

LGBTQ+ Places and Spaces:

Resources for Queer College Students at Various Institutional Types

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INTRODUCTION

A problem exists on many college and university campuses. Heterosexism and cisgenderism, the respective beliefs that relationships between males and females are “normal” and that gender and sex are directly related, have created an environment lacking support for students identifying within the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other minoritized sexual and gender identities) community (Tetreault, Fette, Meidling, & Hope, 2013; Rankin, 2005; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). The creation of a more supportive campus environment is an immediate need and much research has been done on how to do so (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, & Windmeyer, 2017; Taylor, 2015). Most recently, Nguyen and colleagues rooted their 2018 study on creating an LGBTQ+ supportive environment in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, referring to sexual and gender minority resources as microsystems, within a larger campus mesosystem. In their study, understanding the presence or absence of those microsystems helped determine the composition (climate) of the mesosystem. Expectedly then, as the presence of these supportive resources (microsystems) increases, with particular weight given to LGBTQ+ resource centers, so does the campus climate as perceived by LGBTQ+ students (Nguyen et al., 2018; Garvey et al, 2017). This paper will utilize the same ecological framework to hypothesize the campus climate perceived by LGBTQ+ students at a variety of institutional types, through a review of relevant studies and research literature.

BACKGROUND

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory has five levels each influencing and being influenced by the others. At the “highest” level exists the chronosystem. The chronosystem represents time. Below the chronosystem lies the societal macrosystem, the local mesosystem, and the individual microsystem. While our paper will investigate the likelihood of microsystems

within certain mesosystems, it will also be important to understand the larger societal macrosystem and recent chronosystem to grasp the full ecological “picture” of LGBTQ+ politics on campus.

Notably, the United States gay, lesbian, and bisexual movement began in 1950 in Los Angeles with the establishment of the Mattachine Foundation. Outside of a higher educational context, the Mattachine Foundation promoted gay, lesbian, and bisexual culture for three years until its founders left the organization due to fear of persecution, related to their communist ties. The organization was restructured and renamed the Mattachine Society – focusing on acceptance by the heterosexual community (Kissack, 1995).

Fourteen years later, in 1967, Stephen Donaldson, a friend of the New York Mattachine Society would establish the first LGBTQ+ student group, the Student Homophile League, at Columbia University (Beemyn, 2003). A year later the Student Homophile League had chartered a second organization at Cornell University. At both Cornell and Columbia the Student Homophile Leagues were founded as educational organizations. It was common in the early years for these organizations to have a membership largely composed of heterosexual individuals (Beemyn, 2003). Joining a Student Homophile League did not automatically insinuate that a person identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

By early 1969, five Student Homophile Leagues existed (Columbia, Cornell, Stanford, New York University, and Rutgers) and all featured significant organizational dissonance. On one side openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual members wished to have an organization that promoted a unified queer culture, more similar to the initial Mattachine Foundation. On the other side, more conservative members and many allies continued to push for assimilation and acceptance through education (Beemyn, 2003). When police forcefully entered the Stonewall Inn

on June 28, 1969, a known sexual and gender minority bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, the spark needed to ignite the opposing sides in conflict was provided.

Following the Stonewall Riots, the Mattachine Society of New York took little action, generating a call for a new organization to respond and build community with other liberation movements gaining speed across the country. The result was the Gay Liberation Front, established in July 1969 (Kissack, 1995). The Gay Liberation Front met the needs of campus organizations wishing for an organization that promoted the gay culture. And within a few years, over 100 campuses featured Gay Liberation Front organizations, including the restructured Student Homophile League, then suitably named the Gay Liberation Front, at Cornell (Beemyn, 2003).

The national Gay Liberation Front divided in late 1969 due to ideological differences related to relationships with other liberation front movements. And by November 1969 the Gay Liberation Front split and the Gay Activists Alliance was founded. Students of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought each of these divisions with them to campus. Some campuses would feature three or more organizations, representing differing political views within the highly tumultuous national gay rights movement of the 1970s (McNeil, 2014). Over the fifty years since the Stonewall riots, some of these organizations would grow and become fully supported LGBTQ+ resource centers, some would remain campus organizations, and still others would ultimately cease to exist (Beemyn, 2002); institutional variables, discussed below, would shape the outcome for these organizations.

