

THE EFFECTS OF QUEERNESS ON
A STUDENT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR ALMA MATER

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by

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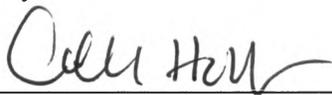
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Brett Alan Trace
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Over the past several years, an increasing number of LGBTQ college students have enrolled in institutions of Higher Education. Current institutional responses to and research on the needs of this group of marginalized students have focused on the experiences of active students. This study shifts the conversation about queer and trans college students towards the needs of queer and trans college alumni as they transition out of the college environment. Using a qualitative interview-based methodology, this study highlights the experiences of recent college alumni and how their experiences as undergraduate college students continue to influence their relationship to their alma mater and their personal development following graduation. By focusing on this overlooked population of queer and trans college students, this study seeks to develop opportunities to better support current students and re-engage these alumni.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

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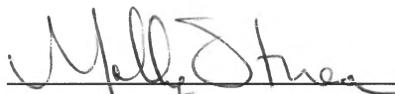
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Effects of Queerness on a Student's Relationship with their Alma Mater* by Brett Alan Trace, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	10
Homophobia, Transphobia, and Heterosexism.....	10
Higher Education and Student Development.....	20
Alumni Relations.....	27
Methodology.....	33
Study Overview.....	33
Recruitment.....	36
Interview Structure.....	38
Memos.....	41
Transcription.....	42
Coding.....	43
Analysis.....	45
Positionality.....	47

Results.....	49
Participant Overview	49
Section Structure.....	51
Individual – Identity Development	54
Peer Interpersonal – Queer Support Networks	61
Faculty Interpersonal – The Classroom	76
Lasting Effects – Alumni Life	87
Discussion	97
Structural Oppression.....	97
College is Queer, but the World is Straight	101
Queer Mentoring Networks – A Response	103
Conclusion	108
Bibliography	111

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the importance of receiving a college education has greatly increased, with many careers now requiring a college degree. For many, college has transitioned from one of many post-secondary options to an expected continuation of their education. Indeed, despite rising tuition costs, college attendance has steadily increased in the past twenty years.¹ Along with the changing role of college in the American education system, there have also been cultural shifts that have changed how many students now enroll in colleges and universities. Today's student body is more diverse than in the past, with women, students of color, queer students, and students from many other marginalized groups enrolling in college at ever-increasing rates.² Many colleges welcome this increased diversity, as it is a commonly held belief in Higher Education that a diverse student body is desirable for student development.³

This increasing student diversity also presents a problem for an institution that, for a significant portion of its history, was available only to certain classes, genders, religions, and races. It is important for Higher Education not only to welcome diverse students, but also to ensure that the institution is able to serve these students. Campus climate surveys, designed to ascertain the ability of a college to serve a certain identity

¹ "National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, Part of the U.S. Department of Education," Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2001-2002, E.D. Tab, accessed May 11, 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/>.

² Kristen A. Renn and Robert Dean Reason, *College Students in the United States: Characteristics, Experiences, and Outcomes* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

³ Susan R. Jones and Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, "Evolution of Student Development Theory," *New Directions for Student Services* 2016, no. 154 (2016): , accessed July 24, 2017, doi:10.1002/ss.20172.

group, have shown that colleges still struggle to provide for women⁴, students of color⁵, and queer students⁶. National surveys on campus climate for diversity have routinely demonstrated that colleges are least welcoming to their queer and trans students.⁷ Whether this is a result of institutionalized heterosexism or transphobia and homophobia on behalf of individuals in the campus environment, queer and trans college students continue to face barriers to their enrollment, retention, and graduation as a result of the cold campus climates they encounter.

Positive interactions with the college environment have been shown to yield positive student outcomes, such as increased career satisfaction.⁸ Conversely, negative interactions with the college environment both discourage students from continuing their education and diminish the positive outcomes they receive after graduation.⁹ As research in alumni relations begins to illuminate the tie between student experience and alumni satisfaction and career success, we can better understand the lasting impacts of positive and negative campus environments. In the past, theories of student development and engagement have focused on the benefits of the college experience during college.¹⁰ As

⁴ Laurel Westbrook, "Where the Women Arent: Gender Differences in the Use of LGBT Resources on College Campuses," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6, no. 4 (2009): , accessed November 17, 2016, doi:10.1080/19361650903295769.

⁵ Easterwood Anita, *Racial Stressors and the Black College Experience at Predominately White Institutions*, PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2016 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2016).

⁶ Sue Rankin et al., *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender People* (Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride, 2010).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Alexander W. Astin, "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education," *Journal of College Student Development* 40, no. 5 (September/October 1999).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, vol. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

college becomes a more ubiquitous gateway to better futures, it is necessary to begin tracking the lasting effects of student success. Understanding the factors that increase alumni satisfaction will also illuminate the longevity of impacts from the college experience.

Because queer and trans students experience a campus climate of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia¹¹, the lasting effects of their college experiences can be damaging even beyond graduation. As college is framed as an integral step in adolescent development and the education system, we must grapple with the implications of heterosexist institutions. Research has already demonstrated that queer and trans students are more affected by negative campus experiences than their straight peers¹², and that these experiences have long lasting consequences. Queer and trans students are the most likely to drop out of college or consider leaving their institution¹³, and they experience less success after college than their straight peers.¹⁴ This study looks specifically at the impact that a cold campus climate has on the relationship queer and trans college students have with their undergraduate institution, the memory of their college experience, and their success post-graduation. By focusing on the outcomes of queer and trans college students, I hope to better understand the relationship between experiences with a heterosexist institution and the outcomes achieved by queer and trans college students.

¹¹ Rankin et al.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael R. Woodford et al., "Contemporary Heterosexism on Campus and Psychological Distress among LGBQ Students: The Mediating Role of Self-acceptance.," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84, no. 5 (2014), accessed July 3, 2017, doi:10.1037/ort0000015.

Given that Higher Education has only recently begun to diversify, it has a history of being a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution.¹⁵ Historically, colleges and universities have sought to remove queer and trans members of the institution whenever possible.¹⁶ As a medical model of gender and sexuality was adopted in the 19th and 20th centuries, colleges began to utilize their services to ‘cure’ queer and trans students, staff, and faculty members.¹⁷ While most colleges have moved away from these responses to queerness, the legacy of these policies remain. Queer and trans students are still the most likely group to experience overt discrimination, and experience covert and institutionalized discrimination at far higher rates than their straight counterparts.¹⁸ Despite the adoption of anti-discrimination policies and the establishment of queer and trans resource centers, heterosexism continues to thrive on college campuses.

Perhaps the reason that Higher Education continues to struggle with addressing this heterosexist legacy is because of a lack of understanding of queer and trans college students. Much of the development of the college environment is framed by theories of student development, an off shoot of the human development field of psychology. Student Development Theories have their origins in the early 20th Century¹⁹, a time when colleges were homogenous and segregated. Because much of the work on understanding

¹⁵ Marilyn J. Preston and Garrett Drew Hoffman, "Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions: Discourses Surrounding LGBTQ College Students," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 12, no. 1 (2015): , accessed November 13, 2016, doi:10.1080/19361653.2014.935550.

¹⁶ Kristen A. Renn, "LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education," *Educational Researcher* 39, no. 2 (2010), doi:10.3102/0013189x10362579.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Rankin et al.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Courier Corporation, 2014).

student development was conducted before the more recent diversification of Higher Education, many of the most widely utilized theories reflect the experiences of a particular group of students and may not hold true for the needs and wants of all college students. Student development theories that do not consider the development of queer and trans students undergird many conceptions of the campus environment and student needs.

Colleges and universities have begun to address more overt forms of discrimination such as homophobia and transphobia. In the recent past there has been a widespread adoption of anti-discrimination language by institutions of Higher Education that is inclusive of sexual and gender identities.²⁰ Additionally, many colleges have taken to establishing LGBTQ Student Centers, offering resources, programming, and community for queer and trans students.²¹ Students who have interacted with these types of centers have responded positively to their experiences both with the center and with their institution as a whole.²²

Those that work with student development theories have also begun to acknowledge the historical lack of diversity that is the foundation for many modern theories. Theorists and scholars from marginalized identity groups have taken to

²⁰ Melinda D. Kane, "Finding "Safe" Campuses: Predicting the Presence of LGBT Student Groups at North Carolina Colleges and Universities," *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 6 (2013): , accessed July 24, 2017, doi:10.1080/00918369.2013.774837.

²¹ Hannah Furrow, "LGBT Students in the College Composition Classroom," *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 6 (2012).

²² Matthew K. Robison, *Through the Eyes of Gay and Male Bisexual College Students: A Critical Visual Qualitative Study of Their Experiences*, PhD diss., Thesis / Dissertation ETD, 2012 (GA: Digital Archive at GSU, 2012).

developing their own models of student development.²³ Additionally, theories around identity development, particularly for queer students, have been successfully deployed in the development of resources for queer and trans adolescents in college.²⁴ Alumni Relations has also begun to move away from a donation-based model of alumni satisfaction to one that emphasizes the ties between student satisfaction and alumni satisfaction and how this relates to alumni giving. By extending the importance of student experience beyond graduation, Alumni Relations has the opportunity to incentivize universities to create a better student experience. Additionally, this extension of the effects of student experience highlights the importance of creating positive campus environments for students of marginalized backgrounds.

With a theoretical foundation that lacks diversity, the linking of alumni satisfaction to student experience continues the ignorance of queer and trans student experiences. By focusing only on development theories that encompass normative students, alumni relations brings the cold campus climate into the alumni experience for queer and trans graduates. Additionally, this study looks to move beyond a donation-based understanding of queer and trans alumni satisfaction towards an understanding focused on alumni engagement. What little research has been conducted on marginalized alumni is conducted separate of larger discussions of alumni engagement, further

²³ Jones and Stewart.

²⁴ Anthony R. D'Augelli, "Identity Development and Sexual Orientation: Toward a Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development," in *The Jossey-Bass Social and Behavioral Science Series. Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

separating marginalized alumni from normative alumni and perpetuating the exclusionary history of Higher Education.

Missing from these discussions is the relationship between understanding the heterosexist college environment, prevailing theories of student development theory, and the future engagement of students as alumni. It is vitally important for student development theory to reflect the development patterns of queer and trans students, as much of the campus environment is created as a result of these theories. If the college environment is designed to promote outcomes for students during and after college, then a college environment designed in ignorance of queer and trans students denies those students the very outcomes it purports to create. Discussing how queer and trans students come to be denied these college outcomes is a necessary step in creating college environments that provide these outcomes to queer and trans students.

This study uses Astin's Student Involvement Theory²⁵ to understand how experiences and perceptions of heterosexism in the college environment influence the college success and alumni satisfaction of queer and trans college graduates. Where previous studies have illuminated the college environment as heterosexist²⁶ and have linked student development and alumni satisfaction theories²⁷, this study seeks to explicitly investigate the experiences and lasting impacts of attending a heterosexist college or university. In doing so, I discuss the need for campus solutions that account

²⁵ Astin.

²⁶ Rankin et al.

²⁷ Amy Catherine Barnes, *What Predicts Alumni Satisfaction?: The Impact of Investment, Involvement, and Post-college Outcomes*, PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, 2007 (2007).

for queer and trans student development to create better student and alumni experiences for those students as graduates.

In order to better understand the relationships that queer and trans students have with their alma maters, I conducted a series of computer mediated interviews to investigate the experiences of queer and trans students at heteronormative colleges and universities. These interviews sought to identify the impacts of students' gender and sexual identity while attending a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution²⁸.

Additionally, I analyze the effect of this experience on the graduate's relationship with their former institution. This study contributes a better understanding of how a queer student's sense of belonging, or lack thereof, during their college experience affects their relationship to their alma mater following graduation by addressing the following research questions: How does the experience of being a queer student at a heteronormative institution affect a student's academic performance, mental health, social growth, and sense of belonging within the institution? How does a queer student's sense of belonging with their undergraduate institution develop and change during and after their college experience?

By answering these questions, I point to the lasting effects of attending a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution on student and alumni satisfaction. These answers point to the need for more widespread adoption of campus solutions that consider and benefit queer and trans students. This study stimulates the need for the

²⁸ Preston and Hoffman.

development of best practices in creating queer and trans student experiences.

Additionally, I hope to illuminate ways in which alumni can be reengaged with their former institutions as colleges combat the legacy of heterosexism.

Literature Review

Homophobia, Transphobia, and Heterosexism

In recent years there has been a proliferation of LGBTQ Student Resource Centers across college campuses, largely as a response to the growing number of queer and trans students on college campuses and growing public support for the interests of queer and trans people. While these centers provide institutionalized support for queer and trans students, it is important to look beyond the center itself and investigate the experiences of queer and trans students on college campuses. Many colleges have conducted this research for their own development through campus climate surveys. These surveys investigate both the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia on campus and how the needs of queer and trans students are being addressed.²⁹ There have been several large-scale campus climate surveys that have sought to understand regional and national campus climates for queer and trans students. The largest of these is the 2010 national study conducted by Susan Rankin, Genevieve Weber, Warren Blumenfeld, and Somjen Frazer through Campus Pride, an organization that seeks to create safer campuses for LGBTQ people³⁰. Their study, the 2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender People, surveyed 5,149 students, staff, and faculty from across the country and across every classification of institution.³¹ This study shed light on the experiences of queer and trans students outside of their individual institutions, allowing

²⁹ Renn 132.

³⁰ "Campus Pride Index," Campus Pride, accessed May 11, 2018.

³¹ Rankin et al 8.

for discussion of the prevalence of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia across Higher Education as a whole.

It had previously been established that while campus climates were cold for all students from marginalized backgrounds, they were coldest for queer and trans students.³² The Rankin et al. study confirmed this finding, and investigated the prevalence of overt harassment, perceptions of harassment and discrimination, and the responses of queer and trans students, staff, and faculty.³³ What quickly became apparent in their analysis is the difference between overt homophobia and transphobia, and more covert heterosexism.³⁴ While overt harassment still existed on campus, this was significantly less common for queer people to experience than more covert forms of heterosexism.³⁵ For example, respondents were more likely to indicate that they were the target of derogatory remarks (61.1%) than they were to report having been physically assaulted (3.2%).³⁶ While it is reassuring to see that LGB students are experiencing less physical violence, it should be concerning that nearly two thirds of respondents indicated they experienced isolation and derision. Moreover, the overt-covert difference applies primarily to LGB students; trans and gender non-conforming students continue to face more overt forms of discrimination than their LGB counterparts.³⁷

³² Rankin et al.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rankin et al.

³⁵ Rankin et al 57.

³⁶ Rankin et al 58.

³⁷ Rankin et al 90.

Whereas homophobia and transphobia can be seen as hatred of and disgust for queer and trans people respectively, heterosexism is more accurately defined as “the expectation that all persons should be or are heterosexual.”³⁸ While many colleges have taken steps to combat overt homophobia, they have continued to institutionalize heterosexism and ignore overt transphobia. It is this unchallenged heterosexism that continues to create cold campus climates despite the creation of LGBTQ Student Centers. Similarly, though colleges may embrace antidiscrimination language that includes queer and trans students, that does not mean that the campus climate is warm enough to support a queer and/or trans student group.³⁹ This is also why queer and trans students continue to report experiencing microaggressions and are often critical of university responses to their concerns.⁴⁰

In addition to their experiences with homophobia and transphobia, the Rankin et al. study asked students about their perceptions of heterosexism on campus. Queer and trans respondents to this survey were more likely than their straight counterparts to identify instances of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism.⁴¹ This is a particularly important finding, as the perception of campus climate can be just as, if not more, impactful on a student than the actual experience of harassment.^{42,43} Queer and trans students were also aware that their experiences and perceptions were a result of a campus

³⁸ Elizabeth P. Cramer, *Addressing Homophobia and Heterosexism on College Campuses* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³⁹ Kane.

⁴⁰ Rankin et al.

⁴¹ Rankin et al 85.

⁴² Rankin et al 81.

