

LGBTQ Students, Faculty & The American Community College:
Campus Climate & Student Perceptions

By

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LGBTQ STUDENTS, FACULTY & THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY
COLLEGE: CAMPUS CLIMATE & STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies at George Mason University

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ STUDENTS, FACULTY & THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: CAMPUS CLIMATE & STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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Judith Baker first drew national attention to the dearth of available information concerning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) students at Community and Junior Colleges in a 1991 landmark article, however, since that time, fewer than 20 articles have been authored on the subject.

In the fall of 2014, an LGBTQ Campus Climate Survey was administered to a group of 51 students at a mid-Atlantic community college campus. Students shared their perceptions and experiences concerning LGBTQ rights and campus inclusion. The thesis examined relationships between 1) immediate family beliefs and students' current actions and perceptions, 2) gender identity and sexual identity and the perception of inclusion, and 3) the stated prevalence of anti-LGBTQ sentiment and peer beliefs.

Community college students in 2014 report a safer, more inclusive environment in which LGBTQ students and staff are visible and valued.

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) students attending community colleges in the United States are, to a large extent, ignored both by administrators and in the available Higher Education literature. Judith Baker, in her 1991 landmark article, ‘Gay Nineties: Addressing the Needs of Homosexual Community and Junior College Students and Faculty,’ referred to the LGBTQ community as the “invisible minority” and urged “faculty and administrators [to] learn how to meet the unique needs of [LGBTQ students and staff]” (p. 31). Although some authors had previously broached the topic at 4-year institutions, Baker’s publication was the first to speak directly to unmet needs of sexual and gender minorities at this institutional type. Today, despite two decades of gay rights victories--the repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT) and the legalization of gay marriage in several states, to name only a few— researchers have yielded almost no data about LGBTQ students at community colleges and initiatives to assist these students are seriously lacking. Fewer than 15 articles have been published on the topic since Baker (1991) first demanded higher education professionals act on behalf of this minority population. Ignoring LGBTQ students is antithetical to community colleges’ egalitarian mission and, as this thesis will explore, can be deleterious to sexual and gender minorities as well as heterosexual students.

Community College and Minority Students

From the colonial days through the industrial revolution, a college education was reserved for the sons (and later the daughters) of privileged, white families. Community colleges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, conversely, “provide pathways for postsecondary educational attainment for the masses...and are frequently the institution of choice for students from underrepresented, marginalized groups” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011). Egalitarian in their approach to admissions, community colleges, as known as Junior Colleges, are “commonly referred to as ‘the people’s college’ and thought to represent ‘democracy’s doors’ allowing entry to participation in postsecondary education” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) for students from a variety of socio-economic, religious, ethnic and academic backgrounds.

In its desire to embrace diversity and promote upward mobility for all, the academy has devoted considerable research capacity towards better understanding newer populations within the post-secondary educational space, including students who identify as first-generation, disabled and non-traditional. Such efforts can lead to the identification of population-specific needs and the implementation of ameliorative programs. Summer bridge programs “aimed at addressing academic and social/cultural issues” (McCurrie, 2009) are popular early inventions for academically-challenged students transitioning from secondary to post-secondary institutions. Prospective first-generation college students in California and Texas can, as high schoolers, elect to enroll in the “Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a college preparatory

program [which] serve[s] underrepresented students in newly desegregated suburban high school[s]” (Watts, Johnson, Huerta, Mendiola, Alkan, 2008). These, and the hundreds of other similar programs, were launched following the examination of available data, suggesting that academic outcomes in secondary school and being the first in one’s family to attempt college can, respectively, affect post-secondary graduation rates.

In the case of LGBTQ students at 2-year colleges, services rarely exist as data is scarce. Zamani-Gallaher and Coudhuri (2011) state that “what is known about [LGBTQ] students at community colleges is virtually nonexistent” (p.36); a statement that is reiterated through the available research. Much like academically ill-prepared students or those from a population with historically low attainment rates, LGBTQ students are in need of support services. In addition to typical pressures that accompany the adjustment to collegiate life, "there are a number of major stressors and behaviors that are highly distinctive to this population which includes depression, anxiety, violence, substance abuse, self-destructive behaviors including high-risk sexual behaviors, and suicide” (Sanlo & Espinoza, 2012). Without empirical data, student affairs professionals lack the information to conceptualize and execute support programs for LGBTQ students. The extent to which various population segments are assisted by staff and assimilated into the fabric of campus culture will influence the long term success of the student.

Campus Climate

Anti-gay sentiment is an important issue on America's community college campuses. Research supports the claim that “LGBT individuals often face a chilly campus climate...and they are the least accepted group when compared with other under-served populations” (Campus Pride, 2010). In one study conducted by Franklin (1998) half of all heterosexual males on a regional community college campus indicated that they had perpetuated some type of violence or engaged in harassing behavior toward students perceived to be members of the LGBTQ community. Franklin (1998) found that heterosexuals engaged in a wide range of homophobic behavior from violence and verbal harassment to ignoring or subjecting LGBTQ students to lectures on the immorality of homosexuality.

Anti-gay sentiment is, at best, an academic distraction and, more severely, it forces sexual and gender minorities to remain in the shadows. LGBTQ students who encounter or who fear the threat of harassment may be “unable to focus on either academic or co-curricular learning” (Sanlo & Espnioza, 2013). To avoid the actual or perceived negative consequences of being a member of the LGBTQ community in an unwelcoming atmosphere, sexual and gender minorities will often conceal their sexual identity and attempt to pass as heterosexual. Denying oneself, while sometimes effective at warding off anti-gay attacks, frequently produces feelings of self-hatred. Ivory (2012) says that staying closeted:

May help LGBTQ students reduce fears and safety concerns... [but that it is] antithetical to developing a positive sexual identity. For closeted LGBT people, every moment is usually wrapped in secrecy, in fear, and too often, in guilt and shame (p. 486).

Controlling the on-campus environment to decrease homophobia and subsequent harassment engenders an environment conducive to productive academic gains for LGBTQ students. Baker (1991) wrote that “homophobia has been found to be associated with people who have never knowingly met a homosexual” (p. 26). Again, this would suggest that giving the LGBTQ community an on campus presence is beneficial for more than just the community itself.

Self-Identity and Retention

Retention is a heavily researched topic in the field of higher education as it suggests a level of institutional integrity and, perhaps more importantly, it directly affects the school’s revenue stream. Despite the excess of information on retaining first generation, non-traditional and racial minorities in community colleges, according to Sanlo and Espinoza (2012) no studies exists to inform higher education professionals as to how to the benefits and best methods for helping LGBTQ students persist to graduation. While retention focuses heavily on at-risk and minority populations, according to Sanlo and Espinoza (2012), studies on retention and LGBTQ students simply do not exist.

Post-secondary student affairs professionals are involved in some or all stages of conceptualizing, creating and/or implementing student development programs and initiatives. According to Brian T. Ivory (2012), theories “describing developmental tasks common to traditional-age college students” (p. 485) help inform student affairs professionals as they execute those initiatives. Developmental theorists Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) posit seven vectors of developmental tasks through which students move; involving the identification of, then preoccupation with a task until it is solved. For LGBTQ students, “dilemmas related to sexual identity and sexual identity development often take precedence to the exclusion of all other developmental tasks (Sanlo, 2004). Until the internal discord is resolved, sexual minority students cannot be assisted via enhanced pedagogical strategies or other traditional methods. Stated differently, LGBTQ students grappling with coming out and reconciling self-image with societal norms or religious morals may be less successful in college, if left unassisted.

