

The Experiences of Belonging in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,  
and Questioning College Students

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**CONTENTS**

Signature page	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	iv
List of Illustrations, Tables or Figures	v
Abstract	vi
Literature Review	1
Methodology and Results	19
Discussion	42
Appendixes	59
Works Consulted	77

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Negative Impacts Concepts

Figure 2: Positive Impacts Concepts

Figure 3 Attempts at Enhancing a Sense of Belongingness Concepts

Figure 4: Campus Climate Concepts

Table 1: Recommendations for Positive Campus Climates

## ABSTRACT

The Experiences of Belonging in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,  
and Questioning College Students

by

Logan Persons Jones

The ability to provide welcoming college environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBQ) students is hindered by the limited amount of research on the topic of belongingness and LGBQ college students. Extant research has focused primarily on survey data with little attention to the lived experiences of LGBQ students. The purpose of this study was to: (1) highlight differences in LGBQ and heterosexual students' perceptions of the campus climate based on a quantitative survey conducted over the past three years, (2) capture more detailed accounts of LGBQ students' experiences with belongingness using qualitative interviews, and (3) provide a forum for LGBQ students to collectively discuss their perceptions of the campus climate and provide suggestions for positive change. Overall, the quantitative survey findings suggest that LGBQ students experience the campus as less accepting than heterosexual students. Findings from the interviews illustrate that LGBQ students have complicated and diverse experiences on campus which are influenced by the mixed responses they receive from peer and non-peer members of the college community. Finally, findings from the focus group demonstrate that LGBQ students have suggestions for positive campus climate change, and support the use of future focus groups with this population. This project corroborates the use of multiple methodological approaches to investigate unique experiences of marginalized groups of students as a means of stimulating new empowerment research and identifying ways to promote positive social change.

## **The Experiences of Belonging in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Questioning College Students**

Of all the challenges that young adults face, one of the most significant is experiencing a sustained sense of belongingness in society. For all, a psychological sense of belonging is considered a fundamental need that an individual must satisfy in order to live a meaningful and successful life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Clegg, 2006; Maslow, 1943). For many, acquiring a sense of belonging comes easily, whereas for others finding and maintaining a sense of belonging is complicated by the norms and dynamics of American society. More specifically, the experience of belonging can be especially challenging for many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBQ)<sup>1</sup> young adults as they deal with the mixed feedback of supportiveness and discouragement of their sexual orientation identity.

These mixed experiences with belongingness can be further complicated when placed within another context, the college years. In general, the college years introduce many new challenges to young adults including requiring students to remain engaged in learning while encouraging personal exploration in other areas of their lives (Wittenberg, 2001). For many LGBQ college students, the college years may be especially challenging (D'Augelli, 2001).

Research assessing campus climates for LGBQ students suggests that the experiences of LGBQ students on campuses are predominately negative and detrimental to overall well-being (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001; D'Augelli, 1989; Evans, 2001; Evans, & D'Augelli, 1996; Gortmaker, & Brown, 2006; Howard, & Stevens, 2000; Lance, 2006; Longerbeam, et al. 2007; Malaney, et. al. 1997; Waldo, 1998). Yet, on the other hand, research has shown that positive and nurturing elements in educational communities do

and can exist that can contribute to interpersonal (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006), social (D'Augelli, 1989), and academic (Lee, 2002) well-being in LGBQ students. Thus college environments have the potential to both enhance and jeopardize the positive experiences of belongingness for LGBQ students. Unfortunately, most research in this area relies on survey data, which limit the ability to provide more in-depth reports about the factors that influence LGBQ students' sense of belongingness. The use of qualitative approaches to investigating the experiences of LGBQ students to compliment quantitative assessment approaches is one way to address this weakness in the existing literature. This study seeks to address these limitations by using multiple methodological approaches to explore the various challenges that young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning college students face in today's society. Before discussing the specifics of the current study, however, it is important to examine the available research on the importance of belonging in general.

### *Belongingness as a Human Experience*

The phenomenon of "belonging" is complicated by a number of factors including the differential consensus on what constitutes "belongingness," the differential constructs of belongingness (e.g. inclusion, support, connectedness, sense of community, and also rejection, loneliness, alienation, and ostracism), and the phenomenological nature of belongingness itself. Nevertheless, statistical and phenomenological data provided by the social sciences continue to reveal that belongingness is a fundamental need, just as Maslow (1943) initially suggested decades ago. For example, research shows that people actively form bonds to produce positive emotions, and resist breaking these bonds because deficits in belongingness are associated with negative, unpleasant emotional states (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, if an individual experiences long-term

deficits in belongingness, then these experiences have the ability to profoundly transform social interactions and an individual's perception of self, others, and the world (Clegg, 2006). Furthermore, a sense of belongingness is generally regarded as empowering, liberating, life sustaining, and something that we perceive as ultimately leading to "self-actualization" and "happiness" (Wubbolding, 2005), whereas a sense of not belonging, or feeling rejected, can be painful, leading to depression, feelings of hurt, and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Finally, research demonstrates that individuals who are targets of social ostracism, or feel a lack of belongingness, suffer some damage to both their mental (Sommer et al., 2001; Williams 2007) and physical (Hale et. al., 2005) well-being. Understanding the powerful effects of belongingness, we begin to ask questions such as: what happens to marginalized individuals or groups of individuals who often experience alienation such as individuals who identify as LGBTQ?

#### *Positioning Non-Heterosexuality in a U.S. Social Context*

In order to better understand the dynamic phenomenon of belongingness among LGBTQ individuals, it is necessary to place societal beliefs surrounding non-heterosexuality within a United States context. Despite the fact that individuals' attitudes towards homosexuals seem to have improved in recent years, the majority of people in the United States still hold negative attitudes towards this group (Herek, 2000). Belief that homosexuality is "wrong" and should be discouraged leads both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals to believe that being LGBTQ is not acceptable in our society (Goff, 1990). The development of these beliefs about sexual orientation can be likened to many other traditional instances of prejudice in the history of society, like racism and sexism. As a result of these normative beliefs, heterosexual privilege and heterosexism is

prevalent in American society (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Lance, 2006). These beliefs fuel the disenfranchisement of LGBQ individuals (Garnets, & D'Augelli, 1994) and can interfere with LGBQ youth experiencing a sense of belongingness and connecting with others on the basis of their sexual orientation.

To continue thinking about belongingness in LGBQ students, it is important to examine further some of the direct and indirect stigmatization attached to identifying as LGBQ and associated with individuals perceived to be LGBQ. While the direct stigmatism surrounding LGBQ issues continues to place LGBQ students in isolated situations (Grossman, & Kerner, 1998b; Moorhead, 1999), an indirect influence of stigmatism influences LGBQ as well. A study on heterosexual college students by Silegman et al. (1991) demonstrates how courtesy stigmatization, the phenomenon of stigmatizing individuals who interact with someone who is believed to be homosexual, also contributes to decreased sense of belonging in LGBQ students by discouraging heterosexual students from establishing supportive relationships with LGBQ students. This dualistic relationship of stigmatism and courtesy stigmatism introduces a threat to belongingness by reducing the likelihood of interactions that could help ease the psychological burden placed on LGBQ students by placing a burden on LGBQ allies as well. In this instance, this courtesy stigma demonstrates how simple everyday interactions, like choosing to have a gay friend or roommate in college, can create additional challenges for both LGBQ students and for those who try to be supportive and affirmative.

Another societal perspective on homosexuality is the imposition of silence and invisibility. In general, silence and invisibly tend to complicate one's ability to accurately

understand the life experiences of someone dissimilar, and this is especially the case for LGBTQ individuals. In addition, LGBTQ individuals are often told to remain silent and invisible (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1999). The lack of visibility about homosexuality also reinforces the misguided and heterosexist belief in our society that homosexuality is abnormal and non-existent. And although LGBTQ communities on academic college campuses appear to have become somewhat more visible and influential in recent years (Waldo, 1998), LGBTQ communities remain largely invisible or hidden from view. Because of this, LGBTQ youth are seldom encouraged to speak out or challenge this invisibility and are not offered incentives to challenge this stigma. This begins to set up a dangerous cycle that fuels yet another, more subtle, societal perspective – heterosexual privilege.

Heterosexual privilege is benefits or unearned advantages systematically afforded to heterosexuals, simply because their social group membership is the norm and deemed desirable (Goodman, 2001; Johnson, 2001). This privilege includes the fact that many heterosexual individuals in America remain widely unaware of this privilege (Goodman, 2001). Due to being a dominant group, this privilege seems to operate largely unconsciously and with no malice. Even so, acknowledging this privilege can have boomerang effects, which result in self-defensive responses like “it’s not my fault that such disadvantages exist for gay individuals.” Typically, when encountered with this privilege, people will deny or minimize the magnitude of heterosexual privilege by blaming non-heterosexuals for not challenging these instances, or profess to be less privileged (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001), or not be prejudiced at all (Johnson, 2001). Bowen & Bourgeois (2001) demonstrate this phenomenon nicely when they observed

that most heterosexual students will rate themselves as less homophobic and more accepting of homosexual students than their peers when prompted. This phenomenon, also known as pluralistic ignorance, is also a manifestation of heterosexual privilege because it involves majority members re-directing the responsibility of challenging societal misconceptions about non-heterosexuality. Unfortunately, the disavowal of these societal perspectives perpetuates U.S. society's lack of understanding concerning the experiences of LGBQ individuals, and operates to reinforce the heterosexual norms mentioned earlier in this section. A vicious cycle looms. The next section will address how societal perspectives also influence LGBQ students' experiences in the college years.

#### *The College Years for LGBQ Students*

Continuing to acknowledge the relevance of societal and environmental contexts, the higher educational experiences of LGBQ students cannot be adequately understood outside of the social context of the college years. As mentioned, for individuals who pursue higher levels of education, the college environment plays a pivotal and all-encompassing role in shaping personal development by introducing a number of new experiences and ideas. For some college students, these developments may include new discoveries about one's sexuality (D'Augelli, 1992; D'Augelli, 2001; Stevens, 2004; Waldo, 1998) and may represent the first opportunity for young people to place themselves and others into different sexual orientation categories (Green, 1998). For other LGBQ students who have made such discoveries earlier in their personal development, disappointment can ensue when they find that their college campuses are unwelcoming (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). Both of these revelations can result in

emotional turmoil that is accompanied by confusion, fear, and a sense of isolation.

Relating this back to the negative consequences of not belonging *and* being LGBTQ in a social context, this turmoil is intensified by having to deal with and understand the social effects of being a member of a socially stigmatized group (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; Goff 1991).

To further examine the college years, it is important to remember that the hidden and invisible nature of sexual orientation has made it difficult to come to a consensus regarding the prevalence of non-heterosexuality in the community. It is reasonable to assume, however, that up to 15% of college students may be identified as non-heterosexual (D'Augelli, 1993). To add yet another interesting element to the experiences of college students, it appears that individuals who graduate from college are much more likely to self-identify as LGBTQ than those who simply complete a high school education (Green, 1998). This finding should not be misinterpreted – no one suggests that going to college increases the chances of becoming gay. What it does reveal, however, is the possibility that a LGBTQ student's development in college may be facilitated by various developmental stages during young adulthood, and the pluralistic and discovery-based nature of post-secondary education.

This personal and intellectual freedom is important to keep in mind as researchers agree that our college campuses should not be places of silence, but rather places of acceptance and appreciation towards diversity – especially less obvious, “hidden” diversity (D'Augelli, 1996; Green, 1998; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Waldo, 1998). Although this is an ideal, the majority of these investigations on college campuses demonstrate that LGBTQ students report a number of

negative experiences (D'Augelli, 1989; 1992; 2003; D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001; Gose, 1996; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998), including a higher rate of harassment and experiencing prejudice than the general student population (D'Augelli, 1993).

