LGBTQA VALIDATION: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Despite increased attention to LGBTQA issues, campus climate studies suggest that LGBTQA students continue to be at heightened risk for mental health concerns and experiences with bullying, discrimination, and feelings of isolation and exclusion (Ellis, 2009; Rankin, 2003). In an effort to combat these experiences and provide a centralized safe space that empowers, connects, and supports sexual minority students, campuses have developed LGBTQA resource centers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQA students to better understand the value of LGBTQA resource centers from the student perspective. Rendón’s validation theory served as the guiding conceptual framework for this study and the investigative process was driven through the primary research question: What are the experiences of sexual minority students regarding on-campus LGBTQA resource centers?

Data was collected through conducting one-on-one interviews with six members of the LGBTQA student population, and the researcher utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to examine experiences. Five themes emerged when exploring how LGBTQA students made sense of their experiences and interactions with on campus resource centers. Despite differences across the identified themes, one foundational element underscored all findings; The LGBTQA community is desiring of and is in continued search for empowering relationships and sustained social exchange. Implications for practice within the arena of higher education are addressed and is accompanied by discussion of how these findings may support the need for further research, scholarly discussion, and action on behalf of the LGBTQA community.

Keywords: LGBTQA students, validation, LGBTQA resource centers, student support
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Chapter One: Introduction

Even as schools continue to possess increasingly diversified student populations, challenges to inclusiveness and threats to the existence of positive campus climates plague higher education institutions (Obear, 2012). Of increasing importance is the ability of institutions to address the distinctive needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual students (LGBTQA) by protecting sexual minority students from feelings of isolation and exclusion and validating identities through the promotion of diverse sexual identities and gender expressions. As a group representing less than ten percent of the general population (Riley, 2010), the LGBTQA population oftentimes finds its unique needs diluted due to an institution’s generalized diversity initiatives or the presence of heteronormative institutional policies and practices (Feigenbaum, 2007).

Heteronormativity refers to the practice of unconsciously holding the experiences of the heterosexual numerical majority as a general standard. It remains a powerful force that unconsciously and more overtly reconfirms heteronormative identities while further perpetuating the silence and invalidation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual identities. In turn, heteronormativity preserves the status quo, therein maintaining the unearned powered position of one group over another (Feigenbaum, 2007). This works to further marginalize or disadvantage students who may already be faced with ‘minority stress,’ or the psychological and social challenges associated with identifying outside majority norms (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010).

The challenge of providing successful LGBTQA support is of utmost importance on college campuses as this educational forum is oftentimes one of the first opportunities that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual students have to
independently develop as autonomous beings, internalize new teachings, and begin to formulate and solidify their self-identity, self-confidence, and self-concept. Though LGBTQA centers emerged in the 1970s (D’Emilio, 1992) as a response to LGBTQA needs, research conducted in 2012 suggests that roughly 8% of 4-year, not-for-profit colleges offer LGBTQA campus centers, with public institutions, institutions geographically located in the West, and those institutions with more politically liberal environments having a higher likelihood of possessing a LGBTQA student center (Fine, 2012).

**Statement of the Problem**

Existing literature on LGBTQA centers is fairly limited in quantity and generalized in scope. The majority of studies have concentrated on the need to implement specific campus-based resources to support LGBTQA student populations (Sanlo, 2004) or have highlighted specific services offered to the LGBTQA community and their allies (Beemyn, 2002; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Beemyn, Dominique, Pettit, & Smith, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005; Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; McKinney, 2005). Additionally, while some studies have focused on the process of introducing LGBTQA resources to different types of campus environments and settings (Ritchie & Banning, 2001) or identifying resistance to this change (Rankin, 2003, 2005), most studies have been conducted through an anecdotal or case study approach and have framed the study from an institutional perspective. In order to capture the range of student experience and highlight student need and student experience, this research focused on exploring the supportive role of LGBTQA centers from the perspective of the LGBTQA student community.

While LGBTQA campus centers have well intentioned objectives such as cultivating feelings of validation and appreciation for LGBTQA members, providing advocacy tools and
informational resources to the LGBTQA community, and encouraging the growth and
development of students so that they can serve as active community members and leaders, there
appears to be a dearth of research dedicated to exploring how students perceive and experience
the supportive function of available resources. As LGBTQA centers are implemented as a mode
for student advocacy and student support, it remains important that LGBTQA centers be assessed
from the perspective of the students to ensure that centers are meeting the needs of the LGBTQA
community and remaining a valuable and utilized resource on campus.

Purpose of Study

While it is important to investigate LGBTQA issues from a variety of standpoints, the
current body of research neglects direct exploration from a student-first perspective. Therefore,
this qualitative investigation explored perceptions of LGBTQA student center support through
the eyes and experiences of the student. This perspective is exceedingly important to consider as
the impressions and perceptions of the LGBTQA student body is imperative to the existence,
maintenance, utilization and maximization of available resources.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of LGBTQA student center support
through the experiences of LGBTQA students. This study was guided by the following research
question:

- What are the experiences of sexual minority students regarding on-campus LGBTQA
  resource centers?

Significance of Study

This study was significant as it serves as a response to a gap in available literature;
however this research also reflects inquiry into a very timely issue. On a national level, laws
related to benefits and protections of sexual minority individuals are evolving. Legislative response on a national level contributes to a trickle-down effect that requires organizations and educational institutions to be more conscious of the issues and challenges presented to the LGBTQA population. Additionally, it holds organizations more accountable for implementing effective strategies that will support sexual minority students and aim to reduce and eliminate barriers to success. As many institutions rely on LGBTQA student centers to serve in this capacity, it is necessary to ensure that the intended supportive functions are resonating with the students who are intended to be served by these resources.

Additionally, LGBTQA students, faculty, and issues are becoming more visible on college campuses (Evans & Herriott, 2004), and institutions are beginning to focus on LGBTQA students as a unique population of diversity (Young, 2011). As institutions begin to more directly recruit sexual minorities, it is important that LGBTQA outreach not end when students are admitted to college. Rather, institutions must possess resources that will facilitate a comfortable, accepting, and supportive educational environment (Young, 2011). The present research study illuminated student opinions about the role of LGBTQA student centers and helped to identify areas for improvement.

The student-centered approach of this research is particularly important to consider as prior research studies have found that administrators and educational leaders alike may not be especially attuned to the evolving needs of the LGBTQA student community. Through investigating from the LGBTQA student perspective not only were students’ needs highlighted, but administrators and allies can gain further insight into the perspectives of this population.
On a broader level, this study yielded findings that can assist other regional or more nationally based LGBTQA+ initiatives. While LGBTQA resource centers in the context of this specific investigative process referred to a physical space in the context of a higher education environment, the supportive structure of LGBTQA resource centers can be found within community settings as well. Directing conscious effort into understanding and gaining insight into the stories and experiences of LGBTQA young adults can help to identify the needs of LGBTQA individuals and inform best practices within all LGBTQA resource center settings. Moreover, this information can also assist in guiding further discussion of LGBTQA need across scholarship, research, and practice. In this way, the current study offers the potential to manufacture change on a broader community level while also directly supporting LGBTQA individuals through making needs, experiences, and stories more visible to allies, advocates, community members, as well as those individuals who may remain unaware of a more privileged status and an ability to serve and support LGBTQA community members.

**Conceptual Framework: Validation Theory**

This study utilized Rendón’s (1994) validation theory as the guiding conceptual framework. As a theoretical lens, validation theory has been used in multiculturally-focused dissertations aimed to explore the experiences of marginalized populations such as immigrant students (Ezeonu, 2006) and students of color (Dandridge-Rice, 2002). This theory has been influenced by feminist researchers and underscores the belief that validation may more important for those students who may not fit the traditional student profile, who may be characterized as members of underserved populations, or who may struggle to naturally integrate to campus life through participation in activities and community offerings both inside and outside of the classroom (Rendón, 1994).
As a theoretical lens, validation theory posits that enabling, confirming and supportive processes initiated by in-and out of class agents fosters academic and interpersonal development among underserved students (Rendón, 1994). The theory itself has six elements that help to describe how contextual factors in the form of institutional supports can positively influence student experience through encouraging both psychological development and behavioral change. One of the strengths of the theory is connecting how vulnerable students will benefit from external validation, which can serve as a mode to promote internal strength.

**Definitions**

This research investigated perceptions of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual community, a group of individuals collectively comprised of a diversity of sexual orientations and gender identity expressions. In academia, it is not uncommon to refer to this community through utilization of the acronym LGBTQA. This acronym incorporates a sub-group within the community who may refer to his/herself as queer or questioning. For the purposes of this research, participants self-identified as a member of the LGBTQA community, so it is possible that individuals who did not yet possess a solidified or exclusive sexual preference, orientation, or gender expression or those who did not wish to define themselves within the confines of those categories were included in the investigative process.

This research investigated perceptions of sexual minority students in terms of the perceived support experienced through LGBTQA resource centers. While centers are typically designed to facilitate support and community, these settings can take a variety of forms. Within this study, an LGBTQA student center referred to a physical space on a college campus, which provided information, community, and services to students who self-identified as sexual minorities. While student centers may rely on student leadership to guide and influence decision-
making, this study investigated students from a setting that was administratively led but that also incorporated some form of student leadership in terms of a governing student board and student–led programming.

This research understood LGBTQA support as an inclusive term that encapsulated a holistic understanding of the LGBTQA student experience. Within the study, the definition of support extended to many dimensions of reinforcement or encouragement including social connection and community interaction, the promotion of academic achievement or professional success, and/or creating a general awareness to LGBTQA+ issues.

However, this study also directly explored a specific type of emotional and psychological affirmation or encouragement known as validation. This study relied on Rendón’s framework and definition of validation to contextualize its data. Therefore, validation referred to the “intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment” (Rendón, 1994, p. 33). In this study, in-class and-out of class agents referred to those individuals who are directly connected to or employed within the LGBTQA student center as well as those individuals who may have appeared more peripheral. Therefore, a validating agent took the role of a LGBTQA center director, fellow administrator(s), center volunteer, lecturer or guest speaker, or another student working or participating within the student center. Moreover, validating forces within this research were not limited only to individuals or occupants of organizational roles, rather validation also occurred through informational exchange or programmatic offerings supported or sponsored by the LGBTQA center and its staff and representatives.
Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative study relied on participation from a small sample of LGBTQA students from a private institution in the Boston area. Students were recruited through flyers and through a university listerv available through the LGBTQA resource center. Participant recruitment through more public means could have threatened ethical considerations by ‘outing’ students who may have utilized the campus resources.

As the study’s participants self-identified, there was potential for similarities across participants that skewed the participant pool and potentially caused the resulting data to reflect more homogeneity across responses. However, my hope was to collect as diverse a sample as possible, especially since the sample size was limited to six student participants. In an effort to diversify the sample, efforts were made to solicit participation from students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual.

I used in-person interview format to collect responses. Face-to-face dialogue has been proven successful in eliciting more comprehensive responses, and also assists in forging a positive rapport between researcher and participant (Eubanks, 2009). Building trust and establishing a positive relationship increases the likelihood that participants will more readily explore their experiences and offer a perspective that may be withheld from other types of investigation (Morrow, 2005). While introducing a researcher into the process increases the likelihood for researcher bias and response affect bias, steps were taken to minimize these challenges to validity.

As a means of reducing potential biases, research questions were reviewed for language neutrality and were formatted as open questions (Butin, 2010), therein allowing for more clarification and individual response from the participant(s). Moreover, I remained conscious and
acutely aware of my own positionality within the LGBTQA community and how my experiences as an educated white woman in my thirties may have inherently biased the investigative and analytic processes. A position of racial, socioeconomic, and educational privilege has framed the research process from cultivating my initial interest in exploring the research topic to selecting a methodology that is intended to highlight the experiences and voices of LGBTQA student community members. As an individual who has benefitted from unconditional love and support from family and friends, my explorative process was intended to mirror and extend a similar environment of mutual respect and appreciation to all participants involved in the study. While this type of atmosphere was expected to foster a relationship of trust between myself and the participants and yield information-rich data, I remained reflective throughout the study to continue to explore how my personal predispositions, values, and experiences influenced and informed the investigative process.

While these positions may have presented unique challenges, it is also important to note the inherent conflict in studying the LGBTQA student population as one whole. While many scholars view this group as a unified community, this acronym represents the experiences of five different sexual minority groups. Each group occupies a different position in current society and may face differences in experiences as far as daily challenges and levels of received and available support. However, I understand the position of the LGBTQ community as a group of diverse individuals who likely share the potential to experience homophobia, be at risk for discrimination, and navigate a society filled with heterosexist perceptions and norms. The decision to attempt to incorporate all members of the LGBTQA community was made as a concerted effort to equally support students through the investigative process. The decision also offered the additional benefit of identifying whether sexual minority students of differing
orientations or identifications hold different perceptions of support. While not the primary focus of this research process, it was a curiosity that was very broadly explored when evaluating data.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Sexual minority students feel unsafe, invalidated, and isolated from their peers and their community (Evans 2002; Rankin, 2003). The presence of homophobia leads sexual minority students to experience feelings of isolation, alienation, and rejection (Love, 1998) and also causes them to develop negative self-concepts and low self-esteem (Slater, 1994). Lack of personal connectedness and the inability to feel valued by others puts LGBTQA students at heightened risk for physical, mental, and social health issues. While some research suggests that a lack of social connectedness puts students at risk for academic non-persistence (Tinto, 1999), scholars also assert that social isolation yields higher levels of depression and suicidality as well as lower academic achievement and attachment to school (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen & Palmer, 2012; Pearson, Muller; & Wilkinson, 2007).

Fortunately, colleges and universities have begun to more fully comprehend the importance of understanding an institution’s role in providing a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for sexual minority students. Though some studies provide evidence of resistance to change in creating welcoming environments for LGBTQA youth (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010), research over the past decade has documented a shift in culture as schools have begun to institute structural changes and enact further measures to create more inclusive and comprehensive policies and practices that serve to protect, confirm, and support sexual minority students (Rankin, 2003).

The purpose of this literature review is to examine and synthesize the existing body of literature dedicated to exploring LGBTQ student experience as it relates to experiences with campus support and the use of available resources. More specifically, this review will rely on recent campus climate research to assess the pulse of LGBTQA experience and explore the
feelings, perceptions, and experiences reported by sexual minority students in post-secondary environments. The review will underscore the experiences of LGBTQA students by mainly relying on research and self-reported data collected from sexual minority students, but this analysis will also be informed by information gathered from other campus constituents such as heterosexual students as well as LGBTQA and heterosexual faculty and staff. These perspectives are intended to add depth and breadth to the discussion provided.

This review also intends to introduce and explore three different support structures found within higher education environments that seek to support LGBTQA students and breakdown perceived barriers towards success. This will include discussion of gay-straight alliance programs, safe space programs, and LGBTQA resource centers. The later portion of the review will focus more specifically on LGBTQA resource centers with attention dedicated to exploring the types of support and anticipated benefits this campus resource seeks to offer LGBTQA students and the broader campus community. This will include exploration of visibility and awareness to LGBTQA student need as well as the social benefits of fostering peer connections and building community. The review will conclude with an introduction to Rendón’s validation theory and a description of how this framework may provide a unique lens for investigating the experiences of sexual minority students and their perceptions and experiences of receiving campus support.

The content of this analysis is largely based on investigation into scholarly literature available electronically through multiple research databases, and it relies largely on peer-reviewed sources. To date, most of the research has been conducted in U.S. institutions, so the majority of literature informing this review reflects the culture and sociopolitical underpinnings of the United States. As LGBTQA research as a whole is a relatively new field of inquiry, most
research represents studies conducted across the last forty years, with a disproportionate amount of studies being conducted in the past twenty years as this topic has gained more attention and generated more interest across scholars.

This review is organized into several distinct sections. This review will begin with an introduction to LGBTQA campus climate research including a brief overview of the history and intention of this type of investigative research, exploration into how LGBTQA campus climate studies have developed over time, and discussion on how findings across studies indicate differences in experience both between LGBTQA students and other community members as well as within the LGBTQA community itself.

The review will then transition into a review of three specific LGBTQA campus resources: gay-straight alliance programs, safe space programs, and LGBTQA resource centers. This section seeks to introduce these resources and explain how these structural supports work to assist sexual minority students. The conversation will then focus more specifically on LGBTQA resource centers and explore how this particular campus resource seeks to address challenges related to LGBTQA student visibility and awareness as well as the more relational aspects of LGBTQA student need including the development of peer networks and community connectedness. The review will conclude with an introduction to Rendón’s validation theory, a selected framework intended to facilitate understanding of the experiences of students who may feel marginalized or have prior experiences with invalidation.