⁴³ Furrow.

climate that was uncomfortable and unsafe, both for them and for students of other marginalized identities.⁴⁴ Queer and trans students, as a result of their own repression in colleges, “discovered the interconnections between various forms of oppression, not merely overarching perceptions of heterosexism, biphobia, and transphobia on their campus, but also many of the other spokes holding up the wheel of oppression that pervades college campuses, particularly that of racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia toward non-U.S.-born people, and especially toward Mexicans.”⁴⁵ Not only must queer and trans students navigate an oppressive environment based on their sexual and gender identities, they are also challenged by their awareness of other forms of marginalization taking place on the college campus, especially for students of multiple marginalized identities.

Student awareness of this cold campus climate had real consequences for the respondents in the study; at a number of points, queer and trans respondents discussed considerations of leaving their college or university.⁴⁶ Cold campus climates present a barrier to retention for queer and trans students, who consider leaving at higher rates than their straight peers.⁴⁷ Interestingly, although queer and trans students are less likely to leave after their first year of study, they consider leaving at increasing rates throughout their time in college, while straight college students consider leaving less with time.⁴⁸ If experiences of heterosexism cause queer students to feel isolated to the point of desiring

⁴⁴ Rankin et al 89, 104.

⁴⁵ Rankin et al 109.

⁴⁶ Rankin et al 140.

⁴⁷ Rankin et al 128.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

to leave throughout their time in college, it is no leap to then assume that this impacts their ability to feel engaged or satisfied with their college experiences. Indeed, Higher Education scholars have demonstrated that a lack of student belonging not only presents a challenge to student retention, but also has impacts on the outcomes of a student's education.⁴⁹ If a major concern of student development theorists is student retention, then the likelihood of queer and trans students to consider leaving their institution points to a college environment that does not foster their student development.

Colleges have a history of heterosexism that has always focused on isolating queer and trans students. The first policies designed to respond to queer and trans students focused on removing queer and trans students from campus, out of concern for the corrupting influence they would have on straight students.⁵⁰ As social thought around queer and trans people transitioned towards a medical model of understanding, colleges began to see their role less as gatekeepers. Instead, colleges and universities began directing queer and trans students to campus-based medical 'treatment' services which were being made available on college campuses for a variety of mental health issues.⁵¹ While most colleges today have transitioned away from this overt oppression of queer and trans students, the history of this oppression continues to exist in more covert forms. These include welcoming queer and trans student groups onto campus, but enforcing

⁴⁹ Sunday D. Griffith, *Using the National Survey of Student Engagement as a Tool to Determine Influences of Overall Student Satisfaction with the College Experience and Help Define Student-centeredness*, PhD diss., University of Toledo, 2011 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2012), 17.

⁵⁰ Renn.

⁵¹ Ibid.

additional administrative oversight on their events and meetings.⁵² It also continues with the prevalence of campus climate surveys undertaken by colleges, but the lack of follow through by many on the findings from these surveys.⁵³

Additionally, the creation of LGBTQ Student Centers as a response to the need of queer and trans students can further isolate them from the rest of campus.⁵⁴ Not only are closeted and semi-closeted queer and trans students likely to avoid specifically queer spaces on campus⁵⁵, but the creation of a separate queer space itself reinforces the othering of queer and trans students.⁵⁶ While straight students are able to access information about and representations of their sexualities in all spaces across campus, queer and trans students are relegated to specific areas of campus, or are tokenized in straight spaces.⁵⁷ One of the issues with providing LGBTQ Student Centers is that many colleges consider the provision of the center as a universal solution that is able to provide resources to any and all queer and trans students. However, queer and trans students have varying needs based on the sexual and gender identities, other marginalized identities they may hold, their level of outness, and the environment of the university itself. Research has demonstrated that there are many factors that decide if a student will use and benefit from the services provided through an LGBTQ Student Center.⁵⁸ In a study of queer women at two different universities, it was found that not only did these

⁵² Kane.

⁵³ Renn.

⁵⁴ Preston and Hoffman.

⁵⁵ Rankin et al.

⁵⁶ Preston and Hoffman.

⁵⁷ Furrow.

⁵⁸ Kane.

students access campus resources differently than queer male students, they didn't access these services the same way between the two institutions studied.⁵⁹ Primarily, women at UC Berkeley were disinclined to engage with student resources due to discrimination within the LGBTQIA+ communities, while women at UC Santa Cruz were more likely to disengage as a result of gender-based discrimination.⁶⁰ Additionally, given that out queer and trans students are the most likely to utilize institutional resources while receiving the least benefits from these same resources⁶¹, it is important to consider other ways that institutions can demonstrate support for queer and trans students.

While queer and trans students certainly struggle with experiences of heterosexism and it does present a significant barrier to their success in college, they are nevertheless persisting through these barriers. Queer and trans students are building their own networks of support, resources, and community when university response is ineffective or nonexistent. The largest source of support for many queer and trans students are their faculty members.⁶² It has been demonstrated that relationships with faculty have tremendous impact both on student success⁶³ and alumni satisfaction⁶⁴. Queer and trans students especially look to their faculty members for representation and

⁵⁹ Westbrook.

⁶⁰ Westbrook.

⁶¹ Christa K. Schmidt, Joseph R. Miles, and Anne C. Welsh, "Perceived Discrimination and Social Support," *Journal of Career Development* 38, no. 4 (2010): 303, accessed July 3, 2017, doi:10.1177/0894845310372615.

⁶² Jodi L. Linley et al., "Faculty as Sources of Support for LGBTQ College Students," *College Teaching* 64, no. 2 (2016): 57, accessed July 10, 2017, doi:10.1080/87567555.2015.1078275.

⁶³ Griffith 105.

⁶⁴ Vanessa L. Drew-Branch, *Student Engagement, Alumni Satisfaction, and Alumni Donations at a Public Four Year Institution: An Analysis of How the Undergraduate Experience Influences Alumni Donations*, PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2011 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2011), 11.

support in and out of the classroom.⁶⁵ While queer and trans faculty members also experience heterosexism and harassment from students and their peers, they appear to encounter it at lower rates than do their student counterparts.⁶⁶ Certainly faculty members still experience heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia from their students and peers, but their status as professors does shield them from some of the more overt forms these can take. Additionally, faculty members, including straight faculty members, can challenge heterosexism and support their queer and trans students by introducing queer content into their classes.⁶⁷ Marginalized students often feel disengaged with course materials that present material that caters only to the normative student⁶⁸; providing students with queer and trans material and scholars can help reengage queer and trans students, as well as broaden the knowledge of straight students.⁶⁹ Faculty members must be sensitive to queer and trans students when introducing this material, however. For closeted students in particular, queer and trans topics in the classroom present a challenge, as they might require students to out themselves.⁷⁰ Students already out of the closet may find that they are the only queer and or trans student in the class in these moments and therefore may become tokenized. It is also important to ensure that heteronormativity does not become reproduced through queer and trans materials; faculty

⁶⁵ Linley.

⁶⁶ Rankin et al.

⁶⁷ Linley.

⁶⁸ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁶⁹ Linley 58.

⁷⁰ Furrow 150.

and students must not assume a shared heterosexuality in the classroom that both others the material and any queer and trans students in the classroom.

When colleges and universities provide resources that are insufficient for the needs of queer and trans students, these students are often more inclined than their straight peers to seek out their own resources. In regards to the mental health needs of queer and trans students, which is a major concern for colleges, queer and trans students are more likely to experience high stress and psychological distress.⁷¹ Additionally, these students are also more likely to seek out mental health resources off campus than they are to utilize resources provided on campus.⁷² In many cases, this is because of a lack of resources that either cater specifically to queer and trans individuals or are capable of discussing issues of sexuality and gender, both of which students are able to find from practitioners off campus. Additionally, students are more likely to utilize resources on campus if they have already come out of the closet.⁷³ In part, this is a result of the isolation of queer- and trans-specific resources from the larger campus community.⁷⁴ Students who are not out of the closet, or are subject to a cold campus climate, are less likely to utilize services if the act of doing so proclaims their sexual and/or gender

⁷¹ Michael S. Dunbar et al., "Mental Health Service Utilization Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning or Queer College Students," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 3 (2017): , doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.03.008.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Jason C. Garvey and Susan R. Rankin, "The Influence of Campus Experiences on the Level of Outness Among Trans-Spectrum and Queer-Spectrum Students," *Journal of Homosexuality* 62, no. 3 (2014): , doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.977113.

⁷⁴ Preston and Hoffman.

difference.⁷⁵ While it is positive that increased levels of outness lead to increased utilization of campus services for queer and trans students, Garvey and Rankin note that these same students are less likely to need the resources being provided on campus as a result of their increased outness.⁷⁶

In order to navigate a heterosexist college environment, queer and trans students have become adept at developing their own coping methods and networks of support.⁷⁷ For many students, these networks exist between their queer and trans peers, faculty and staff members, and outside members of the community. For some students, forcibly creating their connection to the university at the expense of developing their queer and/or trans identity is necessary for their development as students.⁷⁸ Research suggests that students must develop these networks of support to fill in gaps in their own student development, a fact that their straight peers do not have to contend with. Looking beyond the prevalence and patterns of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia in Higher Education, the implications of these on the student development of queer and trans students must next be understood.

⁷⁵ Dunbar et al.

⁷⁶ Garvey and Rankin 383.

⁷⁷ Schmidt, Miles, and Welsh 303.

⁷⁸ Kevin C. Snow, *A Mixed Methods Study of the Intersection of Sexual Orientation and Spiritual Development in the College Experience*, PhD diss., Old Dominion University, 2015 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2015), 76.

Higher Education and Student Development

Theories of Student Development, of which there are many, seek to understand how college students can and do change during their time in college.⁷⁹ These theories dictate how much of the development is individual-driven, meaning that the student takes the leading role in their own growth, and how much of the development is college-driven, meaning that the college environment stimulates a natural development process.⁸⁰ All of the theories around student development focus on paths that students take towards becoming a more developed person, whether that be stages they must progress through or resources they must take advantage of. The history of Student Development Theory is varied, but many find its underpinnings in early English colleges which were small and offered an individualized education.⁸¹ With the expansion of the Higher Education in the 19th Century, larger colleges replaced these smaller institutions and lead to a more sterile institution. Emphasis on student development reemerged with the advent of modern psychology and its theories on human development.⁸² Student Development Theory falls within the young adulthood phase on most models of human development for traditionally-aged students, who much of the theory is developed around. In the early 20th Century, John Dewey, a renowned philosopher advocated for the place of education

⁷⁹ Renn and Reason.

⁸⁰ Renn and Reason.

⁸¹ M. Walker, "Working with College Students & Student Development Theory Primer," University of North Carolina Wilmington, , <https://uncw.edu/studentaffairs/committees/pdc/documents/StudentDevelopmentTheorybyM.Walker.pdf>.

⁸² Ibid.

in public life, and can be considered one of the first student development thinkers.⁸³ For Dewey, education and engagement with the college environment were important in the development of active citizens, and so he advocated for educational institutions which engaged with students as equal partners in their human development. Dewey's concepts for education culminated in the increased self-awareness that colleges could instill in their students.

Student Development Theories are organized into four main schools of thought: psychosocial theories, moral development, typological theories, and person-environment theories.⁸⁴ Additionally, there is extensive research on the identity development of college students. Higher Education pulls from all of these schools of thought when discussing and applying Student Development Theories, with each theory providing different information and different applications. Moral Development Theories focus on the way that students develop thought processes, acquire knowledge, and develop principles for interaction.⁸⁵ Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development forms the basis for most theories in this category. Kohlberg developed six stages of moral development, which he organized into three levels, in the 1950s that track the progression of individual moral development among young men. In the Pre-Conventional Level, one's morality revolves around the avoidance of punishment and obedience to authority. Further development advances to the Conventional Level, where morality is based off of positive

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Student Development Theory - Cheat Sheet," University of Louisville, , accessed July 24, 2017, https://sharepoint.louisville.edu/sites/SIGS/Documents/P_student-dev-theory-01-21-2011.pdf.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

reinforcement and a desire to obey the rules. Finally, in the Principled Level, one has moved past morality that is dependent on others to one which is intrinsically driven.⁸⁶ Other theories of moral development have been derived, but most follow the stages established by Kohlberg in their understanding of the development of personal values.

Psychosocial theories are the most closely related to the psychological theories of human development that student development falls under. These theories focus on the stages of one's development and the specific contents of these phases, which may be hierarchical or sequential.⁸⁷ In 1969, Arthur Chickering identified seven vectors that humans must complete in the process of developing their personal identities, creating Chickering's Theory of Identity Development. While this theory is influential for student development theory, it exists beyond the scope of just a student development theory. Unlike stage theories of human development or hierarchical needs, Chickering's vectors served as a series of developmental tasks that would be completed in different ways and at different paces by each individual.⁸⁸ These vectors start with developing basic competencies in intellect, interpersonal interaction, and physical skills, before moving on to developing emotional intelligence and control over emotional expression. Once these basic competencies are mastered, one begins to experience increased emotional freedom while moving towards autonomy. Developing interpersonal relationships that center on tolerance and appreciation of difference is then necessary to achieve before one can begin

⁸⁶ Walker.

⁸⁷ "Student Development Theory".

⁸⁸ Arthur W. Chickering and Linda Reisser, *Education and Identity* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

establishing an autonomous identity using the skills acquired previously. Once identities have been developed in areas like gender and ethnicity, one can begin to understand their purpose and goals, developing a system of values with which to pursue these goals.⁸⁹ These vectors point to the skills necessary to respond to certain situations, and help to contextualize moments of crises for individuals. In understanding these vectors, particularly in regards to student development, any crisis can be understood as a lack of the necessary skills to deal with a crisis.⁹⁰

In this thesis, I am most concerned with Person-Environment theories, which seek to understand how engagement between students and their college environments stimulates development and growth.⁹¹ These theories think specifically about the intentional role that colleges and students play in student development. Sometimes known as ecological theories, Person-Environment theories focus on how a student becomes developed by interacting with learning processes, educators, peers and social contexts, and the time in which the student is learning.⁹² In the late 1980s, Alexander Astin began writing about a developmental theory which he referred to as Student Involvement Theory.⁹³ Astin saw student development as a process in which the student and the college played an equal role, a significant difference from previous theories which focused on human development and the role of the institution. For Astin, colleges provide an environment that stimulates student development, both intentionally and

⁸⁹ Chickering and Reisser.

⁹⁰ Walker.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² "Student Development Theory".

⁹³ Astin.

unintentionally, but without student participation in their own developmental processes, students would not yield the desired outcomes of having attended college.⁹⁴ Student Involvement Theory posits that the only way for a student to develop is for the college to provide opportunities that the student may become involved in. Involvement opportunities could vary, and should include more than just club membership; studying and coursework, campus employment, and interaction with faculty, peers, and alumni all increase the amount of engagement a student has with their college environment. Whereas previous theories believed students played a passive role in their own development⁹⁵ or that student development was indistinguishable from human development⁹⁶, Student Involvement Theory holds that a student cannot fully develop without their participation, no matter the environment they are in.⁹⁷ Empirical work has shown that the more a student is engaged with their college or university, the more likely they are to persist with their education, providing a boost to retention efforts.⁹⁸ Astin also advocated for a diversity of involvement, demonstrating that over-involvement in any one area limits the developmental advantages a student receives.⁹⁹ These conclusions have been proven and refined with time, but the core principle of involvement as a key to student development has remained.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Griffith.

⁹⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005).

⁹⁶ Walker.

⁹⁷ Astin 520-521.

⁹⁸ Pascarella and Terenzini.

⁹⁹ Astin 525.

¹⁰⁰ Pascarella and Terenzini.

In addition to thinking about student development, colleges and universities must be aware of more general theories about identity development. Many theories that inform Student Development Theory take up at least some element of identity development, but it is important to also consider how identity development itself takes place. This is particularly important given that many early Student Development Theories focused on the experiences of white male college students. While many supplemental development theories have been developed as Higher Education has become increasingly diverse¹⁰¹, colleges must also be aware of the important role that identity development plays for students of marginalized backgrounds. For queer and trans students, the implications for identity development on their student development, given their exposure to cold campus climates as discussed earlier, are crucial. There are two major theories on LGB Identity Development, though it must be noted that major theories on trans identity development are not as forthcoming. These identity theories fall under the psychosocial theories, and feature stages or processes that queer individuals progress through. In Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, queer individuals begin with a sense of confusion about their sexuality, and then begin comparing their identity to others for understanding of their sexuality.¹⁰² Eventually, they come to tolerate their sexuality, which is separate from the acceptance which follows the tolerance stage.¹⁰³ Following acceptance, queer people experience pride in their sexuality before synthesizing their queer identity to their

¹⁰¹ Jones and Stewart.

