Identity, Visibility & Measurement: How University LGBTQ Centers Engage and Advocate for Today's LGBTQ Student

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Abstract

For many of today's LGBTQ college students, college exists at the epicenter of their identity development, and these students have new questions and expectations of their institutions. This study, through in-depth interviews with LGTBQ center directors at 11 major public universities in 10 U.S. states, investigates who these students are and how universities engage and advocate for them. Centers' missions remain focused on support, education, and advocacy, but they are addressing new dynamics regarding identity, visibility, and measurement. Centers must move beyond the explicit LGBTQ categories and address students' intersections of identity. Centers also must balance visibility that protects student privacy in a social media age while serving as a public source of support. Finally, programs need data to drive support for resources, but gathering these data has unique challenges for the LGBTQ community.

Introduction

The college experience for students who identify as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community is quite different today compared to just a few years ago. Research continues to find increasing support among adults, particularly aged 18-39, for LGBTQ protections such as marriage equality (Pew Research Center, 2013a; Holyk, 2014), and as societal acceptance of the community increases, today's LGBTQ individuals are disclosing their sexuality and gender identity earlier, typically around age 20 during college (Pew Research Center, 2013b). In other words, although members of prior LGBTQ generations tended

to come out after college, today's campuses are at the epicenter of many students' identity formation, and these students therefore arrive on campus with new questions and expectations. Accordingly, in an increasingly hyper-competitive environment to attract and retain students, colleges have begun actively recruiting LGBTQ students. As *Time* reported, "A growing number of campuses are launching programs to attract and hold onto LGBT students, including college fairs aimed at LGBT applicants, LGBT student support offices, special graduation ceremonies, and housing and healthcare for transgender students" (Pratt, 2014, para. 7). Although the LGBTQ community is an attractive target market, it is also a constantly evolving one. As Erbentraut (2016) explained, and as the findings in the following study reflect, today's campuses must provide resources not only for students who arrive on campus already in the process of confirming their identities, but also for students who exist beyond the explicit, siloed, traditional LGBTQ monikers. Universities must better address the needs of identities that blur those lines and challenge socially constructed binaries.[1]

Although a wealth of research exists regarding diversity in higher education, there is a lack of communication-specific research regarding how universities engage today's LGBTQ students and advocate for their quickly evolving needs and expectations. This study attempts to address that gap, through in-depth interviews with LGTBQ Center directors at 11 major public universities in 10 U.S. states—Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania. Six participant universities are the largest in their state; three are among the largest nationally.

At the core of these centers' missions is the role of advocacy. They must advocate for the needs of the LGBTQ student—those who are out, those who are still negotiating their identity, and those who choose to remain invisible. Part of this mission is to help secure tangible resources such as brick and mortar space, online space, policies, programming, and reference material that responds to student needs. Advocating for LGBTQ students also means educating the broader campus—from administration to faculty—regarding today's LGBTQ community, which can be a much longer-term, substantive communication hurdle. In so doing, advocating for today's LGBTQ student contributes to the mandates of public interest communications in two ways. First, these centers are equipping students with the tools to participate in (and help direct) broader social discourse beyond college and potentially to help lead the next generation of LGBTQ advocacy. Second, these centers are on the front lines of these evolving needs—and thus the corresponding policy and programmatic needs—of a new LGBTQ generation. As such, the findings here inform many similar mandates organizations will need to address as this generation enters the workforce.

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[1] Although this article uses the traditional LGBTQ label to aid in readability, it does so acknowledging the issues and challenges with such explicit categories. That said, when applicable, the article instead references the specific acronyms or labels used by different centers or in specific research.

Literature review

As universities continue to increase diversity and inclusion efforts on campus generally, creating this welcoming culture for LGBTQ students is crucial. As Sung and Yang (2008) found, for example, a combination of university personality (perceptions of friendliness and warmth), prestige (perception among an applicant's peer groups), and the overall university reputation (based, in part, on perceived care for students) plays a strong role in students' decisions to attend a certain university. Universities that effectively respond to and engage their local communities also are able to build a positive image and long-term support for university actions (Kim, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006). In the context of online communication, research has found that universities should use their websites to promote key successes and institutional values as ways to recruit potential students and communicate with friends and alumni (Will & Callison, 2006). Accordingly, the following literature review first walks through the importance of diversity in shaping organizational culture and success, how that translates on college campuses, and then specifically what research has found specific to the LGBTQ community. The review then concludes with a discussion of the study's theoretical lens—guided by queer theory and intersectionality.

Diversity in organizations

Research consistently emphasizes the positive role diversity plays in organizational success (e.g., Badgett, Durso, Kastanis, & Mallory, 2013; Mundy, 2015; 2016; PR Coalition, 2005; Uysal, 2013). Organizations that recruit diverse employees, and organizations that promote inclusive diversity policies and practices, are able to improve organizational morale and overall competitiveness. Although many such studies address diversity in broad terms, the Williams Institute—UCLA's prestigious law center dedicated to research on sexual orientation and gender identity—released a report in May 2013 reviewing 36 research studies that found the positive impact of LGBTQ-specific policies on organizations' climates and business outcomes (Badgett et al., 2013.). Similar to prior research, this report also found—specific to the LGBTQ community—the positive role inclusive diversity policies play in organizational success. That said, none of the Institute's LGBTQ-related studies investigated fields within communication or addressed the university setting; most of the reviewed studies focused on organizational and behavioral psychology, organizational management, and human resources.