**Introduction to Campus Climate Research**

Much of what is known about LGBTQA experiences on college campuses has been contributed through assessments of campus climate. Measures of campus climate include sexual minority students’ perceptions of experience, their emotional understandings and reactions to
these experiences, as well as the attitudes of other members of the campus community towards LGBTQA students and issues (Brown, Clarke, Goftmaker, & Robinson, 2004). Campus climate research serves a valuable function in capturing the LGBTQA experience as it seeks to establish the extent to which sexual minority students are affected by their physical and interpersonal surroundings including the social constructed phenomena of heterosexism and homophobia. As a whole, campus climate research seeks to document the range of LGBTQA experience as it relates to both incidents of disempowerment and discrimination as well as other institutional and community factors that may influence, encourage, or inhibit sexual minority students from fully engaging within the campus community or environment.

Many of the earliest campus climate studies exist as single-campus investigations initiated as a direct response to incidents of LGBTQA discrimination (Eliason, 1996; Brown, Clarke, Goftmaker, & Robinson, 2004). However, this field of research has evolved and studies have more begun to focus more on identifying factors that may shape individual perceptions of an institution’s level of LGBTQA-friendliness and experiences within a campus community.

Research to date appears to fall into two distinct categories: across-group research and within-group research. The first category of across-group research reflects studies that seek to examine campus climate on a broader level and utilize sexual minority students and other community members including heterosexual peers, faculty, and staff as a basis for direct or indirect comparison. These studies offer the opportunity to highlight differences across community groups and determine how or why sexual minority members may hold different opinions or perceptions from heterosexual community members. These types of studies also help to identify how certain groups within a campus or institutional structure relate to and engage with sexual minority students.
The second category of within-group research tends to rely on data obtained from LGBTQA students themselves. Many of these studies seek to identify salient factors that may shape experience or perception amongst sexual minorities and/or differentially influence or affect members within the LGBTQA community. These studies help to identify similarity and difference in experience and illuminate the notion that sexual minority communities are comprised of a diverse set of individuals.

**LGBTQA Comparison Research.**

Most across-group studies have found that LGBTQA students hold different perceptions of campus climate from heterosexual counterparts (Ellis, 2009; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). This may be because LGBTQA students are found to face higher rates of harassment, assault, and intimidation when compared to heterosexual peers (Bieschke, Eberz & Wilson, 2000). Perceptions of campus climate may also be tied to the overwhelming feelings of fear that LGBTQA students report in relation to the coming out process and the challenges anticipated with gaining peer and community acceptance or approval (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996, Waldo, 1998).

A 2004 study at a large Midwestern state research university employed a multiple perspectives approach to assessing the climate for LGBTQ students. Researchers explored the attitudes, experiences, and the behaviors of sexual minority students, non-LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. The researchers sought to examine how different campus community groups perceive the campus climate for sexual minority students. The study utilized a survey design and yielded a high return rate of 82-86% across targeted populations. Findings indicated that sexual minority students perceived the campus climate more negatively than other members of the campus community. Compared to other community members, sexual minority students reported
having more information and interest about LGBTQ topics and they reported participating in more LGBTQ activities (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004).

Findings across non-LGBTQ identified individuals (students, faculty, and staff) indicated that there were differences in views across groups as to the level of demonstrated interest in and support of LGBTQ programming. The data suggested that LGBTQ students may find stronger support from student affairs staff members than from faculty members based on their reports of increased participation and interest in attending LGBTQ-related events and programming. Student affairs staff also reported an increased potential to challenge derogatory comments or remarks, which may be especially important for students who are in the midst of coming out (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004).

One of the most robust studies of LGBTQ campus climate was a meta-analysis of more than 30 individual studies across higher education institutions (Rankin, 1988). Of the 30 individual studies analyzed, 17 studies reflected single-campus investigations with variation across public and private settings as well as quantitative and qualitative research methods. Most studies utilized a survey design, though the questions utilized across studies reflected diversity. Individually and collectively, investigations found high levels of LGBTQ-related harassment as well as anti-LGBTQ sentiments on college campuses.

While findings such as these have forced some scholars to suggest that colleges and universities have not supported safe and inclusive environments for sexual minority youth and have failed to provide effective learning environments for LGBTQ students (Rankin, 2003), they have also motivated some researchers to expand upon this earlier research and continue to explore aspects of the LGBTQ experiences on college campuses.
One example of this is the State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People’s 2010 investigation of perceptions of campus climate. This research used snowball and purposeful sampling methods to recruit LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff participants from over 100 institutions representing all 50 states. The results of this research indicated that 61.1% of LGBTQ individuals reported being targets of derogatory comments and nearly half of sexual minority members felt purposefully excluded from the campus community. While this data may support the notion that universities can or should do more to assist sexual minority students, this study helped to identify national trends that were indicative of LGBTQ experience in a variety of environments across the United States.

**LGBTQA-Specific Research.**

Exploration into within group differences remains a critical link in LGBTQA research as many scholars have cautioned that while lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual individuals may have many similarities in experience based on the challenges posed by heteronormative or homophobic environments, these individuals also represent several distinct sexual minority groups with unique experiences from one another. To honor this distinction and begin to more comprehensively understand differences within the LGBTQA experience, research has begun to focus on identifying factors that may be related to within-group experience and perception. To date, scholars have posited that a student’s level of outness, gender, and exposure to or experience with discrimination and/or harassment may be related to perceptions or experience of campus climate.

**Level of Outness.**

Level of outness refers to a student’s level of openness regarding a more public disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. A 2006 study focused specifically
on the relationship between a student’s level of sexual orientation disclosure or ‘outness’ and perceptions of campus climate while attending a Midwestern college. The results indicated that students who openly disclose their sexual orientation perceive the campus environment more negatively than closeted students. However, closeted students reported feeling more of a need to hide their sexual orientation. Both out students and closeted students reported experiencing unfair treatment and a need to hide their identity from other students. Additionally, both groups also reported bearing witness to anti-LGBTQ comments from other students (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006).

In 2013, researchers wanted to examine how particular experiences with being out contributed to student views of campus climate. The study yielded 75 sexual minority participants who were selected from a university located in the Great Plains region of the United States. Findings indicated that 86% of students reported not facing discrimination from a professor, however more than half of participants faced some type of discrimination from fellow students. In terms of intentionally hiding one’s sexual orientation from a professor, the majority of participants (58%) reported being open with professors about their sexual orientation whereas 65% of students reported hiding their sexual orientation on one or more occasions to a fellow student. Additionally, 41% of participants reported having to hide their sexual orientation four or more times (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger & Hope, 2013).

These results may not be surprising considering that research finds LGBTQ youth to be at higher risk for teasing (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012), bullying, and physical violence (Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). However, it is important to remain cognizant of the idea that LGBTQA students appear to struggle with feelings of safety and support. These two themes permeate the literature about the LGBTQA coming out
process, but it also seems that these factors may also play a role in student’s experiences or perceptions of campus climate.

**Gender.**

In addition to a student’s level of outness, there has been some interest across scholars in determining how gender may be related to perceptions of campus climate. While some research findings have found that women are more likely to rate the environment hostile (Waldo, 1998) or perceive more anti-LGBTQ attitudes on campus (Brown, Clarke, Gofmaker, & Robinson, 2004), other research findings suggest that men appear more likely to believe that anti-LGBTQ sentiments exist on a campus (Ellis, 2009). While there are differences across research findings, the majority of scholarly literature on homophobia suggests that men are significantly more homophobic than women (Chng & Moore, 1991; D’Augelli, 1989; Schellenberg, Hirt & Sears, 1999) and that gay men are more likely than lesbian women to be the victim of homophobic remarks. Therefore, in relation to campus climate research, some scholars argue that male participants, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, may tend to perceive the campus climate more negatively than female counterparts (Ellis, 2009).

While there are varying perspectives surrounding the relationship between gender and perception of campus climate, more agreement exists across research when the factor of gender is broadened to include gender identity. Within this field of research, data collected from transgender participants suggest that these students have more distinctive experiences when compared to lesbian, bisexual, or gay-identified peers.

Empirical research that aims to examine transgender students’ perceptions of campus climate generally finds that transgender students report increased harassment and experiences with discrimination (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; McKinney, 2005, Rankin, 2003). A national
study found that 41% of transgender participants experienced harassment on campus compared to 28% of LGB participants (Rankin, 2003). A 2011 study examined multiple institutions and incorporated a sample size of 50 transgender participants found that students reported perceptions of a hostile campus climate. Transgender students noted safety concerns while on campus due to their gender identification and the lack of support and education surrounding transgender issues. Inadequate education surrounding transgender issues was also noted in an earlier 2005 study that found that transgender students reported few positive experiences with campus counseling centers, faculty, and staff. These factors contributed to students’ perceptions of a negative campus climate (McKinney, 2005).

Experiences with Homophobia.

The relationship between LGBTQA identification and experiences with lack of support and feelings of isolation appear to be generated in part by the social and cultural happenings on campuses, which include the continued struggle to extinguish homophobic language and heterosexist attitudes (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). A study conducted at another large Midwestern university sought to analyze the impact that the use of the phrase ‘that’s so gay’ had on sexual minority youth. Researchers explored this relationship through administering an electronic survey to 114 sexual minority college students. Findings indicated that students who heard this phrase more frequently were more likely to report frequent physical ailments such as headaches and loss of appetite. These students also tended to report signs of psychological distress such as feeling more disconnected from their campus community.

A 2009 study conducted in the United Kingdom found that discrimination and harassment that can influence perceptions of campus climate but that these types of offensive and disempowering actions can take many forms. Researchers found that the most common attack
was derogatory comments, followed by direct or indirect verbal harassment or threats, and then threats of physical violence. Less common forms of harassment were also reported including pressure to be silent about one’s orientation and/or identity, receiving written anti-LGBTQ sentiments, being denied services, having been victimized by an actual physical assault or injury, threat of being outing by another individual, and being the target of anti-LGBTQ graffiti (Ellis, 2009).

Taken together, the findings of these campus climate studies suggest that members of the LGBTQA community may hold significantly different perspectives on campus climate than other members of the campus community. Moreover, LGBTQA students seem to face frequent challenges, some which may be categorized as social and institutionalized in nature. Based on these occurrences, some scholars, LGBTQA community supporters, allies, as well as sexual minority members themselves advocate that LGBTQA students on college campuses may be in need of intentional strategies and established forms of support that aim to provide sexual minority students with positive affirmation and work to facilitate awareness to LGBTQA student need as well community connectedness.

**LGBTQA Resources on College Campuses**

Both scholarly literature and research has supported the need for and interest in establishing LGBTQA campus resources. The results of a 2006 study found that closeted sexual minority students felt that these resources would be especially helpful in to meet their personal and academic needs (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). However, some scholars remain skeptical of the ability of structural resources in adequately responding to the safety and support needed by sexual minority students, and even argue that these resources may actually leave LGBTQA members with increased fear, vulnerability, and further lack of support (Rankin, 2005). Despite
this alternative viewpoint, gay-straight alliances, safe spaces, and LGBTQA resource centers continue to expand across the United States as identified resources that are intended to engage and support LGBTQA students.

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

Much of what is currently known about student support and the benefits of specific LGBTQA services has been contributed through investigating gay-straight alliances (GSAs). Gay-straight alliances are a form of social support programs that provide a safe place for sexual minority students and heterosexual peers to meet and support each other. These programs aim to identify allies of sexual minority students within the school community. One of the main purposes of GSAs is to provide support for sexual minority students who may be encountering difficult personal situations or who may be experiencing hostility in their school settings. For those individuals, GSAs offer an identified network of individuals who value diversity and inclusiveness (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin & Dreschsler, 2012) and offer support systems for assistance and exchange. GSAs started in the 1980s and are relatively prevalent on college campuses across the United States and around the globe. Though there are some documented cases of resistance to establishment based on an institution’s politics, policies, or religious affiliations, more than 3000 GSAS have been identified, with all fifty states being represented in that figure (Macgillivray, 2014).

GSAs offer many benefits to LGBTQA students. Szalacha (2003) conducted a three-year study of 1,646 students across 33 schools that aimed to compare the experiences and perceptions between students who were enrolled at institutions with GSAs with students who attended an institution where a GSA was not offered. Findings indicated that students at institutions with GSAs reported hearing fewer anti-gay slurs and felt that GSAs had a somewhat positive effect on
their school experience (Szalacha, 2003). Additionally, when students were asked how often they heard positive or supportive comments about lesbian and gay people from teachers, 24% of students from institutions offering GSAs reported once or twice a month compared to only 12% of students from institutions without GSAs. Not only did there seem to be a positive relationship between GSAs and the reported wellbeing of LGBTQA-identified members, but GSAs were also related to changes in actions and level of demonstrated LGBTQA support from community members such as faculty and staff.

The results of this study are complemented by research contributed by Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell (2011) that found that the presence of and participation in GSAs were related to reported improvements to students’ wellbeing and educational achievement. GSAs were found to be negatively associated with young adult depression and positively associated with self-esteem. Moreover, the presence of a GSA was also associated with a greater likelihood of college completion. Based on these results, it seems that LGBTQA support structures may be related to positive outcomes and may have the potential to influence positive psychological and educational consequences for students.

**Safe Space Programs.**

The notion of developing safe spaces is to acknowledge the harmful consequences of social isolation and marginalization (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin & Dreschsler, 2012). These supports offer assistance to the LGBTQA community by designating physical spaces on campus where diversity is respected and students know they can speak candidly and openly with confidants without fear of judgment or harm. Safe spaces are oftentimes identifiable through the designation of a small sticker or other indicator in a door, window, or public area (Fisher &
Kennedy, 2012), however these indicators are not always utilized as safe spaces can be officially recognized but also more unofficially present.

Safe spaces create a space for open dialogue and exchange, but they also serve as a symbol of respect for sexual diversity. Many have mission statements that seek to empower participants or members through directly challenging homophobia or transphobia and communicating a zero-tolerance policy for disrespect, prejudice, or discrimination. The function of the spaces is to foster respect, develop a deeper and more meaningful group identity, and many times to facilitate social change within a community (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin & Dreschsler, 2012).

Research findings support the notion that safe spaces serve a valuable function on college campuses. For some students, safe spaces offer an alternative to gay-straight alliances particularly in environments where institutions fail to recognize or support GSAs. However when compared to GSAs, safe spaces take many additional forms (Fetner et al, 2012) and may be officially or unofficially recognized within college settings. While the term typically designates a designated physical location on a campus, safe space trainings are also present, which allows potential advocates and allies to self-designate an office or room as an opportunity for support and therein facilitate more one-on-one meetings.

Another advantage to safe spaces is that they seek to empower many different groups or subgroups within a community. Compared to GSAs that seem to draw the most participation from sexual minority students, safe spaces appear to foster participation from a broader spectrum of individuals, including students of color and other individuals who may experience marginalization on campus. In this way, both sexual minority students and their peers are offered new opportunities to connect with individuals who they may otherwise avoid. This allows for the
development of new relationships, a broadening of social networks, and a feeling of affirmation or commonality across experience, as individuals share stories, engage in exchange, and seek to support one another.

**LGBTQA Resource Centers.**

One means of attempting to protect, confirm and support students is through offering a LGBTQA safe space in the form of an LGBTQA resource center. Of the nearly 5,500 American colleges and universities, roughly only 100 institutions offer this form of resource (Rankin, 2003) with public institutions, institutions geographically located in the West, and those institutions with more politically liberal environments having a higher likelihood of possessing a LGBTQA student center (Fine, 2012). LGBTQA resource centers are thought to serve as a unique approach to student support as these structural presences provide a centralized source for implementing consciousness-raising strategies such as sponsoring campus events and community-based trainings as well as supporting the more direct social, emotional, and developmental needs of LGBTQA students. Literature suggests that resource centers are necessary as they create visibility, normalcy, and equity (Albin & Dungy, 2005).

While the need for additional campus services for sexual minority students has been documented through assessments of campus climate and the exploration of services such as gay-straight alliances, there is a lack of research that seeks to explore the experienced benefits of LGBTQA resource centers from the perspective of sexual minority students. However, these centers are thought to enable and support LGBTQA students by facilitating awareness to LGBTQA student needs and develop opportunities for sexual minority students to meet other LGBTQA-identified peers and build a community.
LGBTQA Campus Resource Centers: The Anticipated Benefits

Changes to LGBTQA Visibility and Awareness.

Educators and educational environments seem disconnected from fully recognizing the experiences and needs of sexual minority students. D’Augelli (1989) states that there is a silent myth on college campuses that few sexual minority students exist, though national estimates indicate that 6-10% of students identify as LGBTQA and many scholars posit that this is an underestimate due challenges associated with these types of self-reporting measures. In addition to the belief that sexual minority members are a rarity within the student body, a recent qualitative study reveals that educators (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen & Palmer, 2012) also perceive physical forms of LGBTQA bullying as less serious than other forms of bullying.

Across studies, LGBTQA students consistently report that they feel invisible and misunderstood (Baker, 1991; D’Augelli, 1989). A 2007 qualitative study found that LGBTQ students felt belittled and unacknowledged by school counselors and teachers. These feelings were reported in connection with experiences of having others make heteronormative assumptions about an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity and the failure to use gender-neutral or inclusive language about an individual or his/her significant other (Rutter & Leech, 2006). Fortunately, research has found that experiences such as these can be improved through providing education (Evans & Herriott, 2004; Yost & Gilmore, 2011) that aims to raise awareness to LGBTQ issues. Effective educational strategies have included raising consciousness of LGBTQA issues as well as facilitating heterosexual self-awareness.

