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## LGBTQ Community College Students' Decreased Sense of Belonging

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### Abstract

LGBTQ students experience a lower sense of belonging at community colleges. The correlation between campus and classroom climate and academic success, campus involvement, identity, level of outness, and well-being for LGBTQ students contributes to their decreased sense of belonging. Non-LGBTQ-affirming and non-inclusive community college campuses and classrooms lead to feelings of fear, invisibility, lack of validation, mental health challenges, and poor academic performance for LGBTQ students. An extensive literature review was conducted to determine the root causes around the decreased sense of belonging for LGBTQ students enrolled at community colleges. Three themes emerged that explained this decreased sense of belonging: heteronormative and cisnormative campus and classroom climates; a lack of LGBTQ-

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specific training for administrators, faculty, and staff; and a lack of LGBTQ-specific programming and services on campus. Creating a campus-wide administrator, faculty, staff, and student LGBTQ Task Force and promoting the affirmation, inclusion, safety, and visibility of LGBTQ students may help ameliorate the diminished sense of belonging experienced by LGBTQ students on community college campuses.

*Keywords:* LGBTQ students, belonging, climate, programming, support services, training

LGBTQ students experience a lower sense of belonging at community colleges. LGBTQ students encounter a combination of intolerance, harassment, prejudices, disengagement, discrimination, safety concerns, microaggressions, and injustices on community college campuses, leading to feelings of fear, mental health challenges, and poor academic performance (Goldberg et al., 2019).

It is important to define terms that will be referenced throughout this literature review and subsequent discussion. LGBTQ is the umbrella term to include both sexual and gender minority identities. The most inclusive way to categorize sexual and gender minority identities is LGBTQ+; however, due to the multiple derivatives used in the research, the authors have decided to utilize LGBTQ to include all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. When referring to sexual minorities exclusively, LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) was used. When referring to gender minorities only, T, non-cisgender, or transgender was used interchangeably. The operational definition for belonging was taken from Strayhorn (2018), who posited,

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or



feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Heteronormativity is defined as “[n]orms and practices that assume binary alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles and that establish heterosexuality as a fundamental and natural norm” (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 4). Their definition of cisnormativity as “[t]he assumption that all individuals are cisgender,” namely, “gender identity and sex assigned at birth align” (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 4) was utilized.

Although research on the experiences of LGBTQ college students is limited, research on T students is scant, at best (Dugan et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2019). Studies have shown that LGBTQ students feel as if they do not belong in two- and four-year institutions. Garvey et al. (2017) asserted that there is a correlation between campus climate and academic success, campus involvement, identity, level of outness, and well-being. Non-affirming campus climates may contribute to LGBTQ students' decreased sense of belonging, due to them feeling invisible and underrepresented (Garvey et al., 2017). Such a lukewarm and disconnected sense of belonging can adversely affect LGBTQ students' persistence, retention, and completion metrics.

Just as heteronormativity adversely affects the sense of belonging for sexual minority college students, cisnormativity negatively impacts gender minority students' sense of belonging. Cisnormativity in the classroom may lead to avoidance of or antagonism toward non-cisgender students from either the faculty, classmates, or both, resulting in feelings of anxiousness, discomfort, and intimidation (Goldberg et al., 2019). In the Goldberg et al. (2019) study, sense of belonging was measured with a five-point Likert scale of the following feelings: valued as a person at the college, accepted as a part of the campus community, and that they belong on the



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college campus. The study found that educating non-cisgender students on and making them aware of non-cisgender-affirming campus policies and supports contributed to an increased sense of belonging at their institutions. Goldberg et al. (2019) also found that in public two-year institutions, only 50% have nondiscrimination policies that include gender identity, 72.7% prohibit students from changing their gender on documents without legal changes, and less than 7% new student orientation programs embed topics related to gender identity and/or expression. Such cisnormativity diminishes the sense of belonging for gender minority students.

Dugan et al.'s (2012) earlier study of 91 trans students found that they too reported a reduced sense of belonging, including acceptance and integration on their college campuses, illuminating the need to ameliorate and reduce campus cisnormativity and hostile climates. Compared to the LGB and cisgender respondents ( $M = 3.64$ ), transgender students reported a significantly lower sense of belonging ( $M = 3.09$ ). The  $M$  score for the transgender respondents is significantly lower than the other  $M$  scores, suggesting that cisnormativity on college campuses must be addressed to improve the sense of belonging, affirmation, and validation of non-cisgender students.

### Results

While it is important to study and understand this problem of decreased sense of belonging in LGBTQ community college students, understanding the causes of this problem is equally important in order to address and ameliorate the root causes of the problem. There were three themes illuminated in the research that explain the root causes of the decreased sense of belonging in LGBTQ community college students: (a) heteronormative and cisnormative campus



and classroom climates; (b) lack of LGBTQ-specific training for administrators, faculty, staff, and students; and (c) lack of LGBTQ-specific programming and services on-campus.