Examining the studies that report such experiences more closely and critically is crucial in deepening our understanding of the experiences of LGBQ college students. For example, several studies by D'Augelli (1989; 1992; 1993) surveyed openly lesbian and gay male undergraduate students' experiences with discrimination and violence at a large state university in the Northeast. In these studies, gay men and lesbians reported high levels of verbal harassment (75%) and physical threats of violence (25%), and they feared for their personal safety on campus (64%). Most lesbian and gay men also reported hiding their sexual orientation from their peers (80-89%), and nearly half indicated making specific life choices to avoid harassment. A similar study by Waldo (1998) surveyed heterosexual and LGB college students' perceptions of the campus climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students at a large state university in the Midwest. In this survey, LGB undergraduates reported feeling less accepted and respected on campus than their heterosexual peers. Such findings support the claim that negative encounters on campus lead to detriments in "fitting in" and provide evidence that the contexts of discrimination and harassment are quite salient to LGBQ students on campus (Waldo, 1998). D'Augelli (1992, 1993) also included 1<sup>st</sup> year heterosexual college students in his survey to assess homophobia at the university level. In these results, nearly all 1<sup>st</sup> year students reported hearing antigay/antilesbian remarks, felt that harassment was likely for the average lesbian or gay man (91%), and many of these students reported making such

disparaging remarks themselves (67-80%). Similarly, a report by Malaney, Williams, and Gellar (1997) found that 60% of undergraduate students at both a research university and a state college in the Northeast reported having peers who made anti-LGB remarks. These results, combined with other findings (Comstock, 1991), provide overwhelming evidence of a hostile climate for lesbians and gay men on college campuses.

A more recent, national survey administered by the Gay and Lesbian Task Force to 14 universities (2 in the Northwest, 3 in the Southwest, 1 in the Midwest, 4 in the Mideast, 1 in the Southeast, 2 in the Mid-Atlantic, and 1 in the Northeast) surveyed experiences with LGBT issues on campus within a large sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students, faculty, and administrators. In this survey, Rankin (2003) reported that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students indicated that the college community is not an empowering place for LGBQ students and that anti-LGBT intolerance and harassment are quite prevalent. More than one-third (36%) of LGBT undergraduate students experienced harassment most commonly in the form of verbal harassment (89%). Seventy-nine percent of those harassed identified students as the source of the harassment, had concealed their sexual orientation to avoid intimidation (51%), rated the overall campus climate as homophobic (43%), and stated that their college/university was not addressing issues related to sexual orientation (41%). These results reflect much of what others surveys (D'Augelli, 1993) found ten years prior, suggesting that campus climates have not improved much for LGBQ students. Additionally, although a national survey, the 14 universities surveyed by Rankin (2003) are not representative of most institutions of higher education in America because each of the universities surveyed have affirmative LGBQ programming established on campus, unlike the majority of

colleges in the U.S. In fact, only 100 of the 5,500 colleges in the United States have LGBT student centers (Rankin, 2003). Other studies report that only 10% of the country's colleges and universities have included sexual orientation as a protected classification in their codes of conduct and employment policies (Evans, 2001; McDonough & McLaren, 1996). And while over 2,000 LGB student groups exist on American college campuses, only 30 of them have full-time administrators responsible for overseeing LGB activities and programs (Gose, 1996). From these reports, it seems that most college and university campuses have not fully addressed the issues relevant to LGBQ students.

Several studies also provide evidence that LGBQ students' experiences on campus influence their level of attachment to their campus. For example, results from one survey suggests that the longer the LGBQ students were at a university, the more negatively they viewed the campus climate, suggesting that perhaps the longer LGBQ students stayed on a campus where they felt unaccepted, the more they disliked the university. This finding also suggests that the amount of time spent on a hostile college campus is correlated with the number of negative experiences students have, resulting in LGBQ students seeing the need for positive institutional change (Waldo, 1998). Additionally, Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) and Evans (2001) demonstrate that LGBQ students are much more likely than heterosexual students to drop out of schools, suggesting that this is because they are unable to tolerate feeling isolated on campus (Evans, 2001).

While these studies provide invaluable data about these experiences and demonstrate a start in determining the impact of the college environment on the

experiences of LGBQ students, in-depth analysis of the LGBQ college students' experiences remain mostly absent from the literature. More comprehensive work is needed to investigate how LGBQ students make meaning of their experiences on campus.

An example of one such study that began to investigate these experiences in more detail was by Evans (2001), who administered a residence hall climate survey with 20 lesbian, gay, and bisexual students at a large state university. In it, Evans (2001) used the traditionally quantitative survey measures to assess their experiences, but also provided the participants with the opportunity to share their experiences in residence halls with brief qualitative narrative prompts. An analysis indicated three factors which seem to play a role in how LGB students make meaning of their negative experiences: minimizing the negative experiences, exaggeration of positive experiences, and perceiving anything "not negative" as positive. This study provides evidence of the diverse and complicated interpersonal and social processes that LGBQ students experience on campus, and how they cope with these negative impacts. Evidence of this variability in how gay and lesbian college students handle different components of this sexual identification was previously mentioned by D'Augelli as well (1991).

These survey studies are helpful in exposing these realities and making them known, yet most of these surveys truly do not capture the more detailed accounts of these experiences. This lack of research places a stand-still on bettering our understanding of LGBQ students that can contribute to developing hospitable campus climates. In order to further position the investigation at hand, it is worthwhile to mention some of the potential deleterious and advantageous outcomes of being LGBQ on college.

### *Outcomes for LGBQ Students*

Although feelings of isolation and not belonging are common for young people as they develop their identities (Edwards & Mullis, 2001), these studies demonstrate that these experiences appear to be exaggerated for LGBQ students (D'Augelli, 1992). Other college campus climate investigations have reported that many LGB students feel alone, rejected, and isolated, silenced, and lonely (Grossman, & Kerner, 1998a).

In order to avoid the hostility that many LGBQ individuals endure, deal with rejection and sexual prejudice, and cope with less welcoming college environments, many students utilize diverse behavioral and attitudinal coping mechanisms. An example of the diversity of choices and experiences can be observed in LGBQ students' choices about making an LGBQ identity known. Specifically, some LGBQ individuals may elect to "come out" to self and others (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Waldo, 1998), and live a life of truthfulness, whereas other LGBQ individuals may choose to remain invisible, hide their sexual orientation, or "pass" as heterosexual in order to avoid experiencing hostility from their peers or other sources.

To demonstrate actual and perceived risks associated with disclosure, previous survey data depicts "out" students as typically perceiving and reporting the campus climate more negatively than closeted students (D'Augelli, 1991; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). But, Gortmaker & Brown (2006) also have found that regardless of being out or closeted, most self-identifying LGBQ students reported experiencing some form of unfair treatment from another student, felt the need to hide their sexual orientation out of fear of unfair treatment or harassment (80% of closeted students, 44% of out students), and reported hearing negative remarks that put down non-heterosexual students (78% out

students; 82% closeted students). The reports reveal the diverse, yet shared, experiences of being LGBTQ on campus.

Additional research suggests that remaining in the closet or passing as heterosexual leads LGBTQ students to lead double lives, which also cause enduring psychological stress (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). This silence about sexuality creates considerable challenges for LGBTQ students as the social considerations of disclosure and hiding create high levels of stress as reported by Evans & D'Augelli (1996). Living this incongruent life (Rogers, 1980), in this case a life where one's true sexual identity is camouflaged behind a heterosexual façade, is also associated with problems of self-definition, including feelings of guilt (Goff, 1990) and delayed positive sexual identity development (D'Augelli, 1989). This silence about their true sexual orientation is experienced as oppressive (Sommer et. al., 2001), and as suggested by Evans (2001) who quotes a narrative provided by one of her participants, "It's worse to be invisible than to be called names." More broadly, the feelings of not belonging can become permanently isolating (Clegg, 2006), transforming into self-defeat and possibly some socially withdrawn behavior (Twenge et al., 2007).

Similar to how Rogers (1980) emphasized consolidating incongruent gaps between a core identity and public identity to live meaningful lives, D'Augelli (1993) articulates that LGBTQ students must navigate through this hostile environment and integrate a positive non-heterosexual identity into all domains of personal life. Part of this consolidation is observed when some LGBTQ students do chose to come out. Using the measures from the survey data, Garnets, & D'Augelli (1994) found a positive correlation between being out and an increased sense of belongingness. Coming out to self and

others appears to be associated with decreased feelings of isolation (Garnets, & D'Augelli, 1994) and is seen to be synonymous with well-being and self-actualization (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). It seems that the old adage of “being true to oneself” is a valid expression in the case of disclosing one’s sexual orientation, as some LGBTQ students have discovered. Regardless of this positive benefit, the LGBTQ youth who are courageous enough to make their sexual orientation known also risk exposing themselves to the possibility of rejection and hostility as demonstrated by the increased reports of verbal harassment in out students (D’Augelli, 1993; Evans, 2001; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006)

Considering the complications of silence, invisibly, and risk of hostility and rejection, it seems unfair to expect many LGBTQ students to take such personal risks without greater peer and institutional support. If it is unfair to hold such expectations, what are other forms of resiliency that LGBTQ students have demonstrated in the aforementioned studies? To answer this question, we can examine some positive research that juxtaposes the largely negative research of being LGBTQ on a college campus. This research highlights the remarkable resilience of many LGBTQ youth, suggesting that labeling non-heterosexuals as victims may not be accurate or beneficial.

*Comment on Belonging among LGBTQ college students*

It has been demonstrated that both elementary school (Osterman, 2000) and university students’ (Hagbord, 1998) sense of belongingness can largely affect a student’s level of engagement, commitment, performance, and satisfaction with the educational process. For example, when students feel as if they do not belong, they

become detached and isolated from others and from the overall educational process (Beck & Malley, 2003).

Among the research on LGBQ college students, very little has specifically examined “belongingness.” Rather, the aforementioned reports that have investigated the campus climate for LGBQ students have only been able to focus on similar constructs of belongingness like isolation, feeling harassed, a lack of support, or not feeling valued by various member of the college community. Thus, such experiences with belongingness in LGBQ remains vaguely understood and require further research.

Although there is little literature on belongingness among LGBQ college students, there is research to suggest that this is an important area to investigate as it might be crucial to the academic and social-well being of LGBQ college students. One of the most illustrative examples of such positive outcomes of belonging for LGBQ students in academic setting is from is a qualitative report by Lee (2002). In it, she specifically examined the effects of being involved of in a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) with seven high school students in the Midwest. Data was collected through interviews, academic records, and the researchers’ personal reflections over the course of two years. In the report, LGB and heterosexual students involved in a GSA believed that: (a) their involvement in GSA had positively affected relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers; (b) their academic performance improved due to their involvement in the GSA; (c) they became more comfortable with being known as LGB or as a heterosexual ally; (d) they were aware of a heterosexist society but were not able to identify specific strategies they used for handling the heterosexist assumptions; (e) they felt safer and less harassed due to their involvement in GSA; and (f) their involvement in

GSA provided students an avenue for feeling a “sense of belonging to,” and “identification with,” the school (Lee, 2002).

Lee’s report demonstrates that some of the hopelessness and despair that many LGBQ students experience can be removed when supportive and affirmative initiatives exist on campus. This qualitative data reveals the beneficial transformations and feelings of empowerment that can occur when a sense of a supportive educational community is created for LGB students *and* their heterosexual allies. Other studies also suggested that heterosexual students with LGB friends are more likely to have more favorable attitudes and be less prejudiced towards LGBQ individuals (Evans, 2001; Herek, 2000; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997). Such friendships and alliances allow empowering interactions to take place on our campuses and reduce the feeling of isolations that many LGB experience.

Although this study paints a positive picture for LGBQ students, many educational institutions do not have or even allow such students organizations (Lee, 2002; Rankin, 2003). A limitation of Lee’s (2002) report is that the sample was limited to only seven students and the voices of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students were not separated from the voices of heterosexual allies. Qualitative research must separate these experiences in order to accurately capture the experience of LGBQ students. Nonetheless, this report provided support for the use of qualitative research methods and compliments extant quantitative research on LGBQ students experiences, including belongingness.

One point that has been clearly and consistently corroborated throughout the research is the positive effect making support available to LGBQ students. This encouragement also comes from other findings that suggest that LGBQ college students

who had more support during their development were better equipped to deal with victimization experienced on campus (Evans, 2001).

In response to the implications of loneliness and not belonging as demonstrated in the promising results of the Lee (2002) study, psychologists have recommended increasing the amount of support for LGBQ students (D'Augelli, 1989; Garnets, & D'Augelli, 1994; Grossman, & Kerner, 1998a). This support seems capable of significantly influencing LGBQ students' enhanced feelings of belongingness in our academic institutions.

### **This Investigation**

Given shortcomings of previous studies that have relied mostly on survey data to illustrate the campus climate for LGBQ students, the purpose of this investigation is to focus on the experiences of LGBQ students, solicit suggestions for positive campus climate change, and to provide a voice for a hidden and marginalized population. This investigation may help determine how LGBQ students make meaning of their college experiences and provide invaluable information about how to improve school environments for LGBQ students. This investigation is largely inductive – instead of formulating a hypothesis to validate a theory we will be asking more qualitative methods – to reveal certain phenomena. Along the lines of community and social psychological research, this research also seeks to foster change through examining how social environments and social forces influence individual functioning and well-being (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Duffy & Wong, 2003; Rappaport, 2000).