A 2004 ethnographic study involving four college freshmen participants found that increased self-awareness and intentional practices of self-reflection led to challenging one’s own perceptions of the LGBTQA community and transforming one’s desire to serve as an LGBTQA
advocate (Evans & Herriott, 2004). Similar transformative experiences were demonstrated in a 2010 study that aimed to explore how engagement in a diversity course could alter one’s awareness of heterosexual privilege, support for same sex marriage, and reduced prejudice towards sexual minorities. When compared to students enrolled in non-diversity courses, students in diversity courses expressed increased privilege awareness and increased support for same-sex marriage. These students also exhibited reduced prejudice towards sexual minority members (Case & Stewart, 2010).

Across these studies, findings suggest that the conditions for LGBTQ+ students can be improved through not only offering educational interventions for sexual minority students themselves, but also offering ways for the other members of the campus community to remain informed of and engaged in LGBTQ+ related information. Additionally, it appears that consciousness-raising activities may serve as a critical link to transforming positive change across a campus setting as individuals, including students and faculty and staff, as individuals are forced to reflect on their beliefs and internally challenge previously held attitudes and conceptions.

**The Facilitation of Peer Networks and Community Building.**

Sexual minorities report that one of the largest challenges faced in educational environments is experiencing feelings of isolation and a lack of social support. Research has found that general social support was a highly predictive factor of depression and life satisfaction (Sheets & Mohr, 2009). Yet, LGBTQ+ students often report difficulty locating community and social support on college campuses due to fear of rejection or hostility (D’Augelli, 1992).

The presence of on-campus support groups helps to alleviate this burden from sexual minority students and it also helps to create a more positive and inclusive environment for sexual
minority members (Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2013). Many LGBTQ+ resource centers sponsor gay-straight alliance (GSA) programs or safe spaces as a means of forging unity across the student body and offering social support to sexual minority students. As many of these partnership programs are purely peer-led, their mere presence symbolizes vast levels of peer support for sexual minority students (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003) and may work to affirm LGBTQ+ students as valued members of the learning community.

However, research findings suggest that students need various types of social reinforcement to support the successful development of social skills, academic competence, and effective adjustment to an educational environment (Malecki, & Demaray, 2003). Studies have found that LGBTQ+ students can benefit not only from positive relationships with peers, but they also can benefit from relationships with other non-family adults. These individuals oftentimes tend to be more supportive than family members in terms of providing LGBTQ+ individuals with emotional and instrumental support (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). This includes support in the form of providing loving, caring and trusting relationships where experiences and feelings can be shared, but it can also refer to more tangible support in the form of providing necessary resources such as money and time to assist an individual. For many students, these interactions fill a relational void that may not exist for heterosexual students. Perhaps for these reasons, LGBTQ+ youth have indicated a desire to establish more numerous and stronger relationships with their teachers, parents, and peers.

Sexual minority students can also benefit from having mentorships and role modeling relationships (Gastic & Johnson, 2009; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). LGBTQ+ advocates and scholars within the field refer to the relational assets framework which supports the need for sexual minority students to experience deliberate opportunities to create authentic and affirming
relationships across peers and adults as well as heterosexual peers (Sadowski et al., 2009). These opportunities support sexual minorities with a layer of social support that builds resilience to negative experiences or other disaffirming messages they may receive within an institution or on a broader social level. The opportunity to receive positive reinforcement and validating messaging is critical to students who are frequently placed in positions of disempowerment or are forced to navigate through environments that indirectly support verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile or negative connotations about LGBTQQA members.

**Understanding the LGBTQA Experience: Rendón’s Validation Theory**

While student success in college may be tied to broader campus engagement, the success of underserved students who are at risk for alienation, marginalization, or discrimination is connected to experiences of validation (Rendón, 1994; Nora, 2003, Jalomo, 1995). Validation refers to the “enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). The process of validation strengths a student’s ability to believe in their abilities, acquire feelings of self-worth, and increase motivation to succeed. Unlike engagement that refers to more student-initiated and student-directed actions to seek out opportunities to interact with the campus environment and its constituencies, validation underscores the importance of active contextual factors in working to assist students and connect students to their environment.

Rendón (1994) indicates that validation can consist of several elements that can occur across an institutional environment to assist students in feeling included and valued, but that there are two main types of validation: academic validation and interpersonal validation. Academic validation refers to actions that promote academic development such as providing
learning opportunities that empower students and providing individualized attention whereas interpersonal validation extends beyond this type of academic support process to offer actions and behaviors that underscore social support and facilitate interpersonal adjustment (Hurtado, Cuellar, Guillermo-Wann, 2011). Taken together, these two forms of validation support student development.

While Rendón first introduced the theory of validation to further understandings of the experiences of low-income, first-generation, and nontraditional students enrolled in higher education, the present study sought to extend Rendón’s theory to understand the experiences of LGBTQA students who may experience feelings of powerlessness and doubt similar to the first-generation populations Rendón sought to support. One of the central tenets of the theory is the belief that students who experience powerlessness, doubts about their own ability to success, and/or lack validation can be greatly assisted by experiencing positive reinforcement, attention, and a sense of positive regard. These experiences encourage self-affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. As LGBTQA students struggle to be accepted by their peers, experience social isolation, alienation, and homophobia (Rankin, 2003; Wickens & Sandlin, 2010) and are oftentimes the victims of bullying, harassment, and physical abuse (Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013), college communities could benefit from understanding how external supports facilitate sexual minority students’ internal strength and personal growth.

Moreover, LGBTQA students not only report feeling invisible on campus (Baker, 1991; D’Augelli, 1989), but many students remain unable to focus on academics (Lucozzi, 1998). Research conducted in 1994 found that 31% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students withdraw from college for at least a semester or longer and 33% of students officially withdrew
(Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994). Due to these experiences and the undeniable connection between students’ social and academic needs in a college setting, validation theory offers a framework that addresses both areas of student experience while also offering the potential for corrective support. Validation theory maintains that intentional and proactive affirmation of students can not only validate students as creators of knowledge and valuable members of the college learning community, but it can assist students in believing in their capacity to learn, feel included in a campus environment, and “feel cared about as a person, not just a student” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 15).

As a theoretical lens, validation theory has been used in multiculturally-focused dissertations aimed to explore the experiences of marginalized populations such as immigrant students (Ezeonu, 2006) and students of color (Dandridge-Rice, 2002). To date, it does not appear that Rendón’s theory has been directly applied to LGBTQA research. Most LGBTQA research appears to have employed Cass’ (1979) theory of sexual identity formation. This theory seeks to explain LGBTQA behavior and experience by focusing on six sequential stages of development. The theory aims to describe the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that gay and lesbian individuals experience as they learn to accept and incorporate their sexual orientation as part of their integrated self. While Cass’ model does not incorporate all sexual minorities and reserves understanding only for gay and lesbian individuals, there are further concerns about how the theory fails to consider socio-cultural factors that influence identity formation (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Due to these limitations especially in comparison to the strength of Rendón’s theory in viewing the importance of both individual and contextual variables in student development, validation theory was selected as the framework for the present study.
Beyond the interactionist nature of validation theory, another strength of Rendón’s theory is the principle of working with students as whole beings, who have more than just academic needs but also emotional, social, and inner-life aspects of development. The theory highlights the caring, supportive, reflective, and relational processes that characterize human experience. While the current research study intended to bring awareness around LGBTQA experience, it also sought to view this information in relation to the whole individual and create consciousness to the notion that although LGBTQA students may have additional needs, in many ways they are similar to their heterosexual counterparts. Normalizing LGBTQA experience and bringing it to the forefront of scholarly discussion serves as one means to raise awareness and include LGBTQA language and identity to daily conversation. This type of inclusivity and transparency is intended to minimize the power differentials between LGBTQA students and their heterosexual peers, and promote a sense of inclusivity and awareness to LGBTQA issues.

Finally, the selection of Rendón’s validation theory as the conceptual framework for this research was based on its student-center nature, and ability to support transformative change. Rendón’s theory embraces the individual voice of students, allowing for the communication of experience from a first-hand perspective. This characteristic is highly compatible with the IPA approach of the study, which seeks to underscore the ideal of student-as-expert. This goal of the present research is to give voice to the unique experiences and perceptions of individuals in a space where all realities are equally valued, appreciated, and explored and where the participants serve as the reflexive authorities willing to express themselves in their own words, in their own voices, and with their own uses of language and narrative (Lichtman, 2006). Rendón’s theory allows for this possibility, and also creates the ability to inspire transformative change. This change can be grounded within the student, or alternatively within educational institutions.
Summary

Campus climate research has uncovered many of the challenges faced by LGBTQA students within educational environments. It has begun to explore how the experiences and perceptions of sexual minority students may differ from other institutional community members as well as amongst LGBTQA members themselves. As a means of providing further support to the sexual minority student community, colleges and universities have begun establishing LGBTQA supports in the form of gay-straight alliances, safe spaces, and LGBTQA resource centers. These structures are intended to address the challenges to visibility and social support experienced by LGBTQA students. While research has documented the need for these supports and has identified their anticipated functions, very little research exists that explores how students actually experience or perceive reinforcement or assistance from these resources.

The next chapter will provide an overview of the methodological approach of the present study that sought to explore this question. Chapter Three will briefly indicate the epistemological and theoretical perspectives that shaped the study and will introduce the research questions that served to guide the investigative process. The following chapter will also include detailed information about the outlined research procedures utilized including information about sampling, data-collection, and data-analysis. Human protection and ethics precautions will also be discussed.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Research Questions

My problem of practice reflects how LGBTQA college students experience support, validation, and inclusion on college campuses. More specifically, my research focused particular attention on how sexual minority students experience the supportive functions of LGBTQA resource centers as campus resources designated to serve advocacy and informational roles as well as heighten campus awareness to LGBTQA student need. To address this question, I explored perceptions of LGBTQA student center support through investigating from the eyes and experiences of LGBTQA students.

- My primary research question was: What are the experiences of sexual minority students regarding on-campus LGBTQA resource centers?

This project documented the diversity of first-hand experiences that exist in relation to support experienced by sexual minority students from LGBTQA resource centers. As LGBTQA members may experience varying types and levels of support, the purpose of this analysis was to more fully explore and understand the perceptions and lived experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and asexual (LGBTQ) students, and inductively explore how campus-based supports assist sexual minority students in feeling that they are a visible, valued, and included group within the student body.

Methodology

Research Approach.

The research process was guided through inductive qualitative methods. Based on the dearth of literature on LGBTQA students as a whole and limited exploration of the specific issues and experiences of LGBTQA college students, the use of a qualitative approach was selected as a means to underscore the stories, voices, and experiences of LGBTQA student
participants. Durby (1994) notes LGBTQ students are frequently ignored and invisible in American society. Through utilizing qualitative practices, the experiences, stories, and voices of individuals were prioritized and LGBTQA students were provided with a platform to openly discuss and explore their experiences in a space that was guided by the use of open questions and an atmosphere of acceptance. This environment was intended to allow salient thoughts and feelings to uniquely emerge across participants and allow LGBTQA to serve as an educational expert and make visible the stories, challenges, and supports that characterize LGBTQA student experience. In this way, the qualitative methodology highlighted student voice and empowered participants through eliciting visibility to both experience and emotion on an individual basis while also allowing for identification of commonality and differentiation across diverse members within the LGBTQA community. Additionally, this approach transferred and reversed the position of privilege and support to LGBTQA students as they served as community educators, leaders, and experts.

**Research Design.**

A constructivist qualitative approach was employed, as the intention of this research was to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ students, highlight voices and experiences, and make sense of students’ perceptions of the supportive role and value of LGBTQ campus resources. As lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning individuals may occupy differential positions in time and space, and have historically encountered similar, yet unique, experiences in being recognized as equals to other LGBTQ community members as well as heterosexual peers (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008), this design gave voice to the assigned meaning and understanding gained from the perspective of the individual. This served as an intentional process to support all LGBTQ student members in acquiring a space to be heard, be recognized,
and have individual and community needs and experiences to be more highly visible. Moreover, this research allowed for study in an area where knowledge and scholarship is currently limited.

The constructivist perspective captured the belief that truth is constructed when individuals interact with each other and their environment (Crotty, 1996), and the interpretative phenomenological design allowed the phenomenon to be investigated from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, this research sought to give voice to the unique experiences and perceptions of individuals in a space where all realities are equally valued, appreciated, and explored and where the participants served as the reflective authorities willing to express themselves in their own words, in their own voices, and with their own uses of language and narrative (Lichtman, 2006).

**Researcher’s Role.**

My role as a researcher was to exist as a primary data collection instrument. I examined the different experiences of the participants by guiding them through in-depth, one-on-one in-person interviews. I engaged individuals through open-ended questions and flexible protocols that allowed for advancement and investigation of unique experiences and perceptions. I also remained a co-constructor of knowledge able to employ flexibility to probe participants to elicit key themes, ideas, and emotions so that each individual story and voice was more fully explored and understood. However, I also identified and reflected on my own bias in the research as an LGBTQ advocate and community member, and made attempts to understand my personal preconceptions while approaching the phenomenon with an open mind.

The theoretical underpinnings of the employed IPA research approach suggest that while I sought to explore the personal world of participants, my understanding and interpretations were influenced and guided by my own experiences and sense of reality (Smith & Osborn, 2003).
Therefore, my interpretations was bounded by participants’ abilities to communicate and articulate thoughts about their own worlds as well as my own ability to reflect and analyze these experiences.

**Research Tradition.**

This study was guided by an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). This method prioritizes exploration of how an individual understands their experience, and what meaning those experiences hold for the individual. The primary research questions in this study were intended to address how LGBTQ students experience support, validation, and inclusion and further explore what these experiences meant in respect to LGBTQ experience on campus. This perspective relied on theoretical principles of Husserl’s phenomenology, which underscores the importance of consciousness and allows for exploration into perceptions, judgments, and experiences (Husserl, 1970). Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty advanced this understanding by further exploring how prior knowledge can influence the interpretative process. This research explored both avenues through illuminating individuals’ perceptions and realities and also underscoring my contextualized interpretation of participants’ thoughts and experiences.

While other research approaches could have been used to explore the topic at hand, IPA has been used predominantly in the field of psychology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and maintains attention to aspects of cognition that may not be as well integrated within other approaches. Additionally, the idiographic commitment of IPA situates participants in their particular environments and contexts, and explores personal realities with a detailed examination of each history and experience before understanding interconnections and preparing more general claims (Smith et al., 2009). Since the central concept to the topic of inquiry is the intangible constructs of support and validation from the unique perspective of participants who
spanned the LGBTQ community, the exploration of cognitions and the unique lens of each participant were paramount to the investigative process.

Moreover, unlike other approaches, IPA highlights the use of a double hermeneutic, which underscores the importance of gaining understanding on two levels – the participant’s voiced experiences and the researcher’s interpretations of that information. One of the primary philosophic distinctions of IPA research is its ability to directly address and leverage the perspective and worldviews of the researcher. Unlike general phenomenological research that seeks to put aside and bracket the biases of the researcher, IPA seeks to incorporate this knowledge to contextualize and inform understandings. It maintains that the worldviews and biases of the researcher are impossible to separate and limit in respect to their influence during the interpretative analysis process. By addressing this influence, the researcher seeks to uphold authenticity and transparency in the investigative process.

**Participants**

The participants in this study included six self-identified members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning community. The sample size included six individuals to reflect diversity across the LGBTQ community spectrum. All individuals represented traditional undergraduate day students attending the same institution of higher education. The use of traditional undergraduate students helped to tailor the age range and experiential background across participants, therein reducing the likelihood that a difference in perception or experience was directly attributable to an individual possessing more life experience or being in a heightened state of sexual identity development as it relates to age and maturity.

While there is some debate across academic scholars and researchers regarding the
appropriate sample size within qualitative research (Morse, 2000; Jette, Grover, & Keck, 2003), this study met the recommendation presented by Creswell (2007) that the sample size reflects between five and twenty-five participants. Moreover, this number also maintained the standard within IPA research that a small sample size highlight meaning and distinction and reduce the likelihood that subtlety is lost in large data sets (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The six participants included in this research were intended to reflect an appropriate level of saturation that could be used to describe the experiences of sexual minorities who operate within the same institutional culture and are bounded by similar state legislation and regional ideals.

Participants ranged in age from 18-24 years old. All individuals had attended the institution of learning for at least one year, and were officially categorized as sophomore standing or above at the time the study is conducted. This standing helped to guide the process by including students who have had ample time to understand and experience the institutional culture at large and seek out and utilize available LGBTQ services and resources.

As is typical in qualitative research, this study used a small, criterion-based sample that offered depth and breadth to the subject of inquiry. Creswell (2012) suggests that “all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied,” (p.155) therefore all individuals self-referred based on being a self-identified member of the LGBTQ community, and on having had at least three prior experiences participating within or utilizing the Anonymous University LGBTQ campus resource center.