Diversity in universities

A wide variety of research exists regarding issues of diversity on college campuses, ranging from linguistic diversity (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2009; Gazzola, 2012; Gnutzmann, Jakisch, & Rabe, 2014;), to technological/media diversity (e.g., Bahfen & Wake, 2011; Corrin, Lockyer, & Bennett,

2010), and diversity issues specific to certain international contexts (e.g., Hess & Waller, 2011; Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison, 2011; Yamada, 2013). This study, however, is concerned with diversity specifically related to diverse identities. To that end, a good deal of the literature focuses on topics related to multicultural issues in the classroom (e.g., Cumber & Braithwaite, 1996; Lubinda, 2010), and issues related to race and ethnicity in higher education (e.g., Cole & Harper, 2017; Gasman, Nguyen, Conrad, Lundberg, & Commodore, 2017; Gloria, Castellanos, Delgado-Guerrero, Salazar, Nieves, Mejia, & Martinez, 2017; Johnston-Guerrero, 2017).

The ways in which scholars have investigated issues of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism cover a range of topics. Cole and Harper (2017), for example, analyzed college presidents' statements regarding racial incidents on campus. Additional studies have examined the experience of underrepresented groups on college campuses (e.g., Johnston-Guerrero, 2017; Gloria et al., 2017), and in specific fields such as STEM (e.g., Gasman et al., 2017). Along the way, in terms of communicating diversity to external audiences, research has emphasized that universities should be cautious; they must not misrepresent (or over-represent) their institution's true racial and ethnic diversity in the process of establishing a diverse image (online or otherwise) for the sake of competitiveness (Boyer, Brunner, Charles, & Coleman, 2006).

Additional higher education-focused research has explored other types of diversity. Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, and Newman (2016), for example, studied the growing presence of students with disabilities on college campuses and how they advocate for disability-related policies. The authors found that on-campus advocacy is central to student development in that it helps build agency and a sense of purpose. The roots of these pursuits are established before college, but college provides a setting in which to practice and evolve. They explained that through this socialization process, students with disabilities learned how to advocate for themselves and their peers. That said, "Learning to self-advocate was more than mere skill building. Student activism. . .was deeply rooted in doing, role modeling, and teaching self-advocacy. As such, it is important for educators, administrators, and parents to understand the significance of self-advocacy" (p. 256).

Particular to this study, several scholars have explored the role of social media in advocating for diverse issues on campus. Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017), for example, evaluated the risks of social media in creating a climate of slacktivism. In offering 10 premises for student activism, the authors explained that the balance between online and in-person engagement is central to activism on today's college campus. They emphasized that online engagement, when conducted in real time, can play an effective role. Linder, Myers, Riggle, and Lacy (2016) echoed, in the context of on-campus sexual violence activism, that rather than necessarily create a climate for slacktivism, social media provide new tools that help amplify and spread activists' messages. From a different perspective, Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) explored one case of an institution's response to campus advocacy. Based on their findings, the authors highlighted the potential inadequate response by universities to campus needs, finding that if the requests are not in line with institutional goals, or if they feel the needs have been addressed in current policy, those voices are not heard. Accordingly, the authors ask how research can investigate the

"intersections of academic excellence and social justice," adding, "every administration should grapple with. . .how their actions will influence those students who are struggling to find a place on campus, those for whom our institutions were not built" (p. 287).

LGBTQ-specific research in higher education

Within communication-specific literature, there is arguably a lack of research specific to the LGBTQ community in higher education. Of the few studies available, scholars have focused on LGBT experiences, such as navigating often-homophobic fraternity settings (Hall & LaFrance, 2007), reactions to universities with anti-LGBT policies (Spencer & Barnett, 2013), and the experiences of LGBT faculty (Ganesh, 2008). That said, although there is a general lack of LGBTQ-specific communication literature, research in the field of higher education—a good deal drawing from sociological and psychological theoretical frameworks (Renn, 2010)—provides important, key guidance for this study. Messinger (2011), for example, investigated the role of faculty advocacy in pursuing LGBTQ-inclusive university polices, including what encourages faculty to become advocates and the dynamics that shape successful policy pursuits. The study highlighted the often-tenuous context for LGBTQ advocacy on university campuses, which is subject to structural challenges and changes, as well as varying degrees of faculty members' agency to create change. Garvey and Rankin (2018) examined the role campus climate plays in decisions to leave an institution among faculty who identify along the trans or queer spectrums. They found that one third of queer-spectrum/trans-spectrum faculty nationally have seriously considered leaving their institution because of a lack of true support. Respondents indicated that institutions are quick to draft statements of support and inclusion, but universities fall short in translating this to supportive and inclusive action. Githens (2012) outlined 20 years of campus activism to achieve same-sex domestic partner benefits, finding that successful on-campus LGBTQ advocacy requires a focus on "identity-aware" (p. 219) tactics that pursue broad support and participation beyond the LGBTQ and ally community.

