connects with her peers, such as playing video games or hanging out off-campus. Vicky has gotten into hobbies such as baking, thrift shopping, and painting. Alex enjoys hanging out with friends or cleaning to distract themselves. Daniel shares that he has a very beneficial support system through his family, partner, and classmates, and that these are individuals he can go to when he is struggling. Peers and classmates are also support systems described by other participants, with Claudia describing it as "we're all stressed, but we're stressed together."

Finding Community and Achieving a Sense of Belonging

Perhaps one of the most salient themes of the interviews were participants' desires to make connections on campus, both with peers within the LGBTQ+ community and those outside of it. Besides getting an education, all five participants felt that gaining a sense of belonging on campus was a primary goal when first attending. Vicky describes wanting the "stereotypical college experience," which she explained as attending parties, connecting with those in her dorm building, and so on. Perla and Daniel also specifically mention wanting the "LGBTQ+ experience" upon starting college, which they describe as meeting other community members, volunteering for the community, and finding LGBTQ+ events on campus.

These goals proved more challenging for some participants than others. Alex, although also aspiring to meet their fellow community members, described themselves as being a very private person; it took them a while to build up the courage to attend their first LGBTQ+ event on campus (a movie night), because they were anxious about who might see them there and realize their identity. Vicky also finds a rocky start to meeting people. In her dorm, she was supposed to have a roommate who ended up not moving in. Vicky lived alone in her first-year and she laments this because she felt it would be easier to have a roommate to come home to, stay up late with, and go to events with. Nonetheless, Vicky eventually met people from her classes and others through events put on by the campus' LGBTQ+ resource center. Alex also has met a small group of friends on campus who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. Perla and Claudia shared how grateful they were to find their respective friend groups and that having those sources of support may have made the transition easier. Finally, Daniel mentioned the individuals from his cohort, who he has known since his first-year; he describes their relationship as close and includes his cohort as another primary source of support.

Through these interviews, I also examined how each participant would define belongingness in their own words. For Daniel, belonging on campus and visibility of LGBTQ+ identities goes hand in hand. In other words, one should see people like them on campus; the college should explicitly acknowledge that these other identities exist, whether that is the presence of a pride flag or having

LGBTQ+ events and resources. Daniel emphasizes that colleges should also go beyond that, and that students should feel comfortable enough on their campus to seek out help, especially if they experience something like discrimination. Colleges, Daniel shared, should also be educated on the current issues, history, and more about the LGBTQ+ community:

> [The university] needs to understand that there are such a diverse set of perspectives within the queer community, that we are not all the same, that my experience is going to be different from [someone else's] experiences. Everything going on politically, it strikes fear in all of us…And I think I would like for [the university] to know that there's fear in all of us. And I think we need support, and we need visibility. It's one thing to have [visibility] in society but coming to school…it is such an important point to feel safe here on campus.

Claudia and Alex affirm the importance of the university in creating a safe community climate as well, sharing that they hope to see the university continue to put on LGBTQ+ events, such as mixers, movie nights, and workshops to educate students about the community. Alex feels that seeing such events allows the community to be more visible and normalizes it to the point that other students can think "hey, other queer students are here" or "okay, this place is a safe space for me to be more expressive." Vicky defines belongingness as "a place where [people] can learn and also just be their unapologetic selves." Without hesitating, she shares that she does belong on campus and she also

attributes this to the friends and like-minded individuals she has met; she feels that she can express herself openly around these people and "be [her] unapologetic self".

Vicky and Alex go on to describe that they saw college as a place to "escape"; both participants currently live with family, and, to them, the campus, as a whole, became a safe space, away from pressure to conceal their identities or negative comments from family.

When asked about specific spaces on campus, the concept of a third place came up in three interviews (Daniel, Claudia, and Vicky). They each described a particular building on campus, where they felt most comfortable being themselves or meeting up with others. This space can almost be considered the hub of campus; on the first floor, there are food options available, as well as the campus bookstore, and couches, tables, and more for students to sit. There is also a bowling alley and billiards. The third floor of this building is home to resource centers, such as those for LGBTQ+ students, those who identify as women, and other various cultural identities. Daniel shared about this building:

> I do feel like that's a very communal space. And I say communal, because I feel like racially, I feel good there and I feel like there's good diversity there. As a queer person I feel like, because the [LGBTQ+ resource center] is like right upstairs, I feel like it's a good space. That space is designed to be relaxed, to meet people, to eat, to laugh…I think

it's just a safe space and I really like that…I'll go and I'll eat there, and I'll

relax, and I feel fine, you know. And because there's often a lot of people, I

think usually we feel safer when there's a lot more people, you know. A lot

of people are coming in and going out. So I really do like that space… it's

really well built in like making it a communal space,

making it a space where you could engage and meet people.

Vicky also expressed this in her interview:

I think just being in [that building]...and also being on that third level,

where all of the [resource centers] are. It feels very common there. I do

feel safer up there, very small traffic on the third level and it's a relaxing

place. And I can go there with friends. We talk over lunch, we get a snack,

we hang out on the first floor and do the bowling, whatever. Yeah, very

valuable…it's safe to just talk.