Purpose of this Thesis

This thesis seeks to satisfy the unmet need for empirical data regarding LGBTQ students and the current climate at community colleges. Once complete, student affairs professionals can examine the findings and allow the data to inform them regarding how to best assist this segment of their student body. Utilizing a quantitative survey similar to one initially conceptualized by Nan Ottenritter in 1998--although never administered—this thesis sought to understand 1) the current climate for LGBTQ students, staff and faculty on campus, 2) when, how and to what extent these students need faculty and staff

intervention and 3) Information regarding variations in demographics, beliefs, habits and background to inform all readers on how different members of the LGBTQ community experience and perceive campus climate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Giving a voice to LGBTQ students on America's community college campuses has been a topic of interest in higher education for nearly 25 years. Yet, despite Judith Baker's impassioned plea in 1991, fewer than 15 articles have been published on the subject. Karen Franklin's 1998 survey of heterosexual community college students revealed that up to 50% of males harass classmates they perceive to be sexual minorities and, as alarming as that data is to the plight of the LGBTQ community college student, the study fell short on capturing the resulting experiences and feelings of non-heterosexuals on that campus. Furthermore, the study is now more than 15 years out-of-date and it is unknown if today's community college student encounters a similar on-campus environment.

In his article, "LGBTQ People on Community College Campuses: A 20-Year Review" (2012) Steven J. Leider provided an overview of the available scholarship authored in the post-Judith Baker years. The fact that the article spanned a mere four pages was not owing to author's Steven J. Leider's tendency towards brevity but rather results from a lack of original sources. Several authors echo Leider's sentiment and the collective consensus among researchers is that while quantitative and qualitative research of this population is desperately needed, any dialogue on the subject, even articles which lack empirical data, is a welcome addition to a very small body of literature. Perhaps for

that reason, sexual and gender minority student and staff at junior colleges are discussed in the available literature as part of an anecdotal dialogue engendered by those with a background in student affairs. Well-treaded territory includes campus climate, retention, harm to the individual and challenges of conducting the research.

Sexual Minorities on Community College Campuses – A Brief History

The subject of sexual minorities on community college campuses was first addressed by Judith Baker in her 1991 article “Gay Nineties: Addressing the Needs of Homosexual Community and Junior College Students and Faculty”. Baker authored her work to “shatter the silence” and pull back the curtain on “the invisible minority” (p. 25), a moniker for LGBTQ students at juniors colleges which is attributable to Baker and found throughout subsequent literature. Homophobia, internalized homophobia and heterosexism, terms now more widely known both culturally and in the higher education space, are defined in Baker’s article.

According to Baker (1991), the isolation and virtual lack of support experienced by the LGBTQ population on community college campuses is a result of heterosexism, “an assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm” (Pharr, 1997, p. 16). The heterosexist paradigm found within our culture engenders “one of the greatest impediments to the full emotional and social development of gay students and faculty [which] is internalized homophobia” (Baker, p. 27). The provided list of expressions typical of an individual experiencing internalized homophobia range from negative self-talk to the acceptance of peers’ verbal or physical

abuse. Ensuing literature includes more deleterious expressions on the part of LGBTQ students, up to and including suicide.

The trite use of the term ‘homophobia’ and the difference between it and the word ‘heterosexism’ were explored in Baker’s article. She wrote that MacDonald’s (1976) research decried the use of ‘homophobia’ as “vague and broad” (Baker, p. 28); he stated that “the [term would] likely lessen our objectivity and inhibit us in our attempts to find out explanations of negative reactions to homosexuality” (Baker, p. 28). The concept of homophobia was limiting as it informs the reader as to the actor’s feelings about homosexuality however, unlike heterosexism, it was not able to contextualize the reasons behind the emotions. Heterosexism, according to Baker (1991), is “the product of viewing the world through the limited perspective of the sexual orientation dominant in society” (p. 28). To eradicate heterosexism (and the homophobia it produces) on community college campuses requires that staff and administrators be cognizant of the presence of sexual minorities on campus and their alternate viewpoints.

Baker’s plea was to stamp out heterosexism by better educating staff and administrators therefore allowing them “to meet the unique needs of those experiencing the negative ramifications of heterosexism” (p. 31). Suggestions for educating higher educational personnel included a firm commitment from front-line instructors who influence the culture on campus and the content in the classroom as well as administration who have the authority to introduce non-discrimination policies and launch programs to sensitize their faculty and staff. Baker speculated as to the negative

ramifications experienced by the sexual minorities on community college campuses, however, she was limited by the scarcity of empirical data.

Anti-Gay Harassment on Community College Campus- A Quantitative Study

Dr. Karen Franklin, an American psychologist and educator, authored the lone data-driven article on LGBTQ issues on community college campuses. Her paper was presented at the 106th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at San Francisco, California on August 16th, 1998 and reveals an alarming rate of antigay sentiment and harassment at the community college campus upon which she conducted her survey.

Franklin's focus was on those individuals who perpetrate crimes against members of the LGBTQ community within the space of community college campuses in the Greater San Francisco region, an area widely known to be sympathetic to LGBTQ people. Franklin administered a survey which queried the prevalence of and motivations for homophobia and harassment on the community college campus. The survey was administered to "a very diverse sample of approximately 500 noncriminal young adults" and her results revealed "four distinct motivations" for antigay crime and sentiment, which she labels as: Self-Defense, Ideology, Thrill Seekers, and Peer Dynamics.

Those respondents pointing to self-defense as a motivator "claimed they were responding to aggressive sexual propositions"; however, Franklin states that "assailants interpret their victims' words and actions based on their belief that homosexuals are sexual predators" (p. 5). The research suggests that "rather than fabricate accounts of homosexual aggression" survey respondents actually perceive any glance or discussion

with a gay individual as a sexual advance, which Franklin states is a viable reason to react with violence, in the perpetrator's mind.

The second motivator discussed by Franklin (1998) is ideology which, she states, is "the one that comes to mind when most people think about hate crimes" (p. 5). Closely held cultural, religious or societal beliefs may result in an individual feeling justified in enacting homophobia or believing he or she is actually performing a good deed. As Franklin notes "...due to negative beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality...assailants view themselves as social norms enforcers who are punishing moral transgressions" (p. 5). Targets of these aggressors included homosexuals as well as "heterosexuals who do not conform to gender norms" (p. 6). Later in this proposal I discuss the unexpected means by which heterosexuals are negatively impacted by homophobia and the community colleges—or any school's—inability or unwillingness to voice concern over aggressive or exclusive behaviors towards the LGBTQ community. Ideology as a hate crime motivator is a part of the conversation as it leads to violence which impacts both homosexuals as well as heterosexuals who are perceived to act like, look like and/or, in some instances, befriend and sympathize with homosexuals.

Intimidating, bullying, harassing and committing violence against homosexuals (or those perceived to be homosexual) is viewed by Thrill Seekers as an acceptable method for "alleviat[ing] boredom, to have fun and excitement, and to feel strong" (p. 6). Franklin found that, unlike the two previous areas of rationale for antigay violence, Thrill Seekers did not verbalize explicit hatred or disgust for homosexuals; rather they found the group to be amusing targets. She characterizes these assailants as "commonly

adolescents, both male and female, who lack constructive social activities and perceive themselves as powerless” (p. 6).