¹⁰² Vivienne C. Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model," *The Journal of Sex Research* 20, no. 2 (1984): , doi:10.1080/00224498409551214.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

larger identity. Meanwhile D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development focuses on processes by which a queer person comes to enter a queer political community or identity.¹⁰⁴ Queer people begin by exiting their heterosexual identity and establishing their own queer identity. Eventually they establish a network of queer and trans supporters, which leads to their coming out to friends and family. Queer individuals then develop intimate relationships, before eventually becoming involved in queer politics.¹⁰⁵ In both of these models, young queer students, and trans students for that matter, experience vulnerability and a thirst for community. Understanding the specific ways that queer and trans identity development occurs in tandem with general student development is crucial for supporting queer and trans students.

The implications for understanding student development theory and using it in coordination with queer and trans identity development in young adults has tangible impacts on transphobia, homophobia, and heterosexism. Students who are farther along in their gender and sexual identity development will be able to make better use of resources that are designed solely along student development lines.¹⁰⁶ Because these students have developed queer and trans support networks early on in their identity development, however, their need for resources such as LGBTQ Resource Centers are drastically different than students in the early stages of their queer and trans identity

¹⁰⁴ D'Augelli.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Marie Gannon-Rittenhouse and Joyce Pittman, *Heteronormativity and Its Effect on School Belonging: A Narrative Inquiry of Recent Gender and Sexuality Diverse Graduates*, PhD diss., Drexel University, 2015 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2015).

development.¹⁰⁷ For these students who are earlier on in their identity development, resources such as LGBTQ Centers and queer and trans topics in the classroom may actually have negative effects, forcing students in the early stages of their identity development to confront a challenge that they are not ready for.¹⁰⁸ These issues are easily put into Student Development Theory language, however, and so must be understood by those utilizing these theories. That is to say that crises such as not being able to access resources designed specifically for queer and trans students can be understood as a result of not having developed the skills to resolve such a crisis.¹⁰⁹ By bringing Student Development Theory into conversation with queer and trans identity development, the implications of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism can be more easily conceptualized as barriers which not only limit a student's development, but also their ability to see positive outcomes of their education.

Alumni Relations

There are many ways that colleges and universities measure the success of their education, but the most prominent measure of success comes in the form of alumni donations.¹¹⁰ While placement rates and average earned incomes provide information about the success of the educational services a college provides its students, they do not

¹⁰⁷ Gannon-Rittenhouse and Pittman.

¹⁰⁸ Furrow.

¹⁰⁹ Walker.

¹¹⁰ Mary Elizabeth Mercatoris, *Alumni Loyalty: Examining the Undergraduate College Experience and Alumni Donations*, PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2006 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2007).

measure alumni engagement, and more importantly do not provide revenue for the institution. Many colleges conduct donation drives, recognize and award alumni donors, and hold homecoming events as their main method of continuing alumni engagement. It is this financial marker of engagement that has become the main instrument used in alumni engagement research.¹¹¹ While this measure does remove other means by which alumni engagement can be studied, it has provided insights into how alumni think about their college experiences. Alumni donation research has gone beyond studies predicting which demographics are most likely to donate, when, and to what department.¹¹² Today's research on alumni donations seeks to understand the decision making process that brings an alumnus from being unengaged with their institution to the moment of donation and beyond.

In her 2006 dissertation, Mary Elizabeth Mercatoris suggests that alumni move through a series of stages in reflecting on their college experience when making decisions on about donating.¹¹³ While financial considerations are a major concern in this decision, Mercatoris argues that alumni do not begin by thinking about the impact of their potential donation.¹¹⁴ Instead, she found that reflection on the college environment, and specifically the environment outside of the classroom, is what motivated alumni to begin

¹¹¹ Vanessa L. Drew-Branch, *Student Engagement, Alumni Satisfaction, and Alumni Donations at a Public Four Year Institution: An Analysis of How the Undergraduate Experience Influences Alumni Donations*, PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2011 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2011).

¹¹² Mercatoris.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

considering a donation.¹¹⁵ If, for example, an alumnus had positive experiences with their housing, positive relationships with peers and faculty, and minimal difficulty in their interactions with the institution, they would be able to progress beyond nostalgia for the college experience towards considering the merits of donating. However, a student who had difficulty with any one of these areas would find it difficult to consider the merits of donating because of their own negative experience during college.¹¹⁶ Given the difficulty queer and trans students may experience in regards to housing, interpersonal relationships, and interactions with the administration, the impacts of a cold campus climate can affect a student's relationship with the institution even after graduation.

Though this model is based around financial contributions as a measure of alumni loyalty, it does provide insights into how student satisfaction can develop into alumni satisfaction. Other alumni researchers have since looked to understand how student satisfaction translates into alumni satisfaction. For some, this translation is quite literal; a satisfied student is the most likely to become a satisfied alumnus. Using student development and student involvement theories, researchers asked whether or not increased student engagement led to increased alumni satisfaction with their alma mater.¹¹⁷ While still using alumni donations as the measure for alumni satisfaction, this study also investigated when student engagement during college was a driving force

¹¹⁵ Mercatoris 203.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Drew-Branch.

behind a donation.¹¹⁸ The probability of an alumnus donating was in fact increased by the level of engagement the alumnus had as a student.¹¹⁹ In particular, student-faculty relationships were found to be one of the most prominent reasons beyond the decision to donate.¹²⁰ This finding is especially important when considering the experiences of queer and trans students. Research on the experiences of queer and trans students have found that students seek out support from their professors when encountering an otherwise heterosexist environment.¹²¹ If faculty relationships are a leading factor for the engaged student to become an engaged alumnus, then the relationships queer and trans students have with their faculty members may have the potential to counteract negative experiences these students may have during their college experiences.

However, there is also research suggesting that the relationship between student engagement and alumni engagement is not so direct. Continuing to utilize student development theory, other alumni researchers have identified that the outcomes of a student's education is the actual motivator for their donation.¹²² In this model, employment achieved and the level to which that employment is attributed to the alma mater is more likely an indicator of alumni satisfaction, as measured by donations. While student engagement and satisfaction are still an important factor in the donation decision, the context in which a student reflects on their satisfaction is an important factor.¹²³ After

¹¹⁸ Drew-Branch.

¹¹⁹ Drew-Branch 41.

¹²⁰ Ibid,

¹²¹ Linley et al 57.

¹²² Barnes.

¹²³ Barnes.

graduation, students reevaluate their college experience in the context of how the college experience benefitted them, and whether or not this met their expectations before and during college. A student who had high expectations for their college outcomes but struggles to find employment is less likely to indicate satisfaction with their college experience and therefore is less likely to donate as an alumnus.¹²⁴ In this model, student satisfaction is more fluid and the sense of satisfaction an alumnus feels they had as a student can be altered depending on their college outcomes and other contexts.

Essentially, while satisfaction is still what the alumni considers when making their donation, the outcomes of their college education decide the level of satisfaction the alumni feels to begin with. As discussed earlier, the experiences of queer and trans students with heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia can impact their ability to receive the full benefits of student development and the college experience. Utilizing this framework, queer and trans alumni may feel less satisfaction with their alma mater because of lessened outcomes received as a result of the cold campus climate.

While alumni satisfaction is measured through financial donations in a way that student satisfaction is not, it is important to note the impact that student satisfaction has even after the student has graduated. While there is debate about the method in which student development impacts alumni satisfaction, the research agrees that student development does impact alumni satisfaction.¹²⁵ When thinking about the experiences of queer and trans students and the ways in which their satisfaction is impeded by

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Pascarella and Terenzini.

heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic college environments, the effects of these environments can impact the student during and after college. While many of these alumni donation models predict that student satisfaction leads to alumni satisfaction, they also hold that the opposite is true; student dissatisfaction proves to be a barrier to alumni satisfaction and donation. For queer and trans students, experiences with a cold campus climate can impact their satisfaction as students, their student development and identity development, and their post-college outcomes and alumni satisfaction.

Methodology

Study Overview

The growing importance of a college education in recent years has greatly increased the number of students enrolling in colleges and universities each year¹²⁶, including larger enrollment of students from marginalized backgrounds, who had historically been denied college educations.¹²⁷ Despite this diversification of the student body in Higher Education, students with marginalized identities continue to encounter cold campus climates, a result of attending Traditionally White¹²⁸ and Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions¹²⁹. However, research has continued to find that queer and trans students face the coldest campus climates¹³⁰, which has demonstrable impacts on their enrollment, retention, and graduation. Indeed, negative interactions with the college environment have been proven to have a larger impact on a student's development than positive interactions will have.¹³¹ Because much of the design of the college experience relies on student interaction with the campus environment, queer and trans students in a heterosexist college environment are more likely to have their student development negatively impacted than are their straight peers.

¹²⁶ National Center for Education Statistics.

¹²⁷ Renn and Reason.

¹²⁸ Easterwood.

¹²⁹ Preston and Hoffman.

¹³⁰ Rankin et al.

¹³¹ Astin.

This realization is important as alumni relations research begins to focus on the lasting effects of student satisfaction on alumni satisfaction and post-graduate success. This research draws from the same Student Development Theory that creates Traditionally White and Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions by creating a campus environment that is primarily beneficial to the normative college student.¹³² Using alumni relations research to highlight the lasting effects of the college experience even after graduation, this study asserts that a college environment designed without consideration of the experience of queer and trans students will deny those students the positive outcomes the environment is designed to create.

Where previous studies have illuminated the college environment as heterosexist¹³³ and have linked student development and alumni satisfaction theories¹³⁴, this study seeks to explicitly investigate the experiences and impacts of attending a heterosexist college or university before and after graduation. In doing so, I discuss the need for campus solutions that account for queer and trans student development to create better student and alumni experiences for those students as graduates.

In order to better understand the relationships that queer and trans students have with their alma maters, I conducted computer mediated interviews with queer and trans college graduates to investigate their experiences in heteronormative colleges. These interviews sought to identify the impacts of students' gender and sexual identity on their

¹³² Chickering and Reisser.

¹³³ Rankin et al.

¹³⁴ Barnes.

academic success, social development, mental health, and sense of belonging while attending a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution¹³⁵. Additionally, I analyze the effect of this experience on the graduate's relationship with their former institution. The research questions that guided the creation of this study include:

- How does a queer and/or trans student's sense of belonging, or lack thereof, during their college experience affect their relationship to their alma mater following graduation?
- How does the experience of being a queer and/or trans student at a heteronormative institution affect a student's academic performance, mental health, social growth, and sense of belonging within the institution?
- How does a queer and/or trans student's sense of belonging with their undergraduate institution develop and change during and after their college experience?

By answering these questions, I point to the lasting effects of attending a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution on student and alumni satisfaction. These answers highlight the need for more widespread adoption of campus solutions that consider and benefit queer and trans students. This study stimulates the need for the development of best practices in creating supportive educational environments for queer

¹³⁵ Preston and Hoffman.

and trans students. Additionally, I hope to illuminate ways in which alumni can be reengaged with their former institutions as colleges combat the legacy of heterosexism.

Recruitment

Because this study investigates the potential for long lasting implications of attending a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution, considerable thought was given to establishing appropriate participant selection criteria. Given the variety of ways that sexual and gender identities can be performed and understood, participants were asked to self-identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ communities in order to participate. Additionally, eligible participants needed to have earned a Bachelor's degree within five years of their participation in the study, and they must not have attended graduate school. These decisions were made in the interest of preserving the reflections of the college experience. Given the multitude of changes that have occurred on college campuses in recent years around the needs of queer and trans students, student experience may reflect vast differences depending on the timing of a student's graduation. Moreover, because this study is specifically interested in the experience of queer and trans college students during their undergraduate education, the decision was made to exclude potential participants with graduate, professional, and doctoral degrees whose additional education may color their memory of their undergraduate experience. In accordance with requests from the Institutional Review Board, all participants were also required to be 18 years of age or older.

Participant recruitment for this study began in August of 2017, and the last interview was conducted in December of 2017. Social media was the primary and most successful method of recruitment, utilizing my personal networks and connections. A recruitment flyer was created with the study overview, eligibility requirements, and my contact information as the sole researcher. This flyer was then distributed in biweekly postings to social media sites Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Additionally, I posted the flyer in several open Facebook groups for queer and trans individuals, which is where I received the majority of responses. The recruitment information was also distributed to those within my professional network in Higher Education, with the intention of having the study information shared through alumni networks. Responses came throughout the recruitment period, with an increase in responses at each of the re-posting intervals. Because interviews were available in person and via Skype, potential participants contacted me from across the country and outside of the U.S.

Participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card in appreciation of their participation in the study. This information was included in the recruitment flyer. These gift cards were provided via email at the conclusion of each interview.

Participants contacted me as the primary researcher directly, and were asked to complete a small survey to confirm their eligibility for the study. Questions on this survey included information about their level of education, gender and sexual identities, year of graduation, age, and contact information. Once I verified their eligibility, an interview was scheduled for a one-hour window via Skype or in-person, depending on the

availability of the participant. A total of eight interviews were conducted, all computer mediated, over the four-month data collection period.

Interview Structure

In order to allow for participants to speak on a variety of experiences, memories, and reflections from their college and alumni experience, a relaxed interview structure was chosen. Interviews were semi-structured, with an interview protocol being developed to guide the interview and ensure that certain aspects of the alumni's experience were discussed. Using a semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants to speak naturally about their college and alumni experience, moving from topic to topic as connections appeared. As the interviewer, I helped guide conversations utilizing the interview protocol to ensure that each participant spoke about similar aspects of their experience. Because interviews were untimed, participants were also free to engage with some aspects of their recollection more deeply than others. Allowing participants to engage with certain areas of the discussion while disengaging with others provided insight into what may have been important for them as a student, alumni, or member of the LGBTQIA+ communities. While interviews were untimed, the average length of all interviews was one hour.

Interviews were offered either in person at San Francisco State University's Center for Research and Education on Gender and Sexuality, or computer mediated via

Skype. All interviews conducted for this study were computer mediated. An audio recording was made of each interview, and was transcribed as described later in this section. Participants were emailed copies of the informed consent documentation after each interview was scheduled, and asked to provide verbal consent to the interview and audio recording before the interview was conducted. Transcribed and audio records of verbal consent have all been maintained.

Each interview began with the same question: “To get us started, can you tell me a little bit about your path through college?” This question was intended to provide contextual information about the institutions that each participant attended, including location, institutional classification (size, educational approach, recognition)¹³⁶, and any information about transferring between colleges. While follow up questions and topics discussed varied immediately following this question, there were intentional topics that were discussed in each interview. Specific to the experiences of queer and trans students, I asked about the resources that existed on participants’ campuses, such as student resource centers, clubs and organizations, and faculty and staff members. I also discussed their experience with developing friendships among queer and trans students, and their experiences with dating and relationships. If participants did not volunteer information, I inquired about their social life and extracurricular activities, including descriptions of their friend groups and regular activities. With each participant, I

¹³⁶ Robert Morse, Matt Mason, and Eric Brooks, "Best Colleges Ranking Category Definitions," U.S. News & World Report, , accessed May 11, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/ranking-category-definitions>.

discussed their academic experience, including their academic major, classes they took, and professors they may have developed mentoring relationships with. In relation to this, I inquired specifically about the ways in which gender and sexuality may have come up in classrooms or other academic settings. Additionally, I asked questions about the participants' experience with mental health during college and what mental health resources may have existed on their campus, whether they utilized those resources or not.

Moving out of their student experience and into their alumni experience during the later stages of the interview, I asked participants to reflect on their experience and what they had shared with me. How might they have seen themselves change during their time in college? How do they think about their role as an alumnus of their institution? Who have they stayed in contact with after graduation? These questions provided insight not only into how close participants remained with their institution, but how much they have reflected on their college experience and even how important a role it may have played in their personal or LGBTQIA+ identity development. To finish each interview, I asked participants to reflect on the interview itself and the information they had chosen to share with me. What emotions came up during our discussion? Had they talked about their college experience before? Had they thought deeply about their college experience before? Had their views on their experience changed and why? These questions, while validating for the study, were intended to learn more about how queer and trans students feel about their experiences in the moment of reflection.