Although they do not directly refer to this building as a third place, their

descriptions do align with the previously mentioned definition of a third place: as

a communal space for people to exist, socialize, and be comfortable as

themselves. Aside from the third floor's resource center, the building is not

specifically designated as a LGBTQ+ space, but LGBTQ+ students are,

nonetheless, finding solace in this space and consider it to be safe and inviting.

To all five participants, college meant more than a place to attend classes;

it presented an opportunity for them to fully express themselves in different

spaces and meet new people to make connections with. It was particularly

45

meaningful to meet others from the LGBTQ+ community, with whom my participants felt that they could be more comfortable and open about their identities.

Quality and Use of Campus Resources

In the pre-survey, participants were asked to share what (if any) campus resources they used. When interviewed, they were asked to either elaborate on the quality and type of resources used, or to share their reasons for not seeking out resources if they reported using none. Daniel, Vicky, Perla, and Claudia reported using campus resources during their first-years. Alex did not utilize resources until after the first-year.

The most commonly used resources by participants were the campus counseling services and the LGBTQ+ resource center. The counseling services offer individual and group therapy options, as well as workshops and other outreach events. Workshops and therapy options are each available virtually (via Zoom) or in-person on campus. The LGBTQ+ resource center puts on several events throughout the academic year, such as mixer events, drag nights, and more. During operating hours, students can also visit the resource center itself, where they have space to study, play video games, get snacks, and other free resources.

Daniel utilized both counseling services and the LGBTQ+ resource center. Vicky, Perla, and Claudia utilized the LGBTQ+ resource center. Vicky also mentions taking advantage of physical health services on campus, at the health

center. One observation to note here is that of the five participants, only Claudia and Vicky have lived on campus at some point. Claudia has lived on campus since her first-year, while Vicky lived on campus for only the first-year. The campus they attend offers LGBTQ-inclusive housing, which both participants took advantage of. This meant that they lived on a dorm floor where all residents identified as LGBTQ+. As a result, Claudia remarked that she was very aware of what campus events were happening and how the campus was catering to specifically its LGBTQ+ students, since many of these events were widely advertised on her dorm floor. As noted in the previous section, Vicky did not have a roommate, but she and Claudia both believe that their housing situation made it easier for them to get acquainted with campus resources and meet new people (particularly those in the LGBTQ+ community).

In addition to the type of resources used, participants were invited to share their thoughts on the quality of those resources, especially with regards to their LGBTQ+ identity. Daniel had opened up about difficulties during the first-year; his sister was dealing with medical issues and Daniel found himself struggling to juggle his academic responsibilities, his need to be with family at this time, experiencing a friend's death, while also bearing feelings of guilt and stress about starting college. He felt that he would benefit from mental health services and sought out counseling on campus, as he believed this was also most convenient while attending classes. One of Daniel's pressing concerns with seeking therapy was whether or not his therapist was someone that could identify with him and

his struggles. As someone who is gay and Latino, Daniel clarifies that he prefers a therapist that will "understand [his] perspective…and the cultural nuances of being a queer male…or queer person, in general". With the counseling services on campus, Daniel felt satisfied with the therapist he met, but is currently seeking off-campus support. He feels that the campus counseling is limited in the amount of sessions offered; he was seeing his therapist about every 3 or 4 weeks and he would prefer more frequent sessions.

Four participants utilized the LGBTQ+ resource center during their first-year (Daniel, Vicky, Perla, and Claudia). Overall, students were very satisfied with this particular resource and the "amazing things and events" it provides (Daniel). Even Alex, who did not use this resource in their first-year, expresses that "just knowing it exists" gives them comfort. Perla shared her experience attending an event from the LGBTQ+ resource center:

> They had a whole Girls and Gaming event, so you can kind of like, you know, chat with other girls in the queer community. They had different games there, so it was kinda nice to see, you know, girls getting together and connecting through video games and things in common. I hope they have other things like that where we can just kinda hang out, vibe, and just connect, I'm so up for it.

This appeared to be a common sentiment among interviewees, where they especially enjoyed the socializing events put on by the resource center. Within the context of the first-year, students felt that the resource center was often a

"highlight" of that experience and was helpful in getting them "out of [their shells]" in a new environment (Perla). In addition to such events, the LGBTQ+ resource center hosts a free graduation ceremony in the spring semester that is dedicated to LGBTQ+ students. Vicky shared this about the ceremony:

> And, oh the [graduation]! I love how they give out stoles to the graduates. It's like a pretty lavender stole with a rainbow on it and I like how they hold a small graduation celebrating the achievements of people in the queer community, which is very rewarding, especially who might have struggled their entire lives and they're recognized in that moment.

Participants each acknowledged that the LGBTQ+ resource center was a positive aspect of their first-year experiences and may have been key to easing them into the transition to college (Perla and Vicky). Barriers to accessing not just the resource center, but counseling and other resources were shared too, however. Time constraints, schedule conflicts, and other responsibilities (such as to family or work) were common reasons why students could not always access counseling, events, and so on that were provided on campus. Perla laments that she lives an hour away from the campus; when commuting to classes in her first-year, she felt that she did not always have the energy to attend more events or make it to therapy. Vicky agreed that many events took place when she had classes. Alex also felt nervous about opening up to a therapist and did not seek those resources; they also shared that events happened on days that they did not come to campus but they wished they could attend. Like Perla, Alex has a

longer commute and did not want to make the drive to campus if they did not have class. Daniel summarized the situation well when stating that was the campus was not necessarily "lacking, but needing just more" LGBTQ+ resources, aside from the center. From these interviews, it is clear that students *want* to take advantage of campus resources but, in some cases, it is not possible for them and the campus could do with certain changes.