**Recruitment and Access.**

Researchers have found that sexual minority members are oftentimes difficult to identify or recruit because sexual orientation and/or gender identity are concealable dimensions of diversity. Moreover, sexual minority members are infrequently provided an opportunity to
disclose their sexual minority status to organizations and research investigators. Therefore, “options for representative sampling are limited for researchers who wish to recruit sexual minority participants” (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009, p. 9).

In this study, I utilized relationships with gatekeepers at the LGBTQ center on campus to inform individuals about the study. Permission was authorized from the primary administrator of the LGBTQ resource center to recruit participants through community board flyering and electronic communications. The gatekeeper also assisted me by providing email addresses for individuals who participated within the resource center, and had opted to receive further communications about upcoming events and opportunities for programmatic participation. Should ample participation have not been rendered through an initial email attempt, a secondary call for participation would have been sent. If that attempt did not yield successful results, then snowball sampling would have been relied upon to identify participants. All individuals who participated in the study received a $10 amazon gift card.

**Data Collection**

As face-to-face or personal interviews are the best way to collect high quality data especially when a subject matter is sensitive (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2000), this study relied on one-on-one, in-person interviews as the primary source of data collection. Interview data was selected to be the primary form of data, as it allowed for the opportunity to elicit further response and detail to specific questions, and also allowed me to gain rapport and develop trusting relationships with participants. It also had the potential to facilitate the collection of more person-centered data that highlights the individual experience, voice, and story of each participant. While survey data could help to elucidate some similar information, the highly interpersonal nature of the interview process was expected to yield more information-rich
material through utilizing techniques which can reveal meanings otherwise taken for granted by participants (Hatch, 2002).

Additionally, from an ethical standpoint interviews allowed me to assess and monitor participants’ level of comfort with questioning and maintain the potential to avoid inquiries that may elicit discomfort. Moreover, the interview data also required that participants express their thoughts in a more immediate capacity. This helped to eliminate the use of self-editing in participant responses by not extending participants time to overanalyze their answers. In this way, more salient and authentic responses were generated by participants.

I engaged each participant in an in-depth, semi-structured interview that was approximately forty-five minutes in length. The interview was guided by, but not limited to, a few pre-established, open-ended questions outlined in the interview protocol. These questions included one or two ice-breaker questions to initiate the interview and ease participants into the process, and three to five substantive questions that sought to more deeply engage participants into the topic of inquiry. The interview process concluded with closing questions that allowed participants to clarify any responses and present the opportunity to ask questions.

As suggested by Rubin & Rubin (2012), reliance upon the outlined questions was uniquely based on the individual interview process between interviewer and participant. While questions may remain a resource to facilitate discussion and exploration, IPA relies upon semi-structured process that allows for modification and a more organic structure (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The semi-structured interview process allowed for investigation into the topic of inquiry while permitting sufficient flexibility (Creswell, 2007). This allowed me to clarify questions, address misunderstandings, and probe participant responses to elicit follow-up. The potential to obtain robust responses through this methodology made it unique from other methodological
designs (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2000). Moreover, the interactive nature of data collection was increasingly important when considering the topic at hand, as it allowed for investigation and development of responses that appeared salient to the participant and highlighted unique experiences across sexual minority individuals. This was especially important in the present LGBTQ research, as researchers who implement a rigid design and maintain sole authority in capturing and interpreting experience may perpetuate the oppression of LGBTQ individuals (Singh & Shelton, 2011) through not allowing for individual voice or experience to be underscored or through maintaining a power differential in the data collection process which mirrors the more heteronormative environment faced by LGBTQ individuals in daily life.

To empower participants and eliminate the potential for discomfort or concern, all interviews were conducted off campus and the style and approach to the interview process was conversational and informal. Rubin & Rubin (2012) suggest that utilization of a safe and private space during the data collection process can encourage rapport and trust. The mutually agreed upon space allowed for both privacy and a quiet environment in which the interview was digitally recorded via smartphone software. To limit concerns about confidentiality and reduce the potential for participant discomfort, only audio data was recorded. To capture information about the setting, the social environment created between participants and myself, and information about nonverbal communication, I took minimal notes during the interview process. Upon completion of the individual interview, I electronically recorded all notes.

**Data Storage and Management**

All interviews and observational data were electronically recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The electronic files was securely kept as an encrypted file in a password protected computer accessed only by myself and any individual serving in a supervisory capacity. Data
will be stored for approximately three years from the time that the study was completed, as this will exceed the anticipated period for dissertation approval and requirements for data management. All materials will be permanently destroyed thereafter. At the time of dissertation acceptance, the study as a whole was made available to participants.

To ensure confidentiality, all stored and reported information includes the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, all identifying information has been conveyed in more general terms to reduce the likelihood that any specific individual could be easily identifiable amongst their peers or community members.

**Data Analysis**

All participant responses yielded through the in-person interview process were transcribed word-for-word. These transcriptions were electronic, and have been saved as password-protected digital files on a personal computer. Transcribed documents allowed for the reading of line-by-line interview data, but also possessed space for me to make notes which helped contextualize comments and memos therein assisting while delineating codes.

The coding process itself required multiple readings of each individual transcript so I was familiar with the essence of the information (Creswell, 2012). Upon completion of the initial data familiarization process, I began to code material through an initial first round coding cycle that was subsequently followed by a secondary coding process. The initial coding process relied on descriptive and in vivo coding methods. The use of these coding procedures underscored the voice and perspectives of participants (Saldana, 2013) as in vivo codes rely on the utilization of raw data in the form of participants’ words and phrases to facilitate the creation of actual codes.

Upon completion of first round coding processes, NVivo software was utilized to cross reference each interview and help to identify commonalities in language and word selections
across participants. These repetitions were categorized into themes. Themes were labeled intentionally to characterize the text and capturing the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of participants.

Once themes were identified, I identified connections and shared meanings across these categories, therein clustering information into more structured understandings (Willig, 2001). This assisted in revealing patterns to integrate information, inform understandings, and generate meaning across participant experience.

**Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification**

As Morrow (2005) suggests, researchers can use both rich descriptions of source data as well as descriptions of the contexts in which the experiences occur to support the quality of the work conducted. Rich description supported the transferability of data, which reflects the ability of findings to be applied to other situations and settings (Shenton, 2004). This study does not only describe the voiced experiences of LGBTQ participants, but it also noted the institutional environment and campus culture to help bring context to that experience. Information about the university type, location, and level was disclosed. Moreover, information about the participant pool was thoroughly described to include information about participant’s race, gender, year in school, and sexual orientation and/or gender identity, while not compromising individual anonymity.

To assist in making the interpretation of data and the results and discussion sections of the research more meaningful, this study upheld transparency and disclosed detailed information about the methodology employed such as where the one-on-one interviews took place, the length of interviews, as well as the recording procedures utilized. Through providing detailed reports, confirmability and dependability was enhanced to enable any future researchers to assess the
strength of the research design and potentially replicate the study (Shenton, 2004).

Furthermore, as a study’s trustworthiness is amplified when subjects’ perceptions and thoughts are confirmed in a systematic manner (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996), member checking was employed to enhance the quality of the research and respond to the need for qualitative research to be credible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks to be pivotal in supporting the credibility of the study as it assists in confirming the accuracy of data. In this study, I re-engaged participants after the one-on-one interviews were conducted so that all members have the opportunity to review the produced interview transcript. This ensured that transcripts were accurate and appropriately represented the participant’s experiences.

As a final means of upholding the integrity of this work and quality of associated data, I engaged in frequent reflection to clarify bias in all steps of the research process. To accomplish the goal of identifying assumptions and predispositions, I engaged in frequent and deliberate reflection and kept a self-reflective journal throughout the investigation. This journal catalogued experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness as I engaged in the study. Reflective data was then examined to ensure that the data collection and analysis remained authentic to the participant experience.

**Threats to Internal Validity**

Factors may interfere with the fair collection and interpretation of data (Morrow, 2005). As data was collected via individual interviews, experimenter effects may deliberately and unintentional influence subjects. For instance, it is possible that I differentially reinforced responses or behaviors. This may have affected responses across participants, and also had the potential to reinforce responses within the same participant. Efforts were made to minimize these effects through establishing an interview protocol and conducting all individual interviews
in the same space with me serving as the sole researcher. Moreover, I continued to practice
reflexivity and exercised self-awareness during the interview process and in the analysis of data.

These efforts also helped to reduce the potential for threats present through
instrumentation (Schaie, 1988). While interviews were semi-structured and were subject to some
differences across participants, the general format of all interviews remained constant across
participants. Interviews were approximately the same length in time and interview questions
were similar in nature, while allowing for the flexibility necessary in interpretative
phenomenological research.

Finally, all participant data was collected around the same point in time to reduce history
effects and minimize any threat posed by changes in the environment which may influence
participant perception or experience. While each participant came from a unique personal
history, the exploration into the lived experience of LGBTQ students and understandings of
identity validation was examined within a bounded point in time to restrict the conditions of the
study. This was especially important given the recent changes to state and federal legislation that
may have influenced changes in social perspectives and encouraged increased institutional
support of LGBTQ individuals.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The intention of this research was to uphold the highest respect for participants and
maintain the protection of all parties involved by adhering to the recommendations and ethical
guidelines put forth by the American Psychological Association (APA), National Institutes of
Health (NIH), and the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Promoting
ethical research is especially important when exploring the experiences of sexual minorities as
lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals are at increased
risk for social vulnerability (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009). To increase the likelihood that an individual was competent in comprehending the complexities of the study and the intended level of participation, all participants were over the age of 18 years old. Additionally, all participants self-identified as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) community.

Prior to engaging in the study, participants were required to provide informed consent through completion of an informed consent form that outlined the nature of the research and function of participant involvement. To underscore the importance of the informed consent process and the voluntary nature of participation, information included in the written informed consent materials was also accompanied by a verbal overview of the purpose of the study and a clear identification of any potential risks and benefits associated with participation. This explanation was followed by the opportunity for participants to ask questions.

As the potential for psychological and social risk are associated with any qualitative research participation (Lee, 1999), all participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion. Additionally, participants were also affirmed in the ability to skip or limit responses to any individual questions or lines of questioning that may have elicited psychological or emotional discomfort.

To help to minimize any potential risk to participants and to uphold beneficence, conscious efforts were made to eliminate any heterosexual bias in language choice and the presentation of materials. Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, and Melton (1991), advise researchers to be conscious of heterosexual bias that may unconsciously enter research materials or the interview process. Therefore, interview protocols and study-related communications included language that was consciously intended to be inclusive of all individuals.
As LGBTQ community members may be subject to social stigma or prejudice, confidentiality was maintained to promote participants’ psychological welfare. All individual interviews took place in a mutually agreeable location off-campus, which is not aligned with a specific-LGBTQ resource but does provide an area that safeguards diversity. To further protect participations, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were closely monitored, and data and reporting incorporated the use of pseudonyms to conceal the true identity of the individuals involved. Additionally, all recorded interview data was electronically stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer that is only accessed by the researcher. All files and recordings will be held for a minimal period of time before being permanently erased.

In preparation of gaining IRB approval, I sought to uphold respect for persons, beneficence, and justice therein preserving the ethical principles established by the Belmont Report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects. Though the research posed the potential for participants to experience minimal emotional distress in recounting past experiences with campus-based resources, the research intended to investigate an area of inquiry that can have benefits to society. Studies surrounding the experiences of sexual minorities not only allow for investigation into the realities of LGBTQ members, but these studies also have the potential to advance understanding of general human behavior and serve as an impetus towards positive change (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009).

As a researcher, I must recognize my own role in fostering positive change. As such, I consciously explored my initial biases to the subject matter, and have considered the power and privilege that accompanied my role in the investigation process. Peshkin (1988) notes that it is essential that researchers consciously recognize the role of the subjective-self and understand how this self can influence the research process. To minimize any bias, heavy consideration was
given to the research design, and in minimizing the power differential between the participants and myself. The use of one-on-one interviewing allowed individuals to have a space to speak, and the responses of the participants were transcribed word-for-word to yield information-rich descriptions of lived experience. To ensure appropriate levels of accuracy and authenticity, member checking was utilized so that participants had the opportunity to review the data and confirm information for accuracy.
Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

While LGBTQA resource centers seek to offer a variety of services and programs to LGBTQA identified students, there is little research dedicated to exploring the experiences and perceptions of sexual minority students in respect to these spaces. In order to best understand how students experience on campus LGBTQA resource centers, this study sought first hand knowledge and insight from LGBTQA students to understand how they make meaning and gain value from resource centers. Because the LGBTQA community is composed of a diverse group of individuals all coming from unique backgrounds and possessing different interests, perspectives, attitudes, and philosophies, and because sexual minority research oftentimes overlooks the unique experiences between community members, this chapter seeks to capture similarities and differences in experience to provide breadth and depth to the exploration process and to make visible the individual thoughts and experiences of students representing a diverse palate of sexual orientations and gender identities.

This chapter serves to present the findings of the conducted study. This will include discussion of participant data captured during the interview process that is thought to both influence and contextualize the presented findings and themes that will follow. The primary purpose of this chapter is to describe the research findings that resulted from examining the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences communicated by the six LGBTQA-identified undergraduate students who participated in the study. However, this chapter will also discuss some unanticipated findings and analytic memos to give voice to some of the anomalies and unique findings that surfaced during discussions with individual participants or throughout the
data collection process. The chapter will conclude by synthesizing findings and briefly discussing how these themes inform understanding of the LGBTQ experience.

**Data Collection: Discussion of Participant Profiles**

To protect the confidentiality of individual participants, the following demographic and process-oriented data will represent participant information within the context of a participant group. This practice is being intentionally employed to preserve the anonymity of the six participants who may be at greater risk for vulnerability within their campus setting or within the broader community. To ensure their safety, security, and privacy, individual participant profiles will be compiled and relayed through broader-level group analysis. In this way, I hope to strike a balance between honoring individual experience and providing a protective barrier that encourages LGBTQA students to continue to place their trust and confidence in administrative leaders, researchers, and scholars who convey interest in understanding their experiences.

**Demographic Data.**

The participant group consisted of two gay men, two lesbian women, a transgender man, and one male who identified as sexually fluid. The majority of the sample identified as cisgendered, meaning they identified as the gender assigned at birth. It is critical to note that during self-reflection, many participants referred to him, her, or their self as being a queer-identified versus the arguably more rigid label of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or asexual. Participants suggested that this designation was more fluid and was a sign of respect for others who may not identify within a gender binary. All participants attended the same institution of study and utilized the same LGBTQA resource center. This LGBTQA resource center was housed within a private four-year institution in the Boston area. While one participant reported being a transfer student and was therefore able to discuss her experiences in
contrast to prior experiences at her former institution of study, most participants wholly based their impressions and perceptions from interactions had with a single on-campus LGBTQA resource center.

Three participants reported identifying as students of color and all students reported being born within the United States. One individual identified as a second generation, which underscored feelings of appreciation for currently residing within a cultural and institutional environment that acknowledges and supports individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The remaining five participants more strongly identified as U.S. citizens, with four students being born and raised in the New England region of the United States. The remaining two participants were born and raised on the west coast of the United States, which they both characterized as being more socially liberal.

**Data Analysis: Discussion of Participant Process**

All participants in the study provided rich, detailed accounts of their unique experiences with the LGBTQA resource center. While some individuals noted their direct participation within the physical space of the on-campus LGBTQA resource center, others noted that their impressions of or experiences with the center were based on engagement with the center solely through participation within its on-campus programming, services, or events.

The accounts and recollections of experience shared during the research process were varied in length and in space and time. Some participants cultivated an affinity for the space resulting in several years of engagement that led to more information-rich responses to interview prompts, while other participants engaged with the space infrequently and shared insights, thoughts, and impressions based on a single year of engagement or an inconsistent or more fluid relationship with the center over time. Observations and field notes made during the interview
process indicated that these individuals often needed a longer time to respond to prompts or more time to reflect on their experiences to date. Upon reflection, the supplied responses also tended to be more direct and succinct.

Those individuals who reported stronger engagement also appeared to experience more ease and more positive affect when responding to prompts, whereas those participants who had an abbreviated relationship with the center appeared less attune to or less positive in their emotional connection to the space. In general, individuals who reported having shorter engagement with the LGBTQA resource center tended to also have fewer examples to draw from when framing their experiences and responses, which ultimately led to more follow-up prompts and sometimes a shorter overall interview.

All participants were very open in their personal recollections or accounts of their experiences with the LGBTQA resource center. To facilitate a sense of comfort, all participants were invited to select an off-campus meeting space of their liking to conduct the interview. Surprisingly, most interviews took place within the same local café off-campus. Despite background noise, the potential to run into peers, and other foot traffic within the space, conversations maintained a concentrated focus. Participants were not only engaged and candid in communicating their experiences, but they also appeared to be empowered in posing questions of their own during the interview process. At times, participant questions felt like challenges to my intentions as a researcher. However, upon further reflection I wonder whether these exchanges were indicative of prior poor experiences with university administrators, a genuine interest in seeing this study result in greater community support and action, or simply an opportunity to capitalize on intellectual and personal exchange with another LGBTQA-identified individual. These questions, whether they be reflective of challenge or curiosity, were posed with respect
and an intention of being constructive in our conversations together. Based on these interactions, I feel more dutiful in my position as a researcher to relay experiences and the following findings in a way that is equitable across participants but also in a way that is authentic to individual voice.