Peer Dynamics, which was found to include a demonstrative difference in perpetrators based on gender, “embodies assaults aimed at proving toughness and heterosexuality to friends” (p. 6). Distinct from but intrinsically tied to the theme of Ideology and advancing gender norms, males are more likely to justify their involvement in hate crimes using this rationale than females. To evince their own masculinity and demonstrate their allegiance with heterosexuality, males will sometimes engage in “group assaults on homosexuals [which] also foster[s] camaraderie and cohesion within the peer group” (p. 6).

Franklin (1998) identified four distinct psychological justifications for engaging in anti-gay harassment yet a single, overarching theme of innocence also emerged. Regardless of the motivating factor, all four areas have a common thread running throughout - the perpetrator's tendency to minimize their culpability and point to--what they believe to be-- legitimizing circumstances for their involvement in anti-gay harassment. Franklin states that, as a rule, “wrongdoers often try to blame others” which includes cultural and peer pressures, ignorance, and/or reframing of the action to make the actor appear justified.

In this study, Franklin found strong evidence that cultural ideology informed assailants and nonassailants, groups who both endorsed the “widespread cultural permission to engage in violence based on homosexual innuendo” (p. 7). The study revealed that what separated those who participated in violence and those who did not

was not necessarily their beliefs about homosexuals but rather a fear of “adverse consequences to themselves” (p. 7). Four specific deterrents to violence were identified by Franklin (1998): Social tolerance, moral beliefs, personal contacts with homosexuals, and fear of consequences. Regardless of their propensity to actually commit violence, Franklin found that “the majority of all respondents reported having friends who had verbally or physically harassed homosexuals.” In 1998, antigay harassment and violence was a reality in San Francisco community college students’ life either directly or via the experiences of their peers. To what extent Franklin’s data is relevant today is unknown and no similar study has been conducted within any other community college system since that time.

Perpetration rates confirm that community college students in Franklin’s research have an almost inescapable connection to antigay aggression. Ten percent of all “respondents admitted to physical violence or threats against people they believed were homosexual, while another 24% reported antigay name calling” (p. 4). Examining the results for gender specific violence, Franklin found that 50% of males had been involved in some form of antigay aggression. Considering that 23% of “nonassailants had reported witnessing such incidents” we understand that antigay sentiment is at near saturation on the community college campus surveyed by Franklin. So commonplace is antigay aggression that “respondents advocated or defended such behavior out loud classroom [and] almost half ...reported a likelihood to assault again in similar circumstances” (pp. 4-5).

Franklin (1998) includes a section entitled ‘Implications for Prevention’ within the paper, tracing antigay sentiment in higher education back to school children who taunted each other on the playground. Name calling starts early and “surveys of schoolchildren indicate that antigay slurs are the most dreaded form of harassment” (Franklin, 1998). Protection for LGBTQ youth at the administrative level is almost nonexistent with the two more common responses on “the part of school administrators: (1) Boys will be “boys” and (2) “That’s what he (or she) has to expect for being openly homosexual” (p. 9). K-12’s reluctance to participate in protecting its LGBTQ students, according to Franklin, results in an escalation of aggression in which “verbal taunting [becomes] more and more severe abuse, culminating in physical beatings” (p. 7). The permission to harass sexual and gender minorities first granted to schoolyard pupils by silent elementary school teachers is also present on community college campuses. Institutional apathy is interpreted as silent permission to engage in antigay violence by a surprising constituency:

The majority of the young people who harass, bully and assault sexual minorities do not fit the stereotype of the hate-filled extremist. Rather, they are average young people who often do not see anything wrong with their behavior. And the reason they do not see anything wrong is simple - no one is telling them that it is wrong. (Franklin, 1998)

Heterosexual students become the perpetrators of hate crimes; homosexuals (and heterosexual students who are deemed too effeminate or too tomboyish) become the targets of antigay aggression and administrators become enablers. As I will discuss later

in this thesis, to avoid becoming the target of antigay violence and to escape abuse, some homosexuals engage in harmful behavior which affects their self-esteem, academics as well as their physical and mental well-being.

In 2000, Franklin published research on antigay behavior among young adults which contextualized the urgency for fostering an inclusive campus environment. Franklin(2000) notes that “assailants and nonassailant reported similar norms among parents but assailants were significantly more likely to believe that their closest friends were opposed to homosexuality and tolerant of antigay violence” (p. 351). Regardless of family values, an individual who associates with antigay individuals is more likely to become an offender. Administration and campus faculty can reduce the prevalence of such sentiment as I will outline in the following section.

Campus Climate, Retention – Experiences of Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals and college professors interested in the unique needs of the LGBTQ community have authored the remaining articles on the subject of sexual minorities at 2-year schools. Substantive contributors such as Brian T. Ivory, Ronni Sanlo and Nan Ottenritter glean wisdom from their own experiences interacting with LGBTQ students on campus; however their work offers little, if any, new quantitative or qualitative data on the subject. Rather, the available literature provides valuable insights via anecdotes and well-reasoned assumptions which, to this point, have served to inform interested community college administrators.

Campus Climate

To excel in a post-secondary institution requires more than preparation and good intentions, the school must be ready to receive students and respond to their needs. A student's educational journey and the likelihood of graduation can be positively influenced by learning experiences and campus environment (Ivory, 2012). It is for this reason that universities have created and launched educational programs that address obstacles disproportionately attributable to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Villareal, 2010). Despite those programs, widespread acceptance in academia, certain minority groups are not met with similar initiatives. Sexual and gender minorities on community college campuses have experienced a "notable absence of solutions to barriers to educational success" (Villareal, 2010). Lack of support services is but one contributing factor to homosexuals' perception of a chilly climate on community college campuses. Aside from Karen Franklin's conclusion that antigay aggression is prevalent on campus, "no empirical research has been published specific to LGBTQ students' perceptions of their campus climates at two-year institution or their lived experiences of antigay harassment and violence" (Ivory, 2012). What is clear and repeated throughout the few published articles is that "while many disadvantaged students in higher education today have received the increased attention and support they deserve, sexual minority students have remained in the shadows- both in research, literature, and practice (Ivory, 2012). Contributing to the body of research, it turns out, comes with its own set of challenges.

Challenges Surrounding Research

As students who frequent LGBTQ clubs and activities worry how they will be labeled by their peers, so too do “faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to study LGBT students [fear they] may be perceived as gay” (Leider, 2000). Unfortunately, Leider’s assessment of faculty and staff’s reluctance to author research, much like the other contributing author’s statements, are based on assumptions and anecdotal experiences. The author assumes that evincing an interest in and expending the effort to author research on LGBTQ issues is, at a minimum, to label oneself a gay sympathizer and, at worst, to reveal your sexual orientation, a revelation that can limit opportunities within the competitive world of higher education.

Researcher fears aside, the process of identifying and convincing sexual minorities to be participants in studies can be daunting, if not impossible. Leider (2000) posits that the paucity of research could be a symptom of a population who as a result of “social stigma, may not want to be identified” (p. 2) due to potential harassment, as well documented by Franklin (1998). Rankin et al (2010) writes that “nearly half of all LGBTQ students (43%) indicated hiding their sexual identity in order to avoid intimidation on campus (Rankin et al., 2010), further illustrating why it may be difficult for researchers to engage this population for the purposes of study. Furthermore, potential participants may not even realize they qualify to be involved. For example, “students who have not yet come out, [or] those at the beginning stages of sexual identity formation, are unlikely to participate in LGBTQ-related research” (Ivory, p. 483). Interestingly, LGBTQ safe spaces, such as a gay and lesbian student club or an on campus LGBTQ center may not

yield a representative sample of the on campus sexual minority population. Student affairs professionals offer that “even when LGBTQ persons and programs are visible on campus, Leck (1998) notes sexual minority students may steer clear to avoid public association with the LGBT community” (Ivory, 2012).