Relevant to this article, Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) investigated campus LGBTQ centers and how those centers specifically engage the needs of the trans community. The authors contended that these centers often struggle to be truly inclusive of the trans community and that the centers' experience provides a lens through which to witness the tension between the LGB and T communities. In addition to a better focus on naming (labeling) conventions that brand the centers themselves, the authors argued for programming that allowed centers to address the intersectionality of identities rather than identity-specific programming, as well as for the importance of building coalitions for action across campus communities, beyond the LGBTQ centers themselves. BrckaLorenz, Hurtado, Garvey, and Latopolski (2017) agreed that, although a large amount of scholarship exists regarding factors that drive student success, such higher education research specific to trans and gender-nonconforming students is lacking. They explained, "To confront and prevent ongoing discrimination and underrepresentation of gender-variant students, scholars must develop deeper understandings of the unique experiences that

lead to student success for these students" (p. 351). Renn (2010) echoed that although research exists regarding the LGB-specific experience, a lack of research remains exploring the transgender community and how the queer lens can help inform studies of the LGBTQ community on university campuses.

Additional research has focused on LGBTQ inclusion in the classroom, arguing through the lens of social justice theory that classrooms should be sites of social change. Dodge and Crutcher (2015) posited, for example, that including stories of the LGBTQ experience in standard curriculum helps disrupt the "single story" (p. 96) or single narrative regarding social norms. In the process, it allows for the LGBTQ-identifying students to see themselves and positively reinforce their identity. Page (2016) echoed that classrooms could be sites of social change, and that "educators have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of queer-identifying students and to help stem the tide of harassment, violence, depression, and other issues often experienced by gender-and sexual-minority learners" (p. 678). Dessel, Goodman, and Woodford (2017) explored the impetus for by-stander intervention when witnessing discrimination toward a member of the LGBTQ community on university campuses. They found that age (older students), higher self-esteem, positive attitudes toward and friends in the LGBTQ community, and having taken courses with diversity-related content all positively correlated with peer bystander intent to intervene in cases of discrimination toward the LGBTQ community. Ultimately, although this literature provides an important foundation, gaps remain, particularly among communication studies. As Renn (2010) argued, much of the research at the collegiate level has investigated issues related to visibility, campus climate, and identity, but "this work lags behind the work on LGBT issues in K-12 education" (p. 136).

Theoretical guidance

Given the plurality of LGBTQ+ identities—coupled with the fact that the LGBTQ minority is arguably one of the only minorities to cross all other underrepresented and marginalized groups—studying the LGBTQ community requires the theoretical guidance of queer theory (e.g., Epstein, 1994; Seidman, 1994) and intersectionality. Queer theory, for example, challenges set, pre-determined, socially constructed identity categories. It originated from the *us versus them* paradigm that emerged through the social discourse surrounding heterosexual (straight) versus homosexual (gay). The concept has evolved, though, to challenge explicit categories within the LGTBQ community itself, such as homosexual versus bisexual or newer labels such as asexual. Approaching identity from a queer perspective allows fluidity of discovery and attempts to remove an assumption of explicit categories as the basis for evaluating one's identity. In the context of the broader LGBTQ movement, as Gamson (1995) asked, "If identities are indeed much more unstable, fluid, and constructed than movements have tended to assume – if one takes the queer challenge seriously, that is—what happens to identity-based social movements such as gay and lesbian rights?" (p. 391).

Intersectionality, then, extends the conversation beyond questions of sexuality and gender—

acknowledging that explorations of identity require looking at how more than one aspect of an individual's experience informs their lens. At its most-basic level, intersectionality explores, for example, the experience of a transgender woman of color. Being transgender, being a woman, and being a person of color each informs that person's lens. The intersection of those three identities, in turn, informs a unique world perspective that is different in important ways compared, to say, a white, gay male. In the context of communication research, as Vardeman-Winter (2011) argued, "In an increasingly culturally diverse and global communication environment. . . . Theories and practices should reclaim the nuances of lived experiences and personal identities that impact how individuals select, receive, react to, and process messages" (p. 415).

Equipped with the foundational research in diversity and higher education, and guided by the lens of queer theory and intersectionality, this study therefore explores the identity(s) of today's LGBTQ college student, and how those corresponding needs and expectations inform centers' outreach strategies. The findings provide important insight regarding the communication mandates facing today's LGBTQ on-campus advocates and programs. The findings also help elucidate how studying the LGBTQ community can serve public interest communications.

Research questions

RQ1: Who is today's LGBTQ student, and how does that influence university LGBTQ Center programming and advocacy strategies?

RQ2: What do the findings tell us in terms of how LGBTQ advocacy on college campuses can inform public interest communications?

Method

In-depth interviews with the director of LGBTQ centers or programs at 11 major public universities in 10 states— Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania—provided the data for this study. Six participant universities are the largest in their state; three are among the largest nationally. Initially, through purposive sampling a list of directors at 35 universities was compiled based on geographic diversity and university size/prominence. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, an email was sent to the 35 contacts. Thirteen of the 35 replied with interest, and ultimately 11 interviews were conducted. The researcher was able to gain participation from institutions in all regions of the country except the Pacific Northwest and New England but was able to determine saturation had been achieved through this set of interviews. As Constantinou, Georgiou, and Perdikogianni (2017) explained, although some scholars have argued for a

minimum of five interviews and others for a range between 20 and 30, their own research found that through a comparative method, theme saturation can be established at between six and 12 interviews (p. 584)

The specific focus on major public universities was important given the number of students they reach as well as their public context—the frequent challenges of state funding as well as their mandate to serve the people of their respective state. Arguably, the centers/programs at these schools have a heightened challenge as well as a more visible (and legally mandated) accountability compared to private schools. The universities represented also are considered national universities, so they also have more national visibility when it comes to recruiting students and ultimately placing students in jobs upon graduation. Moreover, because this study was approached as a foundational study, targeting national public universities provides a solid baseline of understanding.