The questions relevant to belongingness and LGBQ research that inspire this investigation include:

- What is the campus climate like for LGBTQ students at this particular institution?
- How do LGBTQ students experience belongingness at this particular institution?
- Who makes an impact on LGBTQ students' sense of belongingness?
- What experiences promote overall well-being for LGBTQ students?
- What can facilitate positive change on college campuses?

In order to answer such questions, this inquiry combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This integration is utilized to more fully capture the experiences of LGBTQ students on a liberal arts campus in the Southeast. Utilizing quantitative methods in this investigation provides opportunities to compare this campus to previous survey data and sets the stage for further investigations at this particular college (Phase 1). In addition to assessing the campus climate, qualitative interviews were incorporated to reveal the in-depth experiences and to give contextually relevant expression to the LGBTQ participants' stories (Phase 2). Finally, a focus group was included, which simultaneously allows for suggestions to be made and provides the potential for participants to understand the experiences of their LGBTQ peers in hopes of increasing a sense of community and value (Phase 3) which is aligned with a social empowerment agenda (Rappaport, 1990). To our knowledge, no previous investigations have integrated such diverse approaches to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students in a similar context.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

### *Phase 1: Campus Climate Survey*

#### *Method*

*Participants.* Participants who completed the campus climate survey and identified a sexual orientation were the focus of this investigation. In 2005, there were 659 participants (42% response rate), with 619 (90.2%) participants identifying as heterosexual, and 40 (5.8%) identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual<sup>2</sup>. In 2006, there were 575 participants (37% response rate), with 542 (89.4%) participants identifying as heterosexual, 33 (5.5%) participants identifying as lesbian or gay, or bisexual. In 2007, there were 876 participants (55% response rate), with 836 (95.4%) participants identifying as heterosexual, 37 (4.3%) participants identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning. Further descriptions of the samples are provided in appendix A.

*Measures.* The Campus Climate Survey is used to assess students' thoughts and feelings about the campus climate. In particular, the survey consists of questions regarding demographic and background information, Likert-type questions referring to diversity issues, and limited open-ended questions. Participants are presented a series of questions about their experiences on the college campus, their general and more specific views about others from different and same backgrounds as themselves, as well as their own feelings about issues relating to certain minority groups. Questions from the campus climate survey were selected that fell into three categories: campus climate, the experiences of LGBTQ students, and student interactions. All of the questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*; ranging from (1) *never* to (5) *daily*), a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from (1) *much*

worse to (7) *much better*), or participants were asked to provide a value. A description of the questions precedes their analysis in the results section.

*Procedure.* The Campus Climate survey was administered to the entire student body electronically via e-mail in the spring semesters of 2005, 2006, and 2007. Attempts were made to recruit as many participants as possible by sending reminder e-mails, making classroom announcements, and using word of mouth around campus. Once signed onto the survey, participants were presented with the informed consent form; upon agreement, participants moved on to complete the entire survey. Upon completion of the survey, participants received a coupon for a free beverage and the option to enter themselves into a raffle.

### *Results*

The following section examines whether the perceptions of the campus climate for LGBTQ students differs according to the participants self-identified sexual orientation. In order to analyze the data, participants were placed into either a heterosexual category or a non-heterosexual category based on the demographic information provided in the survey. The questioning or unsure category was only included in the 2007 survey, therefore this group of students is not represented in 2005 or 2006. Participants who did not provide data were not included in these analyses. A full report of means and standard deviations of each survey item is provided in Appendix B.

*Campus Climate Analyses.* Two sample t-tests showed that there were no significant differences in heterosexual and LGB students reporting hearing remarks like “That is so gay,” or something similar to it in 2005 and 2006. In 2007, two-sample t-tests

show that there were no significant differences between heterosexual and LGBQ students in hearing disparaging remarks about sexual orientation.

Two sample t-tests indicated that heterosexual students reported “seeing graffiti with negative comments toward LGBT students” less than LGB students in 2005; ( $t(549)=6.87, p<.0001$ ) and 2006; ( $t(469)=3.51, p<.0001$ ). In 2007, however, the number of times graffiti seen was only marginally significant;  $t(496)=1.65, p=.10$ .

Two sample t-tests indicated that heterosexual students reported contemplating transferring out of the college less than LGB students;  $t(655)=3.69, p<.001$ . In 2006 and 2007, however, this difference had dissipated.

Two sample t-tests showed that there were no significant difference between heterosexual and LGBQ students reporting “I feel as though I belong in the college campus community” in 2007.

*LGBQ Students’ Experiences Analyses.* Two sample t-tests indicated that in 2005 and 2006 heterosexual students disagree more with the statement that “the experiences of students on campus differ depending on their sexual orientation” than LGB students in 2005:  $t(615)=4.75, p<.0001$ ; and 2006,  $t(524)=2.17, p=.03$ .

In 2007, two sample t-tests indicated that LGBQ students disagree more with the statement “Compared to heterosexuals, LGBQ students are treated worse/better on this campus as a whole” than their heterosexual peers;  $t(542)=5.19, p<.0001$ .

*Student Interactions Analyses.* Two sample t-tests indicated that in 2005, heterosexual students report fewer interactions with LGB individuals *prior* to enrollment at the college than LGB students;  $t(566)=4.54, p < .0001$ . In 2006, this difference

between the groups (heterosexual students: became marginally significant;  $t(478)=1.65$ ,  $p=.10$ ; and by 2007 this difference disappeared.

Two sample t-tests revealed that in 2005 and 2006, heterosexual students report having a fewer number of interactions with LGB students *while* at college than LGB students (2005:  $t(566)=4.73$ ,  $p <.0001$ ; 2006:  $t(479)=2.03$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Two sample t-tests revealed that in 2005 and 2006, heterosexual students reported having a lower number of LGBT friends than that reported by LGB students;  $t(507)=9.30$ ,  $p<.0001$ ;  $t(433)=4.93$ ,  $p<.0001$ .

Two sample t-tests indicated that in all three years heterosexual students reported “I feel awkward around students whose sexual orientations are different from mine” than do LGBQ students each year (2005:  $t(554)=4.84$ ,  $p<.001$ ; 2006:  $t(465)=2.40$ ,  $p=.017$ ; 2007:  $t(490)=3.25$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

### ***Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews***

#### *Method*

*Participants.* A total of 22 individuals (10 female, 12 male) were interviewed with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest being 23 ( $M= 20.09$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). Within the sample there were 3 Lesbian (13.6%), 11 Gay (50%), 7 Bisexual (31.8%; 6 female, 1 male), and 1 Questioning (4.5%) individual(s). Eighteen of the participants were white Americans and 4 were from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. The class year varies as such: 8 of the participants were in their 1<sup>st</sup> year, 3 of the participants were in their sophomore year, 3 of the participants were in their junior year, and 8 were in their senior year. Approximately half (55%) of participants indicated that they were a member of

GSA. A complete breakdown of the demographic variables of the participants who completed an interview are provided in Appendix C.

### *Measures*

*Interview Questionnaire.* The questionnaire (see Appendix D) consisted of 19 open-ended questions designed to gather qualitative data and to provide participants with a guided, yet open-ended, opportunity to share their personal experiences on campus surrounding their sexual orientation. There were four sections of the questionnaire. The first section was designed to allow participants to describe their sexual orientation, define belongingness in their own terms, and to introduce the definition of belonging created for this investigation. Belongingness on this campus was defined as:

The experience(s) of feeling like a valued and accepted member of the college community and a general connection with and commitment to the college.

The second section of the interview was designed to gather information regarding the participant's personal experiences with belongingness on campus. The third section of the interview was designed to gather information regarding the way that LGBTQ students perceive the LGBTQ community at the college. The final section of the interview was designed to solicit suggestions for positive campus climate change in regard to increasing LGBTQ students' sense of belonging.

*Post-Interview Questionnaire.* The questionnaire (see Appendix E) consisted of 18 quantitative items to gather data about the sample and one qualitative item to provide the opportunity to make comments that were not made during the interview. The measure also assessed the participant's involvement in the colleges' chapter of GSA, participation in previous campus climate surveys, and 5-point Likert-scale questions on belongingness

and support (ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*). Finally, the questionnaire utilized a 4-point, Likert-scale to assess the participant's comfort level during the interview and to determine whether or not the interviewer was perceived as skilled (ranging from (1) *very comfortable/ skilled* to (4) *very uncomfortable/unskilled*).

*Procedure.* The difficulty of sampling LGBTQ people has been reported in other studies (Waldo, 1998) so an attempt was made to interview as many LGBTQ students as possible by utilizing multiple recruitment techniques including (a) submitting a recruitment flyer to be inserted in a weekly campus wide announcement e-mail (Appendix F) for three consecutive weeks; (b) making announcements in the college's chapter of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), and (c) by asking interviewees to pass the recruitment flyer along to acquaintances who they thought may be interested in participating in the study (i.e. snowballing). All participants were asked the same questions in the same order.

*Interview Protocol.* The primary investigator was trained, and mock interviews were conducted in which the investigator was observed. When the procedure of interviews were reliable (as evidenced by the revised questionnaire, the endorsement of a licensed clinical-community psychologist, and the investigator had no questions about the procedure), the mock interview phase was completed. The investigator met with the participants individually at an agreed upon location and time for the interview and explained the procedures of the investigation. Informed consent was obtained (see Appendix G). The audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately half an hour ( $M = 28.26$  minutes). After the interview was completed, the participant was asked to fill out a post-interview questionnaire at which time the investigator left the room. Once the post-

interview questionnaire was completed, the participant placed it in an envelope at which point the investigator re-entered the room. At the conclusion of the meeting, the investigator handed the participant two recruitment flyers and encouraged the participant to recruit others for the investigation. The participants received no reimbursement for their participation, with the exception of students interested in receiving research credit (1.5 hours) for introductory psychology courses. To protect the participants' anonymity and provide a cover story, a credit form was used from another study being run concurrently by another researcher within the psychology department.

*Coding for Concepts.* This section describes the progression of moving from relatively open interview data to focused research questions and categories of concepts grounded in the theoretical approach described by Strauss & Corbin (1998). Following each interview, the primary investigator made notes about important themes, concepts, and sub-concepts which emerged in the interview. Then, once all interviews were completed, the interviewer, a research team, and the project sponsor met to discuss the most pertinent interview questions that would answer the original research questions of the investigation. After definitions were finalized, the primary investigator and an interview transcriber read half (11) of the interview questions and sub-questions and rated the absence (0) or presence (1) of each concept. After inner-rated reliability was established using Cohen's Kappa, the primary investigator coded the remainder of the interviews for concepts with reliability coefficients greater than .60.

*The Coded Concepts.* For the investigation at hand, the concepts that were focused on are (1) sources and expressions of negative impacts on belongingness; (2)

sources and expressions of positive impacts on belongingness; (3) attempts at enhancing a sense of belongingness/fitting in; and (4) the campus climate.

*Negative Impact on Belongingness*

**Belongingness Definition:** The experience(s) of feeling like a valued and accepted member of the College community and a general connection with and commitment to the College.

This category describes the answers participants provided to the question, have you ever felt that your sexual orientation has negatively affected your sense of belonging at the college? Figure 1 provides an example of each concept from the interview text and provides the reliability scores. Reliability coefficients ranged from .82 to 1.00. These concepts include:

*Peer source of negative impact.* Peer or group of peers identified as source of negative impact on belongingness

*Faculty source of negative impact.* Faculty or groups of faculty identified as source of negative impact on belongingness.

*Staff source of negative impact.* Staff identified as source of negative impact on belongingness

*Administration source of negative impact.* Administration or member of the administration identified as source of negative impact on belongingness.

*Overt Expression.* Intentional, unequal treatment of LGBQ individuals and/or groups.

*Subtle Expression.* Unintentional, unequal treatment that privileges heterosexual norms.