Researchers agree that locating and engaging LGBTQ students in order to expand our understanding of the population can be difficult. The population may be in different stages of the ‘coming out’ process, fearful for their safety, reluctant to frequent LGBTQ clubs and in many cases they may attempt to “avoid some discrimination by attempting to pass as heterosexuals” (Baker, 1991). The latter is a tactic that may, at first pass, seem helpful but which, upon greater inspection, can actually result in harm.

Harm to the Individual

The inability to be truthful about one’s own identity can result in negative consequences for both self and others. Baker (1991) notes that “the safety of passing [as heterosexual] bears with it the costs of self-denial, loss of self-respect, isolation, edited social behavior, and social paranoia” (p.6). There is a consensus among researchers that denying oneself is negative for both the individual and those around him or her. In an unwelcoming environment, “LGBT students will seek relief from their sexual identity by engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as drugs and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, and even suicide (Ivory, 2012), a claim that was seconded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] in 2011. It has been acknowledged by a number of sources that the LGBTQ population is at greater risk for suicide and other health issues (Sanlo &

Espinoza, 2012). In this way, we understand the potential danger for sexual minorities who are either closeted or who are not able to be fully truthful about their identity.

Heterosexuals are also negatively impacted when the sexual minorities around them decide or are forced to hide their sexual identity. Franklin (1998) points to personal contacts with homosexuals as a deterrent for antigay aggression. Baker (1991) writes that eliminating heterosexism happens, in part, when we “get to know lesbians and gay men as individuals” (p. 31). Several additional authors suggest similar positive outcomes however, if LGBTQ students refuse to divulge their group membership, heterosexuals have fewer chances to ameliorate their behavior.

Community college students must be given the opportunity to live their truth or risk academic uncertainty. Although it may seem that one’s decision to reveal his or her sexuality is irrelevant to his or her success in the classroom, Sanlo (2012) notes that “challenges associated with forming a healthy sexual identity will often take precedence over other developmental tasks” (pg. 485). That is to say academic intervention and well-intentioned instructors take a back seat to a student struggling with his or her sexual orientation.

Retention

Retention is a popular topic in higher education as a school’s ability to retain and graduate students is a measure of success and, equally as important, retention drives revenues. Despite an array of academic counselors and cutting edge programs, however, a student in an actual or perceived anti-gay environment will focus first on safety and often cannot concentrate on academic learning or extracurricular activities (Sanlo, 2012).

Researchers agree that until community college administrators assist with improving campus climate, retention will continue to be an issue. Furthermore, due to a lack of data surrounding LGBTQ enrollment, the number of active and exiting sexual and gender minority students is unknown. The dearth of empirical data is a theme woven throughout the available articles.

Interactions with other members of the LGBTQ population are, according to academic literature, lacking on community college campuses and that interaction “can play a significant role in sexual minority students’ ability to persist toward graduation” (Ivory, 2012). Several reasons for these phenomena were cited including that student-to-student interaction is made more difficult on commuter campuses which are “often transitory in nature” (Weiss, 2004). LGBTQ faculty may “be less than enthusiastic to reveal their orientation given the chilly climate on campus” (Leider, 2000) especially as anti-gay sentiment can impact their opportunity to secure one of the ever dwindling number of tenure positions. Retaining student and staff is an intentional activity and, if a college is to be successful in this aim, this minority population must be given a safe, welcoming environment to which they want to remain attached.

Empirical Evidence Needed

The recommendations and best practices offered throughout the literature rely almost entirely on personal experiences or third party accounts and as neither quantitative nor qualitative research has been conducted, it is not known if those suggestions are valid means to improve the LGBTQ student experience. Leider (2012) reported that “[what is

known] is only anecdotal evidence: what's really needed is solid empirical research and quantifiable data (p. 473).

Several authors suggested that community college is a particularly difficult environment for students exploring their sexual identity. Ivory (2012) contrasted the implied freedom of sexual exploration on a residential college with community college students who “[live] under the eyes of hometown friends and family members” (p. 486). Commuter conditions “[do] not permit the same kind of experimentation and exaggerated risks that a sheltered residential campus can provide (Ivory, 2012) Leck’s (1998) statement that “nonresidential campuses face additional challenges toward developing a healthy sexual identity when compared to those at residential colleges” was based upon his observations as an adviser at a commuter college. Compelling as that observation may be, it is still anecdotal in nature and may not accurately represent sexual minorities’ experiences.

The reason for my research is to give a voice to LGBTQ students on community college campuses. Available literature tells us they are on campus, they are experiencing a chilly climate that may result in academic uncertainty and that they are not receiving the attention needed to excel. My aim is to distribute surveys to students of all sexualities and gender identities at a Mid-Atlantic community college in order to assess the climate of today’s community college campus.

My research questions are: What is the current campus climate for LGBTQ students and staff on today’s community college campus? What factors influence a student’s propensity to be more or less supportive of this population? Are efforts to

embrace sexual and gender minorities adequate, overwhelming or nonexistent? What similarities exist between students who are more or less supportive and, to what extent, can a college influence those factors? As surveys will be distributed to a representative sample of students in general education courses, it will be possible to obtain a quantitative measurement of the LGBTQ enrollment on campus.

METHODS

The research design employed for this study will be an 18-question survey delivered to students at a mid-Atlantic community college.

Participants

The unit of analysis is students enrolled in the community college system. Surveys were distributed during class time by this researcher as to encourage completion and allow for clarification, if necessary. To reach an adequate number of first year and secondary students and to minimize duplication, general education Math courses were targeted for survey distribution.

Instrument

One month prior to the survey's distribution, a small number of undergraduate students from a Women and Gender Studies course were surveyed using the final version of the instrument. Student participants evaluated the survey questions and offered their feedback. Based on students' suggestions a final draft of the document was created and sent to my thesis committee members for approval.

For the purposes of data collection, this researcher employed a cross-sectional survey consisting of 1 open-ended and 17 closed-ended questions. The paper-based survey included questions that employ a 5-point likert scale and nominal scale questions at the onset to gather demographic information about respondents. An open-ended

question, on the final page of the survey, included space for a handwritten, individualized response from student participants.

The survey seeks to identify how various segments of the community college population interprets, experiences, accepts and allies –or not– with the LGBTQ community and the prevailing climate on campus. Unique identifiers such as race, gender, nationality, parental beliefs, etc. were requested and subsequently examined for relevance. The survey response rate was high given the instructors’ distribution of the survey instrument and the presence of the researcher. Response bias was expected to be low given that a sizable number of general education classes was visited thus ensuring a high level of return.