### **Heteronormative and Cisnormative Campus and Classroom Climates**

Heteronormative and cisnormative classroom climates contribute to LGBTQ community college students' decreased sense of belonging because they feel judged, discriminated against, and not included, relevant, or validated (Brocato et al., 2021; Garvey et al., 2015; Mathies et al., 2019). Brocato et al. (2021) asserted that to close equity gaps for LGBTQ students, higher education leaders must take a closer look at their campus and classroom climates to identify systemic heteronormative and cisnormative microaggressions and behaviors. The Wellbeing Assessment used in Brocato et al.'s (2021) study was administered to 11,921 undergraduate students from 28 U.S. colleges and universities in 2019 to assess their positive thoughts and feelings, namely happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, as well as negative thoughts and feelings, specifically anxiety, depression, loneliness, and social anxiety. Non-heterosexual respondents and non-cisgender respondents produced overall subjective well-being scores .75 and .5 of one standard deviation lower, respectively, when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, and these findings were statistically significant (Brocato et al., 2021). Although this study did not disaggregate findings by institution type, its biggest strength was that it shed significant light on the systemic heteronormativity and cisnormativity running rampant on college campuses.

Heteronormativity and cisnormativity create hostile learning environments for LGBTQ students, impeding their ability to integrate into the college community (Garvey et al., 2015). In exploring the campus climate for LGBTQ community college students, Garvey et al. (2015)



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performed a mixed methods study using survey questions to collect data for analysis. They found that classroom experiences and faculty interactions contribute to the unsupportive campus climate perceived by LGBTQ students. The results suggested that the classroom climate experiences for LGBTQ students, including non-inclusive language by both instructors and classmates, paralleled their attitudes and perceptions of the campus climate.

Garvey et al.'s (2015) mixed methods study further illuminated the issue. In their study of 102 community college students, it was found that a non-LGBTQ- affirming classroom climate led to a statistically significant negative perception of the classroom climate (Garvey et al., 2015). Students in Garvey et al.'s (2015) study also reported that faculty publicly did not support LGBTQ concerns and challenges or were conflicted about sharing their thoughts openly. When questioned about recommending their community college to an LGBTQ student, one respondent stated,

I think the LGBTQ issue hits a little too personal for any of the faculty to truly feel comfortable in that kind of supportive role. So, if someone I knew was looking for a supportive school, I wouldn't recommend it. (Garvey et al., 2015, p. 536)

Additionally, LGBTQ topics lead to uneasiness and discomfort for many faculty. The response from one participant of the study was especially pithy: "More accountability for teachers to keep class discussion from building up to more hostile anti-LGBT stuff. It's not like everyone has to be pro-LGBT, but sometimes homophobia can really take over a discussion!" Another student shared that one of the many reasons why they considered transferring was that no faculty cared enough to prohibit the use of hateful and hurtful speech towards gay students (Garvey et al.,



2015, p. 536). Non-affirming discourse can be crippling, distressful, and isolating for LGBTQ students, destroying their sense of belonging.

Mathies et al.'s (2019) classroom climate findings for LGBTQ students aligned with those by Garvey et al. (2015). Although gender identity was not studied by Mathies et al. (2019), students who identified as sexual minorities were. Their study focused on the negative effects that the heterosexist phrases or microaggressions like “that’s so gay” and “no homo” had on 574 LGBTQ college students’ academic and intellectual development, developmental challenges, and grade point average (Mathies et al., 2019). They found that academic and intellectual development, namely, “overall satisfaction with the academic experience including academic performance, interest in course content, and intellectual growth” using a Likert scale, where 5 = “strongly agree”, yielded a mean of 3.86 with a standard deviation (SD) of .65 (Mathies et al., 2019, pp. 261-262). Additionally, they found that developmental challenge using a Likert scale, with 4 = “very much a part of my life”, yielded a mean of 2.41, with an SD of .57, while GPA on a scale of 4.0 was reported as 3.41 for the students in the study (Mathies et al., 2019, p. 262). While most participants in this study self-identified as White (69.9%) and as living in the Midwest (67.6%) and the researchers did not identify community college students in the study, these demographics do not dilute the overall impact of the study nor its findings (Mathies et al., 2019). Hateful and hurtful rhetoric and microaggressions, due to students’ sexual minority status, have deleterious effects on both academics and psychological well-being, which are key elements to LGBTQ students’ sense of belonging (Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Woodford et al., 2015). Classroom climates irrefutably impact the sense of belonging experienced by LGBTQ community college students (Garvey & Dolan, 2021).





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**Lack of Training**

Lack of LGBTQ-specific training for administrators, faculty, staff, and students contributes to LGBTQ community college students' decreased sense of belonging. As Garvey et al. (2015) asserted, faculty may not be aware that they are being discriminatory, non-inclusive, non-validating, and/or non-affirming toward members in the LGBTQ population, so the absence of LGBTQ-specific training and education for the campus community only magnifies the issue. Faculty who lack the training and competence in relation to LGBTQ issues may marginalize the experiences of LGBTQ individuals as being outside the norm (Kusalanka et al., 2013). They may not know how to respond to students resistant to learning about LGBTQ issues and more comfortable spewing hateful and hurtful microaggressions than learning how to be inclusive, affirming, validating, and respectful in the classroom (Kusalanka et al., 2013). Such a reality only exacerbates the lived experiences for LGBTQ students enrolled in community colleges.