Memos

Immediately following each interview with a participant, I took time to write memos about the interview utilizing the few notes that I had written down during each conversation. These memos helped not only to provide a small summary of each interview and what I had found immediately important during the interview itself, but also helped to establish relationships between conversations even before I began coding. These memos included contextual information about each interview, as well as the patterns and connections that I had noted during the interview. Using these memos, I was able to relate parts of the conversation back to the research I reviewed in the earlier Literature Review section, as well as to the conversations I had with other participants. I was also able to record which aspects of the interview guide were most utilized in one conversation over another.

Additionally, I treated these notes as a secondary form of data collection. Each memo was coded utilizing the same codes generated through my coding of the interview transcripts, as discussed later on in this section. These memos served not only to record and revisit thoughts after each interview, but also as an opportunity to record what was most engaging for the participant and myself at the time of the interview. These memos also helped establish some of the beginning pieces of my data analysis.

Transcription

The audio recording of each interview was transcribed manually by me as the primary researcher shortly after conducting the interview. A large amount of consideration was given to the style of transcription that would be utilized in generating these transcripts. Verbatim transcription was chosen, as I felt it would allow the participant's voice to be recorded most accurately.¹³⁷ Pauses and false starts were all recorded, to allow analysis of these moments. A pause while a participant thought before, or after, answering a question could provide insight into any number of things. In context, these pauses and other moments were important opportunities to consider the thoughts and feelings of participants as our conversation progressed.

While verbatim transcription was utilized for each of the participants, I have chosen to limit transcription of my own voice in these conversations. Moments where I am speaking alone or asking a question were transcribed from each recording. However, words of encouragement and other forms of active listening participation in the conversation on my behalf were omitted. This decision was made so as to present participants' words uninterrupted and as fully developed statements, rather than to have them broken up by encouragement from myself. The decision to limit my own voice in these transcripts was also meant to provide more space for the voice of participants, allowing their stories and reflections to speak for themselves.

¹³⁷ Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009).

After the first two transcripts were completed, I began keeping a notebook on hand as I transcribed interviews. During this process, I was able to reflect on not only individual interviews, but also on the shared and similar experiences of participants as I transcribed them from the audio recordings. These notes were separate from the memos mentioned earlier, and were not as well developed as those memos. However, they did help guide my understanding of patterns between interviews and provided an opportunity to begin data analysis before beginning the coding process. These jottings done during the transcription process allowed me to predict codes as they were developed and allowed me to become even closer to the data as I prepared it for analysis.

Coding

Once all interview recordings were transcribed, I began the process of coding the interview transcripts along with the memos drafted after each interview. These codes included words and phrases which summarized or encapsulated small portions of the larger data set.¹³⁸ In keeping with the rationale behind choosing verbatim transcription, I choose to utilize an open coding process in generating codes for the data set. Open coding allowed the words and thoughts of participants to become the driving force for code creation, instead of placing code creation authority solely in the hands of the researcher.¹³⁹ Additionally, the codes that were created in this open coding process were

¹³⁸ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Sage, 2015).

¹³⁹ Kristin G. Esterberg, *Qualitative Methods in Social Research* (Brantford, Ont.: W.

more organic than prescribed and new codes were created with each transcript review. Each transcript coding reinforced and redefined the codes utilized previously, creating flexible and adaptable codes. Because of this, transcripts were coded once during a first cycle which helped to generate the codebook, and again during a second cycle to apply new codes to previous transcripts.

During the first coding cycle, the intention was to generate as many codes as necessary and to fully develop an extensive codebook. To that end, initial coding utilized “code splitting”¹⁴⁰ to create as many codes as possible from smaller sections of the interview transcripts and memos. Once all of these codes were compiled into a code book, these codes were categorized and subcategorized to better understand the relationship between codes and how they interacted across transcripts. Using this new categorical coding system, a second coding was performed on each of the transcripts and memos using a holistic coding approach.¹⁴¹ Using the categorized codes, larger sections of the transcripts and memos were coded to allow for broader themes and patterns to be represented, which may have been overlooked in the initial, smaller scale coding.

The codebook generated from this process was maintained in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The number of times each code or category was utilized in an interview or memo was recorded in the codebook, as well as the total number of times the code or category had been used overall. This spreadsheet was color coordinated by category, and

¹⁴⁰ Saldana.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

a graded color-fill system was used to visually represent which codes and categories were most prevalent and in which interviews. Additional sections of the codebook were maintained for quoted sections of the transcripts and memos, which were also organized by category, code, and interview.

Analysis

Grounded theory was used in the development of both the coding process and the data analysis. Data analysis progressed from the generation of initial codes to the categorization of those codes and now to the development of themes between and among categories. This study then identified best practices for responding to the cold campus climate faced by queer and trans college students. The process of identifying best practices is done by drawing on the experiences of participants directly, rather than by hypothesizing best practices and testing them against the experiences of the participants.¹⁴² This not only allows for a more organic development of response to the heterosexist college environment, it also validates the lived experiences of queer and trans college graduates.

Utilizing the codes generated in the coding processes above, I began to identify themes as defined by the categories and subcategories that joined codes together. These themes pointed to similar or shared experiences between participants across institutions

¹⁴² Jenna P. Breckenridge et al., "Choosing a Methodological Path: Reflections on the Constructivist Turn," *Grounded Theory Review: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (June 01, 2012).

and dates of college attendance. Categories and the themes that were extrapolated from them began to manifest as patterns of experiences, needs, and wants among participants. I examined these patterns in conjunction with research that has already been conducted to emphasize work that has already exposed the heterosexist campus environment that queer and trans students contend with,¹⁴³ as well as the role of the institution in perpetuating and alleviating this environment.¹⁴⁴

Additionally, I drew on the work of alumni relations scholars to identify specific ways that exposure to a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution has impacted the experience of my participants beyond their undergraduate experience and into their alumni experience and post-graduate life.¹⁴⁵ In doing so, I highlight that these experiences not only limit the benefits queer and trans students receive during their time in an undergraduate institution, but that these limitations continue to impact them after graduation. However, not all patterns of experience that were generated through my analysis were negative. Utilizing the positive themes that my participants spoke about, I identify areas of improvement in Higher Education which will be crucial in the development of best practices to respond to queer and trans students' experiences with a heterosexist campus environment.

¹⁴³ Rankin et al.

¹⁴⁴ Preston and Hoffman.

¹⁴⁵ Drew-Branch.

Positionality

I would be remiss in my discussion of how I developed this study if I did not discuss my motivation for studying the experiences of queer and trans college students. In particular, I feel it necessary to discuss my own collegiate experience. I completed my undergraduate education at a small, private college outside of Baltimore, Maryland that focused career preparation using a liberal arts educational approach. The three and a half years that I spent at my undergraduate institution, along with the two and a half years that I spent working at my alma mater after graduation, were a complicated time in my life. I had come out of the closet as a gay man while I was in high school, and had developed a vocal sexual identity to combat the homophobia that I experienced then. Coming to college, I had anticipated furthering my sexual identity development and political development. However, the career-focused educational model that my undergraduate institution promoted did not provide space for my desired personal development. My alma mater discouraged political activity of any kind. More specifically, it shut down any activism by marginalized students, and I found myself very quickly being pushed towards the closet. While I continued to openly identify as a gay man, I spent the entirety of my college education feeling stifled and underdeveloped.

This is not to say that my college experience was entirely negative. I benefited immensely from the internship-heavy academic programs that I was involved with, and owe much of my professional success to the opportunities afforded me through my institution. During my time working at my alma mater, I was able to use my position to

help make a college education possible for underserved students in my recruitment territories. This study was inspired not only by my own work reconciling my nuanced experience with my alma mater, but it is also driven by a desire to understand the experiences of students who continue to enroll in Higher Education, some of whom I helped recruit to the institution.

I must also recognize that despite the marginalized experiences I have as a queer and gender non-conforming student, I have been afforded many opportunities that have allowed me to conduct this research. My racial identity as a white person did not require me to grapple with the fact that I attended the most ethnically diverse private college in Maryland during the Baltimore Uprising. My class privileges allowed me the opportunity to attend both undergraduate and graduate school with minimum debt and maximum scholarship, something that my participants have not always been afforded. While I have tried to include the nuanced experiences of my participants, particularly as they pertain to the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class in education, I recognize that my analysis is filtered through my own marginalized and privileged experiences. Continued work is necessary to understand the impacts not just of heterosexism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia on college students, but also how these forces work together as an oppressive system in Higher Education.

Results

Participant Overview

In total, eight interviews were conducted over the four month data collection period for this study. Each interview was conducted virtually using Skype, allowing me the ability to conduct interviews with college alumni outside of the Bay Area. Interviews were conducted with participants in the Pacific Northwest (2), California (1), the Mid Atlantic (3), the Southern United States (1), and France (1). While most participants continue to live in roughly the same area as where they completed their undergraduate education, it should be noted that the colleges my participants attended included schools in the Pacific Northwest (2), the Midwest (1), the Mid Atlantic (3), the Southern United States (1), and New England (1).

Years of graduation for participants varied, though all would be considered recent college graduates. One participant graduated in 2013, three in 2014, one in 2015, two in 2016, and one in 2017. While many of my participants discussed their desire to continue their education beyond their Bachelor's degree, none had enrolled in graduate or professional school at the time of the interview, although several were in the process of searching for or applying to graduate schools.

Two participants identified as gender non-conforming, two identified as women, and four identified as men. Additionally, two participants identified as queer, one identified as lesbian, two identified as bisexual, and three identified as gay men.

While this study was not designed to investigate racial or ethnic aspects of the college environment, it was pertinent to the research to ask participants to self-identify within a racial and ethnic category on the eligibility survey. Seven of my participants identified as white, with one identifying as Palestinian. No participants identified as Hispanic or Latinx. This demographic information highlights the fact that while some of my participants discussed issues of race and ethnicity on the college campus, this study does not fully address the experiences of racially and ethnically marginalized students in Higher Education. Further research should be done not only on the experiences of racially and ethnically marginalized students, but also on the experiences of queer and trans students of color. This study sheds light on the heterosexist forms of oppression that contribute to oppressive systems in Higher Education, but should also serve as a call for further intersectional investigations of racism and heterosexism in education.

Absent from the demographic data collected as part of the eligibility survey for this study were questions about participants' status as first generation college students. However, three of my participants identified themselves as first generation students in their interviews, while five did not disclose their family's education levels. This is important, as all of my first generation participants discussed the ways in which they were negatively affected by being a first generation student in an environment that takes generational college experience for granted.

It is also helpful when reviewing the findings of this study to understand the types of institutions that my participants attended, in addition to their demographic information.

While the names of universities have been omitted or changed to protect the identities of participants, they did share information about the classification of their universities. No two participants attended the same university. Five participants considered their institutions small, while three participants' universities would be considered medium or large. Participants were evenly split between public and private universities, with four at each classification. Four participants identified their university as a liberal arts college.

A small sample size was intentionally chosen to allow for an in-depth investigation of the experiences of queer and trans college alumni. Because of this, I identify patterns of experience between my participants in conversation with other research on the experiences of queer and trans college students. In the sections that follow, I will be looking closely at the experiences of and between my participants around their undergraduate education. These findings are by no means exhaustive, but they are the most prominent patterns of experience shared by my participants. Additional research with larger sample sizes should be conducted to better understand the prevalence of the experiences shared by my participants. My hope is that these findings help us better understand how to support queer and trans college students and alumni.

Section Structure

Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview protocol for this study, participants were asked many of the same questions. However, their responses to these

questions were varied. Participants engaged with some topics more than others, demonstrating that no two participants had an identical college experience. However, there were patterns in the ways that my participants discussed their experience as queer and trans college students, and their experience as college alumni. Their experiences during college can be categorized into three levels of interaction: individual, interpersonal relationships among peers, and interpersonal relationships with faculty and staff members. While there is also an institutional element to many of their experiences, few of my participants directly discussed this in their interviews. Each of the stories that my participants shared with me dealt with their relationships with themselves, others on campus, or the campus culture.

Using these types of interaction to better categorize my participants' experiences sheds light on the patterns that existed at each of these levels. In this section, I investigate all three levels of interaction and the patterns that emerged from them across my interviews with participants. At the individual level, these patterns were largely concerned with understanding the self and, in the context of queer and trans identity, about self-discovery and presenting one's sexual and gender identity. These patterns included understanding one's own sexuality, but also how participants expressed or hid their sexual and gender identities for various reasons during their undergraduate experiences. While I focus in on the experiences of two participants who's gender and sexual identity development featured prominently in their interviews, I should mention that all of my participants discussed uncertainty and change around the topic of outness.

While interpersonal relationships are generally considered one form of social interaction, for my participants there was a distinct divide between their experiences with peers and their experiences with faculty and staff members, and so I have separated these into two different levels of interaction. While my participants discussed their relationships with all of their peers, their relationships with other queer students on campus were featured more prominently than their relationships with their straight peers. In this section, I focus in on queer support networks and how participants identified, created, and altered these relationships to develop communities that were significantly different than their relationships with straight students. In part, this is because these networks are a way of coping with the experience of weathering a heterosexist college environment.

Counter to this is the experience of my participants in regards to their professors and staff members on campus. While the peer interpersonal relationships were largely a site of positive development for my participants, their relationships with faculty and staff members were often less positive. I discuss how my participants saw the classroom as a site of suppression and homo/transphobia by faculty members and occasionally by fellow students. Here, participants discussed their experiences with being a token queer/trans student in the classroom as well as an aversion to gender, sexuality, and race in the classroom.

Because this study is interested in the experiences of queer and trans college alumni, the last portion of this section will focus on the lasting effects of these three

levels of interaction. In their alumni lives, my participants spoke about how their experiences as individuals, with peers and faculty, and with the institution itself have continued to impact them following the completion of their undergraduate degree. In many ways, this is directly related to their experience as college alumni and understanding their new relationship to their colleges as former students. However, these effects are not limited to this one aspect of the post-college experience; my participants share how they have continued to grow in new ways after graduation, have built new relationships, and have reimagined their potential futures. By examining how impactful relationships, missed opportunities, and barriers to success affected these participants as students, we can also understand the long lasting effects these will have into their alumni lives.

Individual – Identity Development

Perhaps because this study focuses on the experiences of self-identified queer and trans college students, it is only natural that we start by discussing how participants understood their gender and sexual identities. College has traditionally been seen as a site of queer and trans identity development, though with changing cultural attitudes and representation more and more students are coming to college with at least some identity development already conducted.¹⁴⁶ The majority of my participants had already developed at least part of their gender and/or sexual identity during college, but for two

¹⁴⁶ Renn.

participants, college was still an important site for self-discovery. While all of my participants also discussed more general personal development, such as the development of leadership and self-confidence, much work has already been done in Student Development on how to foster this personal growth.¹⁴⁷ By focusing on the identity development of two participants, I highlight the importance of fostering this development in much the same way as we foster Student Development.

Jay's path through college was a lengthy one. After taking time off from school and attending community college, Jay enrolled at a four-year institution to complete the remaining three years of their undergraduate education. At this new institution, Jay searched for a community, having not found one in their community college experience. Unable to find a sense of belonging in their psychology program, Jay eventually applied for and received a work study position with the Woman's Center. It was this position, secured in their last year of attendance, that allowed Jay their first opportunities to investigate their own gender and sexual identities. Jay talks about how this opportunity opened the door for their identity development:

Now at community college I wasn't like, hadn't like figured out myself yet. I didn't feel like those [LGBTQ] resources were for me. And then actually at my university for my first two years I still didn't feel like those resources were for me. And so I ended up, I went to a career fair for on-campus jobs and saw, "oh here's the staff for the Queer Resource Center. And there's like a really cute person who works there." And then there was actually a trans guy who worked in the Woman's Center so I was like, "I'm gonna work in the Woman's Center then cause that's a space for, quote unquote, for me." And also there's a trans guy there and I can get to know him cause, like, I had never met a trans guy

¹⁴⁷ Jones and Stewart.

before. And I was just like, in person in real life this can happen and that part of me was like, ready to wake up.