PLACES AND SPACES

The LGBTQ+ community has certainly grown and changed in America since 1969; acceptance and tolerance are far more common, and there are more resources and spaces for

LGBTQ+ individuals to feel safe and supported. That being said, there are still some areas of the United States, as well as world-wide, where LGBTQ+ individuals do not find support at all. For the purpose of this paper, places will refer to the mesosystems in which an LGBTQ+ supportive microsystems are provided. These microsystems will be referred to as spaces.

As we explore where students will find spaces, such as an LGBTQ+ resource center, we quickly begin to notice some patterns; some campuses are far more welcoming than others. In the coming section, we will explore which places are likely to provide spaces for LGBTQ+ students and which places are less likely to. We will spend considerable amounts of time exploring institutional types. We compare religiously affiliated institutions and secular institutions, minority serving institutions and predominantly White institutions, public and private institutions, liberal arts and research institutions, large and small institutions, and two-year and four-year institutions.

RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED VS. SECULAR INSTITUTIONS

In choosing an institution of higher education, students are faced with many decisions, one of which is how central their faith, spirituality, and/or religion will be throughout their college experience. Some students may decide to attend a religiously affiliated institution which is a “privately funded institution of higher learning in the United States that has overtly aligned itself and categorized itself as [religiously affiliated]” (Easter, 2012). Other students may choose to attend a secular institution which does not have any religious affiliation. This definition of secular institutions is very broad, and many secular institutions will differ based on other variables, many of which we will discuss later.

LGBTQ+ students at religiously affiliated institutions often find themselves facing barriers that students in secular institutions do not necessarily encounter. Wolff and Himes

(2010) write, “Current policies exist at religious universities and colleges that bar students with gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities from admission. Furthermore, these schools have wide-ranging disciplinary policies toward current students who identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual or participate in same-sex romantic behaviors” (p.1). The discrimination LGBTQ+ students experience throughout their college experience at religiously affiliated institutions logically implies that it is less likely for students to find an LGBTQ+ space on campus.

To go a step beyond this assumption, Fine writes in a 2012 study, “it is important to note that not one religiously affiliated private institution had an LGBT resource center” (p. 297). The spaces available to LGBTQ+ students on religiously affiliated campuses today are almost nonexistent which is to be expected given the blatant discrimination and even punishment which these institutions practice. While this has begun to change, there are still extremely few religiously affiliated institutions with LGBTQ+ spaces and it is far more likely to see spaces for LGBTQ+ students at secular institutions.

MINORITY SERVING VS. PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Minority Serving Institutions have many differences from predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Many minority serving institutions originated during a time when the student body was denied access to PWIs, while others serve regional minority populations as well as a majority of White students. Unambiguously, LGBTQ+ student identity on minority serving campuses is intersectional by nature, and takes on the requisite challenges of reconciling sexual identity with racial identity (Lang, 2014, p. 4). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), for example, have had a historical focus on improving the social status of Black men, to redirect the course of discrimination (Lang, 2014, p. 5). Mobely and Johnson (2015) note that

“The historical and contemporary religious affiliations that are inherent within HBCU communities present a tension of how and whether these institutions can and will take a reaffirming and nonjudgmental stance regarding the presence of Black LGBT communities on these campuses” (p. 81). These underlying dynamics create institutional barriers for students for students to engage with their identity publicly. Some scholars have found a dynamic where students identify as “black in public and gay in private” (Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan , 2010, p. 24). Morehouse College has been cited as an institution that still upholds this norm. When a group of students at the historically black college for men gained notoriety as “the plastics”, a group of males who function as interstitial figures and disrupt the border of feminine aesthetics through clothing styles and mannerism”, Morehouse responded with blanket dress code restrictions on their style of dress (Coleman, 5, 2016) This is one of many ways that LGBTQ+ students are subtly pushed the sidelines at MSIs.

Despite a historical failure to overcome many obstacles to support LGBTQ+ students on campus, progress has begun over the last decade. In 2012, Bowie State University in in Maryland became the first HBCU to open a LGBTQ+ resource center on campus (Mobley and Johnson, 2015). Since then over 21 HBCUs have recognized LGBTQ+/ally organizations on their campuses (Mobley and Johnson, 2015). These efforts to improve the support for LGBTQ+ students at HBCU’s are bolstered by historic partnerships. In 2011, Spelman College hosted the Audre Lorde Historically Black College and University Summit, which focused on LGBTQ+ issues within African-American and HBCU communities (Mobley and Johnson, 2015). Recent progress suggests that HBCUs are making strides toward improving support for LGBTQ+ students nationwide. However, these institutions must ultimately overcome the tensions between

racial and sexual identity, which some of their students face and which may exacerbate barriers to student support.