Figure 1: Negative Impact Concepts		
DESCRIPTION OF CONCEPTS	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTS FROM INTERVIEW DATA	Cohen's Kappa
Experienced negative impact on belongingness	<i>"The term, 'that's so gay' or, 'he was such a faggot,' or, 'that girl looks like a dyke,' like those things come out of people's mouths constantly. ... For just fear of being a pariah at the school I just, it definitely has affected how I feel and how I feel accepted at the school."</i> Bisexual, 1 <sup>st</sup> year female	1.00
Peer(s) source of negative impact	<i>"Um, I have um, I have a close a close friend who um, when they started talking about the gay marriage and whether or not that should be legalized she started negatively talking about how she didn't believe that gays should have any rights. And then other people at the table started agreeing with her and saying that they didn't understand why gays should have the same rights as heterosexual couples and, which made me sort of uncomfortable sort of voicing my opinion as totally as I would have if I had been in a different environment."</i> Bisexual, 1 <sup>st</sup> year female	. 1.00
Peer overt expression	<i>"Oh yeah, uh, not necessarily outright, like in front of my face or in terms of physical violence or anything. But you do hear negative remarks. It's anywhere you go, like "Dude, that's so gay," ... But it's not something you, it's just kind of there. Like a couple of the desks have things written on them. The presence is clearly there. You know, like things. I put signs up in the hall for GSA and people would write derogatory remarks or tear them down. So I would say that, at times, it has made me feel of lesser value to the community."</i> Gay, sophomore	.83
Peer subtle expression	<i>"Um, well my roommate is slightly homophobic. So I have kind of had to keep that away from him."</i> Bisexual, 1 <sup>st</sup> year male	.82
Faculty source of negative impact	<i>"And we went to the Civil Rights Museum and then we came back to the community center and the teacher asked us to go around and tell how we felt at the Civil Rights Museum and um, one of the girls you know, raised her hand and she said, "I felt angry that they would include gays in the description of Civil Rights." Because part of the Civil Rights Museum has civil rights movements of now and there was gay rights, disability rights, immigrant rights, things of that nature... I felt outraged and I expected everyone around me to just feel outraged and they just, "mmhmm, mmhmm, mmhmm...", " and [one of the professors] was like, "that's an excellent, that's an excellent observation." And you know, and that really set up my experience as gay. You chose to be gay and you chose to be an abomination in front of the lord, and there you go."</i> Bisexual, 1 <sup>st</sup> year female	1.00
Faculty overt expression	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Faculty subtle expression	<i>"My teacher refused to address [the topic of homosexuality]. There shouldn't be any sort of apprehension towards homosexuals."</i> Bisexual, 1 <sup>st</sup> year male	1.00
Staff source of negative impact	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Staff overt expression	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Staff Subtle expression	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Administration source of negative impact	<i>"I mean up until a few years ago we had to completely disassociate ourselves from the school before we had GSA meetings, I mean, we weren't even called the GSA until like 2 years ago. The administration</i>	1.00

	<i>needs to catch up with the students and instead of saying how can we make the students more like us? They need to be saying how can we be more like the students? And that's, I mean, a college is a community of young people with young people's ideas and the administration needs to be like how can we better accommodate the young people since it's their community and they're letting us be here. I mean I think the administration needs to realize that they're on our turf and we're not on theirs." Lesbian, Senior</i>	
Administration overt expression	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Administration subtle expression	<i>"They could not turn a blind eye. I have been here for four years and the desks in Palmer are just now getting changed. I know that said many times about the desks and it finally took me sitting in front of [a dean] and starting to cry about [the desks]. And it kind of made me feel really sucky, for lack of a better word, to get them to do something. I know that I am not the first one to say anything about it. So I think stop turning a blind eye, start sponsoring lectures or showing a movie, you know just keep doing that." Lesbian, senior</i>	1.00

### *Positive Impact on Belongingness*

**Belongingness Definition:** The experience(s) of feeling like a valued and accepted member of the College community and a general connection with and commitment to the College.

This category describes the answers participants provided to the questions (a) have you ever felt that your sexual orientation has positively affected your sense of belonging at the college; (b) what could students do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong; (c) how supportive are heterosexual students of non-heterosexual students; (d) what could faculty do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong; and (e) what could the administration at do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong? Figure 2 provides an example of each concept from the interview text and provides the reliability scores. Reliability coefficients ranged from .75 to 1.00.

These concepts include:

*Experienced positive impact on belongingness.* Participant mentions and/or describes that his/her sexual orientation has had a positive impact on his/her sense of belongingness.

*Peer identification.* Peer or groups of peers identified as a source of positive impact.

*Faculty identification.* Faculty identified as source of positive impact.

*Staff identification.* Staff identified as source of positive impact.

*Administrative identification:* administration identified as source of positive impact.

*Passive acceptance.* Participant describes feeling accepted by a peer or group of peers where LGBTQ status has not been specifically mentioned.

*Active acceptance.* Participant describes feeling accepted by a peer or group of peers where LGBTQ status or aspects of their status have been mentioned, including supporting LGBTQ initiatives.

DESCRIPTION OF CONCEPTS	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTS FROM INTERVIEW DATA	Cohen's Kappa
Peer(s) identification	<i>"I feel I belong just because I have picked out friends who accept me for who I am and treat me with respect and just like any other person. In that sense I belong but in general, the general campus climate I feel that ummm... my sexuality sets me apart." Gay, 1<sup>st</sup> year</i>	1.00
Peer passive acceptance	<i>"I've had people who have chosen not to say their opinion and I've had people said, 'Well I don't agree with it but you're still a good guy so it doesn't matter to me.' And some people have just said 'well I don't really care.' So I have not had people be totally negative towards me about it, so it's pretty accepting." Gay, junior</i>	.75
Peer active acceptance	<i>"But yeah I've had friends before, I had a friend before who said to me, "I love you because you're gay." And I thought well, do you love me for any other reason? But the truth is to that person my gayness was a very positive thing and it was something worth befriending." Gay, senior</i>	.75
Faculty identification	<i>"You know, my experience with the professors has been pretty open to discussing difficult topics and to allowing that to filter into the classroom. I've seen a lot of different faculty members who have that LGBT SafeZone sticker on their doors but I do think that people see those sticker and they're like oh it's a sticker, big deal." Gay, senior</i>	.83
Faculty passive acceptance	<i>"Well first off my entire major is very political and liberal and I feel like with my professors and a lot of my classmates I fit in. And I would not go in and tell them I am bi-curious but if I did I know they would not be like, whoa, that's just too weird. So within my major I feel like I belong and my sexual orientation would not be a problem, but in general on campus is homophobic." Bisexual, senior female</i>	1.00

Faculty active acceptance	<i>"I think that the Safe Zone thing is really important. I mean what I really like about my [removed] professor is at the beginning of the semester in the syllabus towards the end she has written 'I am a member of the Safe Zones' and actually verbally announced it in class as well and said felt free to come talk." Bisexual, senior female</i>	.82
Staff identification	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Staff passive acceptance	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Staff active acceptance	<i>Not Present</i>	NA
Administrative identification	<i>"They've done more programming events in the past and I think they need to do more in the future, round table discussions, um, maybe actively recruiting students from different backgrounds to diversify the campus." Gay, senior</i>	1.00
Administration passive acceptance	<i>"I haven't met anybody like that in the administration. I haven't met anybody like that either because when you're doing applications you can put down if you're gay and even with doing housing you can put that stuff down so I haven't met anybody who's like 'she's gay she can't come here.'" Lesbian, sophomore</i>	1.00
Administration active acceptance	<i>[A prominent administrative figure] made sure to write into the constitution, or whatever it is that governs this place, that faculty may not be discriminated against because of sexual orientation. Which it's not to say they had been but the fact that they said we're not going to tolerate discrimination. So I think other than that the administration just needs to continue to be supportive in the same way." Gay, senior</i>	1.00

### *Enhancing a sense of belonging*

Enhancing a sense of Belongingness Definition: The experience(s) of resisting being negatively affected by or coping with the adversity associated with the experiences of being LGBTQ; this effort can be either attitudinal and/or behavioral. The end goal is to increase well-being, including belongingness.

This category describes the answers participants provided to the question, have you ever done things to "fit in" better or belong at the college? Figure 3 provides an example of each concept from the interview text and provides the reliability scores.

Reliability coefficients ranged from .67 to 1.00. These concepts include:

*Attempts to belong.* Participant mentions and/or describes his/her experience with attempting to "fit in" or belong better.

*Attitude Attempt.* Participant makes references to adopting an attitude or thinking in ways believed to increase the sense of belonging.

*Behavioral Attempt.* Participant makes references behaving in ways that are believed to increase the sense of belonging.

Figure 3: Attempts at Enhancing a Sense of Belongness Concepts

DESCRIPTION OF CONCEPTS	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTS FROM INTERVIEW DATA	Cohen's Kappa
Attempts to belong	<i>"I've become active on campus, like instead of sulking around and saying you know, 'I'm different, nobody's gunna wanna hang out with me.' I've, um, really not made it an option for them."</i> Lesbian, sophomore	.75
Attitude Attempt	<i>"Um, actually. Even after I came out I was still thinking about rushing in a fraternity in the spring and having everyone know that you know, I was gay and I don't want to be in an intolerant fraternity, you know because they are not the people I want to be associated with um... I don't get rid of myself after I found out who I was."</i> Gay, junior	.67
Behavioral Attempt	<i>"I guess one big thing is not sharing this with a lot of people. I still feel like I am kind of pretending that I am not in the relationship, but I am in a relationship. I guess the one huge thing that I have done to fit in has been in not telling people. Umm... so yeah, that's a pretty big one."</i> Questioning, 1 <sup>st</sup> year female	1.00

#### *Perception of Campus Climate and Change*

**Campus Environment Definition:** The atmosphere of the campus as perceived by its members. Campus climate is a reflection of the demographics, opinions, and practices of a specific campus that influence the experiences of members of the college community. This includes whether or not an individual, or groups of individuals, feel listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect (adapted from the campus climate definitions of The University of Wisconsin-Mallory, 2007)

This category describes the answers participants provided to the questions, (a) how would you describe the overall environment for other non-heterosexual students on our campus; and (b) has this environment changed since your time at the college? Figure 4 provides an example of each concept from the interview text and provides the reliability scores. Reliability coefficients ranged from .75 to 1.00. These concepts include:

*Mixed Perception Environment.* Participant indicates that his/her perception of the campus environment is mixed with both positive and negative elements towards LGBQ students.

*Negative Perception Environment.* Participant indicates that his/her perception of the campus environment is negative towards LGBQ students.

*Positive Perception Environment.* Participant indicates that his/her perception of the campus environment is positive towards LGBQ students.

*Environment change.* Participant mentions and/or describes change in the college environment since his/her time at the college.

*Improvement.* Participant mentions that the campus environment has improved since his/her time at the college concerning LGBQ issues.

*Worsened.* Participant mentions that the climate has become worse since his/her time at the college concerning LGBQ issues.

Figure 4: Perception of Campus Climate and Change Concepts		
DESCRIPTION OF CONCEPTS	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTS FROM INTERVIEW DATA	Cohen's Kappa
Mixed Perception Environment	<i>"Um, I get a lot of mixed feedback from people...like people that I know that are gay or lesbian or whatever they, some people tend to be very low key and hide it and other people being more out with it and in front of people. Most of them will say this is an awful place to be gay... People get kind of excluded I think from that, unless they're closeted or not out. But I've heard that a lot from people, that being here has not been a positive experience to be gay because well ... but from what I've heard from other people I think that there's a bit of distress."</i> Gay, senior	.83
Negative Perception Environment	<i>"Hostile, hostile to the point of social danger, and to some extent physical danger. I feel like, I feel like um, students at [this school] want the world to work in a white, heterosexual, upper middleclass fashion. And that's not, that's not how the real world is."</i> 1 <sup>st</sup> year, bisexual female	.75
Positive Perception Environment	<i>I think [the school] has a very, very high tolerance policy. If more people are willing to kind of have this engagement with minorities including the homosexual community."</i> Gay, 1st year	.82
Environment change	<i>"I think I have worked up a sense of trust and understanding, so yeah I feel like I belong more than the beginning. I was nervous all of the time I didn't want to rush because I didn't think anyone would be cool about it."</i> Gay, 1st year	.83
Improvement	<i>"Yeah, it has changed for the positive a little bit. At least with the people that I have interacted with when I am talking one on one with someone and this comes up it's not like they hate me and make me leave. They are generally nice and still my friends or don't have negative attitudes towards it, but umm I still feel like there is work to be done with people getting left out of groups."</i> Lesbian, sophomore	1.00
Worsened	<i>Not Present</i>	NA

## *Results*

The following section examines the experiences of LGBTQ students concerning positive and negative impacts on belongingness, attempts at enhancing a sense of belongingness, and their perception of the campus climate.