Similarly, a qualitative method was deemed most appropriate for this study for two main reasons. First, the purposive focus and corresponding research questions require more depth than breadth. It was important to drill down into the daily lives of these centers rather than conduct a broad survey of general tactics used. Second, a personal, one-on-one approach to this research is important. As a member of the LGBTQ community myself, I have personal experience in many capacities with such centers, and as such, understand the sensitivity with which such topics must be approached. Moreover, self-disclosing to participants my membership in the community helped gain participant trust and confidence.

Given this study's national scope, the in-depth interviews (which ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours) were conducted via Skype. The interviews pursued a semi-structured interview format (See Appendix), guided by a core set of questions, which allowed for flexibility depending on individual responses (McCracken, 1988). During the interviews, participants outlined their specific role, the types of university setting in which they work, the LGBTQ on-campus community, and their experience in engaging and advocating for today's LGBTQ college student. The interviews were transcribed, and the resulting data were analyzed through a constant comparative approach to identify the common links and themes across the interviews (Charmaz, 2000). In so doing, the author employed Corbin and Strauss' (2008) guidance in moving from open, then axial, and ultimately selective coding.

Ideally, it would be most effective to distinguish between participant responses such as by saying, "the participant from Georgia indicated," but the representative examples and quotes in the following findings refer to all participants generally rather than distinguished by some more-specific descriptor. This approach was determined best for several reasons. First, for sake of ease and consistency, several participants indicated that they would prefer not to have their names or institutions revealed. Because three of the universities are among the largest in the country, and six of the universities are considered their state's flagship university, it was determined that revealing the size, location, name, or additional identifying information for any one school might risk identifying other schools. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the decision ultimately was made after analyzing the interview transcripts. Although it might at first glance seem

improbable, and although they certainly operate within their own set of challenges, the interviews revealed that these centers/programs generally discussed a very similar mission centered explicitly around *support*, *education*, and *advocacy*. Moreover, several participants referred the researcher to the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (LGBTcampus.org), explaining that many centers rely heavily on the expertise of each other through this consortium. The consortium helps drive that conversation and provides a consistent set of best practices for centers nationally.

Accordingly, the consistency in interview findings across participants reflected some of the core messages found on the consortium's site. For example, similar to the introduction for this article, which qualified the use of LGBTQ, the Consortium primarily uses the same acronym, but acknowledges, "Acronyms are tricky and can be both regionally and culturally based" (Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Professionals, 2017, para. 6). The general term of participant therefore is used to reinforce the consistency across the participants' insights but is not done to discount the unique contexts that certainly every school faces. With this context, the findings first walk through the baseline takeaways in terms of the centers' ongoing mission to support, educate, and advocate for today's LGBTQ student. The findings then provide a deep dive into the uniquely 21st century challenges resulting from new, evolving questions around identity, visibility, and measurement.

Findings

Campus LGBTQ centers' core mission remains focused on support, education, and advocacy of the campus LGBTQ community, which includes those who are out, those who are still negotiating their identity, and those who wish to remain invisible. Providing support involves a wide range of responsibilities. Fundamentally, support means keeping individuals emotionally, mentally, and physically safe, particularly given the vulnerability of LGBTQ students. One participant explained, "We were recently asked how do we know if we're successful. Our answer was, in order of importance, first that our students are alive. We have many students who are in crisis because of mental health issues, because of safety issues, because of stress of homophobia, transphobia."

Certainly, this support begins as soon as the student is admitted, but participants emphasized that it continues after graduation, as students need resources for post-college realities. One participant said that they often see students for the first time during their senior year, seeking coping resources as students prepare to move back home or into unknown communities. As a result, several participants added that they are beginning to develop LGBTQ-specific alumni networks in part for this very purpose. One participant explained, "Our university alumni relations focuses on affiliate alumni groups, and as a result we have a very active LGBTQ affiliate alumni organization."

Participants also emphasized the important role of undergraduate and graduate student

involvement in providing support. At the undergraduate level, participants explained the benefit of peer-to-peer mentoring—students often are more willing to share with a peer than a center staff member. These centers also have found that in-house counseling works much better than referring students to the university, which adds an important responsibility in terms of providing LGBTQ resources. As one participant explained, "We have [an] in-house counseling intern—meaning the person gets course credit—as well as a social work intern." That same program also has undergraduate library interns who maintain a list of resources that faculty across campus can use in their classrooms. Finally, participants emphasized that providing support requires providing safe spaces where these discussions can happen, where students can be guaranteed a degree of confidentiality. One participant added, "We want to create safe spaces and courageous spaces. Safe spaces ensure confidentiality—letting them know for example we won't post photos of them without a photo release. Courageous space part is equally important. We want students to know they can question. They can have hard conversations." Courageous spaces provide opportunities for an individual to engage more directly with his/her identity as a way to build agency and opportunities for self-advocacy.

These courageous spaces also address the second mandate—partnering with and educating the broader campus community. Similar to the mandate of support, participants emphasized the importance of encouraging students to be leaders in the education process. This involvement includes peer-to-peer programming, having students go into classrooms to speak, providing leadership development opportunities, involving students in program development generally, and involving them in safe-zone training of faculty and staff specifically.