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

One distinct variable that can largely affect the student experience is whether or not the institution is public or private. Public and private universities and colleges have a huge number of differences including cost, size, policies, state and federal involvement, campus culture, and funding. While not an exhaustive list, this begins to describe some of the largest variables which may impact the experiences of any student. Many of these examples directly impact LGBTQ+ students via laws, policies, attitudes, and support.

Interestingly, Fine (2012) defines public status as the clearest prediction of whether or not an LGBTQ+ resource center will be readily available to students. Fine explains that, “As compared to many small, private, liberal arts colleges, larger public institutions may have the resources necessary to create such centers that other schools simply would not be able to,” (p.296). As most issues do, the accessibility to LGBTQ+ resources comes down to money and other resources like space and general community support. Beemyn (2002) adds that the likelihood that a private institution has an LGBTQ+ space is moderated by the size of its endowment. Public institutions are far more likely to have the funds needed to pay staff members, support programs, and create a physical location for LGBTQ+ students. In fact, the first LGBTQ+ resource center with institutional support was founded at a public institution, the University of Michigan in 1971 (Beemyn, 2002).

LIBERAL ARTS VS. RESEARCH INSTITUTION

Deciding to study at a liberal arts institution or a research institution may largely seem like an academic question, however these institutional types also differ in the resources available

to students - a difference which may affect students outside of the classroom setting. For the purpose of this paper a liberal arts institution is an institution in which greater than 50% of the academic programs fall within the arts & sciences as defined by The Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education (2017). While many institutional-types exist between baccalaureate arts and sciences institutions and research institutions, the current comparison is used to demonstrate the wide spectrum of institutional difference. Research institutions are doctoral institutions with varying degrees of research activity, classified by the combination of several factors including: doctoral degrees conferred, number of non-faculty research staff, and research expenditures (Carnegie, 2017).

As of 2002, Beemyn had accounted for 56 campus LGBTQ+ resource centers or offices within the United States. Of these, “all but six campus LGBT centers/offices [were] established at Universities, and most of these [were] at large research institutions” (p. 26). Additionally, Beemyn (2002) noted that 40% of all research institutions as classified by the 2000 Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education featured LGBTQ+ resource centers. Fine (2012) supported this trend a decade later, restating that attributes common to research institutions were seen as increasing the likelihood of LGBTQ+ friendly spaces on campus.

Ultimately, very little research exists explicitly reviewing the difference between liberal arts institutions and research institutions. More significant volumes of research exists exploring other attributes, which comprise some of the differences between these institutional types, including public versus private classification and large versus small student populations.

LARGE VS. SMALL INSTITUTIONS

Large and small public universities often have distinctive characteristics that make for a direct comparison. For example, our analysis concludes that research universities are more likely

than liberal arts colleges to have LGBTQ+ spaces, a distinction that tends to cut across size. As expected, larger universities have a greater likelihood of LGBTQ+ Center presence (Fine, 2002). However, there is meaningful difference to be found in understanding the source of the difference. Fine's argument is as simple as it is convincing. Larger universities have a greater enrollment, a larger faculty, and more resources at their disposal. Incidence of LGBTQ+ identity within the student body is understood to be directly related to enrollment, which suggests that larger schools have more sexual and gender minoritized students. Fine's general argument for any institutional type is supported by the typical characteristics of large institutions. Fine's resource mobilization approach to likelihood cites the factors of greater numbers of queer identifying students, alumni, and faculty to provide visibility and support for LGBTQ+ resources on campus.

2 YEAR VS. 4 YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Within the larger context of places community colleges represent a unique niche, being referred to by scholars as "people's colleges" or "democracy's colleges," due to their service to historically underserved populations (Taylor, 2015; Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). This service largely stops at admission for LGBTQ+ students, noting that "resources and programming for LGBTQ+ students are mostly absent on community college campuses" compared to four-year institutions (Manning, Pring, & Glider, 2012 as cited in Taylor, 2015). For community colleges, the absence of these support services shifts the weight of the campus climate to classroom and instructional settings, which become strong predictors of student perceptions (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). While classroom climate is still important at 4-year institutions, the comparably resource-saturated context reduces its effect on overall climate perceptions.