Improvements to be Made on Campus

To conclude the interviews, I asked participants to share what improvements the campus should prioritize and any other thoughts they had on how the campus should engage with incoming LGBTQ+ students. Participants praise the LGBTQ+ resource center but express that the campus should have more to offer its LGBTQ+ population. Changes do not even need to be major. Both Daniel and Vicky suggested the campus should add pride flags throughout campus, in high-traffic spaces where students, visitors, staff, and so on can see them. Daniel once again brought up the communal space that he enjoyed on campus and shared that a pride flag would be ideal to add here. He stated:

> [A pride flag] would make a huge difference because it's telling me, especially coming in, like, hey, there are other queer people here and this university acknowledges our presence…There are other people who I can connect with, and there's support here…I think knowing that this is a space for everyone and having different flags representing different

diverse populations…I think that goes a long way of showing support, of

showing visibility.

In general, participants thought the idea of LGBTQ+ visibility would be beneficial.

Incoming LGBTQ+ students, especially those who have not disclosed their

identities, would take note of, for example, a pride flag and feel that this campus

is a safe space for individuals like them and that their existence is not only

acknowledged, but celebrated. Daniel stated that the college needs to

understand that there are so many different perspectives on campus, and that,

even within the LGBTQ+ community, individuals are going to have diverse

experiences. Visibility can go a long way of recognizing those diverse identities

and their experiences, and the campus can show that they have that

understanding of their student population.

Alex, Daniel and Claudia recommend education on the LGBTQ+

community itself, which the entire campus community could benefit from. This

might come in the form of workshops or offered classes, which can share more

information on LGBTQ+ history, identities and labels in the community, and more.

Even as members of the community, Alex and Daniel wished that they could

learn more about particular identities within the community that they are not as

familiar with, such as asexual and aromantic individuals. Alex also hoped that the

campus could implement education on trans, non-binary, and other

gender-nonconforming identities. They want to learn more about accessing

gender-affirming care, such as using hormones. Alex started to question their

51

gender identity in their first-year and LGBTQ+ education is something they could have benefitted from to better understand themselves and what support they had.

The counseling services could have improvements as well. As Daniel mentioned, sessions were limited to every few weeks or so, and some students may require more frequent sessions. Additionally, hours of the available individual and group therapy options were not always widely accessible to students. Vicky mentioned that another reason she did not want to attend therapy in her first-year was because she was worried that the counselors had too many students to work with. Daniel also highlighted another concern of many other LGBTQ+ students: accessing an affirming therapist who can validate and understand individual experiences of diverse identities. For LGBTQ+ first-year students, these concerns are crucial to keep in mind when supporting them through the college transition. Alongside navigating classes, navigating campus resources should not take so much additional time and effort, as these are meant to support students in the first place.

In general, participants have praised this particular campus in its efforts to supporting LGBTQ+ students and in welcoming them to campus in their first-years. None of the participants experienced any significant difficulties with discrimination from other students or anything on campus, but Vicky shared that if she did experience something like that, she feels that the campus would be quick to respond and handle such an issue. Daniel also shared that this is an

important aspect of the college experience for LGBTQ+ students, for them to feel

safe and confident that a college will do something about any sort of injustice that

may be endangering a student. The five participants described the campus

climate as, overall, inclusive of students like them within the community.

Improvements can and should still be made though to existing campus

resources, and additional opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to get involved can

be provided. Changes to increase visibility of the LGBTQ+ community can be

made as well and, in the future, perhaps incoming first-year students can be

confident that this is a LGBTQ-inclusive campus and that they, without a doubt,

will belong, be welcomed, and be celebrated here. Suggestions do not end with

this study, and all college campuses should continue to gather input from their

LGBTQ+ students to gauge current issues and if changes made are successful

or need to be re-evaluated.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how LGBTQ+ students describe and navigate their first-year of college, with particular attention to their mental health and access to/use of resources. Past research has shown that the first-year of college is particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ students, especially compared to their heterosexual peers (O'Neill et al., 2022; Kirsch et al., 2015). Challenges for LGBTQ+ students can be partly explained by minority stress theory; on top of academics and other common struggles, LGBTQ+ students may also encounter other difficulties as a result of their identities, such as discrimination or not having sufficient campus resources. Mental health challenges are also heightened for this population, with LGBTQ+ students being more likely to experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022). Although research on this topic has grown in recent years, a gap still exists in understanding how specifically the first-year is experienced by LGBTQ+ students. Additionally, much of past research does not directly address the use of campus resources or belongingness for LGBTQ+ first-years, instead focusing on the college experience as a whole. The first-year is critical to understand on a deeper level due to the unique challenges that students experience in the transition to higher education. Finally, past studies also tend to focus on wider survey data or focus groups; while these methods are informative,

in-depth individual interviews are also necessary to understand the first-year in richer detail, as it is experienced in individuals' own words.

How do LGBTQ+ Students Navigate Their First-Year of College?