In order to establish a baseline of bias (positive, negative or neutral) towards the LGBTQ community in general, the survey includes an attitudinal measure whereby participants are asked to state their feelings and perceptions about the minority population. The initial eight survey statements are presented with a corresponding 5-point Likert scale for participant responses. This measure seeks to establish students’ (1) feelings, both positive and negative, towards the community; (2) opinions as to whether they believe members of the LGBTQ community are equal to the heterosexual population; and (3) perceptions about sexual and gender minorities and whether or not there is a place for them on-campus. The next four statements are presented and students are allowed to ‘check all that apply’ to capture their responses. These statements address participation in or being a witness of particular behaviors such as name calling and ask respondents what they think about and how they react to such behaviors. The third

section of the survey gathers demographic data and queries students' affiliation with the LGBTQ community. Such data is critical as it was ultimately compared to students' responses to determine if and how perceptions about a population contribute to one's assessment of their needs and culture.

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey was distributed to 51 community college students at a Mid-Atlantic campus in the Fall of 2014. Three general education math classes were the selected site of study as they provided this research with access to a large, representative sample of the general community college population. The courses were requirements for first and second year students in all majors and therefore no one type of student was more likely to emerge than any other. Upon arriving in the class room, I read a short disclosure, passed out the Letter of Informed Consent and distributed the surveys. Students were asked to fold their paper in half once complete in order to ensure responses remained confidential among their peers.

Quantitative data captured on paper surveys was inputted into Excel Spreadsheets and coded for analysis. Following the electronic transcription of data, all paperwork was destroyed thereby ensuring that no method exists for linking responses and respondents. Data was organized, scored and analyzed to uncover patterns.

This researcher intended to examine how campus climate responses are informed by one's affiliation with minority status. For example, do sexual minorities perceive a more hostile campus climate for the LGBT community? How, if at all, does a student's immediate family contribute to their propensity to be supportive of the LGBTQ community? What factors influence a student's beliefs about the LGBTQ community?

The open-ended qualitative research question was likewise electronically transcribed and subsequently coded for commonalities. Subjective elements, such as word choice, were examined for consistency against previous quantitative responses. Demographic information and open-ended comments were analyzed and findings were reported.

Ethics

Given the tumultuous climate of the community college campus, every effort was taken to protect research participants and their identities. Prior to beginning the study, students were informed of the risks, regardless of how improbable or seemingly innocuous. All surveys were submitted anonymously and no identifying characteristics were present. The simple process of sharing personal information about one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity can engender the need to talk to a trained counselor. For that reason, all participants were given the contact information of school and off-site professionals who could be enlisted to assist with any post-interview feelings or situations.

Validity

A potential concern in this research is that respondents may provide feedback based on what they believe "we" (school officials, researchers, and society) want to hear and based on their own fluid identity. That is to say that someone who will, in time, decide or realize they are in fact a sexual or gender minority may identify as heterosexual either to hide their identity or because they have not yet 'come out' to themselves.

Additionally, the environment in which surveys are distributed and replied to may affect respondent's propensity to be truthful.

RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

I conducted my research at a small community college located in the fourth-largest metropolitan region of a Mid-Atlantic state. The area is financially distressed, industries continue to leave the area and, very recently, the region was named the country's 'unhappiest' metropolitan area, (Gibbons, 2014) according to economists at Harvard University and the University of British Columbia. The community served by the college is rural and comparatively less affluent than its surrounding metropolitan regions; the percentage of residents living below the poverty line is double the state average. The county's median household income is \$44,402, or 16% less than the state average. The region is predominately white; according to the 2010 census, the county is 85.9% White alone, 8.5% Hispanic or Latino, 4.6% Black alone.

Total enrollment at the community college is just over six thousand students and competition among admissions recruiters is fierce. The state's largest university has 24 satellite campuses offering two-year programs that serve as effective feeder programs for the main campus, which is nationally ranked in the top 50, according to US News and World Reports. Three satellite campuses are available to students within a 30-mile radius of the survey-site community college. Rather than compete with a top-ranked university with a top 25 football program and an enrollment of more than 40,000 students, the community college instead focuses on the students wishing to remain local and in need of

a more intimate environment. The community college is home to 150 instructional faculty members, a 200-person administrative staff and offers more than 80 occupational programs. Students can choose from 40 student clubs and organizations and, post graduation, can transfer to a regional university via procured articulation agreements with 40 regional colleges and universities.

To ensure a representative sample of students and to gain exposure to the widest range of experiences, opinions and input, this researcher intentionally distributed the survey to three general education math courses. The rationale for this action was to capture the most generic cross-section of students as the entire student body cycles through these classes and no one type of student is more likely to be enrolled than any other.

RESEARCH FINDINGS- QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Findings will be discussed in two parts: First, the results of the quantitative survey will be shared with cursory comments. Secondly, the researcher will elaborate on the emergent themes resulting from both the statistical findings as well as the optional qualitative survey feedback and comments provided by student survey respondents. Together the two-part analysis will provide a more holistic portrait of the perceptions of the participants at this research site on the LGBTQ climate at this community college.

Part One: Quantitative Survey Results.

The LGBTQ Campus Climate Survey was administered to 51 community college students over a one-week period in November 2014. By gender, survey respondents identified as 69% female, 29% male, and 2% Gender Queer. By race, respondents identified as: 86% White, 4% Multiracial, 4% Hispanic, 2% Black, 2% Native American, and the final 2% identified as Other. By sexual orientation, 88% of survey respondents identified as Heterosexual and 12% identified as LGBTQ, which breaks down into the following: 6% Bisexual, 2% Gay, 2% Pansexual, and 2% Asexual. Per the demographic survey responses, none of the participants identified as lesbian women although two of the three bisexual respondents were female (the third bisexual identified as gender queer), perhaps suggesting that females are more open to identifying along a sexual continuum.

Overwhelmingly, the students surveyed felt their community college provides a welcoming environment for the LGBTQ students, staff and faculty. Sixty-seven percent of respondents strongly agreed that the campus is welcoming and 11% somewhat agreed with this statement. While 78% of total respondents thought favorably of the campus climate, 22% were neutral to this statement. None of the students, regardless of their race or sexual orientation, indicated an unwelcoming climate at their community college. In fact, LGBTQ students (83%) were more likely than heterosexual students (78%) to indicate a welcoming environment on this community college campus.

In an effort to determine what factors lead to a welcoming or unwelcoming environment, the researcher included survey questions that sought to determine students' perceptions of and interactions with the LGBTQ community. Given that this cross-section of individuals was mostly positive about the LGBTQ community on campus, this could be a product of their own values and beliefs. To that end, students were asked to what extent friendships/interactions with LGBTQ students, faculty and staff are important to them and nearly half of the students (45%) agreed or somewhat agreed that such relationships are important to them while a nearly identical sample, 43%, indicated they were neutral to such friendships. It was noted that the 12% of students who disagreed with the importance of LGBTQ friendships unanimously skipped over the 'somewhat disagree' option to the more definitive 'disagree' option perhaps implying that tolerance and eventual acceptance happens along a continuum whereas intolerance is more intransigent. As for which group places more importance on such relationships, heterosexual students were less likely (49%) to indicate an importance compared to non-

heterosexual student respondents (67%). Given that at least half of students do value such interactions, fostering an environment for LGBTQ staff and students to live their truth is critical for community colleges.