Faculty are not the only members of the campus community who need LGBTQ-specific training. Garvey and Dolan (2021) reported that there are major stakeholders on campus, outside of traditional academic affairs personnel, who have minimal access to LGBTQ-specific training, yet interact just as frequently, if not more often with LGBTQ students. The lack of LGBTQ-specific training for all community college personnel only further alienates sexual and gender minority students and adversely affects their sense of belonging (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). Students interact with all categories of personnel at their respective institutions, so training one group and not the others will only move the needle slightly, often thwarting the positive changes, and causing small victories to be overshadowed by continued prejudice, discrimination, and hateful, hurtful adversity.



Garvey and Dolan (2021) emphasized that LGBTQ students' non-LGBTQ peers need affirmation and validation training, so they can be less alienating in their treatment towards their sexual and gender minority counterparts. Positive connection with peers leads to an increased sense of belonging for LGBTQ students, helping them to succeed and achieve their educational goals (Garvey & Dolan, 2021).

### **Lack of Programming and Services**

The lack of availability of LGBTQ-specific programming, services, and resources on campus contributes to LGBTQ students' decreased sense of belonging. Nguyen et al.'s (2018) study examined the availability of LGBTQ-specific resource centers, counseling services, career planning, and student organizations at community colleges. Nguyen et al. (2018) reported that 49 out of the 936 survey respondents (5.2%) were attending community colleges at the time of the study. Although 85.7% of respondents indicated that there was a student organization or alliance available at their community college, 81.6% of these students reported that there was no LGBTQ resource center, 71.4% reported that there were no LGBTQ counseling services available, and 95.9% of the students surveyed reported that there were no LGBTQ career planning services available at their institutions. When these student services are not available, LGBTQ students' success is adversely affected. Despite its small sample sizes of 49 and then 12 for the semi-structured interviews, this study illuminates the negative consequences that LGBTQ students face when their programming, resources, and support services needs are unmet.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of LGBTQ-affirming, inclusive, safe, visible, and validating campus and classroom environments, curriculum, training, programming, and support services has an



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unrelenting and deleterious effect on the sense of belonging for LGBTQ community college students (Garvey & Dolan, 2021; Garvey et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2015; Mathies et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Woodford et al., 2015). LGBTQ students experienced a decreased sense of belonging at community colleges, due to heteronormative and cisnormative campus and classroom climates, a lack of LGBTQ-specific training for administrators, faculty, staff, and students, and a lack of LGBTQ-specific programming, resources, and support services on campus.

To address the root causes identified, a campus-wide LGBTQ Task Force, consisting of cross-sectional representation from all divisions on campus and students, has the potential to ensure that the most affirming, inclusive, and validating curriculum, climates, processes, policies, programming, resources, and support services are in place for all LGBTQ students, so they can flourish, experience an increased sense of belonging, persist, be retained, and achieve their desired credential(s). Such a collective body of LGBTQ-affirming personnel and students could be empowered to exact change in the classrooms and throughout their campuses to promote the psychological well-being, safety, visibility, respect, inclusion, validation, and success of LGBTQ students. SUNY New Paltz charged their Task Force with:

making recommendations for improvement of the campus climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students, faculty, and staff at SUNY New Paltz. Using data collected through the Campus Climate Survey, on-campus focus groups, and a Campus Pride Index assessment, we provide recommendations divided by in-progress status and priority. The recommendations are drawn from the following categories:

Policy Review, Communications and Institutional Response, Binary/Sex Gender Issues,



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Coordination and Networks of Support, Training and Education, Academic Issues, Employee Issues, and Implementation and Ongoing Assessment. (SUNY New Paltz LGBTQ Campus Climate Task Force, 2013, p. ii)

SUNY New Paltz's model, embedded in the fabric of a four-year institution, could help ameliorate the sense of belonging and affirm the lived experience for LGBTQ students on community college campuses, once modified to reflect the resources and funding available at community colleges.

A literature review and careful consideration of this problem and its causes, plants the invaluable seeds for further research, findings, and recommended solutions. LGBTQ community college students' needs are currently unmet. Their classroom and campus experiences are often characterized by non-affirming attitudes, discriminatory behaviors, and microaggressions from administrators, faculty, staff, and peers, resulting in a diminished and pulverized sense of belonging. LGBTQ students deserve to have their sexual and gender identities affirmed, respected, and validated, be included, and feel connected to their educational environment, college personnel, and peers, and a LGBTQ task force that can help build a more inclusive class and campus environment for all students can be an important vehicle to drive this change.



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