To build upon existing research, this exploratory qualitative study recruited five participants to understand their first-years as LGBTQ+ students. Participants offered a wide range of perspectives and experiences on what the LGBTQ+ first-year experience entails. Participants shared that they did prior research before attending the college, to determine what would be available to them as LGBTQ+ students. The first-year proved to be a difficult transition for the participants, with many opening up about mental health challenges they experienced, such as feelings of anxiety, falling into depressive episodes, and stress of meeting expectations from family. These challenges often led participants to seek additional support from campus resources such as counseling and the LGBTQ+ resource center. Participants also found abundant support from their peers they met on campus and, for many of them, finding people on campus helped them gain a sense of belonging and safety on campus. Overall, the consensus was that the university is adequate in terms of supporting its incoming LGBTQ+ students; however, it could still make improvements to the visibility of the community on campus, as well as the accessibility and availability of resources for this population.

Mental Health in the First-Year

The first-year seemed to be the worst for most participants in terms of their mental health, which aligns with findings from Kirsch et al., (2015). Depression, anxiety, and stress were each aspects of mental health that participants opened up about. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience negative effects, and the present study affirms this finding (O'Neill et al., 2022; Debord et al., 1998). Something to note was that, during the interviews, participants were relatively aware of how to discuss their mental health and what language to use; Perla compares this to when she was in high school, where she did not know how to open up conversations about her mental health and, instead, "bottling things up and letting it build over time." In college, meeting others who may have experienced similar struggles, learning about mental health stigma and misconceptions in class, and more could have contributed to participants gaining that awareness. Participants indicated that mental health feels more normalized in college, not something to be ashamed of but something to be open and direct about.

Minority stress theory conveys that these mental health struggles are experienced on top of minority stressors such as identity concealment and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). Three participants (Daniel, Vicky, and Perla) alluded to their initial caution when meeting people for the first time. Perla specifically described it as "testing the waters," gauging whether or not it is safe to come out or if there is a need to hide her identity for "[her] survival." This is

especially the case for Alex who, compared to other participants, felt the most

pressure to conceal their identity. This can make the first-year a more tumultuous

experience, balancing multiple challenges, responsibilities, and so much more in

addition to starting college.

All in all, mental health challenges in the first-year presented a major

hurdle in starting college and it led them to seek out the support of campus

resources, social support, and other external sources to facilitate an easier

transition.

Achieving a Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging and finding community on campus seemed to be the

strongest indicator of adjustment in the first-year. Not all LGBTQ+ individuals are

out to family, and not all families are accepting of their identities. The university

recruited for the present study is primarily a commuter campus and so most

students are living at home. For Alex, this made the transition difficult; while

questioning their identity, they also felt that being at home meant they could not

fully explore different styles of dressing or managing their appearance. Perla

started her first-year living with family and they too were not as accepting as she

would have liked, even after coming out. For these participants, the campus

community and peers provided much needed support to adjust in the first-year.

As such, belongingness on campus is beneficial for students transitioning

to their first-year of college, as it can support their mental health and wellbeing.

This is especially true if home is not a safe space, as was indicated by

participants (Sotardi et al., 2022). Participants in the present study echo this finding and showcase that finding peers was one of their priorities when first attending. All five participants opened up about their desire to make connections with peers, even before ever stepping foot on campus. For them, peer support became an important part of navigating college. This was especially true for participants who lived at home during their first-year, and this is the case for most LGBTQ+ students who are still living at home (Kirsch et al., 2017). Upon finding those peers, these social connections became a significant and meaningful aspect of college for participants and offered them support when encountering previously mentioned mental health challenges.

To all five participants, belongingness was often defined in a similar way to previous research, indicating that a sense of belonging is achieved when LGBTQ+ students feel seen, visible, and welcomed on campus (Parker, 2021). Most suggestions that participants made about improving resources on campus involved making the LGTBQ+ community and its history more known, for example by placing pride flags on campus for others to see clearly or offering workshops to educate others about the community. For LGBTQ+ students, belongingness is crucial to their well-being and academic success (Woodford et al., 2018). As a community that may not always be accepted, finding affirming people becomes a primary goal in any setting. Daniel shared that this is something everyone, particularly those in the LGBTQ+ community, needs to feel safe in a given setting. Current events, such as bans on gender-affirming care,

LGBTQ+ books, and other restrictions in schools showcase the importance of LGBTQ+ safety more than ever. Students from this community are continually attacked, harassed, and more for existing, and colleges have a responsibility to prioritize LGBTQ+ safety and well-being (Glazzard et al., 2020). For students like Vicky and Alex, college may often be the only place where an LGBTQ+ student can feel comfortable, especially if they do not have a supportive family (Seelman et al., 2020).

<u>Relationship Between Mental Health and Use of Resources</u>

Aligning with findings from Kirsch et al. (2015), the present study found that campus resources are a valuable asset in helping students navigate their college campuses, understanding their experiences, and smoothing an already difficult transition. The role of high-quality and accessible resources is, therefore, one aspect to consider as colleges prepare for incoming classes, especially those of the LGBTQ+ community.

Participants identified a connection between their mental health and their use of resources, recognizing how they were directly impacted by the resources on campus that they used. General student resources, such as counseling services, supported student transitions. For example, Daniel specified that therapy on campus helped with facing his feelings of impostor syndrome in school and combating the guilt that came along with starting his first-year and being away from family. LGBTQ+-specific resources were especially appreciated among participants. Four participants utilized the LGBTQ+ resource center on

campus and praised this particular resource and its role in their transition to college. The LGBTQ+ resource center was well-liked among participants for what it offered, and although time constraints were often a barrier to using it more, participants were eager to see this resource's future endeavors in supporting students.