**Data Analysis: Discussion of Themes**

The following analysis of data resulted from semi-structured interviews and is organized into five overarching themes that are supported through the direct words, language, and voices of participants. In this way, it is my hope for these themes to resonate the firsthand experiences of LGBTQA individuals and to reflect their own thoughts, feelings, and aspirations and for me as a researcher to honor and uphold their intentions to educate others, inform new opinions, and facilitate change. The themes that follow are not presented in order of importance or how they emerged throughout the interviews. Rather they reflect similar statements made by participants during their interviews and were established upon analysis of the interview transcript.

**Central Research Question**

*What are the experiences of sexual minority students regarding on-campus LGBTQA resource centers?*

Five themes emerged when answering the question of how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and asexual students make sense of their experiences and interactions with on campus LGBTQA resource centers. Despite communicated differences in student need as well as differences recounted through the exchanges, interactions, thoughts, feelings, and aspirations for the relationship between student and center, one central theme transcended all stated differences: LGBTQA resource centers can provide a harbor of support for students. For some, the physical space responds to a primary need for students to feel visible and
connected with other in-community individuals. For others, the availability and presence of a physical space on campus serves as a more private space allowing for personal growth and development, a reliable space to study, share challenges, celebrate triumphs, and feel comfortable as self.

**Theme one: Visibility and Connection**

*Community.*

One of the fundamental reasons and motivations for students to engage with the LGBTQA resource center was to respond to a desire to participate within a social space, to meet other LGBTQA identified students, to forge friendships, and to simply have a place to go where they could feel at home with themselves and with others. As one participant stated,

> It’s like its own room. It’s not shared with anyone else. In the student center, there’s like all different types of people around you – like in the library, same thing. You can get like a study room but usually you’re going to be kicked out. . . but this is a space you can go to and know it’s going to be there. And it’s kind of like for you specifically.

In addition to having the space serve as a social haven complete with a television, couch, kitchen space, blankets, and video games, it also provided the opportunity to socially engage in building community through LGBTQA student groups and events or programs supported through the center. Participants stated, “When I am at events, I definitely see lots of different types of people . . . trans people, and gay people, or bi people,” “I kind of already have my own support network of friends and groups and people who are like trans, but it was kind of cool to connect like with other students who I didn’t even know,” “Had I not gone … there’s no other situation where I would have ever met these people. They’re not the same major, we didn’t live
in the same dorm, we’ve never been in the same class. There’s like no other way we would have ever met, and the two people are my two best friends now.” In addition to providing a place to build friendships, relationships, and a new or expanded peer community in college, participants referenced the importance of the space by juxtaposing the perceived ease and comfort of the LGBTQA resource center with other anxiety producing spaces that may be more complex to navigate such as LGBTQA social media platforms or more broad based community spaces like gay bars and clubs. One participant shared her thoughts about what makes the LGBTQA a unique space:

Sometimes it’s so hard to meet people outside of the online hookup scene, or the bar scene or any of those really sexually charged spaces. Just looking to make friends and make community and be in a comfortable, safe space – that can be really hard to come by, and the center is a place where you can just kind of come together with people in different stages of the community.

Additionally, as a participant noted, many of the social spaces outside of campus life come with age restrictions, which can discourage and exclude certain members of the LGBTQA community who are not either eighteen or twenty-one years old. In this way, on campus LGBTQA resource centers offer more inclusivity than other off-campus spaces seeking to serve the LGBTQA community.

In terms of the environment of the LGBTQA resource center, participants mentioned that the resource is truly open to all individuals, though one participant noted that there has been some feedback from bisexual and non-monosexual peers that the center could take additional steps to more fully integrate or represent those student populations. However, individuals felt that LGBTQA centers are generally designed with flexibility to
respond to all LGBTQ student need, though they report improvements are being made to
more fully achieve this goal.

**Programs and Events.**

Participants felt that centers promote LGBTQ student visibility in terms of connecting
with others, but they also work to promote visibility through sponsoring drag shows, mixers, and
lecture series for students to learn from others and interface with other in-community members
as well as heterosexual peers who may serve as potential allies. In addition to serving social
needs, these programs build a space for intellectual engagement about issues of diversity.
Participants felt that the presence of LGBTQ advocates, LGBTQ-identified speakers and
entertainers, and lecture series that were more academically-based all supported visibility to
LGBTQ issues and a sense of connectedness amongst the LGBTQ community on campus.
Participants also gained an appreciation for other elements of diversity that may intersect with
their own experiences.

Participants acknowledged LGBTQ campus events as being one of the main points of
entry into LGBTQ campus life and credit events with further direct engagement with the
LGBTQ resource center. One individual noted how impactful these events were for him based
on his experiences of being raised in a more conservative environment. He credited early
participation at campus events for his introduction to individuals of varying sexual orientations
and gender identities. Though this was initially outside of his comfort zone, his experiences with
LGBTQ programming sponsored by the LGBTQ resource center facilitated his social and
emotional maturity. These two areas of social and personal development were capacities that
many participants reported witnessing growth within due to their relationships and interactions
with the resource center. One person mentioned, “I think it’s just influenced my college
experience in the sense that it has helped me just network and like develop interpersonal skills…it’s given me a sense of awareness.”

**Space: Size and Location.**

While most participants agreed that the events, programs, and the LGBTQ+ resource center itself work to promote visibility on campus and assist with personal and social development, individuals acknowledged some limitations to LGBTQ+ visibility exist based on the size, availability, and location of the LGBTQ+ center itself. Participants characterized the space as being small, tucked away within campus, and having little marketing or outreach conducted to promote its presence to its intended student base. Interestingly enough, the location of the LGBTQ+ center drove different perceptions and experiences across participants. For some, the location of being more removed appeared to reinforce feelings of being invisible and existed as a source of contention on campus. Participants provided these thoughts, “We could actually have like more of a presence instead of this hidden room in the student center that like no one really knows where it is,” and “I just feel like there it does make you feel like a bit like you’re kind of being shoved into a box out of sight on the third floor .. where other people don’t have to deal with or engage with you.” Participants also felt that being more physically removed on campus may be symbolic of the administration’s lack of full fledged support of the LGBTQ+ community.

However other LGBTQ+ participants felt that having the space be more remote provided a sense of privacy for those students who may be just beginning their personal journey of self exploration or acceptance. In this way, the remote location of an LGBTQ+ center may actually encourage use and participation among students who may feel vulnerable entering a space that is more public or adorned with rainbow flags and LGBTQ+ insignia.
Despite differing perspectives on size and location, the majority of participants reported that they felt less visible in their identities when compared to other types of student identity-based centers found on the college campus. The majority of participants cited other student groups that had either entire buildings or actual centers dedicated to their cause. Participants felt that the limited physical appropriation of LGBTQA resource center space was a symbol of the lack of understanding or recognition of LGBTQA issues by administrators or by the institution. One individual shared,

The African American Institute has its own center, like a physical building … so does the Latino organization and so does the Asian American organization. And like we’re not a cultural organization but we are like an identity and a culture in some ways.

These words suggest that while students may feel visible as a collaborative and connected LGBTQA student community, they feel that there is less overt recognition of sexual orientation and/or gender identity as being a central component of students’ self-concept, self-identity, or as a critical aspect of their experience.

**Staffing.**

In addition to a perceived lack of a space or a cultural center, participants also noted the importance of ongoing communication and coordination in LGBTQA resource center staffing as a means of support for visibility and connectedness. A group of participants cited concerns that were generated amongst sexual minority students during a transition in the LGBTQA resource center’s leadership. At the time, it seems that a subsequent breakdown in communication between the general administration and the LGBTQA student community, a lack of a fast search and hiring process, and a lack of funded student programming, left students to feel invisible. As a
means of keeping the community together and supported, LGBTQA students banded together to try to implement a self-serve system that would keep the space going. Despite their best efforts, students noticed a marked decrease in affinity for the space. Ultimately students grew concerned about the vitality of the LGBTQA resource center in the face of all the noted interruptions and challenges.

Like they didn’t have any programming. They didn’t have any funding. They were like trying to conduct a search but the administration didn’t really seem to be quick on their feet on it. Like I think we waited like a year before we actually got someone in the center.

Participants suggested that these examples of delays and deficits reinforced the idea to LGBTQA students that the LGBTQA resource center, and subsequently the LGBTQA community, was not an administrative or institutional priority at that time.

Despite these perceived failures, students did receive other unanticipated displays of support. One critical event was the eager anticipation of the University President’s attendance at Rainbow Graduation, an event coordinated to recognize graduating seniors who identify within the LGBTQA community. The presence of the President at this event spurred excitement within the LGTBQA community and students perceived this act as a nod of support from the top of the administrative ladder.

**Theme two: Mirroring Diversity and Inclusion**

A second theme that emerged across participants was greater awareness to developing further inclusion within the LGBTQA resource center’s groups and programs. Participants reported that the center was formerly represented by a single LGBTQA student group, but that this single group could no longer respond to or be expected to support the robust needs of all
LGBTQA students. Changes and development in the student community called for more conscious efforts to promote further inclusivity through the creation of additional groups. This yielded groups such as queer students of color (QSOC), the creation of a trans and gender non-conforming group, and other intersectional groups such as the Pan-Asian Queer Alliance. One participant commented, “recognition of the needs of trans and gender non conforming students… is great because they can be a much more vulnerable population than gay and lesbian students.” Expansion was necessary in the eyes of students as they wanted to recognize that not only could one group not respond to all students’ needs, but diversity and inclusion in the LGBTQA community was not just about sexual orientation or gender identity, rather it was also about the intersections of identity.

Participants were also transparent in their analysis of other existing student groups, citing some challenges and racial tensions which was another motivation for additional avenues for student supports. “We’ve formed a bunch of new groups, student support groups for the different identities within the queer community. . . queer students of color (QSOC). . .Pride as much as it is a really great social club is you know like pretty white and like felt a little weird.”

Through forming additional groups students were able to directly address issues affecting those characteristics of self that were most salient to them. They were also better able to build connections and respond to the needs of students with whom they may best identify with, understand, appreciate, and assist.

Participants reported that they were also encouraged to form a queer caucus. The caucus was designed to not only respond to differing student needs, but the initiative would allow a member from each respective LGBTQA student group to serve as a liaison so that additional representatives of the LGBTQA student community could be put before institutional leadership
to discuss issues affecting the LGBTQA campus community. The goal was for student voice within each respective community to be strengthened. One participant reported that there was previously one group that was “the biggest one on campus. They are sort of like the go-to organization on campus that the administration reaches out to.” However, as the LGBTQA student community has become more diversified, students feel that student groups needed expansion to respond to this increase in community need. Participants also shared that there was the additional benefit that a queer caucus can assist in further unifying LGBTQA students as assembly members will need to collaborate together to move forward with approved initiatives or decisions.

**Theme three: Mentorships**

**Faculty and Staff Mentorships.**

Participants shared that on campus LGBTQA resource centers can provide a meaningful avenue for mentorships in a few different ways. First, LGBTQA resource centers have the ability to connect LGBTQA students with other LGBTQA identified faculty and staff. While some participants noted some integration of faculty and staff in the resource center space through campus trainings, others desired a more direct relationship with queer-identified faculty and staff. Faculty ands staff relationships were frequently cited across interviews as being an area for much improvement and growth.

In the absence of an official campus mentorship program, participants stated that some of the advantages of faculty/staff mentorships could be resembled through less direct person-to-person relationships. One such example was a professional conference hosted by the LGBTQA resource center that brought LGBTQA adults and alumni to campus to speak about their professional careers and journeys to personal and professional success. One participant indicated
that this created a sense of inspiration that forced him to believe that a successful future awaits and that LGBTQA individuals can find gainful employment in a variety of professional fields. This event was also referenced by other participants who indicated that the significance of this program was also to simply have a visual depiction of an adult LGBTQA member - someone who has potentially lived through similar challenges and who has overcome adversity to now be in the position to share their success story.

Some participants indicated that they were interested in having these events more frequently, or having intentional outreach conducted on campus so that this type of forum could be replicated with existing LGBTQA faculty and staff from individual colleges or campus areas. As one individual noted, “I don’t see a lot of queer faculty or faculty that are queer-identifying or at least outwardly queer-identifying come to the center and be engaged with the center.” This again seemed to be an area of interest.

One primary mentorship relationship that existed for students was the relationship held with the LGBTQA administrator. This individual was perceived by students as being a “pillar of the center and of the LGBTQ community,” “the parent figure in the space,” and simply a friend. Participants indicated that they had candid conversations with the center administrator about their experiences on a personal level. Administrators had been open about sharing their experiences including topics like the side effects of taking testosterone, how to speak with a human resources department about updating your employee record after transitioning, and how to come out at work. While students recognize that the primary function of this administrative role may be to lead day-to-day operations for the LGBTQA center and the physical space, participants reported that one of the most significant roles this individual serves is existing as a primary source of personal support. “When he was in his office and you could talk to him, he
would like spend like hours talking to you about your problems. I have a few good friends who would just sit in there and talk with him and they had like so much going on in their lives. . .” In addition to serving as a sounding board or source of guidance, students also perceive LGBTQA administrative leaders as being able to provide “a direct link between us and the administration so that we know whether or not things that we are trying to plan will be realistic.” In this way, administrators are not just personal mentors but can also serve as campus advocates for community action. Participants implied that the administrator helps them to navigate through institutional red tape or identify best practices for gaining support or approval from the general administration for LGBTQA events.

Peer Mentorships.

Interviewed students indicated that mentorships on campus were not just found between adult and student, or administrator and student. Rather, LGBTQA students themselves sought to provide this type of close-knit bond through offering a student-led peer-to-peer mentorship program. Participants explained that this comes in the form of having older students provide time to help engage and assist younger LGBTQA students on campus. One of the participants who serves as a peer mentor stated, “students who are in the very beginning stages of transitioning to different genders, students who are navigating their first same sex relationship and are just very you know kind of hesitant and confused about how all of that works. Having a place where they can go and ask questions and convene with other people who have gone through the same things is incredibly important and empowering. It’s a really, really wonderful place.” However, the mentor-mentee relationship is not one-sided. Students who opted to serve as mentors mentioned that they gained a lot of satisfaction from serving in this way. Many participants recalled their own past experiences with harassment, confusion, or conflict as being a motivating factor for
assisting another student. Other participants noted a yearning to have received similar support during their own times of struggle stating. One individual shared, “how desperately I just longed to have you know an older person who had been through it all who I could just talk to and ask questions about ‘what’s it like to be an LGBTQ adult?’ ‘How do you do this?’ because obviously my parents didn’t know. I didn’t know any LGBTQ adults, I had no one to talk to.”

Participants suggested that peer-to-peer mentorships provide a number of significant benefits that differentiates this relationship from other types of mentorships. One notable difference is that peer-to-peer relationships may allow for more fluid and less boundaried exchanges, but may also exist as a more casual relationship. “One of the problems is that mentorship by a faculty or a staff member obviously is that there will always be some boundaries that there wouldn’t be, that exist kind of in a friendship between people who are students who are in equal power level.” Additionally, peer mentors can also assist with different needs like providing assistance with student-based experiences like coordinating social groups to go out with, or providing guidance on local establishments or businesses that are supportive of transgender customers. One individual noted an example of how a transgender peer mentor assisted a group of younger transgender students shop for suits for future professional interviews.

Yet, participants reported that there also seems to be a unique space to be filled by the faculty/staff mentorships. One example provided is that students may prefer to speak with a faculty or staff member if they are experiencing psychological distress. One participant felt that students may experience more support from a professional administrator who is familiar with coordinating support or making a referral on campus.

Across interviews, LGBTQA participants reported feeling that the LGBTQA resource center could take a more active role in assisting in building faculty/staff mentorships. The
significance of this type of relationship was to respond to students’ desires to witness or “learn through example” from older generations of LGBTQA individuals. One individual also mentioned how interaction with an active LGBTQA-identified staff member had encouraged him to remain engaged within the LGBTQA community through activism or advocacy post-graduation and throughout his professional path.

**Theme four: Realizing and Honoring Growth**

The theme of LGBTQA centers recognizing student and community growth was represented in a few different areas. Foremost, individuals indicated that while LGBTQA centers represent a physical space, that physical space has reached capacity and the lack of momentum to realize that growth has had an impact on students.

It is a bit saddening to me just how small the center is just considering the amount of students this campus has. I mean I’ve been in the center so many times where there literally aren’t enough chairs for all of the people who come in, and the space sometimes does feel like we’re being shoved into a broom closet.