Visibility is necessary if such relationships are to flourish and, for this reason, students were asked about the extent to which sexual minorities are visible on their campus. Respondents were almost equally divided in whether they were aware, unaware, or unable to perceive the visibility of LGBTQ staff and faculty—28%, 35% and 37% respectively. Responses varied by sexual and gender identity: LGBTQ students were twice as likely to indicate the presence of sexual minority staff, 50%, compared to 26% for heterosexual respondents. Thirty-eight percent of heterosexual students believed that LGBTQ staff/faculty are not visible on their campus compared to 17% for non-heterosexual respondents. Responses may be attributable to a community that is best able to identify fellow community members through a combination of heightened awareness and the process of actively seeking out others.

The literature review points to a continual shift in the American public's awareness of and tolerance for LGBTQ citizens, however, to what extent is that cultural shift felt on community college campuses? The majority of student respondents (67%) supported or somewhat supported LGBTQ rights while only 9% of students indicated they did not. Despite their own stated support for the LGBTQ community, however, students indicated that their immediate families do not share in their sentiments. When asked about their perceptions of their family's acceptance towards LGBTQ rights only 27% of immediate families were supportive or somewhat supportive while 35%

somewhat reject or reject such rights. The most common response concerning family views was neutrality (38%) which, given the polemic nature of the subject, may indicate an unwillingness to admit to the political (some say moral) leanings of one's family. While the split between family acceptance, rejection and neutrality were fairly even in their distribution, actual students' self-reported stance on LGBTQ rights was disproportionately accepting with 66% of respondents indicating their support. The second most common response was neutrality (22%) and the remaining 12% of respondents reject the idea of LGBTQ rights. Responses varied by sexual orientation with 100% of LGBTQ student survey respondents indicating that they support gay rights compared with 62% of heterosexual students. The variance between family and student views makes the case for the shifting ideologies between generations and the swing towards a more inclusive America.

Family beliefs may be less of a factor in determining a student's stance on LGBTQ rights but how do their closest friends' thoughts and beliefs align with their own support or rejection of such rights? The vast majority of student survey respondents indicated that their closest friends support or somewhat support LGBTQ rights (67%) and 15% believe their friends were not supportive. These findings are compelling as the percentage of close friends and actual survey respondents (67% and 66% respectively) who were reported to support LGBTQ rights is nearly identical. This lends credence to the idea that a student's closest friends will more heavily impact their own beliefs and ideologies. For community colleges, these data suggest that recruiting tolerant students is

less important than fostering inclusive environments while on campus. Tolerance and acceptance begets tolerance and acceptance among college students and their peers.

The campus environment is shaped, in part, by the extent to which inclusive services and events are available to those individuals needing them. This researcher included survey questions aimed at revealing students' perceptions of such services. Half of the respondents (50%) reported that the current availability of LGBTQ services and resources on campus are sufficient and only 11% of students indicated a lack of such resources. This response varied little by respondents' sexual or gender identity: Half (50%) of non-heterosexual students, compared with 49% of heterosexual students, believe that the community college provides adequate resources. Eleven percent of heterosexual students say there is a dearth of services compared with 16% of LGBTQ students who say more is needed. The fact that students provided a similar assessment of services, regardless of their identity, suggests an accurate read on the current state of services at this community college.

Campus environment is fashioned, in large part, by a student's on-campus experiences; routine comments and conversations culminate in an overarching sense of inclusion or exclusion. The LGBTQ Campus Climate Survey inquired into such experiences asking students if they had witnessed or participated in any of the following behaviors: name calling, staring, gossiping, verbal and physical intimidation, ignoring, and bullying. Nearly two-thirds (63%) indicated that they have never witnessed harassment based on sexual or gender identity. From the list, the most reported behavior was gossiping (31%) while the least reported behavior was verbal and physical

intimidation with less than 2% reporting that they had been a witness to such activities. Staring and ignoring were equally reported and tied for the second most common behaviors at 15%.

Only negligible differences emerge in this area when examining responses based on sexual minority and majority status: 66% of LGBTQ students have never witnessed harassment based on sexual or gender identity compared to 62% of heterosexual respondents. This finding is compelling as the majority of surveyed students felt that the environment is welcoming, from the prevalence of discrimination to the fear of harassment, LGBTQ students agree that the community college and its student body are mostly free from exclusive, harassing behaviors. In the instances of reported insensitive conduct, the most commonly witnessed by LGBTQ students is gossiping (33%) while three other behaviors—staring, ignoring, bullying—tied for the next most common behavior at 16%. Heterosexual student respondents reported that gossiping and ignoring were the most common harassment behaviors. Overall, respondents reported that they do not engage in harassment (88%) based on sexual and gender identity and, for the small percentage that do, the most common offense is gossiping (10%) and staring (8%). As noted earlier, verbal and physical intimidation based on sexual and gender identity was extremely rare at this community college and it was a behavior witnessed only by heterosexual students; none of the LGBTQ student respondents reported witnessing such activities.

The prevalence of gossiping regarding students, staff and faculty's sexual and gender identity prompted further review of respondents' experiences. Although half of

survey respondents (50%) indicated that they do not hear anyone making jokes about LGBTQ students, staff or faculty, some students (15%) report that they either join in or laugh but do not contribute upon hearing their friends and classmates gossip about sexual and gender minorities. The majority of individuals exposed to such gossip, however, simply ignore it (31%). The smallest population (6%) offered that such behavior would prompt them to explain that sexual and gender identities are not a joke. Unexpectedly, LGBTQ students were less likely than heterosexual students to hear classmates making jokes about the minority population, 66% vs. 48% respectively.

Gender. As Karen Franklin's 1999 student survey at San Francisco Community College demonstrated, sometimes sizable variances emerge between male and female respondents and, for this reason, I will now review if and to what extent such differences were present in this 2014 survey. Male students were slightly more likely to engage in 'harassment-like' behaviors than females (20% vs. 12% respectively). While 'gossiping' was the most popular behavior reported overall, male respondents were equally as likely to 'stare' and 'gossip' with 20% of male survey respondents admitting their involvement in such activities. In reviewing perceptions, it was noted that 40% of males indicated that LGBTQ students who revealed their sexual and/or gender identity have the right to free speech, but I prefer not to hear it compared to only 8% of females with a similar sentiment. No other differences in male vs. female behavior or perceptions were discovered during this research.

Profile of students who engage in harassment. In part, the goal of my research was to construct a profile of students at this community college who are more likely to

engage in particular behaviors, whether inclusive or exclusive, in order to offer academics and administrators a jumping off point from which to begin the work of creating a safer, more welcoming campus environment. To that end, the following section addresses various elements of that student profile.

Join in. Of the survey respondents who indicated that they would join in if they witnessed someone making jokes about members of the LGBTQ community, 100% said their immediate family either ‘somewhat reject’ or ‘completely reject’ LGBTQ rights and 80% stated that their closest friends ‘reject’ or ‘somewhat reject’ such rights. None of these respondents (0%) had friends or family who ‘support’ or ‘somewhat support’ LGBTQ rights. All of these students identify as heterosexual (100%) and the majority of them, 60%, know LGBTQ individuals only as acquaintances.

Stand up for. As noted above, a small percentage (6%) of the overall respondents indicated that overhearing jokes about the LGBTQ community would prompt them to explain that sexual and gender identity is not a joke. These students’ propensity to champion the cause may be attributable to their social ties—the survey results reveal that they know sexual and gender minorities as close friends and family and that their friends are supportive of minority rights. That small cross-section of respondents is comprised entirely (100%) of students who report that their friends support LGBTQ rights. Their families are mostly neutral (66%) to LGBTQ rights while 33% have families that ‘somewhat support’ LGBTQ rights. All of the students (100%) who indicated they would stand up for the LGBTQ community indicated that the LGBTQ people they know

are ‘family’ and ‘friends’ further solidifying the value of forging relationships with the minority community.