The existence of such resources often goes into the decision-making process of prospective students (Glazzard et al., 2020), and as such, LGBTQ+ resource centers and similar organizations are essential for college campuses to have available.; Over half of universities do provide some type of LGBTQ+ campus organization already (Coley & Das, 2020), but LGBTQ+ students are still underserved as a student population. The present study emphasizes the importance of these resources for student well-being; participants felt more positively about their college experiences due in part to the existence of the LGBTQ+ resource center and the people they have met through its events.

Participants did not go into depth about other resources available on campus, such as academic advising, financial aid, or others, leaving room for questions about the range of resources used by LGBTQ+ students. There is no evidence to suggest that these resources are inadequate, so participant perception of the quality of these resources is unknown. Rather, this sample did not consider these other resources as an impactful aspect of their first-year experience. For this study, the primary resources used and discussed were counseling services and the LGBTQ+ resource center. In the interviews, I

provided examples of other campus resources to discuss, but these two were highlighted. Perhaps this particular sample found those to be the most relevant to their personal experiences and challenges, and so they naturally utilized those the most. This is expected, given the sample demographics. LGBTQ+ college students, as noted previously, encounter significantly more mental health challenges on average when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Kirsch et al., 2015). More information on these general resources in supporting LGBTQ+ student transitions into college is needed.

Positive Aspects of the First-Year Experience

In order to understand the full lived experiences of LGBTQ+ populations, narratives that examine discrimination and hardship are important, but not sufficient; research on LGBTQ+ experience must also understand the positive experiences, strengths, and resilience that the community experiences (Seelman et al., 2020). The LGBTQ+ community is a diverse group of individuals, each with their own unique goals, wants, and needs. These unique and positive experiences were reflected in the present study's participants, even with the focus of the study being on challenges associated with mental health and the transition to college.

Although participants shared mental health challenges, they also found that the first-year presented them with new opportunities to meet peers, take advantage of LGBTQ-inclusive resources (such as housing and events), and more to help them through the transition. Four participants went on to praise

community-building activities that the LGBTQ+ resource center has put on; among these are gaming events (Perla), drag queen nights (Daniel and Vicky), and more that enriched their first-years. Such events are crucial for building peer relationships, while also making meaningful impacts on how LGBTQ+ students perceive their first-year experiences (Hill et al., 2020; Blankenau et al., 2022). Alex stated that they do not like to open up about their identity or struggles, but they found that even the presence of the LGBTQ+ resource center is comforting. Throughout the first-year, knowing that it was there allowed them to feel safer and to build up the courage to eventually attend one of its events the following year. They also described moments in which their friends affirmed their gender identity (e.g., double-checking about their preferred pronouns and bringing them gender-affirming clothing when experiencing dysphoria). Similar acts are often highlighted by other gender-diverse college students; even simply asking and using someone's preferred pronouns is shown to make a meaningful impact on these students and encourage them to express themselves (Dolan, 2023).

In general, participants in the present study shared that they did not experience much discrimination on campus. This campus was rated positively by participants, but this is not indicative of all LGBTQ+ student experiences in general (e.g., Yost & Gilmore, 2011; Seelman et al., 2020), nor is it necessarily indicative of all student experiences on the present campus. While participants did not describe overt forms of discrimination, this does not mean they do not exist. Microaggressions were not commonly brought up in interviews either, but

this can also be attributed to these being less likely to be recalled or recognized as hurtful by the targets (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Microaggressions tend to be subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., passing comments) and, in many cases, can go unnoticed by the targets of such comments (Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

This may suggest that, perhaps, this particular campus is fostering a safe climate, and other campuses can utilize similar methods in supporting their LGBTQ+ students. As recommended by participants, part of promoting these safe climates is to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community, to make them and their history visible to the others on campus. However, it is also worth noting that the recruited university is located in California, an area in which LGBTQ+ tend to be more accepted and normalized (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Two participants (Vicky and Claudia) also lived in LGBTQ-inclusive housing during their first-years and were surrounded by communities they found to be "incredibly accepting and affirming." These factors combined suggest that participants were less likely to experience discrimination.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, I want to acknowledge my positionality in the context of this study and its potential impact in my interactions with participants and my analysis (Alessi et al., 2017). Like my participants, I identify as LGBTQ+ and my college journey was primarily about navigating the complexities of my identity and meeting others from the community. I have both grown up and attended

college in California, similar to my participants. These experiences continue to shape my research interests and form the basis of my goals as a researcher, in that I am driven by both my curiosity and passion for the community. It is important for me to recognize that my identity intersects with these goals. It is possible that, as an in-group member, participants could have felt more comfortable in what they were sharing with me. My connection to participants allowed me to empathize with their stories, as these are journeys I can relate to. Still, how I interpreted the data may have been affected, given my position. Ultimately, my identity as an LGBTQ+ individual guided me in amplifying the voices of those from the community and throughout this process, I have reflected on how my position is informing data collection and analysis; I aim to contribute to growing research on this topic, but I also hope to encourage critical engagement with my work and others.