### *Negative Impact on Belongingness*

*Peer source of negative impact.* Sixteen of the 22 participants (73%) identified that a peer or group of peers was a source of negative impact on their sense of belongingness. Of those who identified a peer or groups of peers as a negative source of impact, 5 of the participants mentioned both *subtle* and *overt* expressions, 4 participants mentioned only *overt* expressions, and 7 participants mentioned only *subtle* expressions. Chi-square analyses revealed that LGBTQ students did not differ significantly in their reports of subtle, overt, or mixed expressions.

*Faculty source of negative impact.* Two of the 22 participants (9%) identified that a faculty member was a source of negative impact on their sense of belongingness. These two participants reported that these expressions were *subtle* and not *overt*.

*Staff source of negative impact.* No participants identified the staff or a member of the staff as a source of negative impact on belongingness.

*Administration source of negative impact.* One participant (5%) identified the administration as a source of negative impact on belongingness. This single participant mentioned that the administration demonstrated a *subtle* expression. No overt expressions were reported.

### *Positive Impact on Belongingness*

*Peer source of positive impact.* Twenty-one of the 22 participants (95%) identified that a peer or group of peers was a source of positive impact on their sense of belongingness. Of those who identified a peer or groups of peers as a positive source of impact, 14 of the participants mentioned both *passive* and *active* acceptance, 4 participants mentioned only *passive* acceptance, and 3 participants mentioned only *active* acceptance. Chi-square analyses revealed that LGBQ students did not differ significantly in their reports of passive, active, or mixed expressions.

*Faculty source of positive impact.* Twelve of the 22 participants (55%) identified that a faculty member was a source of positive impact on their sense of belongingness. Of those who identified a faculty as a positive source of impact, 2 participants mentioned both *passive* and *active* acceptance, 2 participants described feeling *passively* accepted, and 8 participants mentioned only *actively* accepted.

*Staff source of positive impact.* No participants (0%) identified the staff or a member of the staff as a source of positive impact on belongingness.

*Administrative source of positive impact.* Five of the 22 participants (23%) identified the administration as a source of positive impact on their sense of belongingness. No participants mentioned both *active* and *passive* acceptance, 1 participant mentioned feeling *passively* accepted by the administration, 4 participants described feeling *actively* accepted.

### *Attempts at Enhancing a Sense of Belongingness Concept*

*Attempts to belong.* Seventeen of the 22 participants (77%) mentioned and/or described an attempt to “fit in” or belong better, which was believed to enhance a sense

of belongingness. Of those who mentioned an attempt to fit in, 6 participants referenced adopting both *attitudinal* and *behavioral* attempts, 3 participants referenced adopting an *attitude* or thinking in ways that were perceived to increase a sense of belonging, and 8 participants referenced *behaving* in ways that were perceived to increase a sense of belonging.

#### *Perceptions of the Campus Climate*

*Environment Perception.* Twenty of the 22 participants (90.1%) described an aspect or aspects of the campus climate. Of those who described the campus climate, 15 participants indicated that their perception of the campus environment was *mixed*, with both positive and negative elements towards LGBQ student, 4 participants indicated that the campus environment is in some way *negative*, and 1 participant indicated that campus environment is in some way *positive*.

*Environment change.* Twelve of the 22 participants (55%) mentioned that the campus environment has changed since his or her time at the college. Of the twelve participants who indicated change, 11 mentioned that the environment has *improved* concerning LGBQ issues. No participant mentioned that the climate has become worse.

*Post-Interview Questionnaire Belongingness Items.* The sample size was too small to indicate if there were significant statistical mean differences in the responses to the five, Likert-type questions between Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Questioning individuals. Therefore, only descriptive data is reported.

LGBQ participants tended to be *unsure* (36% disagree, 23% unsure, 41% agree/strongly agree) about the statement “LGBQ students have difficulty fitting in at the college” ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to *disagree* (82% strongly disagree/disagree, 13% unsure, 5% agree/strongly agree) with the statement that “Heterosexual students at this college will not associate with members of different sexual orientations” ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to *disagree* (82% strongly disagree/disagree, 9% unsure, 9% agree/strongly agree) with the statement that, “I feel like I do not belong at the college” ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). Specifically, LGBQ participants tended to *disagree* (86% strongly disagree/disagree, 5% unsure, 9% agree/strongly agree) with the statement of “I do not belong at this college because of my sexual orientation” ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to be somewhere between *unsure to agree* (18% strongly disagree/disagree, 9% unsure, 73% agree/strongly agree) with the statement that “It is ok to be non-heterosexual at this college” ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

When asked if they would apply to the college, participants indicated that if they were to apply to the college again, they would *probably apply* to this college ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). In contemplating transferring, the participants generally indicated that *they often thought about transferring but never seriously entertained it or rarely thought about transferring* ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

*Other Items.* Participants estimated that 4.5% of students at the college were LGBQ (range of estimates from as low as .001% to as high as 15%). All but two participants (20 out of 22, or 91%) indicated that they would be interested in participating in a focus group about sharing their experiences, and discussing ways of improving the campus climate for LGBQ students.

### ***Phase 3: Focus Group***

#### *Method*

*Participants.* Eleven of the 20 interview participants who expressed an interest confirmed their attendance at the focus group, but only 6 individuals (2 female, 4 male) actually participated in the focus group. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 23 ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ). Within the sample, there were no Lesbian (0 %), 3 Gay (50%), 3 Bisexual (50%; 2 female, 1 male), and no Questioning (0%) individuals. Five of the participants were white American and one was an ethnic minority. The class year varies as such: 3 of the participants were in their 1<sup>st</sup> year, no participants were in their sophomore year, 1 was in her junior year, and 2 were in their senior year. 66.7% percent of participants indicated that they were a member of GSA. A breakdown of the demographic variables of the participants in the focus group is provided in Appendix H.

#### *Measures*

*Focus Group Discussion Guide.* The discussion guide (see Appendix I) is a modification of the interview questionnaire. The guide was designed to organize and introduce certain topics relating to the general experiences on campus, various diversity issues, and the college's diversity statement. The first portion of the guide included making introductions. The second part of the guide was designed to stimulate discussion about participant's experiences on campus and the perception of support received by the college community. The third part of the guide was to discuss the college's commitment to diversity statement. A copy of the diversity statement was provided to each participant and they were asked to discuss the college's statement with the focus being on sexual orientation.

*Post-Focus Group Questionnaire.* The questionnaire (see Appendix J) is a modification of the post-interview questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 16 quantitative questions and three open-ended questions designed to assess the participants' opinions of the focus group. On the quantitative measures, participants indicated on a 5-point Likert-scale (ranging from (1) *strongly agree* to (5) *strongly disagree*) if the focus group produced any positive effects for the participants (i.e. providing a safe place to discuss campus climate issues around sexual orientation, creating a community, etc.). In addition, items similar to the post-interview questionnaire were also included to make group comparisons. Finally, this measure utilized a to 4-point, Likert-scale to assess the participant's assess participants overall comfort level during the interview, comfort discussing with others, and to determine whether or not the co-facilitators were perceived as skilled (ranging from (1) *very comfortable/ skilled* to (4) *very uncomfortable/unskilled*).

*Procedure.* Participants who expressed an interest in participating in a focus group on the post-interview questionnaire were individually contacted based on the preferred means of communication (e-mail, campus mail, telephone, or do not contact). A date and time was selected based on an agreed upon time of the investigator and the project sponsor, a licensed Clinical-Community Psychologist.

Each participant read and signed an informed consent (see Appendix K) before initiating the focus group. The facilitator and participants then created a list of shared expectations concerning how the meeting would proceed and how confidentiality could be maintained. Next, the facilitators led the discussion with the focus group discussion guide and took extensive notes about certain topics and themes that were mentioned.

Finally, the post-focus group questionnaire was administered. No participants withdrew during the focus group meeting.

### *Results*

*Themes Emerging from the Focus Group.* Themes extracted from the focus group were the participants' different experiences with diversity, experiences with faculty and in the classroom, and the college's statement on diversity. With respect to experiences with diversity, participants discussed experiences with varying degrees of harassment. Participants also mentioned experiencing both encouraging action by peers (e.g. coming out) and discouraging action by peers (e.g. tearing down LGBQ related signs) from their peers, and some of the impact it had on their level of comfort discussing their sexual orientation.

With respect to experiences with faculty and the classroom, participants discussed the positive impact that the SafeZones program has provided. When sexual orientation was placed in the context of the curriculum and the classroom, participants expressed a general dissatisfaction with the way that such topics are discussed in class. Faculty and both heterosexual and LGBQ students are uncomfortable, cautious, and hesitant to initiate discussions about sexual orientation in the classroom. Some participants mentioned that raising such topics is shrouded with stigmatization, and that initiating such conversations in the classroom leads others to suspect the initiator as LGBQ.

The final portion of the discussion group led into a discussion about the college's statement on diversity. Participants mentioned questioning the college's commitment to diversity due to the lack of LGBQ representation in the curriculum, coursework, and classes. Participants also mentioned that concerns surrounding sexual minorities parallel

the concerns of other minority groups, including the difficulty about discussing these issues.

*Post Focus-Group Reaction Items.* LGBQ participants tended to *strongly agree* with the statement “This focus group provided a safe space to talk about the campus climate surrounding issues of sexual” ( $M = 4.83, SD = 0.4$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to *strongly agree* with the statement that “I felt respected by other participants in the focus group” ( $M = 4.83, SD = 0.4$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to *agree* with the statement that, “I felt that a sense of community was created for LGBQ students during this discussion.” ( $M = 3.83, SD = 0.75$ ). More specifically, LGBQ participants tended to *agree* with the statement of “This focus group will enhance the cohesiveness of the LGBQ community at the college” ( $M = 3.67, SD = 0.51$ ).

In addition, LGBQ participants tended to either *agree* or *strongly agree* with the statement that “The suggestions made during the discussion have the potential to improve the campus climate at the college” ( $M = 4.5, SD = 0.54$ ).

LGBQ participants tended to *strongly agree* with the statement “I wish there were more opportunities to participate in discussions that give me the chance to express issues around my sexual orientation” ( $M = 4.67, SD = 0.52$ ).

*Other Items.* Collectively, participants estimated that 11% of students at the college were LGBQ.

## DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results of these analyses have also highlighted the complexity of the experiences of LGBQ students on this small, liberal arts campus and raised a number of interesting questions that are tangential to this investigation. Although each of these questions are worthy of further inquiry, we will dedicate this discussion to extrapolate on the original research questions.

- What is the campus climate like for LGBQ students at this particular institution?
- How do LGBQ students experience belongingness at this particular institution?
- Who makes an impact on LGBQ students' sense of belongingness?
- What experiences promote overall well-being for LGBQ students?
- What can facilitate positive change on college campuses?

### *Students' Perceptions of the Campus Climate for LGBQ Students*

The results of the campus climate analysis of the perceptions of both heterosexual and LGBQ students suggest that the environment is “chilly” for those who are not member of a normative, majority sexual orientation. In addition to this general assessment, LGBQ students report quite different, often more negative, experiences than their heterosexual peers. These results support a number of previous campus climate assessments (D'Augelli, 1993; Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001; Evans, 2001; Evans, & D'Augelli, 1996; Gortmaker, & Brown, 2006; Longerbeam, et al. 2007; Malaney, et. al. 1997; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998).

Although both heterosexual and LGBQ students acknowledge hearing disparaging remarks towards LGBQ individuals and report that the campus climate is more challenging for LGBQ students, LGBQ students appear to perceive their experiences as more challenging than their heterosexual peers. For example, LGBQ students were more likely to report other LGBQ students' experiences on campus as being *worse* than their

heterosexual peers who were more likely to report the experiences of LGBQ students as only *slightly* worse. When asked “if the experiences of students differ based on sexual orientation,” heterosexual students were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement than their LGBQ peers. Often, as is the case for many of the items used in the campus climate analysis, heterosexual students tended to be unaware of, minimize, or to not fully understand the experiences of their LGBQ peers others – findings that are echoed in research about heterosexual privilege and sexual prejudice as well (D’Augelli, 1989; Goodman, 2001; Herek, 2000).