Recognizing the relationship between perceived campus climate and student retention, Campus Pride, a national non-profit promoting a positive collegiate experience for LGBTQ+ students, developed the Campus Pride Index (CPI) in 2007 (Garvey et al., 2017). The CPI measures eight cross-institutional factors affecting LGBTQ+ students. A decade after its launch, 274 institutions had implemented use of the CPI, which also features a published annual ranking of LGBTQ+-friendly institutions. As well intended as the CPI is however, only 19 community colleges used it in 2017 (Nguyen et al., 2018). Acknowledging limited use of a consistent instrument, studies using different instruments have echoed community colleges' greatest opportunity for the improvement - that LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of campus climate lies within affecting the classroom climate through curricular inclusion (Nguyen et al., 2018; Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Taylor, 2015). The establishment of campus LGBTQ+ resource centers, one of the greatest predictors of a positive perception by LGBTQ+ students, while ideal, appears to remain outside the resource possibilities for many two-year institutions.

APPLICATION

Having reviewed 12 institutional types, through six comparisons, in the following section we attempt to make meaning of the above research by relating it to our own undergraduate experiences at Bridgewater State University (Bridgewater, Massachusetts), Florida State University (Tallahassee, Florida), and Minnesota State University, Mankato (Mankato, Minnesota).

Bridgewater State University

The Bridgewater State University (BSU) Pride Center is an open, welcoming space in which students have the opportunity to seek academic support, social interaction with others who share the same or different identity, and a breadth of resources centralized for easy access. It is

currently run by Lee Forest, a gender non-conforming individual who has dedicated their life to acting as a resource for their students. For all of these reasons, Bridgewater State University is considered to be one of the best examples of an LGBTQ+ resource center in New England. According to the CPI, Bridgewater is rated four out of five stars with inclusive policy, institutional commitment, and LGBTQ+ counseling and wellness standing out in the sub-rankings (Campus Pride Index, 2017).

BSU's success is a phenomenal addition to the curriculum and student life as a whole. It is consistent with our research that a small, public, secular, 4-year, predominantly white institution in the Northeast would offer such accessible resources for LGBTQ+ students. What is surprising, however, is that Bridgewater is far more successful than other, similar institutions in the area, and even surpasses some larger institutions with more funding than BSU.

Florida State University

Florida State University's Pride Student Union was founded in 1969 as the People's Coalition for Gay Rights in response to the Stonewall Riots. As an executive agency in FSU's Student Government Association, the Pride Student Union's mission is to advocate for, empower, and provide spaces for LGBTQ+ people in the Tallahassee community. A notable success of the student run organization was to advocate for the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in FSU's non-discrimination policy. Recently, the organization has found success hosting collaborative events with other identity-based agencies, such as the Black Student Union.

With the support of the Pride Student Union, other LGBTQ+ student organizations are beginning to develop to meet the more specific needs of identity groups on campus. QTIPOC, which stands for Queer, Trans*, and Intersex People of Color, provides space for LGBTQ+

people of color to find support. Gender Odyssey is an organization founded for the growth, support, and community development of trans* and gender nonconforming students at FSU. While it is notable that the queer community at FSU has the strength to support multiple organizations, the absence of a staffed LGBTQ+ resource center is notable.

Minnesota State University, Mankato

The Jim Chalgren Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Center was established in 1977 at Minnesota State University, Mankato as the Alternative Lifestyles Office, by then Counselling and Student Personnel graduate student Jim Chalgren (Minnesota State University, 2014). The center continued to operate with part-time graduate and student support until 2003, when a student sit-in of the University President's office prompted the hiring of a full-time director. In 1977, the Jim Chalgren LGBT Center was the first LGBTQ+ resource center in the state of Minnesota, and the second in the United States. Today, the Jim Chalgren LGBT Center is organized under Institutional Diversity, reporting to the Director of Gender and Sexuality Programs under the Dean of Institutional Diversity.

While the courageous actions of Jim Chalgren should not be minimized, the variables presented in the above research suggest that the establishment of an LGBTQ+ resource center at Minnesota State University, Mankato would be likely. As a medium 4-year, public, secular, predominantly white, master's-granting institution, Minnesota State University, Mankato represents a suitable place for LGBTQ+ spaces. However, noting the context of higher education in the state of Minnesota, and the discussed variables, it is not expected that Minnesota State University, Mankato would have been the first LGBTQ+ resource center in the state. In this sense, Jim Chalgren's actions pre-empted the hypothesized founding of an LGBTQ+ resource

center in Mankato, specifically over the founding of a similar center at the University of Minnesota.