Limitations

Some limitations in using these findings to draw conclusions should be considered. Data were collected from one university in Southern California and participants were exclusively social sciences majors, and this context should be kept in mind. A wider recruitment would be beneficial, such as sampling from additional majors and additional campuses across a wider geographical and sociopolitical context. Participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on their first-years only; a longitudinal study could be utilized in future research, which

can get a sense of student development and perspectives before, during, and after the first-year. The sample size of this study is also notable. With five participants, results are not generalizable to the full LGBTQ+ college-going population. However, the purpose of these data is to gather an in-depth understanding of a smaller group of participants, with the hopes that their stories may lead me towards future research questions to consider.

Finally, in this study, other life experiences and identities were not explored in depth. For example, the differences between students who commute vs. those living at home, as well as intersections of multiple systems of oppression. Individuals may have multiple identities and are actively facing different forms of discrimination (whether due to their race, socioeconomic status, and more). This could impact factors such as transitioning to college, sense of belongingness, and mental health. Those who live on campus are also likely to be more aware of campus events, resources, and climate as well as have more access to utilizing these resources without driving to campus. Living in a LGBTQ+ community could also impact their experiences with discrimination (i.e., being less likely to encounter it). Considering student on- versus off-campus living in future research would be a useful nuance to consider. Despite these limitations, the present study offers the unique perspectives of LGBTQ+ students and an examination of their first-year experiences, the resources that may support them, and their mental health.

Implications and Future Research

The present study has several implications for practice and future research. The quality and availability of resources for LGBTQ+ students on college campuses is an important consideration in research; high-quality campus resources can ease the difficult transition into the first-year for LGBTQ+ students, as well as improve their overall mental health and well-being throughout their college journeys (Kirsch et al., 2015; Glazzard et al., 2020). The present study can inform both university and high school educators and administrators looking to support this population of students. Results showed many suggestions for improving student support in this vulnerable time, the transition into college (Glazzard et al., 2020).

Results from the present study highlight the need for LGBTQ-specific resources and inclusive campus spaces to ensure students can thrive. They have also presented concepts that have been unexplored in prior research, such as the existence of third places on campus. This could be a topic to explore in future studies, especially when considering the relationship with the transition into college for LGBTQ+ students and how this population specifically could benefit from third places. LGBTQ+ student perception of campus climate is an important topic to consider as well. Given the study's sample size, there is not likely to be much variation, and future studies with larger sample sizes could get a more diverse understanding of campus climate and how welcoming this is for incoming LGBTQ+ students.

I intend to use these data to more deeply explore LGBTQ+ students'

transition into college by developing a broader quantitative examination of

themes discovered and remaining questions. Specifically, in a future study, I hope

to explore the within-group differences of LGBTQ+ students (i.e., living on- vs.

off-campus), experiences with additional campus resources (e.g., advising), and

additional perspectives from gender-diverse students. A quantitative study would

allow for a larger sample of LGBTQ+ students, with greater range of identities,

experiences, and nuances. Further, because interview methods may require

participants to have some comfort being out among the researcher, this could

allow researchers to include those who may not have been comfortable sharing

their experiences via an interview; an online survey could not only reach more

students, but could also allow the researchers to include additional questions

such as Likert scales to rate campus resources and gain more insight into

participant satisfaction with campus efforts.

Conclusions

Findings from the present study can inform practice and policy

implemented on the campus. Participants have shared common suggestions

that, given time, could be relatively easy to implement and could benefit the

campus community as a whole in understanding and validating LGBTQ+

identities. Even with the conclusion of this study, the campus can and should

continue to gather LGBTQ+ feedback to be on top of current recommendations,

especially as new students are coming in each year. Participants also shared that seeing the recruitment flyer was uplifting and this research was both meaningful and personal to them. Future research can continue this trajectory, inspiring LGBTQ+ students to share their own stories.

This study examined LGBTQ+ college students to understand their first-year experiences, including mental health challenges and use of campus resources. The present study provided in-depth and nuanced information about LGBTQ+ students' perception of campus climate, the effectiveness of campus resources, and the role of peer and community support in achieving belongingness. Although there were important insights to be gathered from this study, further research on this issue and applied support for this population is necessary to better support LGBTQ+ students. One participant (Daniel) shared this quote from artist Keith Haring: "I am not a beginning. I am not an end. I am a link in a chain." The participants from this study are only one piece of the LGBTQ+ community; their stories are valuable, but the literature should not end here. LGBTQ+ voices should persist in both campus spaces and in research to ensure not only their safety and wellbeing, but also their thriving.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FORM

Interview Recruitment Form

1. Email *

    _____

2. Please provide your phone number. This will only be used as an alternative form of contact (format: (123) 456-789). *

    _____

3. Are you a transfer student? *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes
    ( ) No

4. When did you start at the unversity? *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Fall 2023
    ( ) Spring 2023
    ( ) Fall 2022
    ( ) Spring 2022 or earlier

5. Do you identify as LGBTQ+? *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes
    ( ) No
    ( ) Not sure

6. How would you describe your sexual orientation? *

_____

7. How would you describe your gender? *

_____

8. Have you experienced any mental health challenges while in college? (e.g., experiences with depression, anxiety, distress, etc.)