The amount of interaction between these diverse groups may also contribute to these differences. Heterosexual students were also more likely to report feeling awkward than LGBQ students around students of different sexual orientation in all three years. This awkwardness indicates that interactions between heterosexual students and LGBQ students may be jeopardized by heterosexual students’ hesitation to be-friend or get to know someone who is LGBQ. In addition, LGBQ students were also more likely to have reported interacting with other LGBQ students more than their heterosexual peers. However, this effect seems to be diminishing, with both LGBQ and heterosexual students reporting a comparable amount of interaction with LGBQ individuals *prior* to enrollment at the college in years in 2006 and 2007. This pattern suggests that the campus climate may be changing for the better in that heterosexual students and LGBQ students are interacting more (although some amount of awkwardness exists). Perhaps these interactions have assisted LGBQ students in creating a sense of inclusion, or a stronger sense of belongingness within the college.

Additionally, a number of LGBQ affirmative initiatives have been implemented in the college campus like SafeZones, a Gay-Straight Alliance, and the formation of a GLBT resource center. Given the concordance of these findings with the recent increase in institutional support, one wonders if these programs have been a source of positive impact for LGBQ students. While this investigation can not directly respond to this question, the change in the most recent year does provide some additional information into the current reports of the experiences and perceptions of LGBQ students as demonstrated by the interview data.

Unfortunately, the conclusions that can be drawn from the campus climate survey are restricted by the limited amount of more in-depth information provided. Fortunately, this data is quite helpful for setting the stage for the qualitative interview investigation which allows for more open-ended questions to be asked concerning the experiences of LGBQ students not captured from the campus climate survey.

### *LGBQ Students' Reports of Experiences*

#### *Sources of Negative and Positive Impacts*

From an analysis of the interviews, LGBQ students appear equally likely to mention negative and positive experiences with belongingness on campus. This co-occurrence suggests that the mixed consequences that being LGBQ has on belongingness are not simply positive *or* negative, but *both*. Considering that it is highly likely that self-identified LGBQ students will experience forms of negative and positive impact on well-being and make an attempt to resolve it, it seems understandable that this type of duality would manifest itself in the narratives. The following excerpt demonstrates the duality in which these experiences may take place:

*“I would say, there’s not a particular experience that would lead me to believe that I would be discriminated against, but, sort of... as somebody who has come out and has heard a lot about people coming out and then getting in trouble for it or whatever, I think that’s kind of resulted in my choosing to stay away from certain situations. Like I choose to stay away from certain situations and that has resulted in a sense of less belonging. You know, certain friends. If I’m at a party and there’s certain people that I want to talk to, I will not talk to them because I’m afraid that they don’t want to talk to me because I’m the gay kid in the room, or, that’s the kind of thing I’m talking about.” Gay, senior*

This single narrative provides a wealth of information about some of the negative consequences of being LGBTQ on campus, and echoes some of the benefits, hesitations and negative consequences of coming out as mentioned in previous research. In this narrative, the participant shares how certain predominately negative experiences of hesitation and doubt of how his peers may treat him have negatively impacted his sense of belongingness by forcing him to choose how to interact in everyday situations. In particular, this participant also mentions his choice to stay away from situations in order to protect his sense of belongingness.

However, when asked if his sexual orientation has positively impacted his sense of belongingness, the same participant is able to share some positive impacts on belongings as well:

*“In a way, yeah. I mean also, I mean also it has been something that fosters conversation that has led to really positive results. My friend [removed] was an RA [on campus], she was a female RA on a male hall and I would go over to her room two or three times a week just to hang out or whatever and all of her, everyone on her hall, they were all straight men. But my presence there created this sense of curiosity for them and they started asking me questions not just about me but about gay people in general and then she said ‘don’t ask me, ask [name removed] he’s the one who would know’. And so like, we sort of started a dialogue with these people who had never met a gay person before, some of them, and had certainly never been friends with one and now I was like a daily part of their lives and they wanted to know about it. And what impressed me about it was that they weren’t scared or homophobic, they were very interested to know what was going on and they wanted to know like what’s the big deal. So, and yeah some of them I still talk to now, like 2 or 3 years later.” Gay, senior*

In contrast to the negative experience reported previously, this narrative demonstrates some of the positive impacts that sexual orientation can have on LGBTQ students’ sense of belongingness. In this case, the positive experience was feeling like his heterosexual

peers had a respectful curiosity to learn about his experiences being gay. In addition to creating friendships between heterosexual and LGBQ students, this curiosity appears to have made him feel as if he made a positive impact on his heterosexual peers' lives as well. In this sense, both heterosexual students and a LGBQ peer benefited. This indicates that the experiences of LGBQ students are both positively and negatively influenced by virtue of their sexual orientation.

As the interview data and the narratives above reveal, LGBQ participants indicated both positive and negative impacts of belongingness. Of these impacts, peers or groups of peers were identified as the most significant source of positive and negative impact on a LGBQ students' sense of belongingness. Consistent with previous research and theory, these results underscore the relatively prominent role that peers and groups of peers can play in subtly and overtly enhancing or subverting LGBQ students' experience on campus, especially belongingness (D'Augelli, 1992).

Although cited less than peers or groups of peers, other descriptive results revealed that the faculty could also be sources of negative and positive impacts on LGBQ student's sense of belongingness. For example a source of negative impact made subtly by faculty is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

*"I have some [professors] who just avoided the subject [of sexuality] all together even if it's prominent among the author that wrote the book and it clearly affected his work and the subject matter. My teacher refused to address it." Lesbian, senior*

This source of impact was subtle in that the faculty resisted taking advantage of the opportunity to discuss sexual orientation when it appeared appropriate to do so. This report indicated that some hesitation to discuss these sensitive topics still exists in the classroom.

Fortunately for LGBTQ students, neither the faculty, staff, nor the administration were cited as making *overt* expressions of unequal treatment. Even more so, faculty were identified as positive sources of impact by making actively affirmative efforts to enhance a sense of belongingness in LGBTQ students, as demonstrated by the excerpt:

*“I think [that the faculty] already took a big step, I see those stickers everywhere, like the SafeZone um which I think that’s really... that really helped me when I first came to here because I didn’t really think about going to a faculty member to talk about issues but I know that if I wanted to I could so, I’m in [a class] right now and one of my professors has like on her syllabus a thing that says” if you want to come talk to me about gay issues feel free because I’m a SafeZone participant.” So I think more teachers doing that would be cool. Let students know that they are available and that kind of stuff.” Gay, 1<sup>st</sup> year*

It appears that, when faculty members are actively affirming of LGBTQ sexual orientation, LGBTQ students may feel a sense of validation and safety. Mention of faculty involvement in SafeZones was heavily cited by participants who mentioned how faculty could increase a sense of belongingness in LGBTQ students, indicating the positive impact of such initiatives and supporting their implementation.

Additionally, another authority figure on campus, the administration, on campus was cited as sources of positive and negative impact on LGBTQ students’ sense of belongingness. Participants cited that the administration had made more positive than negative expressions. The single report of a subtle expression of negative impact is captured in the following excerpt:

*“I had a lot of classes in [a building] my first two years and umm, things that were written and even the first day of school there were things written on the desks that gave me this impression that the school or the community did not like me. And since the school was not doing anything about it somehow the school is making it Okay that that’s written there, that this feeling of not belonging is like okay for some people to feel that way.” Lesbian, senior*

This participant does not need to use words like “disparaging” or “hurtful” to express her feelings of distress because of this negative graffiti. This participant later mentioned that it took a number of years for the administration to address the graffiti after she, “literally, went crying to [a dean],” to have her voice heard, and this demonstrates the need for

campus leaders to be more vocal and responsive about their commitment to LGBTQ equity.

Although this lack of action on the part of the administration was identified, more students cited the administration as becoming more active in promoting LGBTQ equity:

*“Well I think lately the administration has been doing a lot actually. By making a point to show up to functions that have been sponsored by the GSA and also to theatrical productions. Last year [a prominent administrative figure] like specifically declared that FOSTER is going to be GSA, we’re getting rid of this FOSTER rule. Last year or the year before the administration said ok, professors are allowed to come out to students because before they weren’t allowed to...So I think other than that the administration just needs to continue to be supportive in the same way. Um, continue to support things, students’ efforts, students want to talk about ..., the administration needs to let them...” Gay, senior*

These active and affirmative actions of authority figures support other research that calls for the inclusion and support of LGBTQ students’ needs (D’Augelli, 1989; Rankin, 2003). A challenge that many institutions may continue to face is balancing being both affirming *and* responsive to LGBTQ issues and concerns on college campuses as they arise. Instead of only intervening when a LGBTQ student is distressed, the need to intervene may be avoided all together by being passively affirming and addressing LGBTQ issues quickly without LGBTQ students intervening on their own behalf. Regardless of which means authority figures chose to be affirmative, these instances underscore the powerful impacts that such expressions can make on LGBTQ students’ sense of belongingness.

#### *Attempts at Enhancing a Sense of Belongingness*

Results from the analysis give life to some of the attempts made by approximately half (55%) of the LGBTQ students in this study in order to enhance or protect feelings of belonging on campus. Consider the following excerpt as an example of how some LGBTQ students’ may attempt to belong when asked if they have acted in ways to “fit in” better:

*“Um, I guess just you know like average comments ya know, the guys getting to talk about females and then I would just chip right in, ya know, oh yeah you know, so yeah definitely, definitely. I*

*found myself as a freshman and as a sophomore doing that and kind of hiding behind the veil of being straight and not of course exerting any kind of honesty in the conversation.” Gay, senior*

This participant mentions perceiving the need to conceal his gay identity from his peers for a sustained period of time and acting against his sexual orientation by passing as heterosexual. Likewise, a younger participant also demonstrates passing as heterosexual, then realizing that his gay identity could exist as well:

*“Um, during orientation I probably un-gayed myself a little, like toned it down, so people wouldn’t be like oh he’s the gay kid. And my FaceBook didn’t say I was gay when I came here and then I realized it was ok and that nobody was going to have a big, you know, gay bashing party, so it was ok.” Gay, sophomore*

Other research has cited certain behaviors and attitudes that LGBQ students adopt (Evans, 2001) to counter the negative consequences that identifying as LGBQ can have on well-being (Rankin, 2003). For instance, LGBQ individuals who experience sexual prejudice have to make conscious decisions about how to live and interact with others. Although not the focus of this paper, these responses support Evans’ (2001) findings that LGBQ students respond to the real and perceived negative experiences in a myriad of ways. A question for future research to examine is: when LGBQ students feel the need to think or behave in ways to protect themselves from negative consequences of exposure, to what extent are these actions beneficial to LGBQ students? Such questions seem highly relevant considering that many students chose to hide their sexual orientation from heterosexual and LGBQ peers, which can result in feelings of dishonesty or guilt for not being visible to other LGBQ peers in need of role models and support.

#### *Perceptions of the Campus Climate*

As much of these experiences with belongingness are directly and indirectly related to the campus environment, it seemed necessary to assess LGBQ students’ perceptions of the campus climate in more detail. In fact, this qualitative interview

compliments the broader, quantitative findings of the campus climate survey. Even though participants who described the campus climate reported hospitable aspects of the campus climate (89%), the negative experiences were slightly more prevalent (95%). Several pieces of the data provide a qualitative illustration of the ways in which LGBTQ students' negative and positive perceptions of the campus climate are interrelated. For example, nearly all participants who mentioned campus climate change mentioned that it has gotten better and no participants mentioned that it has gotten worse. Consider the following expert as an example of how LGBTQ students report negative and positive elements of the campus, and how the campus appears to be changing for the better:

*"[This school] is a lot more open than it was my freshman year because as soon as I got here I was bombarded with like negativeness from people. It's like my roommate was homophobic, this is when I thought I was gay but I didn't come out for a whole year because of my roommate. And then apparently there'd been stuff, just because of like stuff put on cars and stuff like a year before, I haven't heard of anything that negative so it feels like a more open more safe place to me as far as gayness and other things." Sophomore, Lesbian*

Another interesting aspect highlighted by this participant is how the *absence* of negative events can be interpreted as a positive change. This phenomenon was also mentioned by Evans (2001) who stressed that the positive and negative experiences of LGBTQ students can be interpreted in a number of ways.