The mandate of advocacy certainly intersects with the importance of supporting and educating—advocating for the LGBTQ student is at the heart of these centers' missions. In the process, centers must identify the best tools to reach the right audiences, which can be challenging depending on the context. In discussing the growing role of alumni, participants added that for many campus centers, LGBTQ alumni remain a largely untapped donor source, which could help support advocacy efforts. In this context, participants also referenced the importance of building coalitions across campus and beyond. Securing long-term support from other units on campus and organizations in the local community can help achieve with advocacy pursuits. Moreover, as one participant explained, often students feel more comfortable coming out to leaders in different organizations. "If a Jewish student comes out in Hillel, or if a Latino student comes out to their Latino student organization, then those leaders can suggest that student come here."

To that end, five of the participants indicated that because of their relatively rural location, their campus centers are the only visible LGBTQ advocacy organization in the region, which by default can extend their advocacy responsibilities beyond campus walls—particularly when local media reach out for comment for specific issues. Moreover, as one participant explained, "My work extends beyond the student population. . . This weekend I'm going to speak at a church 15 miles from here because they're wanting to become an open and affirming congregation. We get requests from school districts, faith communities. All of that is part of the mission." That

participant added that, in addition, there is the chance that a potential future student is sitting in that audience, hearing that the university is a welcoming, safe space. Regardless, in the process of supporting, educating, and advocating for today's LGBTQ student, these centers are operating in a uniquely 2018 context—a context that requires center administrators to address new and evolving issues related to identity, visibility, and universities' focus on measurement and data-driven decision making. Accordingly, the following sections outline these challenges and how participants are shifting advocacy efforts to address them.

Evolving identities

Traditionally, LGBTQ Centers have focused on addressing the needs of these explicit identities: gay male students, lesbian students, bisexual students, and increasingly transgender students. Participants emphasized, however, that the identity of today's students is much more complex. As one participant explained, "There are a lot of students who don't find gay, lesbian, bisexual, or even transgender an appropriate label for themselves anymore." Another participant acknowledged, "We have a real increase in students self-identifying with non-binary identities. In fact, they'll use the term 'non-binary'—not gender-queer or trans. Very noticeable…. We also have an increase in students identifying as asexual, aromantic. That is also new for us." Similarly, participants consistently argued that they get more requests for information regarding gender identity rather than sexuality. As one participant explained, in many cases, "Students are the ones raising the bar. They are entering college out, expecting to have up-to-date resources. . . including transgender students who reflect a range of stages of transition." Consequently, many of these identities bring with them specific mental and physical health resource needs. As mentioned, university-level resources often are inadequate or even uninformed, which requires center administrators to be sources of expertise. One participant explained, "We have a five-year plan. . . and revisited [it] at the end of year two. Even in those two years we saw a change in the profile of the students we interact with."

Beyond the increasing number of students who identify beyond the LGBTQ monikers, participants also must be aware of shifting identities and their corresponding preferred pronouns. Most participants have seen a noticeable increase in those students who now prefer to be referred to as "they" rather than "he" or "she," with one participant explaining, "'They' is probably the most popular pronoun in our center. It drives English professors crazy." They also emphasized, however, that regardless of how they identify in terms of gender or sexuality, today's students seek support for their entire identity, not just the LGBTQ aspect. Transgender women of color, for example, face unique hurdles on college campus. These centers, therefore, must operate at the intersections of identity. One participant acknowledged that the importance of intersectionality is front and center, but his center is still trying to identify best practices in addressing those needs. He explained:

> We're seeing international students wanting to address LGBTQ issues [as well as] students of religious minorities and other ethnic minorities. Seeing the relationship. It's

not an "either, or" thing. There are people who are African American, and Latino, and Jewish and Muslim who are lesbian or gay, and we need to collaborate. Right now we're not meeting that challenge very well. But it's important in student development.

One of the key communication consequences of these shifts is the name of the centers themselves, and how they talk about the student community. Given the blurring of binaries, the increase in students whose identity is fluid, and the focus on intersectionality, participants emphasized that the LGBT moniker for centers is antiquated. How to update the language, though, is an ongoing, but crucial discussion. Language is important, and how these centers talk about themselves and the work they do might alienate the more-vulnerable members of the community they serve. As one participant asked, "Does LGBT really reflect what we do now? Do we need new language?" Some programs have extended the traditional LGBT label to include LGBTQIA, to ensure identities such as queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual (or allies or affirming) are included. Rather than extending the label, though, there is a growing trend to rename these programs "Gender and Sexuality," or the less frequently used SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression). Most participants acknowledged that if they have not already updated their name, they anticipate doing so in the near future. One participant hesitated, though, explaining that their program has stuck with the even older GLBT label to honor the original, historic name of the center. Another participant added that it might be important to keep the current naming, explaining, "LGBT is familiar and comes up in a search engine when students are looking for resources."

Tied to this conversation is the question of how to reach and engage these individuals. The same message that was used 10 years ago will not reach today's LGBTQ student. Accordingly, when asked what is the most important message to convey, participants consistently answered some form of the message, "Regardless of how you identify, we're here for you." Participants emphasized that they must meet the students where they are and let them know that the center respects and sees their full identity. Students are not defined by just the LGBTQ aspect. As one participant explained:

> The message goes back to that support, education, advocacy mission. It really does reflect what we do. The first thing we want students to know is that if they need support. . .we are here for them. We also want them to know they can walk in the door with all of their identities together. They don't have to come in just as LGBTQ.

The language in acknowledging individuals' evolving, negotiated identities (starting with the name of the program or center itself) therefore is crucial. The complexity of these identities also speaks to the importance of coalition building on today's college campus. These centers must partner, for example, with Black student unions and advocacy groups to be able to understand the full context facing the transgender woman of color mentioned earlier.