For Jay, being exposed to new identities and a new environment allowed them the space to develop their own gender and sexual identity. They mention that, prior to this position, they had never felt engaged with queer or even gendered spaces and actively felt that they could not take advantage of them. What is important here is that Jay was not able to begin thinking about their identity because they had never been in an environment with the right representation and familiarity to allow them to do so. Jay and I spoke about this further, wondering about how the right conditions allowed them to begin their path to self-discovery. It is important to remember that this occurred in the fifth and final year of Jay's education, but it would be a mistake to assume that this delay had anything to do with this being the time for an eye-opening moment. Jay did not receive work study until the third year at their undergraduate institution and was painfully aware that the barrier was one of representation, not timing.

Student Development Theories have influenced much of the design of the college experience, intending to create multiple opportunities to foster personal growth in students.¹⁴⁸ However, by ignoring the need to intentionally foster identity development for queer and trans college students, we are doing students like Jay a disservice. It is not that Jay was not ready to begin investigating their gender and sexual identity, but instead that they did not have the right environment, the right balance of challenge and support,

¹⁴⁸ Astin.

to begin to develop their identity. And indeed, Jay was aware that they could have had more time to develop their identity if they had simply been granted work study earlier in their time at their undergraduate institution. The resources to help Jay in this process were always available to them, but it was this student employment position that exposed them to these resources.

Additionally, it was not just Jay's identity development that was delayed because of this. In their final year of college, the relationships that Jay developed as a result of this identity development also greatly impacted their holistic personal development:

So it's like really good that I was finally able to come out of my shell and out of the closet at the same time. And be able to build a community of people that I could relate to and identify with and be like, "hey." There were always gay people and I always gravitated towards them and I didn't know why.

While Jay struggled to find a sense of belonging with other students in the psychology department, the friends that they made as a part of their queer identity development shows that this development greatly helped their ability to build lasting friendships based on shared identity. In many ways, this last year of Jay's experience highlights how fostering identity development can also help to foster many other desired aspects of growth. However, Jay's story also points to the damage that can be done by ignoring identity development as a part of the holistic development process. Jay only experienced one year of tremendous personal growth, something they knew that many other students experienced in all four years of their undergraduate education.

In Jay's experience, their identity development coincided with personal growth and coming out of the closet. However, for Ian, identity development and personal growth did not result in coming out of the closet. Ian attended a small, private college where he majored in Biology, participated in the Honors Program, and was a member of many honor societies and student organizations. In many ways, Ian followed a traditional path of student development that prioritized academic growth and leadership development. His undergraduate career included numerous leadership positions, as well as several research and presentation opportunities. Much of this development was driven by Ian's own volition:

[I w]as very introverted, didn't talk to very many people and everything throughout high school. Then went off to college, living on my own- well not on my own, but away from my parents. Um and uh, with like a whole new group of friends, basically kind of like [a] blank slate. Definitely started coming out of my shell more. Kind of decided like the first day I'm gonna try not to be so introverted with these people. Cause I knew that if I start off that way I'm never gonna like, get out of it so I have to like immediately force myself out of that habit.

In many ways, Ian was successful in taking advantage of his college experience to enact change in himself, to the point that he no longer considered himself introverted by graduation. By seeking out friendships and leadership opportunities, Ian challenged himself to grow as an individual. The openness that Ian experienced with other people also meant experiencing openness with himself:

And so that kind of led to, you know, thinking more about my sexuality because I was being more open with people and that required being more open with myself I guess. So definitely, like, acknowledged to myself that I was attracted to men. But then also realized that I'm also still attracted to women. Um, it's more

like certain people I find attractive rather than like one gender or the other. So was like, “I guess I’m bisexual, that’s a thing right?” And it is. So you know, kind of like, went with that. But still didn’t come out to anyone other than myself.

Ian shared with me that while other people around him began to learn about their sexuality in high school, he had avoided his own identity development for a number of reasons. However, when he enrolled in college he was presented with an opportunity to change how he interacted with people and with himself. While he was able to investigate and understand his bisexuality because of this larger personal growth, this did not mean that he was prepared to come out of the closet in that environment. This may be because Ian’s college environment emphasized academic objectivity, reinforcing a segregation of his sexual identity from other aspects of his larger identity as a leader or academic. Unlike Jay, it was not until after college that Ian was in the right environment to begin coming out of the closet:

Wasn’t until after college that I came out to people. I came out to my good friends from college I guess some time in the first year after I graduated. I don’t remember exactly. Came out to them. Then I went to Puerto Rico for half a year and lived with like, ten other people and so relationships were kind of like a ‘don’t go there’ type of thing, um, for that. And then came back and started working in Capital where I am now and living on my own in Capital. And that’s when I was kind of, finally able to start, you know, looking into having a relationships with people.

In contrast with Jay’s experience, Ian’s experience demonstrates that self-discovery and outness are not inherently tied. While Ian found the space in college to reexamine his sexual identity, he did not find the space to come out of the closet around this identity until after college.

College is generally seen as a space where students have the freedom to develop themselves and live openly. In many ways, both Jay and Ian did find this to be true. Both were able to find the right environment to develop their sexual and gender identities while also developing themselves holistically. For Jay, holistic development came as a result of being able to engage with their identity development, while the opposite was true for Ian. But both discussed important ways that the closet and their outness affected their ability to engage with the campus environment. In their experiences, being uncertain or closeted about their identities precluded them from engaging with queer and trans spaces on campus. Earlier, Jay mentioned that because they had not begun to develop their gender and sexual identity, they never engaged with LGBTQ resources on campus that may very well have fostered this growth earlier in their experience. Although Ian had developed his identity, he mentions that he never attended Q Group meetings or events because queer spaces, like his identity development, were largely divorced from his larger college experience.

Each individual will understand the relationship between their identity development and their college experience differently. However, not intentionally creating open spaces to allow students to do this identity development work does them a disservice. For Jay, not entering the Woman's Center until their senior year meant not beginning their identity development until their last year in college. For Ian, prioritizing other aspects of his development over his identity development meant remaining closeted until after college. Finding ways to foster identity development for college students is

critically important, given that queer and trans college students experience delayed sexual and gender identity development as a result of heterosexism in earlier stages of their lives.¹⁴⁹ By not providing space to remedy delayed growth in this one area, we may unintentionally be limiting the ability of queer and trans students to achieve full student development.¹⁵⁰ For Jay and Ian, their personal and identity development were closely linked and grew in tandem. By not considering gender and sexual identity development as integral parts of holistic student development, we will continue to limit potential growth and reinforce heterosexist assumptions that continue to closet even our most developed students.

Peer Interpersonal – Queer Support Networks

For all of my participants, relationships with other queer and trans students on campus played an important role in their college experience. These relationships took on many different forms, from friendships to club memberships to romantic relationships, and each of my participants engaged with different forms of relationships in different ways. However, all placed importance on relationships they built around shared identity in a way that they did not experience with their straight peers. Here, I am particularly interested in the ways in which networks between queer and trans students not only

¹⁴⁹ Alexander F. Parks, *A Qualitative Inquiry Exploring Out College Students' Experiences with Queer Content in Secondary School*, PhD diss., The University of Alabama, 2014 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2015).

¹⁵⁰ Grace Elizabeth Surdovel, *Reflections of Closeted Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Former College Students: A Phenomenology*, PhD diss., Wilkes University, 2015 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2015).

created community for my participants but also existed outside of traditional college resources. Through friendships, club memberships, and dating, my participants built uniquely queer spaces that allowed them to flourish alongside their queer and trans peers.

Dave attended Honors College, a STEM-focused campus of a public university system in the Mid Atlantic, where he was heavily involved with the campus' queer student life. While he was an active member of several queer student groups on campus, Dave's participation in his college's queer community goes beyond his extensive club leadership. Dave came out late into his high school experience, but knew very early on that his queer identity would play an important role in his college experience and was very intentional about LGBTQ-friendliness in his college search process:

My senior year of high school I would just type into Google "is so and so college gay friendly or LGBT friendly." And I would try to find people who actually go there through social media and ask them their experiences. And I talked to a couple upperclassmen and kind of got their idea of it. And they turned me on to the groups.

Even before deciding which college he would ultimately attend, Dave was able to cultivate relationships with queer and trans college students during his search. While this experience speaks to the importance of representation in college admissions, I am more specifically interested in the example of queer support this experience provides. The students that Dave was able to talk to not only helped him understand the campus climate of his potential schools, but also invited him into their communities. While Dave did not mention continued relationships with these upper level students after arriving at Honors, this small instance demonstrates the potential for queer friendships as a response to a

heterosexist college environment. These conversations did not end with simply sharing perceptions of the college environment, but also included an invitation to join the queer community on campus.

The support that he received from upper level students was not lost on Dave, who through his leadership in the campus' queer community developed friendships with lower level and prospective students. Dave's experience before and immediately after arriving on campus greatly shaped his college experience by allowing him to develop a queer home early on in his college career:

Yeah, it sucked me right in. I found my first group of friends and kind of that first week of college you meet all of these new people and everything just kind of sticks. But definitely to meet that crowd. But I just wanted to create that experience for underclassmen and make sure that they were more welcome there on campus. There was some stuff that needed to be updated. A lot of our name change policies were really obtuse and hard to get around. So that was really difficult for some folks.

Because he had been able to make inroads with the queer student community before arriving on campus, he was able to immediately develop a queer friend group that stayed with him throughout his experience. The impact of this encouraged Dave to continue working with younger students to ensure that they had the same opportunities to develop queer friendships that he did. Additionally, he also felt that it was his responsibility to his queer friends and future queer friends to advocate for changes to the college environment to make it more welcoming for queer and trans students. It is these relationships between queer and trans students which nurture and sustain student advocacy and responsibility to the larger community.

But Dave's relationships with his queer and trans peers impacted more than just the queer community that he had created and was a leader in. Early in his college experience, he struggled with his academic major in the Pre-Med program, something that many students in similar programs experience. For many students in this situation, academic struggles can affect their personal development and mental health while finding solutions to these struggles can be difficult. Where some students will seek out academic support or talk to academic advisors, Dave's friendships with other queer students are where he first found support for his academic difficulties:

Um, I had a group of friends that were helping. Honors College is a STEM-heavy school so there's a lot of people going through the same thing. And it's a pretty common transition that first year or so. A lot of pre-med kids decide to not do it. And I had a couple friends who were taking a couple environmental science classes and we'd be talking and they're like, "this sounds a lot more like what you're interested in, not what you're taking right now." So there were definitely some folks who were able to help with that.

Dave's relationship with his friends and his ability to share his academic struggles with them allowed them to see their major as a potential fit for him. While academic advisors and his own research helped him to make this transition logistically, these friendships helped Dave overcome a significant barrier to student success.

While earlier I talked about the role that Jay's friendships played in their identity development, those same friendships played just as important a role in their personal development. The friendships Jay built with other queer and trans students on campus were some of the first friendships they built that felt genuine and came naturally. Jay shared with me that while they tried during the first four years of their college experience

to build friendships with other students in their academic major, the relationships never came easily. Though Jay was able to make friends in the department, they always felt that there was a divide between them and their academic peers. However, as Jay understood their sexual and gender identity and began to come out, they were able to develop transformative friendships with other queer and trans students in their Queer Experience program. This program, a monologue-based performance that also consisted of story and community workshops, gave space to feelings of uncertainty and hurt as well as love and happiness:

So there was one discussion we had where every single person in the room said, “you know I’m, I was worried I’m not queer enough. Or that like I’m not valid, or my experience doesn’t count, or someone else is more worthy to share their experience.” They’re really big things to realize that everyone else felt that way too.

Jay never felt community with their friends in the psychology department because they had different motivations; Jay was interested in psychology because of their own experiences with mental health, while their peers were more interested in studying other subjects. The difference with the friends Jay made in the Queer Experience program has to do with a shared struggle; Jay, as well as all the other students in the program, had felt like an outsider. Jay found a community that shared their gender and sexual identity as well as a space where their uncertainty was welcomed and understood. In this program, Jay was able to develop support networks that did not exist in their academic spaces.

It was Jay’s friendships with other student employees in the Women’s Center and Queer Resource Center that allowed them to come out of their shell in college. In their

last year of college, after finally obtaining work study and entering an environment that challenged and supported them to think about their identities, Jay also built important friendships. They mention that it was during this last year that they attended their first parties, hung out with other queer and trans students regularly, and felt that they had developed a community:

I really appreciated being included. I've always felt like an outsider, so for me that was like totally new to just be around people that are like, "oh you're cool you can be whoever you are and explore that if you need to cause this is the time and place to do so." And then, like, having parties was cool cause I don't throw parties I don't really know what to do at them. Going to them and seeing what people are doing, and sometimes being the person to crash on the couch and be like, "ok I'll help you clean up since you let me sleep here." Like that kind of stuff. So that was really fun. It was like being part of the social, you know, group.

It wasn't until Jay began working in queer and gendered spaces that they began to develop friendships that felt validating and supportive. These friendships fostered Jay's sexual and gender identity development, but also fostered their social development. Here again, Jay mentions that if they had had access to these spaces earlier on in their college career, they would have had a more traditional developmental process.

While individual friendships held great promise for Dave and Jay, for other participants, queer student organizations played a more prominent role in their undergraduate experience. The importance of queer student organizations was something that I anticipated and discussed in my literature review, but of the participants who talked about student groups on campus, many addressed insufficient student organizations.

While all of my participants shared with me information about the clubs and

organizations that existed on their campus, those that engaged with the topic pointed to groups that either were not reflective of their identity or their goals for a queer student organization. Two of my participants helped to change leadership in these organizations in order to make changes, while another created his own group.

Both Samantha and Becca attended small, private, liberal arts colleges on the Eastern seaboard and talked about their experiences with student organizations on campus. While Samantha majored in social work at a rural, centrist college, Becca attended a progressive college both in its politics and educational plan. However, both described helping to create leadership change in their queer student organizations by staging leadership “coups.” Samantha participated in the process that changed the leadership in her student organization, but was not directly involved in the leadership itself. In her experience with the existing student group, it was the messaging behind the group’s name that hinted at a fundamental disagreement with current and past leadership:

So there- when I attended there was TEA, which was the LGBT club on campus. And TEA stood for Tolerance Education and Acceptance. So, I was already blah because I hate the word tolerance like that. So I was like, “seriously guys?”... So the tolerance thing. I always come back to that L Word quote and it’s awful, I don’t wanna quote that show, but sometimes it’s necessary. Um, but it’s basically the implication that there’s something to be tolerated. Like I don’t want to be tolerated. Like, you tolerate something that bothers you or you tolerate something that’s annoying. *Sigh* So yeah it’s um, I don’t like it, I feel like it’s, it doesn’t send the best message when you’re trying to have an LGBT club and stuff like that.

While Samantha had disagreements with the philosophy behind the only LGBT group on campus, it was actually her and her friends’ schedules that kept them from becoming part

of the club. However, in her final semester, she was able to attend the group's meetings along with several of her friends. Their influx, right at the time of officer elections, set off a change in the club's leadership when one of her friends stepped up to replace the outgoing president. And while this change had not been about changing what the group was doing, Samantha discussed feeling engaged with the group in a way that she hadn't before. Instead of doing simple ice breaker activities, the group was able to do actual political work, which Samantha and her friends had been doing outside the group already.

At Becca's college, a disagreement with club structure was also at the heart of organizational change, though of a different nature. At their progressive college, the queer group on campus had become a space for a certain subset of queer students that discouraged others from sharing the space:

For 2 years on campus we had a queer group. And it was called Queer at New England. And the first year I was in it, um, I was a little skeptical of the group's leaders. Because they seemed a little, like, queerer than thou. A real type. And this was like kind of, for lack of a better way to describe it, the Tumblr, like, oppression Olympics were getting like real strong. And...it just, it wasn't a very welcoming place for queer people of different stripes. And they, it was a place like, "I shouldn't have to teach you anything." When it's like, "yo we're really here to kind of, like, come together and be friends." And like, what kind of club is this? Nobody really understood.

Becca's queer leadership experience in high school allowed them to step in and try to open up the group to other students, particularly those that were questioning or still learning about their identity and what it meant to be queer/trans. In many ways, Becca sought to give the club some clearly defined guiding principles, something that had previously been missing. And they were successful in changing the group's exclusive

past. The organization did well under Becca's new leadership and was positively received by other students on campus.