LIMITATIONS

LGBTQ+ places and spaces is a vast topic and has been a focus of research in recent years, so it is to be expected that we could not possibly cover all of the important topics and arguments that exist in regard to the LGBTQ+ experience on campus. We realize that we have not discussed several issues, including regional differences and political climate on campus. We would also note the challenges that exists when comparing intersecting institutional types.

There are significant differences in regional location in regard to LGBTQ+ spaces. Beemyn (2002) writes, "Only 2 of the 38 public doctoral/research universities in the South have centers or offices, whereas 10 of the 12 West Coast institutions of this type do so..." (p. 27). The location of an institution within the United States can dictate the likelihood that a student will find a space reserved for LGBTQ+ students.

Another issue we did not explore was the impact of political climate on campuses. While "the university-educated tend to be more liberal in terms of greater tolerance, support for civil liberties, and openness to non-traditional social and moral views," (Mintz, 1998, p. 22), the population beyond the college or university walls may not necessarily subscribe to those ideas. Without support from donors, alumnae, and the community around the campus, it is far more difficult for an institution to create an LGBTQ+ space. Beemyn (2002) writes, "Not surprisingly, the largest number of centers/offices are found in states that have historically had more liberal political climates..." (p. 26). Here we can see that political climate, as well as region, greatly impacts the availability of resources for LGBTQ+ students.

Lastly, while our research findings seemingly and primarily focused on support for students with minoritized sexual identities there appears to be a research gap related to minoritized gender identity support on campus. Notable forthcoming research by prominent scholars like Dr. Genny Beemyn and Z. Nicolazzo are beginning to address this gap in research, but there remains little evidence to draw deeper conclusions about institutional differences in trans* student support.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Across institution types, the general trend appears in favor of better resources and more institutions for LGBTQ+ students. Minority Serving Institutions seem particularly poised to improve the resources available to their students, with drastic improvement over recent years.

Further, we echo Garvey's finding that institutions have room to improve their assessment and reporting practices on climate and resources for queer students (Garvey, 538, 2014). Many institutions engage in very limited efforts to even assess the need for resources and support for LGBTQ+ students. The existing Campus Pride Index makes publicly available assessments of institutional climate for LGBTQ+ students. A good place to start for campuses attempting to improve their resources for these minoritized students would be to participate in the Campus Climate Index. With a better foundation of prescriptive research on best practices for campuses, support LGBTQ+ students becomes more accessible.

While the direction of support for LGBTQ+ students is general positive, the United States political climate is a cause for concern. In 2017, the Department of Education rescinded Obama-era guidance on protections for transgender students under Title IX as part of a broader effort to consider gender aligned biologically assigned sex (Battle, 2017). While the previously existing guidance was part of a set of unenforceable recommendations, this change is a reversal

of years of increasing federal support for LGBTQ+ rights on campus and change the tone for campuses just beginning to consider lending support to these students. These actions are potentially the first of many efforts and should be watched closely.

CONCLUSION

The intention of this paper was to explore the likelihood of an LGBTQ+ supportive mesosystem (place) through the presence of particular microsystems (spaces), a goal which we believe has been met. We began our paper by introducing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory and by discussing early steps in the LGBTQ+ rights movement. It was discovered that the earliest portions of the LGBTQ+ movement occurred outside of higher education, and that LGBTQ+ student activism came to campus as a part of the larger student rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Second, we explored 12 different institutional types, through six comparisons, and assessed their likelihood to have supportive microsystems for LGBTQ+ students. Exploring the intersection of these institutional types, Beemyn (2002) demonstrated that existing and new LGBTQ+ centers/offices (the leading example of a supportive LGBTQ+ microsystem) were more likely to be found at large, public, presumably secular, four-year, research institutions. We then utilized a review of research literature (Garvey et al., 2017; Tetreault et al., 2013; Rankin, 2005), to relate the presence of microsystems to mesosystem climate. To bring meaning to the paper, the literature was applied to three specific University contexts. As the paper concluded, regional and political differences between campuses were acknowledged as additional factors affecting the campus climate for LGBTQ+ students. And lastly, the need for ongoing climate assessment through the use of the Campus Pride Index was discussed.

The paper in its entirety demonstrated the importance and the variables related to the presence of supportive microsystems and the development of a positive mesosystem for sexuality and gender minoritized students. So long as these minoritized students face hardships related to pervasive heterosexism and cisgenderism on campus the systems and next steps presented in this paper will continue to be necessary.

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