Tricky visibility

These new identities bring with them new challenges in terms of visibility. Appropriate balance

between visibility and privacy is key for these centers' work to be effective. Such balance applies to a center's brick and mortar presence, as well as its online presence. The online context is particularly important to discern, especially given that entering college freshmen are among the first born in the 21st century and are digital natives.

In terms of physical space, participants talked about the location of the center or program itself. Increasingly, these centers are given spaces in prominent, more-visible locations, such as the student union, along with other student services and student groups. On one hand, the location signals legitimacy for the center's mission, but as one participant explained, "Visibility brings with it normalization, which is a double-edged sword." For those individuals who are more confident with their identity, the more prominent space has led to a greater willingness to walk in. On the other hand, the more central location might present a heightened hurdle for those who are still negotiating their identity or those who want to remain invisible. Participants explained that those students are the most vulnerable and the most important people to reach, but the visible space might create a barrier for seeking resources or support. As one participant said in anticipating a move to a new building, "We'll have our own space, but in the middle of campus. Particularly for our students of color, the new location is going to be hard."

Three participant examples in particular elucidated this tricky question of visibility. First, one participant told the story of how a student union recently underwent an extensive remodel. Similar to broader national trends, the new renovation involved a lot of open spaces and glass. The center advocated for, and received, a larger space during the renovation. Although the central room was obscured from view purposely to provide privacy, the center was given a very public, front facing room. Soon after the building and center reopened, several university administrators complained because every time they walked by, they never saw anyone using the LGBTQ center. It was being used, but everyone was in the safe space that was obscured from view. There was no way to definitively show the administrators, though, without compromising student privacy. As the participant explained, "They're going where they feel safe. You're not seeing where our students really interact. For the administrators, it didn't even occur to them that students would not feel safe being seen in a fishbowl as people walked by."

A second participant explained that their center was moved to a location on campus where most students live, but into a building that—although visible—offers mainly administrative student services. The result is that the building is locked at 5 p.m. Most students they serve, though, seek programming and support after that time, but at the time of the interview there was no mechanism to allow for that to happen within the center itself. Another participant echoed that the highest traffic is after hours, between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m.

The third, and perhaps most compelling story, was from a participant who discussed when a LGBTQ student commits suicide or is the victim of a hate crime. The participant said that the questions she has to ask are different than if these situations occur within other minority communities. She explained:

> When we have suicide on campus, or a hate crime, the situation [that] is created [is] completely different if it's an LGBTQ student. We don't know their family situation. . . I

don't even know how to respond as a community, because I don't know if they'd want us to out them. How you handle that, it's completely different. Other identities, there's a very public memorial. We often cannot do that if we're unsure how out the student was. We have some superstar queer activists who still are not out at home.

That understanding creates a difficult communication challenge when discerning what to communicate, to whom, and through which channels. This same participant added that university communication can be hesitant to actually label a hate crime as LGBTQ. She provided the example of a student who had been beaten while being called a fag repeatedly, yet the school communication labeled it an "attack that is a possible hate crime." Students asked her why the administration did not label it explicitly, given the number of witnesses who observed the attack. She explained, "The sense was, if someone was targeted because of their religion, or because of their race, it immediately would have been named…. I bring this up because it's all about media and how people talk about things."

Indeed, the chosen channels of communication are important, and they vary depending on the communication need. Several participants discussed the benefits and risks of providing their cell phone information to students, given students' preference to communicate specifically via texting. On one hand, cell phone information provides an important, immediate lifeline, especially for more vulnerable students. On the other hand, this strategy risks a tremendous, 24/7 time commitment. One participant explained that providing personal cell phone contact information has "made it very difficult and somewhat stressful to have boundaries with work and personal life, because they will text at 2 in the morning. It's the best way to communicate with them. . . but they have no boundaries."

Participants also discussed the importance of Facebook, with most indicating that their center provides both public and hidden Facebook groups. Public (open) groups allow for peer-driven discussion, as well as notifying students of events and resources. Participants also have found that Facebook is a much more effective communication tool than email. As one participant explained, "We have a Facebook page where we share opportunities. . . We're very aware that students don't check their email, especially their school email. They see it as one big school spam." At the same time, as one participant explained, Facebook also is a mental health tool. If there is risk of a student having a crisis, but they are not responding to emails, she explained, "I can go on Facebook and I'll see if a student has been active. . . They're still functioning; they're still interacting. I can message that student and they'll get back to me because that's how they communicate." Similarly, as another participant explained, "We find out about violent hate crimes because a student will post about it on Facebook but hasn't reported [it] to the police." Conversely, those Facebook groups that are hidden or secret (closed) are often limited to students, purely peer driven, and confidential. The peer-driven, confidential communication can provide a crucial lifeline of support. Students play a leading role in who is invited and who participates, creating a safe (online) space for conversation. One participant provided this example: "Some of our students have closed groups, and the one I'm involved in is a secret group for. . . basically the middle-eastern LGBTQ student organization. Students didn't feel safe

if any of their family or friends could see that the group exists, much less that they're a member."