#### *LGBTQ Participants Responses to Belongingness Items*

Analyses of participants' responses to the belongingness post-interview questions provide further indication of this diversity in experiences and perceptions. Although participants generally indicated that they belonged on this campus, these results are not to be interpreted as evidence of shared sense belongingness in all LGBTQ participants. The relative heterogeneity – as shown by the range of the responses from the Likert type items – among LGBTQ students suggest that in spite of the shared identity of being a

sexual minority, LGBQ students have different perceptions about their situations on campus. The following excerpt from the interview questionnaire illustrates how one participant feels generally accepted and perceives that:

*“Umm just like, I mean I am not too experienced in all of this but from what I’ve witnessed and stuff. You know about me I think everyone is pretty much like, generally accepting and just like being respectful to it and they don’t really change how they act. I think that overall people are supportive. And people don’t go out of their way to make my life different. And I don’t think this should be something that changes peoples behavior and stuff so I don’t think its necessary to go out and be supportive and stuff. Like no one is going to be supportive of me for being heterosexual and I think it’s ridiculous” Gay, sophomore*

Another participant describes a different experience and perception about belonging by separating her bisexual identity from other aspects of her identity:

*“Yeah, I don’t think we belong. You know I don’t think that we belong at all. I think that’s made evident through GSA putting on you know gay friendly movies or events and just no one showing up and I think that speaks louder than any words. We don’t really belong here, so I might belong but my sexual orientation doesn’t.” Bisexual, 1<sup>st</sup> year female*

Perhaps, as LGBQ students mature during college or gain more confidence in their LGBQ identity or receive positive and LGBQ affirmative expressions, they come to see their situations as less distressing and less dissimilar than their heterosexual peers.

Another interpretation is that other developmental and individual differences begin to present their effect on the LGBQ students’ perceptions of their situations which could not be detected by the measurements used in this investigation. A final interpretation is that the campus may not be a place of belonging for some LGBQ students and that this part of their identity is not affirmed. These phenomena reveal the diversity of perceptions and the complexity of consolidating a sexual minority identity.

### *LGBQ Students Perceptions of the Focus Group*

The responses to the Likert questions in the post-discussion group questionnaire revealed that the LGBQ students felt like the focus group was a safe and communal place to discuss these concerns. Additionally, they all expressed hopefulness about the helpfulness of their suggestions and wanted to have more opportunities to discuss these

issues. Understanding the separateness of loneliness experienced by LGBTQ people also allows one to better understand why gay and lesbian groups are so cohesive once a community or support network is found. These responses provide support for conducting focus groups with LGBTQ participants and seem to substantiate other research, which shows that creating such environments are often the first time that such an affirming environment is offered (D'Augelli, 1992) and these environments can offer enriching ways for development (Edwards & Mulis, 2001; Garnets & D'Augelli, 1994; Lee, 2002).

The following excerpts from the post-focus group questionnaire provide examples of this:

*"I now know there are other people I can relate to on this campus in regards to this subject. Sometimes it can be a bit lonely." Bisexual, male, 1<sup>st</sup> year*

*"I think that just knowing that people care enough to discuss these things help me." Bisexual, female, freshmen*

*"I learned that the experiences that other members of my sexual orientation have been very different than my own. This group helped me to gain a broader opinion of how the college should improve its diversity comfort level with LGBTQ students." Gay, senior*

### *Limitations*

The findings from this investigation must be interpreted within a number of limitations. The first set of limitations is related to questions about the generalizability of the findings based on the samples included in the different phases of the project. On the one hand, the sample size of the campus climate survey is considerably large, with response rates from the entire campus climate ranging from 37% to 55%. In comparison to the campus climate, the sample size of the interviews and focus group are small (n = 22 and 6, respectively). Nevertheless, 22 interviews (ranging from 15 to 47 minutes each) is an acceptable, if not admirable, sample size for this type of qualitative research. Findings from the interviews and focus group are consistent in many ways to previous

research and the findings from the campus climate survey increasing our confidence in its representations of LGBQ students' experiences.

Additionally, the sample may consist of an over-representation of *eager* LGBQ students who want to share their stories and may not have included individuals who are unaware of, are not secure in, or have yet to disclose their sexuality. As this research is inspired by an empowerment agenda for socially mindful research, it is fitting that the perspectives and experiences of LGBQ students who feel compelled to share their experiences are explored.

Finally, the small sample sizes of LBGQ students prohibited the exploration of differences within the sexual identity categories. This is problematic as research suggests that the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual men, bisexual women, and questioning individuals differ. For example, Bisexual students usually are treated with ambivalence because they do not conveniently fall into heterosexual or homosexual categories (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996). Nonetheless, findings from the diverse sets of data presented underscore elements of a shared experience among sexual minority groups.

A second area of limitations is related to methodological considerations such as the items used to measure LGBQ students' level of belongingness in this study have not been subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Further scale development such as factor analysis and item analysis are needed to support the future use of our measures. Lastly, these items need to be compared with other validated measures of belongingness. Nevertheless, the concepts used in this investigation are unique, and few scales that focus on belongingness have focused exclusively on belongingness within a LGBQ population.

Future research that continues to investigate this construct within LGBTQ populations is warranted.

We must also acknowledge that this study uses self-reported measures, which may be biased by social desirability concerns that may not be reflective of actual behaviors. For example, participants may only report unprejudiced attitudes towards diversity because such attitudes are considered “politically correct.” Moreover, in the interviews, the effects of social desirability can be quite profound in that one-on-one interviews may create heightened participant presentation concerns. Likewise, the focus group may also introduce presentation concerns to participants who may not know each other beyond this setting. Despite these potential limitations, the use of these self-report measures likely provided an opportunity to better capture the lived experiences of students that would not be afforded with the use of more experimentally-based approaches that place more restrictions on participants’ responses.

An additional constraint results from limiting the coding concepts to specific research questions. For example, because we only coded specific interview questions, a participant could have mentioned a highly relevant concept elsewhere in the interview that would not be included under our coding procedures. Although time constraints limited our coding to include only half of the research questions in this process, we acknowledge that ideally this should have included all of the interview questions.

Finally, although the sexual orientation of the interviewer (i.e. homosexual male) was not explicitly mentioned during the interview, it is likely that many participants may have been aware (or assumed) that he identified as non-heterosexual. These beliefs might have influenced the participant’s level of comfort, connectedness, trust in, and

engagement with the interviewer. This rationale is partially supported by the post-interview questionnaire in which all but two participants indicated feeling somewhat or very comfortable during the interview. It is important to acknowledge, however, that a weakness of such a matching lies in the possibility that an investigator that shares the same sexual orientation with the participant may not adequately ask follow-up questions to clarify ambiguous answers. Lastly, the investigator and the interviews were peers, so double relationships are always possible and participants may fear revealing personal information knowing the high probability of crossing paths on campus. Thus, the current research provides a venue for much discussion about the influence on both the investigator and the participants.

A final limitation is the campus under investigation. For example, the college campus is a mostly white (85%), very expensive, metropolitan Southeastern liberal college with a larger than average Greek system (approximately 50% of students are Greek), which is typically organized around heterosexual activities. Despite these unique characteristics reflected on this campus, the results of this investigation parallel many of the results of previous investigations (D'Augelli, 1994; Rankin, 2003; Malaney, Williams, & Geller 1997). Additionally, this campus is unique in that it has included LGBQ affirmative programming like GSA, SafeZones, and a progressive Student Counseling center. The campus also includes sexual minorities as protected under that college's harassment and discrimination policy and is currently developing a GLBT resource center to serve this population of students. Although these characteristics are positive, it is important to remember that many accredited institutions do not have gay-

friendly programming. As such, this study may significantly underscore the problems facing LGBQ students on less welcoming campuses (Rankin, 2002).

Regardless of these limitations imposed by our choice of research design, the present investigation provides invaluable insight into the experiences of being LGBQ on campus. The voices of the participants will be shared with other LGBQ students, peers, faculty, and organizations in hopes that their experiences will be recognized and appropriated by others.

### *Recommendations for Developing a Positive Campus Environment*

Although the findings from this investigation illustrate a myriad of both positive and negative experiences, LGBQ students collectively generated a comprehensive list of suggestions for improving the campus environment (see Table 1).

Table 1: Recommendations for Positive Campus Climates
<p><b>Recruit and Retain high-quality students</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop visible programming targeting LGBQ students</li> <li>• Include LGBQ demographic information on student fact sheets to recruit gay and gay-friendly students and deter students not appreciative of such diversity</li> <li>• Instruct all people about civility, democracy, and respect for diversity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Demonstrate Institutional Commitment to LGBQ individuals and concern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage LGBQ alumni to form a group</li> <li>• Address discrimination and harassment issues promptly and visibly</li> <li>• Provide, clear, safe, visible means for reporting negative acts against LGBQ students</li> <li>• Provide visibly safe and LGBQ-friendly persons within campus safety, the administration, and academic department for LGBQ students</li> <li>• Convey messages of acceptance, not tolerance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Integrate LGBQ issues into the curriculum</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide educational programming, like GLBT or gender studies classes or departments</li> <li>• Integrate LGBQ issues into existing courses, when appropriate</li> <li>• Use inclusive language</li> </ul>
<p><b>Create Safe Spaces for Dialogue (Rankin, 2003)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop LGBQ resource centers</li> <li>• Encourage more Faculty members to become involved in SafeZones</li> <li>• Create LGBQ groups for under-representing populations</li> <li>• Conduct more focus groups with heterosexual and LGBQ students</li> <li>• Open discussions to combat the lack of opportunities available for authentic dialogue in hopes of creating healthy communities for LGBQ students</li> </ul>

<p>Create Safe Residential Spaces (Evans, 2001)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hire openly gay staff</li> <li>• Expediting room changes when LGBQ issues can not be resolved</li> <li>• Deal with anti-gay reports quickly and visibly</li> <li>• Identify LGBQ friendly roommates, RA's, and halls</li> </ul>
<p>Encourage Student Alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicize GSA meetings and events</li> <li>• Encourage openness and discourage oppressiveness</li> <li>• Establish and foster multiple groups for LGBQ students and allies</li> </ul>






Although the majority of the participants reported wanting to feel supported and affirmed and wanted to be a part of the process of change, there were a few students who were somewhat resistant to these types of interventions, as illustrated by the following students' comments:

*"I think that a lot of it is just personal things you have to overcome yourself. I don't think that there needs to be like an oversight of all these people to make sure people are comfortable because not all people are going to be comfortable and people just have to get through." Gay, sophomore*

*"I really think the only way things can get better is like people having personal experience with non-heterosexuals so like me interacting with those groups and teaching them about those issues and so they know the truth. Like I wouldn't choose this, it's not easy, it sucks, and like I don't know." Gay, 1<sup>st</sup> year*

This reiterates the need to respect that there are differences in how individuals make meaning of their experiences and their relationships with others.

### *Implications for Future Research*

This research is a part of a larger body of ongoing social research being conducted regarding the need to facilitate positive change and identify the needs of sexual minority groups on our college campuses. Evidence has shown that positive change has been facilitated by the presence of positive sources of affirmation and acceptance in the lives of LGBQ students. In particular, this research has provided more insight into the relationship between sexual orientation and feelings of belongingness. It does not dictate what experiences are "most appropriate," rather the intent is to reveal the mostly

unspoken experiences of being LGBQ on a small liberal arts campus to identify the diverse ways that LGBQ students go about connecting with self, the college environment, and others.

In alignment with an empowerment agenda for social research (Rappaport, 1990) and by incorporating multiple research methodologies, we have endeavored to highlight the resiliency of LGBQ students that allows them to exist in an environment that is frequently experienced as inhospitable. To our knowledge, no previous investigations have integrated such diverse approaches to understanding the experiences of LGBQ students to this extent. It is our hope that this approach will stimulate new empowerment and multi-methodological research by psychologists and academic institutions interested in creating environment that nurture the development of all students.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Despite the common ground of sexual orientation, the gay and lesbian community remains a diverse community within itself (Garnets, & D'Augelli, 1994). Debate continues among both professionals and members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexed, and Questioning (LGBTIQ) community about the definition of sexuality and how it should be investigated. Additionally, literature is mixed about the inclusion of transgender and intersexed with sexual orientation. For example, not all people who are transgender or intersexed identify as homosexual or have homosexual relationships. There was no presence (0%) of self-identified transgendered or intersexed individuals in the current investigation. For the aforementioned reasons and for the purpose of this paper, Transgendered and Intersexed individuals were not included.

<sup>2</sup> The categories for sexual orientation changed in 2007. In 2005 and 2006, the categories were heterosexual, lesbian and gay, and bisexual. In 2007, the categories were heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersexed (LGBTI) and unsure/questioning.