Several individuals noted the small space as a limitation of the progression of work the LGBTQA center could perform. Many felt that in order to continue to put forward quality and expanded programming, the space would need to develop into a physical center occupying a distinct building, or at least more than what participants implied was a repurposed office space. While participants expressed their appreciation for having a designated space, the majority of LGBTQA participants noted that the currently supplied space is overcrowded, over utilized, and overextended in the number of students it seeks to serve. While participants communicated some degree of disappointment over the physical space, one individual did mention that it was going to be upgraded shortly, which appeared to provide some consolation.
In addition to physical space, participants indicated that the LGBTQA resource center needs to be administratively supported through more appropriate numbers of professional staff and administrative leadership. LGBTQA participants indicated that while student participation, programming, and uses of the space had significantly grown, there was no growth in the number of administrative leaders committed to the space. “There’s like a lot of queer students on campus and for one person to tackle all of that is like kind of ridiculous.” This left the space to be staffed through the direction and leadership of a single administrator. According to participants, this individual maintains responsibility for supporting students, expanding programming, attending administrative meetings, coordinating trainings and events, and responding to any immediate concerns. One individual shared, “you can tell like when Eric was here like you know he was constantly in meetings, he was constantly like overworked. And Jonathan has just started and has to pick up like all of the things where Eric has left off and like clearly there needs to be more hiring in that area. But like I think unless we demand it, the institution is not going to do anything even when Jonathan is like ‘we need some help here’.”

Participants expressed feeling overwhelmingly satisfied with the changes and progress made by the newly hired administrator, but they also felt that the introduction of additional staff members may further facilitate campus development and allow other campus leadership to more deeply engage with LGBTQA students and the center. Participants implied that the reason new staff had not been introduced was due to financial limitations though students also had questions about the overall level of institutional commitment to the cause.

Another category of realizing growth was conducting outreach to better communicate about the space, its purpose, offerings, and membership. Participants communicated that some of their counterparts and peers are unaware that the campus even has an LGBTQA resource center.
One individual added that even for those students who are aware of the existence of a center, oftentimes students have difficulty finding any information about the space online.

In terms of introductions to the center, several participants noted that their first experiences with the LGBTQ resource center were through word of mouth or from a peer referral. One individual recalled, “I was aware of the existence of the center, but I couldn’t find a lot of specific information about it online. There really isn’t a lot that’s out there in sort of the campus resources.” Similarly, it was also stated,

There’s probably tons of people on this campus questioning themselves who could benefit from the services of the center but who don’t have you know the confidence to walk right in and start asking questions, or who don’t feel like they can just show up at a meeting out of the blue… I feel like having much more … kind of open campus outreach and much more general campus conversations about LGBTQ issues would make the center a lot more welcoming to people.

When it comes to advertising or promoting the space, participants expressed a number of differing feelings. Some felt that promotion was lacking and necessitated further attention and improvement. One individual stated, “The center honestly doesn’t really do a lot of big, broad, bold messaging to people in any respect.” Other participants cautioned against institutional promotion as they felt any current endorsement of the center would be disingenuous in its message or representation of programs and services. This subgroup of individuals voiced commitment to wanting to ensure that any marketing of the space fairly captures services and programs that are available but they also wanted to ensure that any printed or electronic messaging sets the correct tone for potential LGBTQ campus members.
Theme five: Facilitate change, Goals, Improvements

While participants were quick to identify the success and accomplishments of the LGBTQA center, they were able to identify changes, goals, and areas for improvement. Some potential points for improvement have already been referenced such as space, location, staffing, outreach and promotion, and further engagement from faculty and staff. Yet a theme that emerged across almost all interviews was the role of the LGBTQA center in existing as a space for social advocacy and action. “If the resource center was like a big, you know, like proponent and really got out there and stuff, I think that could be a cool thing to get behind. And I would definitely want to be involved in stuff like that.” Participants reflected over the past year, and recollected that a number of significant movements were made. One popular topic of discussion was the pursuit and procurement of several gender-neutral bathrooms. LGBTQA students felt passionate about this accomplishment as they recognized the role this resource plays in affirming and supporting the needs of trans and gender non-conforming students. Yet, participants indicated that the process for approval was not an easy one, necessitating a referendum through the student government association. The path for approval and the implementation process were not straightforward even though it represented what one participant referred to as “a simple change in signage”. Another individual stated, “One of the huge issues on campus for the queer community is the gender neutral bathrooms…like half of the signs haven’t even been put up.”

This gender-neutral bathroom call to action was necessary and was generated in response to LGBTQA student need and advocacy. However, as a whole, the interviewed students possessed mixed feelings about the LGBTQA space being at the center of social, political, or campus movements. While one participant stated, “if you’re not vocal about it, like needs and desires from the administration, they’re not going to do anything about it,” other participants
voiced concerns about too dramatically integrating social and political action out of the space as it had the potential to divide the community.

As a potential alternative, some participants suggested cross promotion or deeper engagement with these causes through other social justice clubs on campus. Participants felt that these groups may be more appropriate forums for action since their intention was to raise consciousness and engage more directly in political and social reform.

It is important to note that across interviews, the tone for bringing about change was varied. While some individuals referred to action as being achievable through the currently structured channels and systems, others referred to facilitation of change through more drastic measures such as sit-ins and campus-wide protests. However, even for participants who were in favor of more severe measures, this type of method was not the preferred avenue for consideration or resolution.

While participants possessed differing ideas about how social change should be accomplished, they all agreed on a number of issues requiring further attention and action. One such example is the integration and implementation of a campus-wide system of honoring students’ preferred gender pronouns. Several participants noted that this shift in campus practice should be easily attainable, yet it requires coordination at an administrative level. Participants felt that training for faculty and staff was necessary for the broader campus community to understand why gender pronouns are significant to students and how it can be critically empowering to ask a student their preferred pronouns. “Teachers won’t ask you for your gender pronouns, they just won’t do it…asking and having a list of people’s preferred gender pronouns can really make a big impact for students.” During the course of individual interviews, several participants identified this issue as being as small change that could manufacture a significant
shift in student support. Participants indicated that this shift in mentality and language regarding LGBTQA students could provide the additional benefit of improved classroom experiences as well.

A final objective for change would be continuing to see the community and LGBTQA center expand and grow in unison. Students voiced a desire for more direct acknowledgment and recognition from the administration. “We’re a very accepting community. We’ve got a lot of gay people, we’ve got a lot of queer spaces on campus, but the acknowledgement isn’t quite there.” Participants feel that an improved and a closer relationship with institutional leadership would yield more success for the center in terms of the institutional community and its leadership in further understanding the space, its offerings, and the community that resides within it. Additionally, interviewed students aspire for a LGBTQA resource center that serves as an integrated center across LGBTQA community member regardless of individuals’ role or relationships with campus. What seemed really important to one student was “really making sure the center is the center of LGBTQA life - student, faculty, and staff life on campus and having those resources not just for students, but having those for whoever needs the resource.” This sense of complete campus integration and community support appeared to reflect what students would perceive as an ultimate goal for the space.

**Unanticipated Findings**

There were also some unanticipated findings that are worth noting. The first unanticipated finding was that for this particular sample, a student’s year in school appeared to influence experiences with the on-campus LGBTQA resource center. Most participants indicated that they pursued the center as a first year student, seeking a space to find students who also identified within the LGBTQA community and who may understand their experiences and
interest in connecting with similarly-minded individuals. However, for the eldest year of currently enrolled undergraduate students, the LGBTQA resource center was established and developed after their first year on campus. While these participants did not have the center to turn to during their first days on campus, these individuals appeared to play an integral role in establishing and shaping the center and maintaining its progress towards serving the needs of incoming students. In this way, there appeared to be a distinct difference in perspective and experience between those students who entered college during years when the LGBTQA center was not available with those students who were able to seek out the space during their first days, weeks, or months attending college. Not only did this seem to draw differences in experiences between younger and older students, but participants also indicated that for some of their LGBTQA identified peers the lack of an established center during these students’ first year may have facilitated lack of a relationship or connection with the center in future years. One participant shared, “I do feel like there are some older students that still don’t know about it, … if they weren’t there at the beginning like it’s sort of weird to come in now. ..but it’s welcoming to everyone.”

As an administrator, this communicated difference was not something I had anticipated. In many ways, I initially felt that I shared in a sense of disappointment for those students who may have experienced more struggle and hardship during their initial year on campus. However, after reflecting on the responses of participants I found that these students actually utilized this hardship as motivation to facilitate change. Upon the establishment of the on campus LGBTQA resource center, these students took on leadership roles and utilized their experiences to help shape the center and its associated services and program. These students transferred struggle into
empowerment through helping and serving others – which also represented a frequent response to my interview question regarding why students opted to participate in my research process.

Another foundational theme that emerged from this study was that LGBTQA students are resilient regardless of the level of support they experienced from the center. While many of them transparently stated pitfalls of the current structure of the center, due to its availability or the lack of a robust administrative team, they all agreed that the space is well-intentioned, necessary, and an asset to campus life.

**Analytic Memos**

When I began this study, I anticipated that I would encounter a lot of stories about ally connections and building a safe network of on campus support. While I did encounter some impressions about gay-straight alliance building and educating the general campus community about the needs of LGBTQA students, the conversations I had were far more solution-oriented and in-community focused than I had envisioned. The conversations had with LGBTQA students certainly reflected their desire to be understood and for there to be further improvements implemented campus-wide, but many conversations were had within a tone of understanding, thoughtfulness, consideration to all of the logistics and administrative quandaries involved in building campus-wide momentum for change. Participants were not resentful of any of the perceived shortcomings, rather they focused their energy into being mindful of the multitude of needs reflected across undergraduate students, whether those students identify as LGBTQA, heterosexual, or other. Participants spoke of the adversities and challenges encountered on campus and within the center, but their remarks were all framed with an attitude of proactivity and constructive criticism and of genuine care for self and others. The concept of bringing about
change appeared to serve as a framework in which all students operated, even following comments of struggle, challenge, hardship, or disempowerment.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the thoughts and experiences of LGBTQA students to understand the role and perceived support of on-campus LGBTQA resource centers. An analysis of the interview data unveiled five themes that captured the essence of what it is like to engage with on-campus LGBTQA centers and participate within these spaces as an LGBTQA student. Participants found that their experiences centered around the LGBTQA resource center’s ability to provide a sense of campus community, inclusion, and connection. Yet, individuals also spoke of how their center works to respond to community growth and development, mirror community and student diversity, provide mentorships, and foster social change on the college campus. While participants were able to readily identify some fundamental changes or improvements to the space and the functions and services offered, there was consensus amongst all participants that LGBTQA resource centers are valuable and provide necessary support to LGBTQA students.

For LGBTQA students, building new relationships and connecting with in-community members and the broader institutional community were some of the most rewarding benefits of engaging with the space. Participants found this sense of connection not only existed in the relationships with peers, but also within the connections built with the administrative leadership within the space, and the community partners, speakers, and lecturers who participated in programming sponsored or hosted by the LGBTQA resource center.

Participants spoke at length about the ways in which they derived meaning and support from their involvement with the LGBTQA center and its community. For many it reflected a safe
space that could be relied upon for a sense of personal understanding and belonging. For some, it was a place to study, to relax, and simply be at one with self. While participants spoke with fondness and appreciation for the friendships and social support gained through involvement with the LGBTQA center, their comments also reflected some sense of alienation from the broader university community. The participants’ descriptions of their feelings of connectedness, support, and mutual understanding within the LGBTQA community stood at a sharp contrast to the ways in which these participants described other experiences within the broader institutional environment and even within other off campus or communal LGBTQA spaces.

Participants also credited engagement with the space and the center’s administrative leadership for the ability to have a more direct relationship and communication channel with university administrators. This was important to students in the sense that these individuals represented key stakeholders who maintain decision-making authority to approve further improvements and expansion. Developing these higher-level relationships was valuable for students to not only feel visible to the highest level of the institutional leaders, but it also created an avenue to manufacture further discussion and campus change. Some of the changes students hope to further address are concerns over both the physical size and location of the space, center staffing, availability of robust programming, and instituting a cultural shift that serves to further engage and support the LGBTQA community as a whole.

Participants had a number of visions for how the center could further support or engage the LGBTQA community. Some students felt that the LGBTQA center should expand to serve all campus members of the LGBTQA community. In this way, LGBTQA faculty and staff could be equally served by this resource. This would also provide the added benefit of having LGBTQA-identified faculty and staff further engaged and easily identifiable to students within
the community. This type of change would also create a pathway to build in-community mentorships on campus, something that students acknowledged was lacking but very much desired.

Additional visions included the center facilitating more social advocacy on campus and providing the groundwork for a more socially conscious atmosphere. Participants felt that the center could take a leadership role in facilitating the incorporation of a preferred gender pronoun initiative that could be instituted campus-wide as well as better services and policies for supporting and bringing visibility to issues faced by non-gender binary or trans-identified persons. In this way, the LGBTQA center was viewed as being at the crux of social movements on campus, though students wished to see more social change and advocacy efforts.

Despite any limitations of the current space, overall participants reported that the LGBTQA resource center was at the heart of LGBTQA student life on campus. Individuals felt that space served all of the members of the LGBTQA student community, but felt that student need and the student community has begun to shift at a rapid pace. In this way, participants hoped to find that the center would begin to build momentum to keep up with the constantly changing needs of students and the ever-growing community of LGBTQA students it seeks to serve.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of the current research study was to develop a better understanding of how LGBTQ students experience and perceive support from on-campus LGBTQ resource centers. The study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate LGBTQ students’ experiences and perceptions of on-campus LGBTQ resource centers based on prior engagement with these spaces. In looking at perceptions of support, this study sought to understand support as defined by Rendón’s conceptualization of validation. According to Rendón, validation is viewed as an “enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and-out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Data analysis from the study revealed five themes 1) visibility and connection, 2) mirroring diversity and inclusion, 3) mentorships, 4) realizing and honoring growth, and 5) facilitating change, goals and improvements. Despite some distinct differences across these themes, one foundational element underscored all findings; The LGBTQ community is desiring and is in continued search for empowering relationships and sustained social exchange. This chapter will provide a discussion of each theme, speak to its relational underpinnings, and demonstrate how it may be positioned within existing literature and research. Implications for practice within the arena of higher education will be also be addressed and will be followed by discussion of how the findings of this study may support the need for further research and scholarly discussion.

Visibility and Connection

Literature on LGBTQ visibility and inclusion finds that sexual minority students often feel unsafe, invalidated, and isolated from their peers and the community (Evans, 2002; Rankin 2003). For the participants in this study the concepts of visibility, connection, and support were identified and discussed in unison. Students expressed a desire to connect with other LGBTQ
identified students on campus to meet friends, feel understood, and be visible on campus. Having the LGBTQA resource center serve as a reliable physical space to connect and interact with LGBTQA peers allowed students to normalize experiences related to their own developmental milestones and personal challenges, make friends, find belonging, and create peer-to-peer relationships that could not be as easily developed elsewhere on campus. One student described the value of the space as “a safe space for students that was open and we could just go and be among other students who kind of understood our experiences, have access to resources, and really form a much more connected community.”

This type of interpersonal engagement and connection directly demonstrates an important tenet of Rendón’s validation theory, the concept of interpersonal validation. Within this concept, social networks are developed in which students validate each other through activities such as sharing and creating supportive, caring relationships. Throughout interviews, participants identified their LGBTQA peers as being one of their greatest assets in the LGBTQA resource center and on campus. One participant noted the primary value of the space as being “the people – the people who are there providing that community that you can really come back to with whatever you need, and whatever problems you may be having, whatever life decisions you might be in the middle of. That was really a lot of it.” Forming these connections offered support but it also offered a sense of affirmation and respect that was missing from other interactions, forums, or relationships on campus.

However, these connections provided students with more than just a sense of belonging, it created a sense of establishment. Through having a space that supported and fostered stable, reliable, and impactful relationships with others, LGBTQA students felt encouraged to be authentic to self, to feel bonded together, and be empowered to stand on their own feet and
cultivate a visible LGBTQA community. Prior research has suggested that some LGBTQA resource centers were implemented with the intention of creating LGBTQA community visibility through offering gay-straight alliance programs and leveraging LGBTQA relationships with more privileged or strongly positioned heterosexual peers. In this way, heterosexual students served as human capital to raise awareness to LGBTQA issues and bring the LGBTQA student population into the center of community consciousness. However, the findings of this study suggest that LGBTQA resource centers serve a critical function in fostering feelings of visibility amongst and across students so that LGBTQA individuals are building bridges and creating pathways and footprints for one another. In this sense, students are not only feeling recognized in their own individuality, but they are also being affirmed as a member of a visible, attention-worthy community that is self-promoted and independent in its ability to assert community worth.