In talking with Becca and Samantha, it became apparent that queer student organizations, particularly when they are the only queer student organization on campus, must remain open to the changing wants and needs of their members. TEA may have worked for some students, but for Samantha and her friends, the organization wasn't doing enough change work. For Becca, an organization that was supposed to be open and inclusive had actually become exclusive. The changes in leadership that Becca and Samantha helped to create brought changes to the queer clubs at their colleges; however, it is leadership changes that also prove the biggest threat to queer student organizations. Becca assumed leadership of the organization for one year after having been a member for a year. However, as their time was increasingly monopolized by academic and professional work in their third year, they were unfortunately unable to continue guiding the organization they had helped to alter, and the group stopped meeting shortly thereafter:

I also just got like, really busy the last few years with my own work and also like work work so. Um. I didn't go to as many clubs. And also everybody is just so god damn busy that it's also really hard to have a club last.

This is a common occurrence in queer student organizations; when a dynamic club leader leaves, it is often hard for the group to keep going. However, in Samantha's experience, the 'coup' that she helped stage had lasting effects on the organization. Not only did the

group continue after her graduation, she was able to continue to watch the group develop after she graduated:

But like, I said I did end up going to meetings after I graduated. And kind of got to see how it evolved. And it was interesting. Um. I think the club got a rebrand the year after. I don't remember when but it's gotten a rebrand and it doesn't go by TEA anymore.

Samantha's organization not only continued to act on the changes that she and her friends made, it became a space that alumni could continue to participate in, which may have helped it bridge this leadership change.

Like Becca, Alan attended a small, private liberal arts college that was known for having a progressive educational approach. Alan's college, located in the Pacific Northwest, had several queer clubs and organizations, but Alan struggled to find himself represented in any of those spaces. The community that Alan was looking for would be built on a shared identity, which for Alan meant that it would include queer, masculine-presenting individuals who would share his own experiences as a gay man. However, the groups that already existed on campus were devoid of people with his same identity, and he struggled to feel engaged with those present and the activities that they organized:

So when I was a freshman and I was in orientation I walked into the queer student alliance meeting. Um, and...did not really feel...like I, like obviously I was welcomed there. But it very much felt like, well there was no one who, at the time, I would have identified as a man. Or like masculine. Or...yeah. Someone who I guess I would read as another gay man. Um, which, felt odd. Like, and they were doing this like, it was like this weird like coloring activity. Something that to me was like, "well, I'm an adult, I don't really want to be doing this." Um. And you know, like, "I feel like this is just infantilizing my

experience.” So I just like never really engaged again.

And for two years, Alan simply didn’t engage with other queer students outside of dating. But, when in his junior year he took on leadership roles in student government, he also re-started an organization that had once existed at his college:

So there was a group on campus that existed sort of three years before called the Gay and Bi Men's Support Group. And we, I like decided to restart it except like due to the change in terminologies and everything we changed it to the Queer Masc Peer Group. So like support, not just focusing on men per se, but generally like queer masculinities. So I like restarted that and had that going.

For Alan, creating this group was a direct response to his own conflicted feelings about not having a queer community at his college, despite the presence of people with his shared identity. And he found that other students shared his desire for a queer masculine organization on campus that wasn’t currently reflected in the existing student groups. And for a while at least, the group was successful, democratic, and helped Alan to find a queer community on campus. Alan drew upon the desires of group members to create an environment that was part community building, part activism, even though this was different than how he originally envisioned the group. And while the club faltered when Alan became too busy to run it, this experience highlights the need for multiple queer student organizations on college campuses. Queer and trans students do want student organizations on their college campuses, but different students will want different organizations. Queer student organizations need to be adaptable, willing to change their programming and purpose as students’ needs and wants change. We need to invest in student leadership that will help these organizations weather leadership changes, and we

also need to recognize that multiple student organizations are necessary to meet the needs and wants of multiple student identities.

This queer student organization was not the only space that Alan found queer community however. A large portion of my interview with Alan talked about his romantic relationships during college, which I have come to understand as a space where Alan built a particular kind of queer community. While Alan did not talk about his relationships in the same way as Jay or Dave talked about their queer friendships, there is something to be said about the place of relationships in developing these queer networks of support. Community based on shared identity was an important part of Alan's college experience, as we discussed when he created the Queer Masc Peer Group, and his romantic relationships reflected this. It was in his romantic relationships with two men that Alan discussed feeling kinship around their shared identities, particularly around class identities:

So he was like, I don't know, but it was weird because I identified with him more in a way. Because the first guy came from, he went to Phillips Academy and came from a very nice New England Prep family. And this guy, he also actually had a lot of similarities. Like a single mother who had a lot of financial and health problems. And he like loved but was really frustrated by her. And like a really shitty family situation. So, and that resonated a lot with me. And it was something that you don't really find at College.

It was interesting because we didn't have very many interests in common because I found him like a compelling person. Because again he was someone who came from a very complicated family situation, low income gay man at College. And so I felt like I had a lot in common with him.

Romantic relationships largely did not factor into my other interviews, but Alan's experience raises questions about what could be considered part of a queer support network. It was in his romantic relationships that Alan was able to find his lived experience reflected. As we discuss ways that queer support networks help queer and trans students persist in a heterosexist environment, it is important to consider the ways that romantic relationships can contribute to those networks.

All of my participants so far have talked about their experiences with queer networks that existed on their college's campus, but this was not the case for all queer networks. Emily, like several of my participants, had an untraditional path to graduation. For three years, Emily was enrolled in a regional campus of the public university in her Midwestern state that was located in her hometown. During these three years, Emily did not talk much about networks she built with other students on campus. In fact, Emily often felt averse to many of the queer spaces and programming on her college's campus because she had an established queer support network outside of, and counter to, the networks on her college's campus. Emily developed many friendships with local non-students in the punk community, which included a substantial queer subset. This friend group helped Emily to develop a more radical set of politics that was not reflected in the larger campus community:

There definitely were. I wasn't that interested in them. Mostly because I think that my politics at the time, I felt more radical than the other queer people on campus...so I think that it really set me up to set myself apart from everyone. And to align myself with like the more radical punk community which

is not necessarily entwined in any way with the university they just happened to be in town.

This experience is similar to the experiences of Samantha, Becca, and Alan, who all found that there was something lacking in their student organizations. For Emily, however, this caused her to seek out communities off campus instead of engaging to change the on campus community. And eventually, because Emily had established much of her social life outside of the campus environment, she ultimately withdrew from her university, moving away after her third year to the Pacific Northwest.

While I focus on the potential for queer support networks to help students navigate the heterosexist college environment, Emily reminds us that these networks do not always exist in the context of the college environment. In her experience, this network in her hometown provided a social and intellectual community that she was not finding in school. This network ultimately helped her to leave the university entirely. However, this was not the only queer support network that influenced her college experience. After moving away from her hometown, Emily found another non-collegiate support network which opened her eyes to new possibilities for herself:

But what happened is I found a, a family to work for, um, with a child. And they were a two mom family. And this was actually my very first time with any exposure to queers raising children. So I started working for them. And then I met my partner here in Northwest City. And I pretty much knew I wasn't going to be going back to Town any time soon. So then I found another family, another two mom family with children to work for after that. And I, I mean another family after that. Again with two moms. Um...and I think that seeing older queer people, especially queer families...made me...like I felt very comfortable around them, I could see myself becoming an older queer person which I felt was really lacking in Town. I felt there were many young queer people and not very many older queer people. And...I think I felt excited to get old and queer, and also be

queer. Instead of, "oh no what about when I'm not 23 anymore?" Like are there still going to be queer people around me here at Town? And I think the answer was no.

It is this second support network that helped Emily to see new possibilities for her future, which did not exist in her hometown communities, on or off campus. Eventually, after spending three years in the Northwest, Emily began to look into the possibility of completing her undergraduate degree now that she had a new understanding of her future possibilities. She completed her last year of undergraduate coursework through a mix of online classes and transfer credit from the local community college and graduated remotely. Emily's experience speaks to the importance of multiple queer support networks which incorporate a variety of politics, experiences, and generations. Networks of queer peers are important for supporting queer students, but representation of future possibilities are just as important.

In this section, I focused in on queer support networks in various forms and how my participants developed and benefited from these networks. I consider these experiences about networks of queer support rather than simple examples of queer community because of their direct potential to help queer and trans students navigate a heterosexist college environment. Resources shared between friends, club members, and even romantic partners helped students grow and bridge barriers to their success, while at the same time providing queer and trans students a sense of belonging that they expressed not feeling within their institutions. While I discussed Jay's experience working at the Queer Resource Center at their college, it is worth noting that only one other of my

participants had an LGBTQ Student Center on campus. Neither of these two participants talked extensively about their interactions with these centers, but all of my participants talked at length about their experiences with friends, clubs, and partners. While research has demonstrated that resource centers do assist students¹⁵¹, we should investigate the potential of queer support networks to do much of the same work as an institutionalized resource center. Colleges should focus on how to foster the development of these networks in ways that feel organic and student-driven. As I will discuss later, it is also important to think about spreading these networks beyond current students to include alumni, faculty, and staff. As many of my participants explained, their experience was about people, not institutions.

Faculty Interpersonal – The Classroom

My participants talked about their experiences with academics in a variety of ways, but they primarily focused on the classroom and their interactions with professors in that context. In particular, I asked my participants about their experiences with gender and sexuality in the classroom and how these topics were or weren't addressed by their peers and their professors. However, my participants described multiple experiences with faculty both in relation to these topics and more generally. Faculty members stood out as mentors and support systems for my participants in a variety of ways, from nurturing their academic curiosity to providing them with opportunities to further their

¹⁵¹ Kane.

academic and professional development. In these ways, faculty played important roles in helping participants continue their momentum towards graduation and eventual employment. Faculty's potential to impact student success was also present for my participants in the ways that it challenged them. Several participants discussed how positive relationships benefited them, but also discussed how their experiences with homophobic and transphobic faculty negatively impacted them. It is this latter experience that I will investigate in this section, as negative interactions with faculty are more impactful to a student's development than are positive interactions.¹⁵²

The struggles my participants faced when interacting with faculty and the classroom were twofold; they contended with outright homophobia and transphobia on behalf of their faculty members and occasionally fellow students, but they also dealt with heterosexism operating under the guise of objectivity. Samantha, one of the students who helped 'stage a coup' in the queer club at her college, also discussed several incidents with professors on campus. In particular, Samantha had multiple issues with one professor in her program, who's private counseling practice focused on LGBTQ individuals. Samantha shared with me her experience of confronting this professor about the language she used in the classroom:

Ok so my Facebook status: "Actually had to ask a professor to refrain from using the word 'choice'-" that's what it was, it wasn't homosexual. It was, "Actually had to ask a professor to refrain from using the word 'choice' when referring to the gay and lesbian lifestyle. Decided against asking for a word change in place

¹⁵² Gannon-Rittenhouse and Pittman.

of the word lifestyle.”

There was a lot for Samantha and I to unpack about this incident. Samantha shared that in this class, she was the only queer student. I talk about the experience of being a token queer student later on in this section, but Samantha mentioned that she knew she had to say something to this professor because she was the only person in the class who would speak up about this issue. Additionally, we talked about how Samantha felt that she had to pick her battles on this issue. Her professor’s statement about ‘choosing’ the ‘gay and lesbian lifestyle’ was offensive to Samantha on several levels, and while she felt empowered enough to speak out against this, she did not feel that she would be able to fully address her professor’s errors. This issue was exasperated by the professor’s resistance to Samantha’s concerns and suggestions for new language. For many marginalized students, it would be difficult enough to address their professor’s offensive language at all, but even Samantha found it difficult to fully address the issues with her professor. She went on to tell me about how this experience made her less engaged with her human behavior class than she had already been. She also mentioned that she had to take courses with this same professor in two additional semesters after this incident.

Samantha was not the only participant to discuss issues with homophobia and transphobia in the classroom, but she did speak the most in depth about it. Other participants talked vaguely of fellow students who shared experiences with professors my participants never had. This experience came up for several participants and demonstrates that queer support networks not only helped students connect with

resources, they also serve as a warning system that helps students avoid harmful experiences. And several participants talked about incidents where other students made offensive comments in the classroom in passing. But what was more prevalent for my participants was the subtle heterosexism that influenced classroom conversations and academic work. Few of my participants had experience talking about gender and sexuality in the classroom. Those that were able to discuss gender and sexuality in the classroom did so in specialty courses around gender and sexuality, often in elective courses, as was the case for Emily. While Emily's college had a robust gender studies program, gender and sexuality were not always discussed in the same ways across disciplines. While Emily had positive experiences with her lower-level gender studies courses, gender became an issue when it came up in her sociology courses:

I had a really hard time with how much they, they would talk about gender in my sociology classes. As like this thing that, um, can determine behavior and then at the same time I was taking these gender studies classes where maybe that wasn't necessarily the case. And at the same time most of my friends were queer or genderqueer or trans. And so I had a lot of intersecting ideas and so I think that that made my experience in college this thing that I wasn't learning anything new. I already knew these things. I was just going through the motions to get the grade.

Emily's experience highlights some of the damages of bringing gender and sexuality into individual classrooms rather than into overarching curriculum. In her gender studies courses, where these topics were a part of the curriculum, she was presented with a unified way of discussing gender and sexuality. However, this was not the case when gender and sexuality were introduced in certain sociology courses, which were not in conversation with other classes on gender and sexuality at the university.

While it is important to bring these topics into the classroom discussion, to do so without also bringing these topics into conversation with the larger curriculum sends conflicting messages to students like Emily who have their own, lived understandings of gender and sexuality. This segregation of gender and sexuality from more core coursework was also part of a larger resistance to ‘political’ discussions in the classroom that my participants raised in our conversations.

Zamir attended a regional campus of his state’s public college in his hometown in the Southern United States. Zamir and I discussed several ways in which heterosexism affected his sense of belonging at his university, but here I want to highlight the ways it affected him in the classroom. Zamir majored in graphic design, which allowed him space for creativity that carried over into his other courses in the humanities. In both areas, Zamir shared that he encountered limitations on his creativity and the topics he engaged with. Professors often challenged him to be less provocative with his work, which is especially harmful given that Zamir’s work came out of his lived experience as a queer person of color:

And also like I could see, there were a lot of people who would, who, there were a lot of faculty members who I felt close with and I could discuss with and I could relate to them but within the department even, even though the work I didn’t feel like there were many opportunities where I could inject my identity and like my personal experience in my work. It was definitely [inaudible]. Not until my senior year, I guess, like through my last year. But yeah. That time I was able to put in a little more personality and discussion things and branching out from there. But, a lot of it wasn’t necessarily...but yeah I feel like even then, even that time I didn’t really feel encouraged to really push that part out cause a lot of professors were like, ‘well don’t go too far out there. You don’t want to challenge too many thoughts’ and things. So that sense of things.

Throughout our interview, Zamir demonstrated that he wanted to talk about his lived experience and the conflicting feelings he had about his intersectional identity. In his graphic design work, a place where this desire was especially present, he was told that his ideas, based on his own identity, were too challenging for his audience. Even in a space where Zamir was given space to inject his identity in his work, he found that there were limitations on just how much of himself he could incorporate.

This limitation was not experienced by Zamir alone. Becca attended a college with no majors, where an educational plan is determined by the student in conference with several professors on campus. The culmination of this four year educational plan was often a thesis, which Becca had chosen to write about menstruation and their peers' experiences with it. This work stemmed from Becca's own experience with menstruation, and unlike Zamir, they were encouraged to bring their experience into their work. In many ways, Becca was not limited in the same ways that Zamir was; their work was not labeled too provocative, but that does not mean that it was not also limited. Instead, Becca found difficulty with gaining approval for a topic that clearly made some faculty members uncomfortable. I asked them about having to meet with professors more regularly than other students, and if that had to do with their topic:

[T]he science folks that were on my plan committee were like, "no she has to be more anthropological, no she has to be more biological." So I kind of ended up being pulled into silos. And so, uh, like, simultaneously my thesis was not biological and scientific enough and not enough of an anthropological study. And it was infuriating. It's like, I'm trying to write an interdisciplinary piece and you guys are really making that hard.

In Becca's case, it wasn't that her topic was too proactive, but rather that professors didn't know how to respond to it. The interdisciplinary approach they had chosen sparked a disciplinary conflict within their academic committee that Becca never experienced and that other students in their cohort did not have to contend with. While this conflict did not keep Becca from continuing with their project, it did mean that they met with their committee more than other students and were subjected to additional review that could have discouraged them from the topic altogether.