You must count in order to count

Given the evolving and shifting identities of today's student, the vulnerability of identity among the LGBTQ student population, and the tricky question of visibility, how to advocate for resources can become equally tricky, particularly in today's data-driven university context. As one participant explained in advocating for her center's needs, "Simply put, data speaks. If you're not counting, you don't count." Another participant echoed, "Data speaks. Quantifiable things speak to resources. We don't count LGBT students, and think that speaks volumes. . . The institution can pretend we're not here if there aren't hard numbers." Still another participant argued, "With numbers come resources. You can't ignore them. So 10% of a population identifies as LGBT, but you still have one person serving 10% of the student population?" Effectively counting or measuring, therefore, can have important benefits. Tracking who these LGBTQ campus communities are, how they identify, where they are located, and what they need leads to higher retention and graduation rates, helps secure more institutional resources, and contributes to a supportive, safe, inclusive campus culture. Accordingly, participants explained that increased and more effective resources improve the center's reputation and how people see the center itself.

That said, getting data for the LGBTQ student community has particular challenges compared to other university populations. The fundamental question university administration wants answered is how large is the LGBTQ student population who needs serving. The answer is difficult, participants explained, because of a variety of factors. First, as more than one participant joked, "I can guarantee you that universities always graduate more LGBTQ students than they admit." Meaning, LGBTQ identity often comes of age during college. Individuals are coming out much earlier, but the college setting remains a formative space for identity development, LGBTQ or otherwise. Accordingly, one participant argued for asking identity questions at the end of college rather than on college applications. She explained that if you ask on the application prospective students will think, "If I answer yes to this, will the institution discriminate against me?" She went on to say, "Also, we know students don't come out until they get here, so I think our numbers would be more reflective of our population if they answered it on the backend." In addition to quantifying this moving target, one of the key challenges is the part of the community who chooses to remain invisible. Moreover, these centers must acknowledge the privacy concerns unique to LGBTQ individuals and that students might change how they identify. As mentioned, for those individuals who remain invisible or are still negotiating their identity, how do you accurately quantify their presence?

Participants were mixed on the merit of asking sexuality and gender-related questions on college applications. Those who support the question argued that it could provide a baseline of metrics that would allow some program development and outreach targets. Those who are warier hesitate because there is no way to guarantee that the responses are valid. First, as mentioned

above, identity formation often happens once on campus. Second, students often complete their application with parents in tow. Depending on if the person is out, the student-parent relationship, and if the parent will see the application, they might choose to not answer truthfully. As one participant explained, "It would be amazing to know [ahead of time], so we could reach out to folks even before they get here. I also know it would be hard for people to answer authentically." Regardless, participants agreed that if schools do decide to gather such data on the front end or back end, they must be careful how the question is asked. As one participant explained, "It's important to have good numbers. It needs to be asked in the right way. People need to be able to identify who they are, and not be forced to select from 'gay, straight, other'… 'male, female, other.'" Another participant added, "What I want to know is do you identify as LGBT and have you *ever* identified as LGBT, because that also speaks to what we do. We're missing an opportunity if we frame the question in this kind of static-ness." As a result, how universities ask the question can show potential students the degree to which a university is committed to LGBTQ inclusivity and support.

Discussion

Together, these centers—while remaining focused on support, education, and advocacy for the campus LGBTQ community—are evolving their missions to better address uniquely 21st century needs related to identity, visibility, and measurement. Accordingly, participant comments helped answer the first research question regarding who today's LGBTQ students are and how those identities influence these centers' outreach strategies. Many students who seek support do not want to be labeled explicitly by LGBT or even Q. Students increasingly identify as non-binary, asexual, and aromantic. Accordingly, more students today see their identities as fluid; many want to be referred to as "they" rather than "he" or "she." Along the way, centers must address students' complete identities, meaning they must conduct their work at the intersections of identity, understanding and addressing the unique needs facing, for example, the Latino, Jewish, or Muslim LGBTQ student.

These centers also must navigate tricky questions of visibility. On one hand, they serve as a very visible source of campus support. On the other hand, confidentiality is at the center of much of their work. Students must not only feel protected and safe to negotiate their identities, they also, when appropriate, must be empowered to become leaders. In turn, striking the right balance of visibility translates to physical and social spaces. Securing visible space in the newly remodeled student union in the heart of campus might reflect a university's commitment to the center, but it also might deter some of the more vulnerable students from having the courage to use the center. Similarly, students communicate primarily through online forums, but centers must have those spaces that allow for open conversation while protecting student privacy. The question of visibility becomes particularly tricky when a LGBTQ student is the victim of suicide or a hate crime; a student might be out on campus but closeted elsewhere. It is important

therefore to respect that student's situation, which might be unknown. Work also remains as to how the university talks about such incidents; university leaders might be less willing to explicitly call something an LGBTQ hate crime, for example, compared to when such events occur in other minority communities.

Finally, data speak when securing resources, but gathering data specific to the LGBTQ community has unique challenges. Students come of age during college and are perhaps the only minority group that can choose when (or when not) to disclose their identity, so tracking the LGBTQ student population is a moving target. Determining how to convey resource needs to the administration and the best ways to gather data is an evolving process.

This answer to the first research question, in turn, helps address the second research question, which asks how these findings inform public interest communications. First, these centers are providing resources to aid with identity development and tools for these individuals to help educate others, shape discourse more broadly, and possibly become tomorrow's advocacy leaders. Second, many of the mandates facing these campus centers likely foreshadow the expectations this new LGBTQ generation will have of organizations as they enter the workforce. Unlike prior generations, these individuals are out and they expect organizations to understand their nuanced identities holistically—how they exist beyond the binaries, beyond the explicit LGBTQ categories, and beyond the LGBTQ community itself. Corporations often promote, for example, the success of their affinity groups, or those employee-driven support and networking groups that form around certain types of identities such as a women's group, African-American group, or LGBT group. Considering the above findings, then, questions arise for those employees who exist at the intersections of marginalized and underrepresented identities. Moreover, when considering mental and physical health needs of the LGBTQ community, the emerging mandates are even more important. It is one thing for a major public university—a relatively secure, safe environment—to provide important health resources, but what about companies that are either unable or unwilling to provide those same resources?