In addition to supporting community visibility and connection, some participants credited the LGBTQA resource center with supporting a sense of personal development in the form of interpersonal growth. One participant shared, “I think it’s just influenced my college experience in the sense that it’s helped me just network and like develop interpersonal skills …it’s given me a sense of awareness.” Another participant stated, “The resource center has influenced the ways that I’ve developed looking at my own identity, and I’ve interacted with individuals who have helped me to look at myself differently.” Participants reported utilizing the center as a space to interact with individuals who were similar yet different from themselves but who were open to sharing experiences, challenges, and stories. In this way, students learned from one another, grew more familiar and comfortable with elements of individual diversity, and were able to acknowledge, and many times celebrate, differences in perspective and experience.
Students also used relational exchanges within the center to explore understandings of self and their identity. Through exchanges with others and through engagement with the programs, events, and academic lecture series sponsored by the LGBTQA resource center, students were able to evaluate, challenge, and reconstruct notions of self and recognize the complexities of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. While some students referenced the importance of seeing self as being multidimensional and fluid, others suggested that the LGBTQA resource center provided them with a sense of liberation. These feelings were tied to having a space which encouraged the freedom to explore and continually redefine self. In addition to this sense of freedom, students also reported feeling that their process towards self-acceptance or self-understanding was respected. This allowed students to feel honored even in their most vulnerable states.

Validation theory posits that students work best in environments that foster agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation (Rendón, 1994). Participants generally felt affirmed, honored, and liberated in the LGBTQA resource center, as was evidenced by their ability to feel free in exploring their identities and discovering their place within the community. However, students also noted the additional affirming practices of regularly using preferred names and preferred gender pronouns, engaging in frequent conversations about the needs of transgender and non-binary students, and pushing to expand programming and services to meet the needs of the various subgroups within the LGBTQA student community. Participants juxtaposed this type of visibility and empowerment with those experiences had outside of the space. During general campus interactions, they reported a general lack of awareness to community needs.
Prior research has found that LGBTQA students frequently experience invalidation in the form of physical violence, verbal threats, and bullying (Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). While the participants included in this study did not mention threats to their physical safety or experiences with bullying on campus, they did reference experiences with microaggressions. These experiences came in the form of dismissive attitudes encountered when students sought guidance during routine experiences such as completing a job application or more unique college experiences such as traveling or studying abroad. This experiences oftentimes re-elicited feelings of invisibility, frustration, and disappointment as students did not feel that administrators or staff members fully understood how additional barriers or considerations existed for LGBTQA students.

**Mirroring Diversity and Inclusion**

In addition to the LGBTQA resource center serving as a safe space, many participants characterized the space as being judgment-free, welcoming to all, and reliable in the feelings of safety it provided. Participants generally felt that the space equally affirmed students across diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, though some participants suggested that further progress could be made to more fully embrace bisexual students and more directly address the needs of LGBTQA students of color. Through creating more channels for the recognition of the diversity within the LGBTQA student population, the center continued to grow with the needs of students. It strove to mirror the diversity that existed amongst and within students, but it also sought to be a space of continued inclusion.

Research over the past decade has documented a shift in culture as schools have begun to institute structural changes and enact further measures to create more inclusive and comprehensive policies and practices that serve to protect, confirm, and support sexual minority
students (Rankin, 2003). While participants did not note particular policies within the center that were specifically helpful, they did identify an abundance of practices that served to confirm students’ worth and value. A notable theme that arose during the course of interviews was the theme of intersectionality and how on-campus LGBTQA resource centers can work to more directly address the varying needs of in-community members. Specifically, participants felt that the LGBTQA resource center served as a space to generate intentional dialogue and action surrounding the varying and unique needs of students who may experience multiple forms of discrimination, disempowerment, or vulnerability.

The idea that individuals possess multiple identities that can rise and decline in salience depending upon self-identification at a specific point in time represent findings of earlier research conducted by Jones and McEwen (2000). The findings of this study indicated that students fluctuate in their recognition or appreciation of other forms of identity including dimensions of racial and ethnic identification. However, for the participants in this study, the concept of being a sexual minority student was largely communicated in tandem with a participant’s racial or ethnic identity or level of perceived privilege based on other factors such as gender or sex.

While participants noted that the LGBTQA resource center fostered dialogue surrounding privilege and positions of power, the space itself still needed to take action to manufacture some additional improvements to more fully respond to the multiple dimensions of students’ experiences and identities. One participant stated, “There’s still not enough consciousness of the intersections between race, sexuality, and gender incorporated within the center.” This particular participant was also sensitive to the fact that much of the student leadership team identified as Caucasian as did the center’s present and former administrators. As such, one of the most direct
responses to this need for further inclusion and awareness to intersectionality was the creation of additional student groups. By creating a new student group, queer students of color (QSOC), and giving voice to students’ shared and individual experiences, the LGBTQA resource center aimed to more holistically honor, affirm, and validate students and cultivate a greater sense of inclusivity and unity.

The need to more fully serve LGBTQA students of color and offer unique programming is tied to earlier research findings that suggest that LGBTQA students often report difficulty locating community and finding social support on campus due to rejection or hostility (D’Augelli, 1992). Participants noted that queer students of color are at increased risk for vulnerability due to the multiple forms of oppression or disempowerment that they can be faced with. In forming new groups and being intentional in creating a more student-centered space, students felt that the resource center could serve to further combat students’ experiences or feelings of invisibility, isolation, or alienation.

In addition to mirroring student diversity through QSOC, participants also noted that the LGBTQA resource center was also working to establish a queer caucus. The goal of this caucus was to create a panel of students representing the diversity that exists within the LGBTQA community so that a greater number of students would have the opportunity to speak with administrators and engage in exchanges that could help to guide impactful campus change and effect inclusive administrative action and policy. Participants felt that the caucus effort was highly valuable and of great importance as previously there had not been a direct channel for communication with the individuals who govern change on campus. One participant noted, “I mean we are a minority population but I think it’s important that our concerns are heard and also that we hear back directly.”
LGBTQA students’ experiences with feeling a lack of administrative support has been widely documented in prior research studies. In addition to feeling that higher-level administrators may be operating within heterosexist frameworks when establishing policies and decisions (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012), research has also indicated that LGBTQA students can experience a lack of reinforcement and acknowledgement from school counselors and teachers. The findings of the current study reflect some aspects of earlier research that suggest that students feel unacknowledged by teachers (Rutter & Leech, 2006).

Rendón’s validation theory strongly underscores the importance of the relationship between professor and student in creating an affirming educational experience. The framework highlights that teachers or professors serve as in-class agents that validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community. Teachers and professors can also support students’ academic and interpersonal development. This can be accomplished through several different means including learning and referring to students by their names, ensuring that curriculum reflects students’ backgrounds, and serving as mentors. Based on participants’ perceptions and experiences in this study, relationship building with faculty and administrators appears to be one of the largest areas for further improvement on campus. Though this type of initiative is not directly managed by the LGBTQA center itself, students felt that the resource center should be committed to educating the broader campus community and engaging faculty, staff, and administrators in ongoing training to identify and establish best practices for recognizing and honoring LGBTQA diversity inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, efforts like the queer caucus allow students to address multifaceted concerns with administrators so that LGBTQA issues can be discussed in tandem with other conversations about campus diversity. Students would also have the ability to share their perceptions and stories of in-class
invalidation with leaders so that the campus community has direct evidence of practices that fostered feelings of validation as well as those that promoted feelings of invisibility or marginalization.

**Mentorships**

**Adult mentors.**

Perhaps one of the most direct representations of LGBTQA students’ desires for relationships was through their voiced interest in creating and sustaining mentorship programs. Participants voiced a desire to have close-knit relationships with other LGBTQA members who could guide them through processes and decisions and also acknowledge and celebrate important milestones along their personal journeys. Research findings have illustrated that sexual minority students can benefit from having mentorships and role modeling relationships (Gastic & Johnson, 2009; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009), and Rendón’s validation theory views mentorship relationships as being a fundamental vehicle for providing a validating experience.

Participants suggested that having these types of mentorship relationships are especially beneficial during pivotal stages within their development as an LGBTQA person. Examples noted were having an individual to seek advice and guidance from when navigating an individual’s first same-sex relationship, locating businesses or organizations that are trans-friendly, or possessing access to someone who could provide guidance on how to come out as LGBTQA-identified to an employer. Participants felt that mentorships or role models were critical in providing a roadmap for success, but they also allowed for a sense of companionship, sage, and wisdom that could not be offered by heterosexual peers or heterosexual parents.

Some participants referenced possessing a mentorship or parent-like relationship with the LGBTQA resource center’s administrator. One participant stated, “When he was in his office
and you could talk to him, he would spend like hours talking to you about your problems. I have a few good friends who would just sit in there and talk with him and they had so much going on in their lives and he really helped.” Another participant added that the administrator was “like the parent figure in the space” attributing this remark to both the relationship built with the administrator as well as the level of regular coordination and conversation that was had to plan and execute events together. Having a constant source of guidance was affirming to students in having a designated and reliable resource and a point of reference for personal and academic direction.

Despite relatively regular access to the center’s administrator, participants sought more direct contact with other types of LGBTQA mentors including peer mentors, faculty/staff mentors, and community mentors. Prior studies suggest that students need various types of social reinforcement to support the successful development of social skills, academic competence, and effective adjustment to an educational environment (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). At the present time, LGBTQA students have access to the LGBTQA center, its administrator, and peers, as well as other community partners and speakers who engage in LGBTQA programming. However, students desire even more deliberate relationships with campus partners and heterosexual allies who reside outside of the doors of the LGBTQA resource center.

**Mentor Events.**

In terms of programming, one of the events indicated as being impactful was a professional development conference that showcased LGBTQA identified professionals. The conferenced allowed individuals to share their professional and personal journeys and field questions from the audience. Students felt that this type of interaction and engagement was especially beneficial as it allowed LGBTQA students to see the multitude of careers and paths
that can be taken by LGBTQA persons. Some participants indicated that seeing a representative from the community in a high-ranking professional position assuaged a sense of fear that identifying as an LGBTQA person would prevent them from being successful professionally. In this way mentor events and programming allowed LGBTQA students to gain new perspectives on self or reinforce the idea that all avenues and opportunities remain open in terms of future possibilities for advancement and exploration.

Though not solely academic in nature, these programs provided students with the ability to experience themselves as capable and feel treated as equal in terms of achieving future potential. These two principles were identified in Rendón’s validation theory as being central to a student’s ability to trust their aptitudes and acquire feelings of confidence. However, these programs also allowed students to engage with out-of-class agents who are equally important in fostering academic and interpersonal development and allowing students to recognize their self worth.

**Peer Mentors.**

Participants discussed their interest in continuing to build their peer-based mentorship program while bridging the LGBTQA student community with LGBTQA-identified faculty and staff. Execution of this plan would position students strongly as prior research has found that students can benefit from having positive relationships with other peers as well as non-family adults (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Rendón’s validation theory also underscores the importance of peer-to-peer relationships and experiencing validation from out-of-class agents. Having multiple sources for connection can provide students with diversity of perspective and experience to learn from and would serve as a potential source of emotional and instrumental support. Additionally, as one participant noted, there are different benefits within peer mentors
that cannot be accommodated or found within adult mentors. This is related to some of the power dynamics and age-related differences in experiences. In this way, peer-mentorships offered different forms of support or validation that could not be supplied or substituted through other relationships.

**Realizing and Honoring Growth**

Literature suggests that resource centers are necessary as they create visibility, normalcy, and equity (Albin & Dungy, 2005), however little is known about how LGBTQA resource centers should operate and develop in order to best serve students. The participants in the present study felt that the LGBTQA resource center was promoting community visibility and supporting students’ needs, however students felt that the development of the center, its programs and services, staffing, and structure were not keeping up to pace with continually evolving student need. Failure to provide additional resources in the form of a larger physical space, a more distinct space, additional human capital, and more expansive and robust programmatic offerings led students to question whether LGBTQA support is truly an institutional priority.

While Rendón’s validation theory does not provide specific guidelines on the physical spaces best suited to affirm nontraditional students, it does reference the fact that environmental factors including physical surroundings can either support or encumber students’ growth and development (Rendón 1994). In respect to how the LGBTQA resource center supported student need on a capacity basis, the current space was perceived as overcrowded, too small, and not substantial enough when compared to other spaces on campus that are designated to honor individual diversity or cultural identity.

Students cited multiple examples of other spaces on campus that they felt better reflected an institutional commitment to both symbolically and more literally support students. This
included physical centers on campus that were spacious, easily recognizable, and more free standing. Comparatively, the LGBTQA resource center was perceived as a repurposed space within the student center that was hidden away, located on a high floor, and remiss in its presence due to a lack of signage and campus recognition. Participants were interested in seeing the current center develop into a larger epicenter on campus that was known by the campus community, could be easily located, and could regularly manage the traffic flow and student groups who were interested in utilizing the space. Representation and support through this type of structural establishment would serve to formally recognize and validate students and serve as a distinctive physical marker of the institution’s ongoing dedication to supporting the LGBTQA community. It would also serve as an emblem of recognition for LGBTQA cultural pride.

**Facilitate change, Goals and Improvements**

The function of safe spaces is to foster respect, develop a deeper and more meaningful group identity, and many times to facilitate social change within a community (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin & Dreschsler, 2012). The LGBTQA resource center had a particular meaning for students in facilitating change within their community so that individuals found a space that felt authentic and uplifting. Students noted several positive transformations over the past several years, beginning with the establishment of the resource center itself just five years earlier. Over the course of the next years, the space delivered a number of successful programs including social events and speakers, and it provided a physical space for student groups to convene, find organizational unity, and grow.

Over the course of participant interviews, it became clear that students desired more energy and momentum from the center in terms of its active participation in social and campus advocacy. Participants noted a few initiatives in which the LGBTQA resource center played a
significant role in moving the needle towards greater LGBTQA visibility. This included rallying behind a referendum for gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, and subsequently requesting more signage and resources be developed so that students could locate the newly established restrooms. However, students felt that this type of social advocacy is needed on a more frequent and reoccurring basis so that the burden of addressing LGBTQA need and community visibility is not placed upon the shoulders of students themselves. Rather, students expected that the LGBTQA resource center lead more radical change on campus.

Much like research data gathered in a 2007 study which found that LGBTQ students feel belittled and unacknowledged by school counselors and teachers (Rutter & Leech, 2006), participants in the present study felt disempowered and marginalized by many of their professors. These feelings were a result of having to combat heteronormative or gender-normative assumptions about an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity and/or the failure to use gender-neutral or inclusive language. Based on the participants’ accounts of these experiences, disempowering practices continue to manifest in the classroom, and make these spaces feel invalidating. Despite this present state, students believed that the energy, philosophies, and practices maintained within the LGBTQA resource center could be replicated on campus so that other venues could serve as equally affirming spaces for students. However, this again relies on the LGBTQA resource center, its staff, and supporters in taking a purposeful approach to expanding the noble work accomplished within the center and expanding its focus to manufacture larger level campus change.
Goals and Implications

Implications for Practice.

The findings of this study suggest that LGBTQA resource centers can play a pivotal role in shaping the college experiences of sexual minority students through the relationships they develop amongst LGBTQA students, throughout the broader campus community, and within students’ relationships with themselves. Resource centers also offer many direct benefits, programs, and services to students, and at their core are affirming spaces and symbolic structures that create a visible emblem of support for LGBTQA students who may feel lost on campus, in need of community, or in need of support.

Center Establishment.

As stated earlier, research indicates that only a small percentage of institutions offer an LGBTQA resource center (Fine, 2012), which means that many students may continue to struggle to find community and support on campus. One of the most fundamental implications of this research is that colleges should begin to establish LGBTQA resource centers within those campuses that do not currently possess one. Despite all of the shortcomings, limitations, and future desires communicated by participants, the individuals interviewed voiced genuine appreciation for a space on campus that was designated to acknowledge themselves, their community, and their needs. Even when centers fell short of encapsulating all elements of the LGBTQA student experience, students felt driven to identify and voice these limitations and engage within the center in a solution-oriented fashion. By communicating their thoughts and proposing new ideas or improvements, students held themselves equally accountable for facilitating change and serving as an agent for action for themselves, their peers, and future generations of LGBTQA identified students.
A different call for action is needed by those campuses that have a center established. Within these domains, student ambition and needs must be met and propelled forward by campus allies in the form of administrators, faculty, and staff. These members of the community must be tasked with joining in the process and establishing resources and creating environments that are both inclusive and supportive. As educational professionals charged with providing students with opportunities and environments that facilitate personal, educational, and professional development, it is essential that administrators, faculty, and staff continuously engage in training and education that will build their vocabulary, introduce and establish best practices, and provide a sense of confidence and competency in assisting LGBTQA students.

As the participants in this study indicated, experience, language and terminology, and student need is constantly changing and for centers and allies to truly serve students they must not remain stagnant in the level of understanding and support they provide. Failing to continue to evolve and respond to changes in the landscape and architecture of the LGBTQA community and cultural atmosphere may force resource centers to become invalidating, archaic, and unused. For these spaces to continue to be meaningful, impactful, and successful they must be mindful of the continually assessing and moving the needle forward to create positive change. However, this same call to action must be paralleled on campus so that LGBTQA resource centers do not exist as single silos of support.

**Hiring.**

As relationships remain at the crux of support for the LGBTQA student population, it is necessary that institutions not just focus on the outputs of the center in terms of the available programs, services, and physical space, but leadership and administrators must also be purposeful in evaluating the human capital involved. Hiring for an LGBTQA resource center
leader or administrator should require the intentional pursuit of a forward thinking, progressive, and empathic leader. The findings of this study underscored the importance of having this administrator exist as an individual capable of both social advocacy and community building.