These findings suggest that LGBTQ visibility may be a substantial contributing factor in regards to an individuals’ propensity to embrace or reject the population.

Visibility occurs across a spectrum from initial recognition and becoming acquainted with to the eventual befriending of and, ultimately, the mutual exchange of respect for an individual. The data points seem to suggest that the more students are exposed to the population, especially if the exposure occurs via the stated or perceived support of a close friend, the more likely a student is to lend their own support.

RESEARCH FINDINGS –QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The final page of the survey contained the following, open-ended writing prompt: *What can you share about your experiences, thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the LGBTQ community?* While all quantitative survey responses were completed in their entirety, only 82% of surveys were submitted with students' thoughts and feedback in the qualitative portion of the survey. The goal of the open-ended question was simply to engender additional dialogue not otherwise possible via the preceding questions. The majority of respondents elected to expand on their allegiance for or rejection of the LGBTQ community and a few students offered general observations about their local LGBTQ community and related topics.

Support. The majority of short answer responses (64%) centered on student support for the community based on a few themes: (1) proximity to and affection for members of the LGBTQ community, (2) belief that LGBTQ citizens are equal too/no different than the majority, and (3) transformative experiences leading to tolerance/acceptance. Earlier in this paper, it was stated that 66% of total survey respondents supported LGBTQ rights; therefore, for 64% of short answer respondents to offer written support is in line with the previously documented findings.

Student's proximity to and affection for members of the LGBTQ community was a common topic in the short answer response portion of the Campus Climate survey. One respondent shared, "I strongly support gay rights and for them to have equal rights. My best friend since I was 7 has suffered with being transgender so it's very close to my heart, when something is said about it." Another student wrote,

I feel that the LGBTQ community should not be labeled. I feel that they are just normal people living their own lives. I have some very close friends that are gay and they are the same as anyone else. They are just looking for their own type of love.

These responses suggest that to be acquainted with sexual and gender minorities as close friends and/or family can lead to greater acceptance of and support for the community. Nearly four-fifths (78%) of students offering supportive statements knew LGBTQ individuals as family members or close friends.

Many students expressed a belief that LGBTQ citizens are equal to the heterosexual majority and should be treated accordingly. One respondent, who reported knowing more than 10 LGBTQ community members as family and friends wrote, "I feel the LGBTQ community deserve the same respect and rights as any other human being. Human beings should be able to love whomever they please regardless of race or gender." This connection between the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the current day struggle for gender and sexual equality was shared by a handful of survey respondents. Others used the space to express support and disappointment about their peers' behavior: "If people are LGBTQ then let them be. They aren't any different from

non-LGBTQ people and they have rights. I just hate the people who only say they are for the attention, which is often.” This quote was written by a male, heterosexual student—an unexpected comment given the near-consensus among students that the community college is safe and accepting of this population.

A final common theme of support was presented via transformative experiences leading to tolerance/acceptance, a compelling finding as it demonstrates not only mental and emotional growth but also the metacognition necessary to examine and redefine one’s once flawed values or beliefs. A male, heterosexual student wrote:

People are mean and rudeness comes in all shapes and sizes. LGBTQ opinions are improving in the area but there is still a strong negative outlook present. I used to have a very bad opinion until I met a gay person.

This student also reported now being acquainted with more than 10 LGBTQ community members as friends and family. Another student spoke of the separation of her own values and those of her parent:

I fully support the LGBTQ community. I have attended a gay pride parade with my friend. I was mortified when I came home to my dad screaming at me for attending the parade. His views are obviously different from mine but I always stand up for the LGBTQ community.

These transformative experiences solidified students’ support and demonstrate how the introduction of sexual and gender minorities onto a campus or into someone’s life can result in greater tolerance and/or acceptance.

Rejection. Approximately 10% of short answer respondents expressed some level of rejection towards the LGBTQ agenda or visibility. One student wrote, “I know that they have their rights to be who they want to be but I don’t agree with it.” The notion that the LGBTQ community’s actions infringe on the heterosexual community was a common theme:

I feel that people nowadays are unable to voice any opinion other than full support of the LGBTQ movements. I feel that a fair balance should be in place. I do not want to see every TV show include an element of this. I want to be able to see things that I fully support.

Finally, other student respondents elaborated on their feelings about the current state of LGBTQ affairs and how its emergence affects them, “I like them as people, but I don’t like when they push it on me or over do it just for attention.” Due to the limitations of this data collection method, it is unknown how, why or to what extent this student feels sexual and gender minorities impose their feelings and actions on him. What is known is that all of the students (100%) who offered unsupportive short answer comments reported that they did not know LGBTQ individuals as friends or family. One-quarter (25%) indicated they did not know any sexual minorities at all and the remaining 75% only knew them as acquaintances.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the current climate for LGBTQ students, staff and faculty on today's community college campus. The scant data that does exist in academic literature is both two decades out-of-date and also insufficient, according to the many researchers and academics cited at the outset of this paper. The data suggests that community college students' overall acceptance of and integration with the LGBTQ community on campus has improved in the years since Karen Franklin (1998) surveyed students at San Francisco Community College. Students' propensity to engage in both violent and non-violent harassment has diminished and the variation between male and female incidences of anti-LGBTQ aggression is less dramatic.

Nearly 25 years ago, Judith Baker stated that "homophobia has been found to be associated with people who have never knowingly met a homosexual" and this study's data supports her claim. Students who reported being less supportive of LGBTQ rights also reported either not knowing any LGBTQ people or not knowing them very well. Conversely, respondents who reported knowing LGBTQ individuals were more likely to support their rights. Interestingly, when asked whether or not friendships with LGBTQ students, staff and faculty are important to them, more than half of respondents were neutral or denied that such relationships were of value. However, these data demonstrate

that establishing such a connection increases the likelihood that one will be supportive of or, at least, tolerant towards sexual and gender minorities.

Fourteen years ago, Leck's (1999) work found that "sexual minority students may steer clear to avoid public association with the LGBT community;" however this current research demonstrates that, at least on this campus, LGBTQ students do not intentionally engage in such behavior. That this college's LGBTQ population is willing to engage with their peers and report their sexual and gender identity via my survey suggests that they are well-adjusted and better able to 'live their truth' which, in turns, introduces their heterosexual peers to more LGBTQ students thus further reducing the likelihood of homophobia on campus.

The current day study reveals significant changes in behavior and ideologies, however, one area that remains relatively unchanged is a student's inclination to mimic the thoughts and behaviors of their closest friends. In 2000, Karen Franklin published her study of anti-gay assailants and stated that while "assailants and nonassailant [both] reported similar norms among parents...assailants were significantly more likely to believe that their closest friends were opposed to homosexuality and tolerant of antigay violence" (p. 351). This researcher found that community college students in 2014 were equally inclined to follow their friends' conduct; however, the large majority of students report that their friends were supportive of the population and, thus, they too were supportive. Students' whose parents were unsupportive but who had supportive friends were overwhelmingly supportive as well. This finding demonstrates the urgency of addressing non-inclusive thoughts and behaviors; by teaching tolerance and/or

acceptance to one student, not only is he or she altered, but so too is he or she likely to impact the life or lives of his closest friends.