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

9. Have you used any resources on campus? (e.g., CAPS, Rec Center, QTRC, Student Health Center, etc.) *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

10. Which campus resources have you used? (N/A if none) *

_____

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction/Background
To start out, I would like to learn more about who you are and what your experiences have been so far. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, Whatever you feel comfortable sharing with me:

      a. ***As a student:*** Can you tell me about your affiliation with the university, what you're studying, and what brought you here?

      b. ***As a person:*** When you're not being a student/studying, what do you like to do for fun? How do you unwind (what fills you with energy)?

      c. ***As a community member:*** How would you describe yourself as a member of the LGBTQ+ community? Can you tell me more about your identities?

First-Year Experiences

      a. I want to hear about your experiences in college here. Can you tell me what it has been like to be a student here? How would you describe your experiences so far?

      b. Now I would like to focus more specifically on your first-year. Can you tell me about that first-year of college? How would you describe your feelings and experiences throughout the first-year of college?

            i. *What was it like to navigate the university your first-year here?*

      c. How did you navigate university life as an LGBTQ+ student during your first-year?

            i. *Did you feel the need to hide, conceal, or not talk about your identities **during your first-year**? In what ways did you experience this? Why do you think that was?*

            ii. *Were there ways in which you felt you could be open and even celebrated with your identities **during your first-year**? In what ways did you experience this? Why do you think that was?*

      d. Did you experience prejudice or discrimination involving your (LGBTQ+) identities during your first-year? Can you share what these experiences were like, if you feel comfortable?

      e. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, what do you wish you knew *about the university* before coming here?

Mental Health
   a. Can you tell me about your mental health journey as a student at the university, and specifically what it was like during your first-year?
      i. *How would you describe your mental health (positively or negatively) upon starting your first-year?*
      ii. *What challenges did you experience (feeling stressed, feelings of anxiety, depression, etc.)?*
      iii. *In what ways did you grow in terms of mental health?*
   b. Compared to before college, did you feel that your mental health was better or worse during your first-year?
      i. Can you describe the top 3 contributors to your mental health during your first-year? (ask to elaborate)
      ii. How did you seek support or cope? (campus resources, peers, etc.)

Campus Resources
Now I'm hoping to learn more about your interaction with different campus resources, and how they have helped you, or could be more helpful to you.
   a. In your pre-survey, you wrote that you used (list resources answered). Are there other resources (clubs, advising, counseling, etc.) that you use, or any edits to that list of resources that you use at the university?
      i. *How often did you seek support from campus resources during your first-year?*
   b. Can you tell me about the resources that you use the most?
      i. *How & why do you use them?*
   c. Can you tell me about which resources have been most helpful to you?
      i. *How were they helpful - what was helpful about them?*
   d. Can you tell me about which resources have been disappointing to you?
      i. *In what ways have they fallen short?*
      ii. *How could they better serve your needs?*
   e. Overall, did you feel like campus resources met your needs as a first-year student? Can you tell me more about that?
      i. *If applicable, how could the campus better support you or meet your needs?*

        ii.   How difficult or easy was it navigating these resources (availability of appointments, hours, location, etc.)? Can you tell me about this?

    f. Which resources do you wish you had during your first-year? Or which needs do you wish had been better supported?

Campus Climate (Belongingness)

    a. At this university, do you feel like you belong? - Can you tell me more about that?
        i.   More specifically, as a student who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, do you feel like you belong at the university? - Can you tell me more about that?

    b. What does belonging on campus mean to you, as an LGBTQ+ student?
        i.   What does it feel like or look like?
        ii. How do you know when you feel like you belong?
        iii. In what circumstances on campus do you feel like you DO or DO NOT belong? (are there certain spots or spaces on campus you can go to?)

    c. In general, can you tell me about a time when you felt fully valued and seen as who you are?
        i.   (This can include someone knowing about your LGBTQ+ identity and understanding or respecting your experience or otherwise feeling supported with regard to your identity.)
        ii. Have you felt this at this university as an LGBTQ+ student? Can you tell me about that?
              1. If you haven't, what would that look like to you to feel fully validated here?

    d. What do you want the university to know about its LGBTQ+ students and how to better support them?
    e. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, so that I better understand your experiences regarding the topics we've discussed?

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

March 14, 2024

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Expedited Review
IRB-FY2024-254
Status: Approved

Prof. Stacy Morris and Sarina Sauceda
CSBS - Child Development, CSBS - Dept of Child Develop
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Prof. Stacy Morris and Sarina Sauceda:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "First Year Experiences of LGBTQ+ Students: Belongingness, Resilience, and Utilization of Resources On Campus" has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. The study is approved as of March 14, 2024. The study will require an annual administrative check-in (annual report) on the current status of the study on March 13, 2025. Please use the renewal form to complete the annual report.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's COVID-19 Prevention Plan for more information regarding campus requirements.