Consequently, this study raises important questions for future research. It could be fruitful to examine, for example, exactly how centers develop resources that reach those students who could become potential leaders versus those students who seek more confidentiality—and how the interpersonal communication expectations between those two types of students can affect the life of an organization. Given the above corporate example, it also would be interesting to replicate this study by interviewing human resource and internal communication leaders at organizations known for their LGBTQ-inclusive policies and programs to determine if they are noticing and addressing similar shifts. Finally, given the fundamental importance of measurement, and how strong numbers can secure better resources, future studies—particularly in the field of public interest communications—should explore the questions that different groups focused on issues of public interest ask as well as how they measure successfully. For example, how do organizations that serve groups with specific social justice-related needs capture the appropriate data to convince upper management or funding sources to provide needed resources? As mentioned, counting in the LGBTQ community presents unique

challenges, but the investigation merits exploration.

Conclusion

Reaching, engaging, and advocating for today's LGBTQ college student reflect the mandates of this study's theoretical lens as outlined through queer theory and intersectionality. The central challenge is understanding and addressing students' complete identity—not just the LGBTQ aspect. Doing so requires several things. First, as intersectionality's premise argues, these centers must work across the university, collaborating with organizations such as a Black student union or a campus Hillel chapter. Doing so helps build networks that can provide key resources and systems of support beyond only the LGBTQ center's capacity. Second, students must help lead. They must be involved in program development. They also must help in terms of peer-to-peer opportunities as well as lead educational opportunities across campus. Doing so positively reinforces their own identities while providing a key resource and source of support for others who are still negotiating their identities or are not comfortable being out publicly. Third, although education has long been central to these centers' missions, ongoing education is even more paramount today in terms of education for the centers themselves as well as university administrations. On one hand, these centers must remain current with LGBTQ student expectations, understanding—as queer theory emphasizes—their shifting and evolving identities. On the other hand, with remaining questions regarding how best to measure, centers must continue to find ways to educate leaders regarding the population they serve as well as the appropriate ways to communicate about the community. As mentioned, universities still struggle with how to address LGBTQ-specific crises publicly.

The mandate facing these organizations is unique, but it is important to understand more broadly in terms of the emerging public interest needs and expectations of the LGBTQ community. Central to this mandate is understanding that these needs and expectations are not static, but rather they are constantly evolving. This understanding reminds us that public interest communications is a process, not a thing—particularly on a college campus where individuals are coming of age across a variety of identity-driven factors, while being prepared to enter the workforce and perhaps take a leadership role in driving important societal discourse more broadly. Yes, these centers continue to focus on how to support, educate, and advocate for the LGBTQ student, but what drives those responsibilities—related to dimensions such as identity, visibility, and measurement—is in constant flux. Perhaps not so ironically, this generation's embrace of more fluid identities guides the mandate to develop communication strategies that are fluid themselves, able to adapt, shift, and accommodate, then analyze, learn, and begin again.

Limitations

As with any study, this research has limitations. Because of the qualitative method, coupled with purposive sampling of large, public universities, the results are not generalizable. Rather they provide a deep-dive insight on the experience of a specific type of organization. Moreover, although there was adequate geographic diversity among the participants, interviewing participants from the Pacific Northwest and New England would have been beneficial. Finally, it is important to remember that participants' insights reflect a specific time and certainly are subject to today's quickly and unpredictably shifting national political context.

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Appendix: Key interview questions for semi-structured interviews

Section 1: Base Information

1. In which state is your school located?
2. What is the official name of the campus LGBT center or office?
3. What is your current role with this center?
4. Can you talk a bit about the importance of the LGBT center to campus? What is its core role?

Section 2: Organizational Background:

1. Please tell me about the history of the center.
2. What is your mission? Your primary goals and objectives?
3. Who are your key stakeholders/publics? Can you speak a bit about today's LGBTQ student on campus (knowing that this is a tough question, because there are so many identities and needs)?

Section 3: Communication Planning and Outreach

1. Could you walk me through the general process of your communication/outreach process?
2. What communication tools are most/least important for your center?
3. What is the biggest change you would make in terms of communication tactics or strategies?
4. How important are social media tools to the center?
5. What are the most important messages that need to be communicated through your center?
6. Do you engage alumni?

Section 4: Questions Regarding Visibility

1. It seems like a lot of centers have been renaming themselves lately, such as Centers for Sexuality and Gender. Could you speak a bit to your thoughts about the importance of a center's name?
2. When I was in undergrad (many years ago), I remember being scared to go into my campus's LGBT center, because it was right there, visible on the quad. Any thoughts about that type of visibility?
3. Some schools are starting to ask "the question" on application materials, if students identify as LGBTQ. Do you think it's important to track this data in some way? Whether on an application or once they're on campus?

Section 6: General/Concluding:

1. Are there any plans for changes in the future? Do you see the center growing? Are there certain groups that need better outreach?
2. What advice, in terms of communication strategy/considerations would you have for other LGBT Centers?
3. Anything else important to discuss?