The true number of LGBTQ students on campus has been difficult to measure for a number of reasons including the fact that such demographic data is not captured at the time of enrollment and sexual/gender identity are fluid and thus depends on respondents' understanding of him/herself at the time of inquiry. Student survey participants were asked to identify their sexual and gender identity, as stated previously, and their responses provide quantifiable data regarding the enrollment of LGBTQ students. Approximately 12% of students identified as non-heterosexual, less than 2% identified as 'Gender Queer' and no participants identified as Transgender. The number of LGBTQ-identified students at this campus is more than triple the national average; according to a 2014 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey, "less than 3 percent of the U.S. population identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual...and 1.1 percent is [unsure or] something else" (Washington Post, 2014, Somashekhar). This discrepancy between national statistics and this campus may be a result of college students' evolving self-identity and proclivity towards experimentation or may suggest that a disproportionately large number of sexual minorities attend college. The true reason for the variation is not known and is one of many suggestions for the next team of researchers tackling the topic of LGBTQ students on 2-year college campuses.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This researcher's study demonstrates that, to some extent, on at least one particular community college campus, the LGBTQ community feels accepted and heterosexual students are, more often than not, supportive of sexual and gender minorities. What is not isolated and identified in this study are the factors that lead to the observed shift in perceptions from Karen Franklin's 1998 student survey to these present day statistics; factors such as an overall cultural shift, geographical differences, and/or institutional initiatives and their effect on the student body. This study is unable to answer the following questions: Did students arrive to campus already instilled with a propensity towards LGBTQ inclusion? Did an on campus mentor influence their current feelings? Did any of those individuals who reported not supporting LGBTQ rights arrive on campus with a more tolerant mind-set only to be persuaded differently? To answer these and many other important questions concerning how and why students reject, tolerate, accept or remain neutral on the subject of LGBTQ equality and rights, a longitudinal study mapping students' perceptions and actions from enrollment through graduation is recommended. Such a study would provide administrators and researchers with the critical information concerning the factors that impact and alter students' mindsets and attitudes regarding LGBTQ individuals.

Karen Franklin (1998) found that the majority of young people who bully the LGBTQ population do so, not because they are ‘hate-filled extremists’ but rather because ‘no one is telling them that it is wrong’ (Franklin, 1998). If the opposite is true and LGBTQ students are reporting that incidences of bullying and harassment are almost non-existence on this campus, can we assume an intervention of some sort, whether intentional or not? What actions do staff and faculty take on this campus if and when students are overheard speaking disparagingly about the population? How are new employees trained on the topic of building an inclusive campus environment? Essentially, is the campus environment a product of intentional diversity training or a product of a new generation of students?

Future research must determine whether the level of acceptance realized on this campus is mirrored at other community colleges and, if so, what similarities do inclusive and/or exclusive campuses share. On those campuses that have launched initiatives promoting inclusion, what methods have emerged as an effective means for introducing the LGBTQ population to students otherwise unfamiliar with and/or unsupportive of their rights and presence on campus.

APPENDIX

The Purpose of this Survey

This survey was designed and is being administered in an effort to better understand how students at regional community colleges perceive and interact with a particular minority population. Surveys are being completed by students in multiple classes at this college and at multiple colleges in several states.

Your honest feedback is requested.

There are no right or wrong answers. There are only your thoughts, experiences and perceptions.

This is a confidential survey. No mechanism exists to link your responses to your identity. Neither your professor nor your college will be made aware of your feelings about this population.

Ultimately the results will provide a snapshot of community college students' shared experiences and better inform student affairs professionals seeking to provide services across a diverse spectrum.

Glossary of Useful Terms:

Allies - people who support equal civil rights, gender equality, LGBT social movements, and challenge homophobia and transphobia. Allies are commonly referred to as 'heterosexual allies' or 'straight allies' as well.

Asexual – a lack of attraction to or desire for sexual activity and/or sexual relationships

Gender Identity – is a person's private sense, and subjective experience, of their own gender.

LGBTQ – an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning

LGBTQ Rights – laws that protect and extend privileges and rights to the LGBTQ population such as being allowed to marry, parent/adopt, engage in same-sex partnerships, gain access to sex reassignment surgery, be free from discrimination in regards to employment, access to housing, to enjoy immigration equality, etc.

Sexual Identity – the sexual orientation with which one identifies. Sexual identity is how an individual sees himself or herself, and is not necessarily a reflection of their actions or current romantic relationship.

LGBTQ Campus Climate Survey

1. My community college is welcoming of LGBTQ students, staff and faculty

Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

2. LGBTQ faculty/staff members are visible on my community college campus:

Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

3. At my community college, there are a sufficient amount of LGBTQ support services and resources

Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

4. I prefer to avoid places on campus where LGBTQ students and allies hang out

Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

5. Friendships with LGBTQ students, faculty and staff are important to me

Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

7. What is your stance on LGBTQ rights?

Support	Somewhat support	Neutral	Somewhat reject	Reject
1	2	3	4	5

7. What is your immediate family's stance on LGBTQ rights?

Support	Somewhat support	Neutral	Somewhat reject	Reject
1	2	3	4	5

8. What is your very closest friend's stance on LGBTQ rights?

Support	Somewhat support	Neutral	Somewhat reject	Reject
1	2	3	4	5

9. At my community college, I have witnessed people do the following to a student based on sexual or gender identity: (Check all that apply)

- Name calling (*Hey Faggot!*)
- Staring (Including pointing and laughing)
- Gossiping (*Did you see that butch in our class?*)
- Verbal and Physical Intimidation (*Don't look at me fag or I will break your face*)
- Ignoring
- Bullying
- I have never witnessed harassment based on sexual or gender identity

10. At my community college, I have participated in the following to a student based on sexual or gender identity: (Check all that apply)

- Name calling
- Staring
- Gossiping
- Verbal and Physical Intimidation
- Ignoring
- Bullying
- I have never participated in the above behavior based on sexual or gender identity

11. Students who say they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or questioning their sexuality or gender identity: (Check all that apply)

- Make everyone feel uncomfortable
- Just want attention
- Have the right to free speech, but I prefer not to hear it
- Have a healthy sense of self
- Positively contribute to the in class dialogue
- I don't know

12. When I hear a classmate/friend making jokes about LGBTQ students, staff or faculty, I:

- Join in
- Laugh but do not contribute
- Ignore them
- Explain that sexual and gender identity is not a joke
- I do not hear anyone making jokes about LGBTQ students, staff or faculty

Demographic Information

13. How do you identify:

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern
- Native American
- Multiracial
- Other (please specify) _____

14. How do you currently identify:

- Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Asexual
- Unsure
- _____ (Fill in the blank)

15. How do you currently identify:

- Male
- Female
- Transgender

_____ (Fill in the blank)

16. How many LGBTQ-identified people do you know?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-9
- 10+
- I do not know any LGBTQ people

17. The LGBTQ-identified people I know are:

- Mostly friends
- Mostly family
- Friends and family
- Acquaintances
- I do not know any LGBTQ people

Short Answer

What can you share about your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the LGBTQ community?

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BIOGRAPHY

Victoria Suarez grew up on military installations around the country and graduated from high school in Okinawa, Japan. She attended Marywood University and earned a Bachelor's degree in Business and Spanish in 2004. She then earned her Master's of Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Higher Education from George Mason University in 2015. She has spent many years in the higher education industry and is currently the Campus Director at a mid-sized health and beauty college in the northeast.