I want to take a minute to return to Zamir's experience with academic heterosexism. While his graphic design work placed limits on how much of his identity he could bring into his work, he did have one space where he could engage with parts of his identity in the classroom. This took place in his English minor, where he was able to engage with queer literature in his papers and other coursework. This was clearly an exciting area for Zamir, who had struggled to see his identity reflected in the student body. But while Zamir talked positively about being able to read and write about Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* in one class, he was conscious of how much of an anomaly this was in the department:

But at the same time I struggled with a lot my minor in the English department because a lot of the readings that were required of me weren't necessarily things that I was interested in. It was like, oh you should read this whole old book about like, I don't know, we were reading Mark Twain, you're reading these whole old authors. I didn't really find any sense of community from it. I didn't really see myself in it. As being some gay brown man. Like reading about stories like white people and being straight and these things. It wasn't something interesting that I identified with. So I didn't feel as, um, brave to just like, jump in and read about them. And that sort of, yeah, after a year and a half I think that's when I

didn't feel like continuing with the minor just because, I didn't find that sense of community from the readings and stuff. I didn't find the need to align myself with it.

This conflict is an important one. The English department was a space where Zamir was able to engage with aspects of his queer identity and community in a way that he had not found in any other academic space on campus. But in telling me about this positive experience, Zamir was quick to pivot to the ways that the department had not supported him. Sure, he had been given the space to bring in queer literature if he did the work himself, but the actual coursework of his classes did not provide him with queer literature or nonwhite literature. And in the end, that discouraged Zamir from continuing with his English minor altogether. It would be easy to talk about diversifying coursework theoretically, but Zamir provides a clear example of how a non-diverse curriculum actively discourages marginalized students from persisting towards completion.

In our discussions around the classroom, several of my participants described their experiences being the token queer student in the classroom. And while much work has been done on tokenism of queer students in the classroom¹⁵³, my participants shared a variety of experiences with tokenism. Traditionally, being the only student of a marginalized identity in the classroom results in feelings of isolation. In Zamir's experiences above, there was often an underlying tone of being the token queer student in the classroom. And in much the same way as his marginalization in academia

¹⁵³ Furrow.

discouraged him, so too did being the token student keep Zamir from taking courses that addressed sexuality:

But yeah. I don't know. My friend was president of the GSA at the time and he had taken the class. And he was also someone who was sitting back and listening to a lot of these straight people say, "oh this is how I feel about this, this is how I feel about that." And he was just like, "hm, alright." So I'm glad you're [the friend] in [the class], but the majority of the class just was mostly straight so there's that. It's hard to really challenge, I feel like it, when you're going to that kind of class where you're expecting to find a sense of "I'm finally here in a situation where I can add my two cents and contribute to the discussion," but a lot of it's still being overwhelmed by the opposite end of the spectrum [straight students].

In this discussion, Zamir was sharing with me the few classes that addressed topics of gender or sexuality and why he chose not to take them. In this particular class, his friend shared with him his experience of the classroom being filled with their straight peers, leaving Zamir's friend as the only queer student in the classroom. And this experience made Zamir reluctant to take the class, even though he would not have been the only queer student in the class given that his friend was already in it. For Zamir and many other students, being the token student, particularly in a class about diversity, is further isolating.

But this wasn't the case for all of my participants. For Samantha, being the only queer student in her classes actually encouraged her to be more vocal about gender and sexuality. While she mentions that it was not often that she was the only queer student in the classroom, it did happen, and she actively challenged this fact by writing papers and presentations about gender and sexuality at every opportunity. As in the example earlier with her professor's offensive language, Samantha actually felt that her position as the

only queer student in the classroom gave her motivation to challenge homophobia in the classroom:

Cause I even like. I was so used to being the token gay in the classroom anyway. And that was one of the- I was definitely a lot more outspoken at Local College but that was because I had a lot more opportunities to speak. And I think it got a little bit more comfortable. And it was kind of one of those things where I got more comfortable being that person because somebody has to.

For Samantha, being the only student of her identity in the classroom was a way of overcoming the bystander effect. Knowing that she was the only queer student in the classroom gave her the sense that she had to be vocal about queer issues because there was no one who was there to do it for her. This advocacy carried over into her classes where she was not the only queer student, and in these classes queer students latched on to each other as a means of mutual support.

Samantha wasn't my only participant to share what it was like to not be the only queer student in the classroom. Alan also mentioned that he went into classes expecting to be the only queer male in the classroom. However, when this assumption was disproved by other queer men in the classroom, Alan mentioned that he immediately gravitated towards those students:

Yeah. I would say...I maybe had out of like every class that I was in. Like two, well not two, three, four classes total where there was another like queer man in the class. And it usually helped a lot honestly. Like in, like I found myself agreeing with them a lot.

Even in these moments where queer students found themselves not alone in the classroom, the fear of being tokenized was present. The presence of other queer students

in the classroom came as a surprise to students like Alan. Disproving this assumption created by heterosexism became almost a means to create queer community within the classroom. Other queer/trans students immediately became allies in a classroom that often excluded them.

Alan and others' experiences being one of several queer students in the classroom demonstrates that as the student body in Higher Education diversifies, more students are able to find themselves reflected among their peers. But what my participants have also shared is that while they have been able to find community among peers, they continued to feel excluded from academic spaces. Experiences with objectivity were shared by most of my participants, who had been told by their professors that gender and sexuality either did not belong in academia, or belonged in certain, segregated areas of academia. And while I spent the majority of this section focused on the ways that heterosexism impacted my participants in the classroom, Samantha's example of confronting a professor's homophobia should be a reminder that homophobia and transphobia do continue to impact students. While Higher Education may be diversifying, if we do not also diversify our curricula we are simply inviting an increased number of students to be affected by homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in the classroom.

Lasting Effects – Alumni Life

Throughout each interview, my participants reflected on their experiences as college students in multiple contexts. And while these reflections are an important part of my study, it is my participants' discussions of their lives as college alumni that provide insights into the lasting effects of their student experiences. In all areas of interaction, a nuanced interpretation of student experience is expressed; participants did not always understand their experiences in the same ways, or may have had conflicted feelings within their individual experiences. Many understood their identities as students and as queer and trans individuals separately, and experienced their campus differently as a result of this split. If my participants struggled to understand their place in college as queer and trans students, is it any wonder that they now struggle to find their place as queer and trans college alumni?

In many ways, there were no clearly defined ways to be an alumni, let alone a queer/trans alumni. Participants' alma maters rarely defined what it meant to be an alumni of the school or how they could maintain their connections. And for many, this unclear status made it difficult to stay in touch with parts of their experience which had been important during their times as students. Jay, who had a transformative year as a result of working in the Women's Center during their final year of college, found it difficult to stay connected to the center or other events that were important for them as a student:

Uh, I tried to stick with it and go back but a lot of the departments that I worked in- like I'm really proud that the Woman's Center changed their name to the Women's and Gender Center, great. Um, but the Queer Resources Center unfortunately succumbed to the queer drama, and unfortunately half the staff quit all at once, and they've had a couple of rough years in a row. And there's just a lot of like, I don't know a lot of difficulty with that. And those were the programs I went to when I was going there. Like I went to see those programs. Like they had a Vagina Monologues type thing that they did. They had the Queer Experience. I always would like go every year but last year they didn't even have it. Um. So it's been, what, three years since I graduated now. And I like, I like the idea of going back to the college campus. I still live in the same town so it's not too hard. But I don't really bother ever. Like I don't even check their events pages. I get their alumni emails and I'm just like, "ugh." So I get annoyed with that.

For a while at least, Jay was able to be an active alumni who participated in events held by organizations that were important to them. But as these spaces changed, and in some cases closed, Jay lost the motivation to continue to be involved, to the point where they are now almost actively disengaged. Without the spaces that were important to Jay as a student, it became difficult for them to know what else they could stay connected to.

Jay was not the only participant to have this experience. Dave too did his best to maintain his connection to the parts of campus that had been impactful for him as a student. He continued to attend and participate in club events, but was conscious that he was no longer a student. As a recent graduate, Dave felt that he would be able to continue to occupy the same spaces as when he was a student with minimal change, but this was also a site of discomfort for him:

And it, between that and looking back and seeing all the work they're still doing in the community and being kind of proud of them for that. And helping out where I can. Sending donations if I have extra money. Doing design work for them on the side. Like handing out flyers and inviting people to events. But also kind of being aware that it's their thing now. I graduated, I have my degree, I

don't want to be that guy that just hangs around forever. So I kind of, be mature like, "ok you guys got it, I'm gonna do my own thing. And I trust you." Which is hard! But it feels like the mature thing to do...But I'm feeling like that might expire in the next like couple of years. Cause eventually everyone that I was there with will have graduated with or moved on. There'll be a whole new crop of new kids, which will be interesting.

Dave was conscious about reconceptualizing his role as an alumni in an organization for current students at his college. But in many ways, Dave was also aware that his participation may seem strange the farther removed he was from his graduation. While club leaders that knew him as a student welcomed his help, would new leaders that he didn't personally know be as accepting of his help? For Dave, the next few years will be a time of transition in his role as an alumni, and he was not certain what direction that new role may take.

Unlike Jay and Dave, Becca did have a clearly defined role as an alumni; they maintained an active relationship with their college's Admissions Office, and often helped out with regional recruitment events that were close by. And while this relationship was clearly defined and easy for Becca to navigate, it was not without its uncertainties. After their graduation, Becca's college began a series of changes in its enrollment policies that had serious implications for the college as a whole. Namely, the college was looking to grow its enrollment by a significant amount. This change challenged Becca's understanding of their college:

Yeah so, I think they want to grow to 1000 students. I think that that's a very poor choice, like I would not have chosen to go there if they were that big I think. I don't think that the size was something that appealed to me as consciously as I realized. But uh, I definitely wanted a tight-knit community and I think that growing it when, I don't know, I don't think that they have enough

housing. I don't think that they have enough professors. I don't think that they have enough money. I think it's just fucking stupid. It's just, do all the rest of it first. And then grow it. If you insist on doing it.

Becca was very open about their disagreement with this change in the college's make up, which they felt was being undertaken for all the wrong reasons and would have serious implications for students like them. And this disagreement on the college's direction called in to question Becca's continued role with the Admissions Office; should they continue to speak with prospective students about the college if they disagreed with the direction it was headed in? Or, perhaps this conflict made it more important that Becca talk to students about what they felt made their college what it was.

Alan, the most recent of my participants to graduate, has a much different understanding of his alumni experience that goes beyond being uncertain of his role in relation to his institution. For Alan and many of his fellow alumni, this uncertainty is much greater; he is currently grappling with questions about the importance of his student experience:

[J]ust as like a former student I feel kind of like, left floating in the wind honestly. And I know that like, obviously that's what tons of post grads are feeling. But the thing about Little is that they work you so hard and they like, induct you, you kind of induct yourself into this ethos of like, there is some, we can't identify, that there is some greater purpose to everything that we're doing here. Even if we can't see it. We're like forging what like, academia should be like. And so when you get the degree and you see that that degree looks just like every other degree. Um from a college. And you still have the stupid like, \$25 parent-student graduation dinners. And you still have the boring like, commencement speeches. You feel kind of like, I feel like there's this added dimension of "well, what now?"

Alan and his fellow alumni spent four years going through an arduous academic process, but are now feeling uncertain about their place in the world. And because Alan was the most recent of my participants to graduate, this uncertainty felt especially raw. Alan admits that he is still processing the emotions of his undergraduate experience, both good and bad. His experience demonstrates that we are not only not defining alumni roles for our graduates, but that we may not be preparing them for graduation either.

Feeling uncertain about their roles as alumni was not the only issue my participants addressed in our conversations. What was particularly important, given our earlier conversations about the ways that queer community existed for my participants during their time in college is the way that graduation impacted these communities. I've already discussed how Jay became disengaged with aspects of their university that had fostered their identity development as these areas changed. For Samantha, the transition to alumni life meant increased distance between her and her former classmates as a result of not seeing each other on a weekly basis. Maintaining friendships became a difficult task:

I am terrible at keeping in touch with people. I mean the funniest thing is I have all of these Twitter friends who I talk to all the time. And it's like, I am so terrible, I felt kind of like an asshole because you know, I passed my exam on Friday and I totally meant to text one of my friends but I forgot. And it's like, she just like commented on my Facebook post and then I was like, oh no. I totally meant to text you!

Staying in contact with friends and staying up to date on people's lives became a difficult task when those friends were removed from the context Samantha had gotten to know

them in. And while maintaining contact was hard, making plans to see people that were important to her during college became even harder, as Samantha mentions:

But it is hard now cause the one friend moved up to fucking Town, so she's an hour away and I'm like, I don't wanna drive up there. I barely want to go to work in Hometown, that's a thirty minute drive. Yeah and it's like, "I love you, I miss you" and she...she's asked to go out to the bar a few times and I'm like, "it's 45 minutes away and last call is at 2 and..."

For Samantha and others, this loss of community was difficult and hard to navigate. But it had particularly important impacts when considering that my participants weren't just losing their friends; many were losing queer communities that they had spent years creating. Graduation for some meant not only beginning a new chapter in their lives, but also doing so alone in a world that was not nearly as queer as the one they had created in college.

While I've talked at length about Jay and Dave's experiences with their alumni life and transitioning out of college, each shared impactful experiences with not only losing their queer community, but also entering a world that was profoundly different from the one they had created. Dave puts this quite simply:

Oh, god, it was rough. For sure. Cause I graduated and I went on to work a full time internship that didn't pay that much so I also worked a second job during that. So I just kind of flew into a 60-hour work week and I felt like I kind of lost my community. A little bit. Because what they don't tell you after you leave college is the real world is very, very straight. And very, very cisgender. *laughs*

It wasn't just that he had lost his community; he entered a working environment where his sexual identity was not reflected or recognized. This is especially important given

that Dave had been incredibly intentional about creating queer communities for himself in college as a response to not having those communities at other stages of his education. Jay too talks about this transition from a space where they were able to explore their identity to one where they experienced being closeted:

Yeah so it's almost like I'm a cis person at work and I have to not really be super queer or out or actually gay. Which I wanna do but the more, like, I act like myself the more people see feminine traits, like I have like a more feminine voice and what not, so I have to like really suppress a lot of who I am at work. I like being, like, myself and around people. So I feel like I've been kind of forced backed into a closet a little bit. Albeit a different one, um, all different clothes in there but, um.

Jay had spent most of their college experience not engaging with their gender or sexual identity until their final year of college. Using a queer support network, Jay was able to spend that last year going through some truly transformational changes. But upon graduation, Jay entered a workforce where they not only couldn't engage with their gender and sexual identity, but they also had to hide that identity in a way they had not previously done. For queer and trans college students facing graduation, in addition to facing issues of employment and housing, they also face the added prospect of entering a 'Straight World.'

It would be easy to end my results on this important note, but to do so would be disingenuous to my participants who are finding ways to navigate this transition while still engaging with their queerness. After graduation, Zamir faced a small period in which he was unemployed and no longer in school. During this time, he spent more time with his queer friends from college because he had the time to spare. But he also was

able to find new queer communities which engaged with his professional goals in a way that he hadn't been able to while he was in school:

Cause I found, I met with somebody from my high school and she was dating someone and she said, 'hey, their- my boyfriend is doing this like art collective thing and you need to, I told him that you do comics and stuff and so I wanted to let you know, he wanted to meet you and see if you wanted to be part of this.' And it's like, 'yeah, definitely.' So through him I was able to meet some local people in the community who are like around my age and still interested in like the same things that I was. And I got to meet people who are also gay and who are also...sort of thinking along the same lines that I was thinking. And help me, uh, really branch out more. And through them I got to meet other friends. And I feel like after graduating SSU I really got to understand myself a lot better. Like it really helped me define my identity a lot more, I got to see myself as a stronger personality. And I really got to learn about myself as well.

Zamir had struggled with finding a space where he could engage with his queer and ethnic identity while he was a student. But after graduating, he found his way to a community that not only reflected his identity, it also allowed him to get to know himself better. In this way, a lot of Zamir's growth occurred after he graduated from college, a space where his growth had been limited in certain ways. While Zamir continues to face challenges as a college graduate, it is important to remember that there were also many opportunities for him to grow after college.