Findings also noted the significance in having an administrator who identified within the LGBTQQA community. Participants felt that this personal background and direct involvement in the LGBTQQA community allowed the administrator to offer meaningful insight and guidance. While it is arguable whether an LGBTQQA resource center administrator is most strongly positioned to help students if the administrator identifies within the LGBTQQA community, it may be advisable that search committees intentionally vet candidates for knowledge and understanding of the landscape of LGBTQQA affairs and competence in assisting a diversity of students. These individuals must also be able to engage with, educate, and train other campus personnel.

While less intentional focus may be given to the hiring of other faculty, staff, and administrators, the results of this study suggest that in-class agents also play a significant role in shaping the experiences of students and serving as supports on campus. In this sense, search committees should also look to hire campus community members who are interpersonally-oriented, willing to engage in professional development, and exhibit multicultural sensitivity.

**Training & Assessment.**

While the existence of LGBTQQA centers is a notable first step towards progress and recognition, it remains the responsibility of campuses and institutions to regularly assess the programs, services, and successes of these spaces, continue to update and develop them, and ensure that the goals and mission of the center remain in focus and remain student-centered. This includes implementing deliberate practices in establishing the space so that it is fully inclusive of
all students. Again, at the time that this study was conducted, many students noted that further work needed to be done to more fully embrace transgender students and LGBTQA students of color. These groups are in need of further attention and must be recognized in future efforts.

Based on these findings, it is especially important for administrators to create programs, services, and events that target the concept of intersectionality and perhaps work with other existing groups and organizations on campus to sponsor and co-sponsor events and initiatives together.

In addition to creating assessment tools and regularly soliciting feedback and monitoring results, this research highlights the importance of speaking with students directly and engaging students in being co-creators of change. The participants in this study were transparent about their perceptions and experiences and were genuine in their care for seeing a better future for their LGBTQA peers to follow. However, participants noted that their stories are oftentimes not shared and their voices frequently remain silenced. Students would like to see administrators take additional steps to invite them into discussions and have students take a seat at the table.

Through creating more direct pathways for communication, like the queer caucus, and engaging students in frequent conversations, administrators will have a better pulse on the issues that exist on campus and identify effective solutions for improvement. Additionally, seeking input from LGBTQA students directly will assist in breaking the cycle of perpetrating heterosexist, gender-normative, or heteronormative policies and it invites visibility to the community.

The physical space of the center, its location on campus, its marketing practices and campus presence were literally and figuratively tied to the levels of support perceived by students. For students to want to be engaged, they must feel that the work being conducted for their community and for their person is beneficial, useful, and well intentioned and representative of authentic care and support. Campus administrators who may be in the process
of establishing a space or who may be remodeling or expanding their services for students may find further success in critically thinking about how these spaces stack up against other identity-related spaces on campus. The participants in this study reported that while the LGBTQA resource center was available and located in a centralized space on campus, there was a feeling that this space was different from and inferior to other campus services directed to celebrate and give voice to aspects of identity and culture. This led students to be both curious and disappointment in their comparative standing, and it led to some questions about how authentic campus interest was in cultivating LGBTQA support. Therefore, these considerations should be discussed by university leaders so the goal of creating an LGBTQA affirming space on campus is fully actualized.

**Campus Integration.**

Present findings indicate that the work of LGBTQA student support cannot solely be accomplished through having a resource center on campus. While this entity can be a center for support, its mission needs to be mirrored and supported through other structures on campus such as faculty and staff engagement, educational systems which can accommodate and support modes for recognizing preferred name changes and preferred gender pronouns, and adequate training for administrators, faculty, and staff. This assumes a campus-wide commitment to LGBTQA support and would also underscore the importance of having LGBTQA based dialogue at the forefront of administrative conversations spanning academic, student affairs, and enrollment management divisions.

Finally, the participants in this study served as the student voice advocating and calling for increased participation, not just from heterosexual allies across campus but also from fellow LGBTQA members within the campus community. Students yearn for closer relationships to
mentors, role models, and LGBTQA identified adults who are willing and able to provide firsthand knowledge and guidance. Though experiences, challenges, and triumphs will be different across time, it is important that the LGBTQA community at large come together to create a fabric of unity and support that transcends generational differences, professional roles, and positions of power.

Moreover, LGBTQA resource centers do not need to be solely for student use. Rather, the participants in this study were interested in seeing this resource become a foundation for all LGBTQA individuals on campus and encourage engagement and exchange across university positions and roles. In this way, the center would serve all members of the LGBTQA community and help to further build an integrated network of support.

Lastly, these findings may inform services and programs for other types of LGBTQA community resource centers. While the context of a college campus center may impact and drive some of these findings, the foundational elements of providing displays of positive reinforcement and support and cultivating a commitment to relationship building are undeniably elements of human nature. In this way, community centers or safe space groups may begin to identify and integrate some of these findings in a way that will also support LGBTQA persons through the programs and services offered within those settings.

**Implications for Research**

The body of existing research contains a number of gaps and areas for further study within the domain of LGBTQA student research. While there have been studies to document assessments of campus climate from the perspective of LGBTQA students, many other areas rely on research that is driven by impressions or perceptions of heterosexual peers, administrators, or faculty and staff members. One of the primary goals of the current study was to put forward
research that was student-driven and based on information gathered directly from LGBTQ+ students. While this goal was accomplished, this study is still limited in the scope of understanding it provides and further research is necessary to expand and complement understanding across students and institutional environments.

**Limitations in the Study.**

**Sample.**

The sample contained in this study relied upon the opinions and impressions from six undergraduate students representing gay, lesbian, transgender, and questioning students. However, each of these groups may have differences in experience that are more nuanced and more variable than the data or results from this study reflects. Therefore, it would be fruitful to continue to gain further information from students within these specific in-community subgroups and to expand the sample to include students who identify as bisexual and asexual. While bisexual students were not purposefully excluded from this research, recruitment efforts did not yield any bisexual students. While being more inclusive in the sample would lend further internal validity to the study, the lack of voice and presence from this section of the LGBTQ+ population may be even more telling as one participant mentioned that bisexual students may not feel as included in the services or programs offered by the LGBTQ+ resource center. Therefore, more intentional practices may need to be employed to actively recruit bisexual students in future research. This would allow for a better understanding of how or if resource centers respond to, reflect, and support bisexual students.

Additionally, one of the largest regrets of the formulation of this study was limiting the sample population to those students who were sophomore year or older. While the intention was to identify a sample comprised of individuals who had ample opportunity to engage within the
space and to develop impressions and perceptions, this may have unintentionally created a gap in the research. Throughout interviews with participants, it became clear that freshmen students gravitate towards the center to take advantage of the peer-to-peer mentorship programs offered between first year students and upperclassmen. Freshmen or first year students may offer a unique perspective to furthering the exploration process of how on-campus LGBTQA resource centers support students. Additionally, this may be particularly interesting as first year students arguably have the most difficult time transitioning to college life and may be most vulnerable in establishing their community identity or their self identity as an LGBTQA member.

**Areas for Further Investigation.**

Participants noted that discussions and representation of intersectionality are sometimes overlooked in the LGBTQA resource center. This topic may reflect another area for further investigation as students represent persons of multiple dimensions of identity and value. The complexity of human identity and the salience of centers may be connected to the varying elements of individuality. While participants noted the intersections between sexual orientation and gender identity with racial and ethnic dimensions, this can be expanded to also explore additional categories of diversity including socioeconomic status, religion, ability, language, geographic location and age.

In addition to further investigation from a participant or individual level, it is also necessary to explore whether similar findings would occur within campus centers that have a more historical establishment in college environments. The participants utilized in this study attended an institution that had a center in existence for five years. The length of time the center has been established may play an integral role in the salience it has to students, the campus, and
the institutional culture. In this way, it is possible that more longstanding centers may provide additional supportive measures that were not yet discovered or identified in the present study.

Finally, student-centered research within the LGBTQIA student population needs to be further developed and expanded. The experiences of within-group individuals should be further explored to help to identify nuances that may exist between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, and asexual students. While cultural understandings reflect these individuals as a joint group of sexual minority members who may experience challenges or difficulties when compared to heterosexual peers, this is not to say that each of these subgroups has similar experiences, perceptions, impressions, or attitudes. Rather, it is necessary to further explore and honor the unique complexities within each group so that the community as a whole can be honored and can honor one another.

Student centered research is not just about recognizing nuance, it is also about giving voice to the important role of being a part of a campus community. The level of honesty and transparency offered from participants in this study was overwhelming and exceedingly helpful in guiding understanding. Students were eager to speak freely about their thoughts and experiences, and seldom did they do so with hesitancy. Prior scholars have already identified that positions of power exist between campus members and administrators. As such, researchers must be sensitive to the power dynamics and positions of privilege that impact all levels and angles of research. While this study sought to reduce the dimensions of power that inherently exist between researcher and participant, there exists a fine balance in requesting and conducting a data gathering process of personal information with imparting and sharing the importance of the nature of the research and study being conducted. Scholars need to continue to be transparent
in the motivation and intentions of their research to preserve the integrity of the process and to uphold moral responsibility to vulnerable communities and persons.

As a researcher, one of the primary responsibilities I hold at this point in my research process is to honor the stories and voices of my participants through presenting these findings to my fellow administrators, potential allies on campus, and those individuals in positions of authority. Through sharing my research, I hope to create more awareness to the current state of LGBTQA affairs and impart understandings that can even transcend institutional environments and help to drive LGBTQA awareness in daily interactions and exchanges.

Additionally, through my engagement with students and currently being a member of an institutional community, I feel that I also possess the responsibility to support students through making myself known as a campus ally, as a potential mentor, and as someone who can contribute in supporting and expanding the efforts of the center. As the participants in this study communicated, limited staff and resources reside in centers. It is up to researchers, scholars, and practitioners to recognize their role in instituting change and fully serving students by breaking down barriers and creating a culture of accountability that allows students to remain authentic to self and successful in their relational and educational journeys.

**Conclusion**

Though the participants in this study indicated that several improvements could be made to foster a greater sense of support and create a more positive environment on campus, the findings of the current study mark a clear departure from prior research which found campus climate for sexual minority students to be chilly at best (Evans, 2002; Rankin, 2003). Participants indicated that much progress has been made in terms of fostering LGBTQA visibility, though they admit that there is more work to be done. Despite any shortcomings, participants were
decisive in their impressions that having an on campus LGBTQA resource center was a significant marker of pro-LGBTQA community support, and students’ affinity for the space was largely due to their ability to feel supported, affirmed, and valued as both LGBTQA community members and campus community members.

The themes identified within this study 1) visibility and connection, 2) mirroring diversity and inclusion, 3) mentorships, 4) realizing and honoring growth, and 5) facilitating change, goals and improvements charge students, administrators, and faculty/staff with a call for action. These communities must work together to identify need on campus, establish inclusive policies and practices, and continue to monitor the effectiveness and additional needs that will arise over time. As LGBTQA student research gains more momentum in the field, it is critical that scholar-practitioners lead the charge in honoring and preserving student voice while rallying and executing change. In this way, commitments to student service and support will be sustained and new ideas, approaches, and theories will be integrated into educational settings and communities.
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Appendix A – IRB approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: January 14, 2016  IRB #: CPS15-11-17
Principal Investigator(s):  Billye Sankofa Waters
                           Meredith Kuczick
Department:  Doctor of Education Program
             College of Professional Studies
Address:  20 Belvidere
           Northeastern University
Title of Project:  LGBTQA Validation: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Participating Sites:  permission in file
DHHS Review Category:  Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents:  One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval:  12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JANUARY 13, 2017

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B – Recruitment Email

Subject line: Research Participation Invitation: Experiences and Impressions of the LGBTQA Resource Center Requested.

Dear Student,

My name is Meredith Kuczik and I am a current doctoral student in the Doctorate of Education program in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I am interested in learning about your experiences and perceptions and am inviting you to volunteer to take part in a research study about your experiences with the LGBTQA Resource Center.

I, along with the principal investigator, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, are asking you to participate in this study because of your participation with an on-campus LGBTQA resource center. Specifically, we are interested in speaking with LGBTQA-identified students who are sophomore, junior, or senior standing and have participated with the on-campus LGBTQA Resource Center, its affiliated programs or events, or utilized the center’s services on at least three occasions.

The purpose of this study will be to gain a better understanding of student experiences, opinions, and perceptions of how on-campus LGBTQA resource centers may support LGBTQA students. Study participants will be asked to provide their thoughts and perceptions on the LGBTQA Resource Center to help the researcher identify how students perceive or experience support from the center and its affiliated programs, events, and services.

I am inviting you to participate in an interview with me. The primary issues that will be discussed in this interview will generally surround your impressions and experiences with the LGBTQA Resource Center and your understandings, observations, and insights into how this resource may assist students. The interview will involve mostly open-ended discussions and will be conducted in a conversational manner. The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and later transcribed for analysis. At the conclusion of this research, the recordings and transcripts will be stored confidentially and eventually destroyed.

Interviews will be held at a time convenient for you. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be held in anywhere you choose off of campus. You will be provided with a brief summary of the interview approximately 2-3 weeks after the interview takes place for your review and comment, should you choose. Participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether to participate will have no bearing on your rights as a student.

If you would like to participate, please respond to this email at Kuczik.m@husky.neu.edu. Students will be selected at random to complete the interview process. Interviewed students will be given a $10 amazon gift card as compensation for participation. All participants will be provided with a copy of an informed consent form prior to completing the interview. The participant consent form can also be provided upon request prior to agreeing to participate.

Thank you for your attention and assistance.
Meredith Kuczik
Doctoral Candidate, Doctorate of Education
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Appendix C – Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Dept. of Education

Investigator Names: Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, Principal Investigator. Meredith Kuczik, Student Researcher.

Title of Project: LGBTQA Validation: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher, Meredith Kuczik, will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

We are asking you to participate in this study because of your association with an on-campus LGBTQA Resource Center. Specifically, you are someone who is sophomore, junior, or senior standing, a self-identified LGBTQA community member, and have participated within an LGBTQA Resource Center, its affiliated programs or events, or utilized the center’s services on three or more occasions. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research.

The purpose of this study will be to gain a better understanding of how LGBTQA students perceive and experience support from on-campus LGBTQA resource centers. Study participants will be asked to provide their thoughts and perceptions on the center as well as its services, events, and programs to help the researcher gain insight into LGBTQA student experience and understand how students feel on-campus LGBTQA resource centers support them.

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The primary issues that will be discussed in this interview will generally surround your experiences with the LGBTQA resource center and your understandings, observations, and insights of the center and its services and support. The interview will involve mostly open-ended discussions and will be conducted in a conversational manner. The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and later transcribed for analysis. At the conclusion of this research, the recordings and transcripts will be stored confidentially and eventually destroyed.

Interviews will be held at a time convenient for you. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be held at any location you choose that is not on ****** University’s campus.

You will be provided with a brief summary of the interview approximately 2-3 weeks after the interview takes place for your review and comment, should you choose.

The risk to participate in this study is very low. Interview questions are non-intrusive. Student participants will be asked to discuss information pertaining to their experiences and perceptions of the LGBTQA resource center and its services and programs. Should you feel uncomfortable about discussing such matters, you can simply ask to skip those questions and move on to another question. Additionally, you will also be briefed on the context of the interviews prior to
the interviews taking place. Should you voice objections regarding the content of the questions that will be asked, you will be provided the opportunity to opt out of the interview.

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, it may influence programmatic changes or identify ways in which on-campus LGBTQA resource centers could further support LGBTQA students. Additionally, findings may benefit other campuses or communities where an LGBTQA center is present.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researcher will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual being within this project.

To protect your identity, you will be given a pseudo-name in order to ensure your confidentiality. Additionally, only necessary and general demographic data will be recorded as it pertains to the aims of this study. Any identifiable links to personal information will be removed and stricken from interview transcripts and the collected data.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Should you decide, after the study has begun, that you no longer desire to participate, you may quit at any time.

If you have any questions or problems, please contact Meredith Kuczik at Kuczik.m@husky.neu.edu, 617-373-3907(W) or Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, primary researcher at b.sankofawaters@neu.edu, 617-390-3852.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

For your participation within the study, you will be given a $10 amazon gift card. Additionally, there are no specific costs to be incurred by you as a participant.
Appendix D – Interview Protocol

Interview questions:

1. Can you tell me about your experiences with the LGBTQ resource center?

2. Reflecting on your experiences thus far, which services or benefits offered by the LGBTQ resource center are most valuable to you?

3. How have any of the individuals associated with the center influenced your college experience?

4. In what ways do you feel that the LGBTQ resource center has supported your academic or personal development?

5. How has the availability of the LGBTQ resource center or your own participation within the center impacted your self-confidence or feelings of self-worth?

6. What message do you receive from the center regarding your value as a campus community member?

7. Why did you decide to participate in this study?

8. What do you hope to gain as an individual and as a community member from this study?