If your study is closed to enrollment, the data has been de-identified, and you're only analyzing the data - you may close the study by submitting the Closure Application Form through the Cayuse Human Ethics (IRB) system. The Cayuse system automatically reminders you at 90, 60, and 30 days before the study is due for renewal or submission of your annual report (administrative check-in). The modification, renewal, study closure, and unanticipated/adverse event forms are located in the Cayuse system with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission Webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. Please note a lapse in your approval may result in your not being able to use the data collected during the lapse in the application's approval period.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risks and benefits to the human participants in your IRB application. If you have any questions about the IRBs decision please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2024-254 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive regarding your research from participants or others should be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

King-To Yeung

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

KY/MG

REFERENCES

Alessi, E., Sapiro, B., Kahn, S., & Craig, S. (2017). The first-year university experience for sexual minority students: A grounded theory exploration. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 14*(1), 71-92. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2016.1256013

Blankenau, A., Hopmeyer, A., Auerbach, L., Schuman, Z. D., & Hopmeyer, A. (2022). Queer peer crowds on campus: LGBT crowd affiliation as a critical correlate of college students' loneliness, academic well-being, & stress. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *70*(7), 1411–1439. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2030616

BrckaLorenz, A., Duran, A., Fassett, K., & Palmer, D. (2021). The within-group differences in LGBTQ+ college students' belongingness, institutional commitment, and outness. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14*(1), 135-146. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000135

Coley, J. & Das, D. (2020). Creating safe spaces: Opportunities, resources, and LGBTQ student groups at U.S. colleges and universities. *Sociological Research for a Dynamic World, 6*(1-12). doi: 10.1177/2378023120971472

Dolan, C. (2023). Understanding nonbinary college students' sense of belonging. *Journal of College Student Development, 64,* 16-30.

Fish, J. (2020). Future directions in understanding and addressing mental health among LGBTQ youth. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 49*(6), 943-956. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2020.1815207

Garvey, J., Viray, S., Stango, K., Estep, C., & Jaeger, J. Emergence of third

    spaces: Exploring trans students' campus climate perceptions within

    collegiate environments. *Sociology of Education,* 1-18.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040719839100

Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the Listening

    Guide: A voice-centered relational method. *Qualitative research in*

    psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design,

    (157-172).

Glazzard, J., Jindal-Snape, D., & Stones, S. (2020). Transitions into, and

    through, higher education: the lived experiences of students who

    identify as LGBTQ+. *Educational Psychology, 5.*

    https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00081

Hill, R., Nguyen, D., Kilgo, C., Lange, A., Shea, H., Renn, K., & Woodford, M.

    (2020). How LGBTQ+ students thrive in college. *Journal of Student Affairs*

    Research and Practice, 58(3), 267-281.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1738241

Hood, L., Sherrell, D., Pfeffer, C., & Mann, E. (2018). LGBTQ college students'

    experiences with university health services: An exploratory study. *Journal*

    of Homosexuality, 66(6). https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1484234

Keup, J. (2023, April 7). *First-Year Experience and Transfer Student Success*

    Summit [Presentation]. CSUSB, San Bernardino, CA.

Kirsch, A., Conley, C., & Riley, T. (2015) Comparing psychosocial adjustment

across the college transition in a matched heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual sample. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(2), 155-169. 10.1353/csd.2015.0017

Lothwell, L., Libby, N., & Adelson, S., (2020). Mental health care for LGBT youths. *Psychotherapeutic Engagements With LGBTQ+ Patients and Their Families, 18*(3), 268-276. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.focus.20200018

Meyer, I. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *129*(5), 674-697. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

Mossakowski, K. (2014). Stress and mental illness. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118410868.wbehibs358

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day.* Paragon House.

O'Neill, K., Conron, K., Goldberg, A., & Guardado, R. (2022). Experiences of LGBTQ people in four-year colleges and graduate programs: Findings from a national probability survey. *Williams Institute,* UCLA.

Painter, K., Scannapieco, M., Blau, G., Andre, A., & Kohn, K. (2018). Improving the mental health outcomes of LGBTQ youth and young adults: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Social Service Research, 44*(2), 223-235. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1441097

Parker, E.T., III (2021). Campus climate perceptions and sense of belonging for LGBTQ students. *Journal of College Student Development, 62*(2), 248-253. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0019.

Pryor, J. (2018). Visualizing queer spaces: LGBTQ students and the traditionally heterogendered institution. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 15*(1), 32-51. DOI: 10.1080/19361653.2017.1395307

Seelman, K., Woodford, M., & Nicolazzo, Z. (2020). Victimization and microaggressions targeting LGBTQ college students: Gender identity as a moderator of psychological distress. *Microaggressions and Social Work,* 1-14.

Sotardi, V., Surtees, N., Vincent, K., & Johnston, H. (2022). Belonging and adjustment for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students during the social transition to university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(6), 755-765. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000305

Schmitz, R. & Tyler, K. (2018). 'Life has actually become more clear': An examination of resilience among LGBTQ young adults. *Sexualities, 22*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718770451

Snapp, S., Watson, R., Russell, S., Diaz, R., & Ryan, C. (2015). Social support networks for LGBT young adults: Low cost strategies for positive adjustment. *Family Relations, 64*(3), 420-430. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12124

Thacker Darrow, N., Duran. A., Weise, J., & Guffin, J. (2022). LGBTQ+ college

students' mental health: A content analysis of research published

2009-2019. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services.*

https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2022.2093302

Woodford, M. R., Kulick, A., Garvey, J. C., Sinco, B., & Hong, J. (2018). LGBTQ

policies and resources on campus and the experiences and psychological

well-being of sexual minority college students: Advancing research on

structural inclusion. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender*

Diversity, 5(4), 445-456.

Yost, M. & Gilmore, S. (2011). Assessing LGBTQ campus climate and creating

change. *Journal of Homosexuality, 58*(9), 1330-1354.