And Zamir wasn't my only participant to feel this way. Ian, who had been able to do some personal identity development work while a student, found that in his post-college life he was able to engage with that identity more openly. It was outside of his college environment that he came out of the closet and began engaging with other queer men, as discussed earlier. It was Ian's transition to college which gave him the space to investigate his sexual identity. However, Ian demonstrates that self-discovery does not

always equate to outness. While his new college environment gave him the ability to rethink how he interacted with others and with himself, it did not stimulate his coming out. However, the independence he experienced after graduating from college was conducive to his coming out process.

The ability to develop outside of the college environment is also not exclusive to alumni, as Emily demonstrated when discussing her return to college remotely from her new home in the Pacific Northwest. A lack of community had been part of Emily's decision to leave her institution, but it was a new community that gave her the space to complete her degree after a three year break. While the queer people that Emily knew as a student were all young and radical, they did not provide Emily with a vision of her potential future. The older queer community that she found after moving, however, did demonstrate new possibilities that stimulated her to not only return and complete her Bachelor's degree, but also to begin making preparations to attend graduate school. In pushing colleges to consider post-graduation as a site of continued development, Emily reminds us that development can take place off campus even before graduation.

Zamir, Ian, and Emily's experiences highlight that while there are many opportunities for queer and trans students to develop community and their own identities during college, to say this is the only place they are able to do so would be incorrect. For many students, college is a space where this development takes place, but we should expand our thinking to consider new, queer spaces outside of the campus environment where development is taking place. Jay, Dave, and Samantha, show us that the transition

to alumni life has serious implications for the queer communities that they built as students. Not only were these three forced to contend with a working environment that was significantly less understanding of their gender and sexual identities than were their colleges, but they also faced a sudden loss of the support network which allowed them to navigate such a heterosexist environment in the past. Throughout my interviews, I learned about not only the barriers that queer and trans students face while attending college, but also the many ways that students navigate isolation, tokenization, homophobia, objectivity, and their changing roles as alumni. By not recognizing and addressing the disparities that queer and trans college students must contend with, they are left unequipped to tackle the transition to alumni life.

Discussion

Throughout this study, my participants brought attention to the diversifying collegiate student body while commenting on college and universities that have not diversified themselves. With more students of marginalized identities enrolling in post-secondary education, it is important to discuss the ways in which these groups of students have been denied access to education in the past, how the legacy of that exclusivity continues to function in institutionalized ways, and how best to respond to these two facts. Moving away from my participants direct experiences with their alma maters, I highlight several overarching themes present in my conversations and in the literature. In addition to investigating the ways in which heterosexism affected students during and after their time in college, I also develop out the idea that queer support networks offer a potential response to Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions.

Structural Oppression

I began this investigation into the experiences of queer and trans college alumni by discussing the different ways that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism affect queer and trans college students while they are in college. My participants shed light on how these continue to affect them into their alumni life within the context of their alumni relationship and more generally in their lives outside Higher Education. And while at certain points my participants discussed their experiences with more overt forms of

oppression, these examples were not as prominent for recent alumni as they may have been for less recent alumni.¹⁵⁴ Instead, more covert forms of oppression were present in the experiences of participants, though they did not always comment on this.

In this study, I primarily focused on understanding the ways in which institutionalized heterosexism affects queer and trans college students. Throughout conversations with participants, heterosexism was frequently present but often went unaddressed. It is important to note that few of my participants talked directly about these more subtle forms of oppression, though all discussed experiences that were influenced by heterosexism. At first, this often seemed a perplexing dilemma; my participants were affected by heterosexism but did not always comment on it in the same way that they readily commented on homophobia and transphobia. In many ways, this is because covertness is a defining part of institutionalized heterosexism in the college environment.

This was present during my earlier discussion of my participants' experiences as students. Students who are faced with academic objectivity may not readily recognize this as an aspect of heterosexism, but Zamir's experience of being told to limit how much of his identity he put into his work highlights the many ways that heterosexism is present. The assertion that academic work be objective was particularly strong for students in STEM fields like Dave and Ian, who both mention that gender and sexuality were not present in their classroom discussions and occasionally made it difficult to relate course

¹⁵⁴ Rankin et al.

material to their own experiences. This objectivity and rejection of knowledge developed through lived experience is anything but objective. Instead, objectivity enshrines the lived experiences of the normative while at the same time refusing to examine these or any other lived experiences.¹⁵⁵ Here, heterosexism denies the knowledge that queer and trans students gain from their lived experiences around gender and sexuality in a way that it embraces the lived experiences of straight and cisgender individuals. What is considered classical or foundational in many disciplines, texts often written by straight and cisgender people, are taught without question, while texts written by queer and trans people must be constantly defended, if taught at all. This adherence to objectivity denies the contributions of queer and trans scholars and challenges the ability of queer and trans students to enter these fields in a way that it does not challenge straight and cisgender students. While my participants did not directly comment on objectivity, or in some cases did so positively, it is important to understand the subtle ways that objectivity actually continues the exclusive history of academia.

And while this study focuses on heterosexism, any conversation about structural oppression in Higher Education must be intersectional. Conversations around oppressive systems in education must understand that racism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression are all pieces of a larger oppressive system. This study, as well as other research¹⁵⁶, demonstrates that marginalized students are aware of the oppression that

¹⁵⁵ Robert Diaz, "Queer Unsettlements: Diasporic Filipinos in Canada's World Pride," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 19, no. 3 (October 2016): , accessed May 10, 2017, doi:10.1353/jaas.2016.0030.

¹⁵⁶ Rankin et al.

other groups of marginalized students face. We cannot simply respond to each individual form of oppression without also addressing the interconnectedness of these multiple forms of oppression. While the divide between normative and marginalized students can be apparent in the ways that students of color, women, and queer and trans students face barriers based on their identities, these barriers themselves are a part of institutionalized oppression in Higher Education. Gaps in retention, persistence, and graduation rates may point to symptoms of this system, but we must also investigate the underpinnings of these barriers if we are to dismantle the system. Normativity is composed of racism, sexism, and heterosexism as discussed in the literature review of this thesis, but my participants also highlighted their experiences with classist aspects of normativity. Not only is the increasing cost of college education pushing out students from lower socioeconomic statuses, those students that do enroll are faced with an institution that is difficult to navigate for first generation college students. The attention paid by my participants to classism further illuminates the interconnectedness of this oppressive system; high costs of attendance and missing resources for first generation students often affect students of color, who must also contend with institutionalized racism. It is necessary to address the multiple oppressions that marginalized students are facing, but we must think intersectionally about our responses to this system, as it is made up of interconnected oppressions.

College is Queer, but the World is Straight

Earlier, I shared Jay and Dave's experiences with leaving the queer communities that they had developed during their time in college and the stark contrast they found in their professional lives. These experiences present a challenge for queer and trans college students that has not yet been addressed. While all students will face some difficulty transitioning from a college environment to a professional environment, queer and trans students face additional isolation and discrimination. This is because these students have spent their college experience learning to adapt to a specific type of heterosexist environment at their academic institution, but are transitioning to a wholly new heterosexist environment with many fewer resources to navigate this transition.

Because queerness is not visibly marked, queer and trans working professionals may find it difficult to establish queer community in the same ways that they had in college. Clubs and other student organizations offer a clear place for queer and trans college students to begin building their queer support networks, but similar organizations are harder to find or nonexistent outside of the college environment. For alumni like Dave, entering the working world can be incredibly isolating when there are few, if any, other LGBTQIA+ individuals in the office. Additionally, students who were able to be out during their time in college may find this harder in professional environments which have their own oppressive systems of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. Because the narrative around coming out of the closet is that it is a one-time occurrence,

alumni may not be equipped to transition to a working environment where they may be re-closeted.

As colleges and universities begin to develop career preparation services to assist college students with the transition after graduation, it is also important to think about preparing marginalized students for this transition and the particular challenges they will face in the working world. This study highlighted the lasting effects of heterosexism on a college student's alumni life, but it is important to also investigate the new forms of heterosexism that these students will face after graduation. It is not enough to design responses to create better queer student development; we must also think about long-term queer human development. While it is important to create college environments that allow queer and trans college students the necessary resources to remove barriers to their success, it would be a disservice to limit these efforts to the college environment. Queer and trans college students like myself and my participants are caught off guard by being re-closeted in working environments and the lack of queer friendships in these environments. As students prepare for transitioning out of the college environment, they should also be prepared for a potential culture shock that has real impacts on queer and trans individuals.

Queer Mentoring Networks – A Response

Discussing what colleges and universities can do to better support queer and trans students is important, but we should also recognize that students are already navigating the heterosexist college environment despite insufficient or nonexistent institutional responses. There are ways that institutions can learn from the queer support networks that my participants demonstrated, and we should take steps to do so. In addition to addressing the heterosexist barriers that queer and trans college students face, queer support networks offer an opportunity to foster an organic response to these barriers which could help students better navigate their college environments. These networks also provide an opportunity to foster holistic student development goals through queer community and identity development.

These networks of queer support should be understood as responses to a heterosexist college environment, and provide many of the outcomes that we hope LGBTQ Student Centers provide. However, these networks function in ways that are far different from more institutionalized responses. Many LGBTQ Student Centers rely on professional staff to manage resources and organize programming. And while this offers stability that student organizations cannot always provide as demonstrated by my participants' experiences, queer support networks are made up of peers who share resources, experiences, and identities. Students who are out of the closet will make use of student diversity resources, but students who are in the closet or questioning their identity are less likely to utilize these resources even though they are often designed

specifically to benefit these students the most.¹⁵⁷ By creating resources specifically for queer and trans students that are housed in a queer space, institutions draw attention to the divide between straight and queer students that requires a certain level of outness to navigate. Queer support networks, however, are integrated into daily life in the college environment because they are built on relationships that don't necessarily require outness to maintain. It would be a mistake to think that institutionalized responses to the needs of queer and trans students are not helpful, but there are limitations to which students they can assist.

There are opportunities, however, for colleges to foster the development of these queer support networks to assist queer and trans students in a variety of ways. Indeed, these networks already help students in aspects of their holistic student development through their inherent need for community building. Friendships and romantic relationships established between queer and trans students offer opportunities for students to find others who share their marginalized identities and desires. These networks, built on relationships, offer an opportunity for students to share resources with one another, allowing out students to bridge the gap between closeted and questioning students and institutionalized resources such as the LGBTQ Student Center.

Student clubs and organizations built around shared identity also provide opportunities for queer and trans students to build communities that foster leadership development and outness. A major issue for queer clubs is leadership transitions, as

¹⁵⁷ Garvey and Rankin 383.

demonstrated by Alan and Becca earlier. However, club advisors can encourage both community and leadership development by fostering a club environment that has scaled leadership opportunities. Through numerous smaller leadership positions, clubs can increase their leadership pool, fairly distribute responsibility, and increase members' investment. These opportunities allow younger students to gain leadership experience alongside and from their more experienced peers who will eventually graduate and be replaced by these younger students. Not only does this type of structure allow student clubs to have longer lives by decreasing the likelihood of a leadership crisis, it also allows these organizations to adapt to the changing needs of students on campus. And certainly, providing multiple opportunities for club leadership earlier helps individual students develop leadership skills and experience.

Additionally, finding ways to incorporate these queer support networks into an institution's response to queer and trans students brings their identity development into their holistic student development. By validating queer and trans students' experiences with questioning and discovery around gender and sexual identity, colleges can challenge heterosexist assumptions which force queer and trans students to separate their identity development from other aspects of student development. A holistic concept of student development that includes development around multiple identities would trouble the separation between normative and marginalized student development and provide space for students who are questioning or uncertain about their identities. In bringing identity

development into conversation with student development, we challenge heterosexism which currently creates this division.

Throughout my conversations with participants, mentoring was presented as an area that helped them develop and navigate the heterosexist college environment. While earlier I discussed their experiences with homophobic and transphobic professors in the classroom, there were also professors who provided my participants support, advice, and representation. Mentoring relationships between faculty and students have played an important role in student development in the past and they are readily suggested as means of supporting marginalized students. For queer and trans students, faculty mentoring also offers the opportunity to increase LGBTQIA+ representation across campus. Dave discussed how his college maintained a voluntary 'out faculty' list, which allowed staff and faculty to publish their gender and sexual identities, making themselves available for students in need of a mentor or the knowledge that there is a queer future. A resource like this would have been helpful for Emily, who did not find older queer people in college. Traditional faculty mentorship that seeks to address queer and trans students should also be utilized to increase representation.

I also see mentoring in the queer support networks that my participants were a part of. Older students helped Dave find the queer communities on his college's campus even before he had made an enrollment decision. Jay's friends not only presented possible futures and identities for them, but also provided them with the space to question their identity. Emily's queer community in the Pacific Northwest eventually encouraged

her to complete her undergraduate degree. By recognizing the potential benefits of queer support networks and treating them as seriously as mentoring relationships between faculty and students, colleges can help to foster organic, student-driven responses to the heterosexist college environment.

Just as it is important to think of queer mentoring networks as more than just a faculty-student relationship, it is important to think of these networks as intersectional, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational. One queer student group on campus is not enough; different students require different kinds of communities and responses, particularly when those students occupy the intersection of two or more marginalized identities. Queer mentoring networks must be conscious to also bridge racial, classed, and religious divides. These networks must also exist beyond any one academic discipline, as there is a hesitance to discuss gender and sexuality in STEM fields while these conversations often already have a home in the arts and humanities. Students and faculty in these queer mentoring networks should work to break down disciplinary boundaries which segregate academic interests into isolated silos.

But, as a particular concern of this study, these networks must be intergenerational; they offer an incredible opportunity to engage and re-engage queer and trans college alumni. Establishing mentoring relationships between college students and college alumni has the potential to help maintain institutional knowledge in these networks and in student organizations, to allow queer and trans students access to their college communities that may be far queerer than their working communities, and to

recognize the lasting effects of attending a heterosexist institution. Additionally, networks built and maintained between college alumni and faculty/staff offers opportunities to give ongoing career mentoring for these alumni. Queer mentoring networks offer opportunities to define the role of a queer college alumni and continue to stimulate ongoing personal development even after students have left the college campus.

Conclusion

As I began to develop this study, I was originally interested in the experiences that queer and trans college students face while they attend a Traditionally Heterogendered Institution. That concern has remained, as evidenced by the discussions around student experience and student development theory. But as I began creating this study, I drew on my own conflicted experience as a queer college alumni and the challenges I had never expected to face following graduation. In choosing to focus on the experiences of queer and trans college alumni, I hoped to shed light on a transition that is often overlooked even as colleges begin creating more substantial career preparation services. While marginalized students must also contend with the inherent uncertainty of the traditional experience of transitioning out of college, I found that there were few conversations happening about the specific challenges marginalized students faced in transitioning out of college.

This study was originally conceptualized as a way to understand how queer and trans college alumni stay engaged with or become disengaged from their colleges after graduation. What my participants shared went far beyond this initial research question. Their experiences with heterosexism stayed with them after graduation, impacting how they talked about their college experience and how they have transitioned to a new life as an alumnus. Many talked about coming to terms with their undergraduate experience, or with transitioning into an environment where heterosexism was much more rampant. All discussed their relationship to educational institutions and the possibility that they would return to graduate school, but none did so without trepidation.

While I investigate experiences of heterosexism and its far-reaching impacts, my participants raised many questions about the interconnected forms of oppression that they and other marginalized students faced. This work should be understood as part of a body of work on the institutionalized system of oppression in Higher Education that stems from an exclusionary educational history. Responses to and research on this oppressive system must be intersectional in their conceptualization. It is not enough to address one form of oppression, but we must instead be constantly aware of the many forms of oppression that exist in Higher Education. I hope that this research inspires further research on heterosexism, racism, classism, sexism, and other oppressive systems that continue to covertly impact marginalized students.

This critical consciousness is a powerful tool, but it can also be a heavy burden, and to end here would be a mistake. Instead, I wish to again highlight the incredible

resilience of my participants and all queer and trans students who continue to exist, come together, and succeed on college campuses. The ability of queer people to build networks of support that include resource provision and emotional labor is truly inspiring. By queering our responses to the needs of queer and trans college students, we can draw on the incredible work that these students have done, are doing, and will continue to do.

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