## GLOSSARY

*Allies* refers to peer(s) or faculty members who are affirming of LGBTQ issues and individuals

*Bisexual* individuals demonstrate a sexual attraction and/or behavior towards persons of both sexes

*Gay* refers to males who identify as homosexual

*Heterosexual* individuals demonstrate a sexual attraction and/or behavior towards persons of the opposite sex

*Homosexual* individuals demonstrate a sexual attraction and/or behavior towards persons of the same sex

*Lesbian* refers to females who identify as homosexual

*LGBTQ* is the acronym that has been adopted to identify relevant issues of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning individuals

*Non-heterosexual* includes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBTQ) individuals

*Questioning* individuals express some amount of sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex. These individuals may or may not act on their attractions, but they describe themselves as questioning whether or not they are exclusively heterosexual.

*Questioning* refers to individuals who are questioning their sexual orientation or uncertain about their sexual orientation

*Sex* refers to biological descriptions (male and female)

*Sexual orientation* refers to an individual's sexual attraction and/or behavior

**APPENDIX A**  
**CAMPUS CLIMATE PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHICS**

Category	2005	2006	2007
	N = 659	N = 575	N = 876
<b>Class Year</b>			
1 <sup>st</sup> year	186	158	267
Sophomore	203	171	207
Junior	161	161	207
Senior	133	114	195
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	247	193	290
Female	435	410	581
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>			
Heterosexual	619	547	836
Non-Heterosexual	40	33	37
Gay/Lesbian	15	33	26
Bisexual	25	--	--
Questioning	--	--	11

**APPENDIX B**  
**CAMPUS CLIMATE T-TESTS**

Category	Year	LGB(Q)		Heterosexual	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Campus Climate</b>					
Disparaging LGBQ Remarks					
	2005	4.32	0.91	4.1	0.97
	2006	4.27	0.91	4.01	0.98
	2007	2.68	1.22	3.07	1.196
LGBQ Graffiti					
	2005	2.64**	1.38	1.51**	0.92
	2006	2.1**	1.3	1.51**	0.87
	2007	1.5	0.78	1.30	0.58
Contemplating Transferring					
	2005	2.87**	1.15	3.56**	1.13
	2006	3.38	1.14	3.47	1.15
	2007	3.38	1.12	3.66	1.12
Belong to the College Community					
	2005	--	--	--	--
	2006	--	--	--	--
	2007	3.85	1.07	3.99	0.95
<b>LGBQ Student Experiences</b>					
Sexual Orientation Differs					
	2005	4.27**	0.93	3.56**	4.27
	2006	3.84*	1.19	3.46*	0.93
	2007	--	--	--	--
Treatment					
	2005	--	--	--	--
	2006	--	--	--	--
	2007	2.44**	0.92	3.43**	0.93
<b>Student Interactions</b>					
Prior to college					
	2005	3.67**	1.37	2.68**	1.25
	2006	3.29*	1.33	2.88*	1.34
	2007	3.00	0.92	2.83	0.73
While at college					
	2005	3.75**	0.1	2.74**	1.25
	2006	3.29*	1.32	2.64*	1.26
	2007	--	--	--	--
Number or LGBQ friends					
	2005	15**	11.1	5**	5.5
	2006	9.28*	8.9	4.78**	4.6
	2007	--	--	--	--
Awkward Interactions					
	2005	1.25**	0.6	2.1**	1.4
	2006	1.57**	0.62	2.0**	0.97
	2007	1.57**	0.99	2.29**	1.05

\* p &lt; .05

\*\* p &lt; .01

-- indicates that the item was removed, altered, or added

**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Category	Frequencies (N=22)	
<b>Class Year</b>		
1 <sup>st</sup> year	8	
Sophomore		3
Junior		3
Senior		6
<b>Sex</b>		
Male		12
Female		10
<b>Kinsey Identification</b>		
Exclusively Heterosexual		0
Predominately heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual		3
Predominately heterosexual, more than incidentally homosexual		1
Equally heterosexual and homosexual		0
Predominately homosexual, more than incidentally heterosexual		4
Predominately homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual		5
Exclusively Homosexual		9
<b>Self-Identification</b>		
Gay		11
Lesbian		3
Bisexual		7
Male		1
Female		6
Questioning		1

## APPENDIX D INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Thank you for taking the time to meet today. Before we continue, we need to review your rights as a participant (Briefly mention confidentiality, audio taping, who will have access to this material, moving on from questions, etc to obtain Informed Consent). The goal of this interview is for me to better understand your experiences as someone who may identify as not exclusively heterosexual. I hope this meeting will provide a safe place for us to discuss belongingness, the general campus climate, and many of your experiences at this college. I will ask a variety of questions to guide our talk and to address specific questions that I think are important to be answered. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

*My first two questions are about sexual orientation and belongingness. I realize that these may be hard to answer right away, but I am asking them to frame our discussion and so that I can get a better sense of how you feel.*

1. I know this is a big question, but how would you describe your sexual orientation?
2. A bigger question, what do you think it means to belong as a member of the college community?

*I also have really struggled with creating a definition of belongingness and your definition will be very helpful to me as I continue to work on this project. For the sake of this project, I've come up with this definition from talking with others and from reading some literature on belongingness.*

Belongingness at this College:

The experience(s) of feeling like a valued and accepted member of the college community and a general connection with and commitment to the college.

(Hand definition of belongingness to participant)

*Using this definition of belongingness as a reference for answering the remainder of these questions...*

Experiences on Campus:

3. Have you ever felt that your sexual orientation has negatively affected your sense of belonging at this college? Could you give me an example?
4. Have you ever felt that your sexual orientation has positively affected your sense of belonging at this college? Could you give me an example?
5. Overall, how would you describe your sense of belongingness considering your sexual orientation?
6. How would you describe the overall environment for other non-heterosexual students on our campus?
7. Has this environment changed since your time at this college?

8. All people respond to environments differently and I'm curious to know: Have you ever done things to "fit in" better or belong at the college?
9. Have you disclosed this information to anyone besides me and yourself? What has made you comfortable (or uncomfortable) in sharing this information?
10. How supportive do you think heterosexual students are of non-heterosexual students?

Experiences with a LGBTQ community:

11. How would you describe the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning community at this college?
12. If you could speak for others, how would you describe the experiences of other non-heterosexual students?
13. Do you have any LGBTQ friends at this college? How did this friendship form? Is this friendship different than friendships you have with heterosexual students?
14. How have your friendships with LGBTQ students influenced your experience at this college?

Climate Change questions:

*For the last part of our interview, I would like to ask your personal opinion about how the campus climate could improve for non-heterosexual individuals.*

15. What could students do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong?
16. What could faculty do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong?
17. What could the administration do to make non-heterosexual students feel like they belong?
18. What could organizations like GSA do to improve the campus climate for LGBTQ students?
19. Overall, how could this college become a more inclusive community?

*I do not have any more interview questions for you, but are there any topics that you wish to revisit or expand upon before we conclude our interview? Would you mind filling out this brief questionnaire? I will leave you alone for a few minutes and when you are done will you please place it in this envelope (Interviewer exits the room).*

*Thank you again for having the courage to interview and share your experiences with me. I would like to meet and interview as many people as possible and, as you can imagine, recruiting some individuals may be more difficult than others. Would you mind passing along information about this opportunity to share? This flyer may be helpful; it includes my contact information (Hand participant a Recruitment flyer).*



d) It is ok to be non-heterosexual at this college.

SCALE: *strongly disagree*      *disagree*      *unsure*      *agree*      *strongly agree*  
 1                                      2                                      3                                      4                                      5

e) I do not belong at this college because of my sexual orientation

SCALE: *strongly disagree*      *disagree*      *unsure*      *agree*      *strongly agree*  
 1                                      2                                      3                                      4                                      5

f) 18. If you had to do it over again, you would:

1. Definitely apply to this college
2. Probably apply to this college
3. Unsure what I would do
4. Probably NOT apply to this college
5. Definitely NOT apply to this college

g) In contemplating transferring from this college have you:

1. Decided to transfer
2. Seriously considered transferring
3. Often thought about transferring but never seriously entertained it
4. Rarely thought about transferring
5. Never considered transferring

8. Describe the overall level of comfort you felt during the interview:

- a.) very comfortable
- b.) somewhat comfortable
- c.) somewhat uncomfortable
- d.) very uncomfortable

9. How skilled do you feel the interviewer was (sensitivity, appropriate responses to comments)?

- a.) very skilled
- b.) somewhat skilled
- c.) somewhat unskilled
- d.) very unskilled

10. Have you ever completed the Campus Climate Survey?

- a.) Yes, in (circle those that apply)                      2005                      2006                      2007
- b.) No

11. A focus group would allow for collaboration in improving our campus climate. Would you be willing to participant in a focus group discussing variations of the interview questions?

- a.) Yes
- b.) No

If yes, please indicate the preferred way of contacting you in the future:

*E-mail*                      *Phone*                      *College Box*                      *Do Not Contact*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone #: (\_\_\_\_)\_\_\_\_\_ College Box #: \_\_\_\_\_

Use the remaining space to make any additional comments that you were unable to make during the interview or that were not addressed by the above questions.

APPENDIX F  
RECRUITMENT FLYER

YOUR CHANCE TO INTERVIEW  
ABOUT SOMETHING RARELY TALKED ABOUT

Less than an hour of your time will help better others understanding of the experiences of students who may identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Questioning of one's sexuality.

I am recruiting students who would be interested in sharing their experiences as a sexual minority in a completely confidential, one-on-one, interview.

Your contribution to this research will be vital in understanding the experiences of a minority population on our campus, providing firsthand narrative descriptions on belongingness and sexuality. This information will hopefully be used to improve the quality of life for *all students* of the college community.

If you decide to participate in this project, you and I will meet together at a location and time of your choice. **Your identity will be kept entirely anonymous throughout this process.** I have estimated that this interview will require less than an hour depending on how much you wish to share.

If you wish to participate or have any questions about this research, please contact Logan Jones any way you please at:

Cell: (813)389-1788  
E-mail: jonlp@rhodes.edu  
Campus Mail: Rhodes Box 1736

## APPENDIX G

### Informed Consent for Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate. The comments made during the interview are going to be analyzed and used in order to gain a better understand experiences of belongingness at this college.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide at any time that you no longer wish to participate, simply indicate so and you may leave without penalty.

In order for me to fully record your experience and for you to have my undivided attention, I will be audio recording our session. These audio tapes will be kept in a lockbox until transcribed. These audio tapes will be labeled cryptically to protect your anonymity. One other member of Dr. Davis's research team may also have access to these tapes and data in order for us transcribe your narration into print. Only Dr. Davis's research team will have access to this information. These tapes will be completely destroyed once accurately transcribed. The typed transcriptions will also be kept in a secured location and may be slightly altered to remove any indication of your identity. Please note that your identity will remain confidential and at no point in time will your name or other identifying information be used when reporting data (instead we will make references such as "gay, a sophomore reported...").

My experience with the counseling process (e.g. work with the crisis center hotline, coursework on the counseling process & beginning counseling skills) will allow me to assess if you are experiencing any unusual discomfort. The nature of this interview is not to be distressing, but it is possible that some individuals may experience some discomfort depending on their personal comfort level. Please understand that ensuring your well-being during this process is imperative to me. I admire your courage and openness in sharing. Although the personal benefits of this interview vary between individuals, I hope that this experience will provide you with insightful information into your own feelings and beliefs. Your contribution to this research may also someday transform the climate of college as well. I cannot, however, guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research other than whatever knowledge you may learn about yourself and the contributions to this research that you make.

If you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, we move onto the next question. If you experience any stress, anxiety or psychological discomfort as a result of participation in this research, you may contact the Counseling Center at x3128.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me anytime, day or night, at (813) 389-1788. If you would rather talk to my advisor who is also a counselor, Dr. Anita Davis, then you may contact her at (901) 843-3989. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may also contact Nick McKinney at (901) 843-3566.

**CONSENT AGREEMENT FOR INTERVIEW AND AUDIO RECORDING**

I have received an adequate description of the purpose of this interview and the procedures for audio recording sessions during the course of the proposed research study. I give my consent to be recorded during participation in the study, and for those recordings to be listened to by persons involved in the study, as well as for other professional purposes as described to me. I understand that all information will be kept confidential and will be reported in an anonymous fashion, and that the audio recordings will be destroyed after an appropriate period of time after the completion of this project. I further understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

Printed Name of participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX H**  
**FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHICS**

Category	Frequencies (N=6)
<b>Class Year</b>	
1 <sup>st</sup> year	3
Sophomore	0
Junior	1
Senior	2
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	2
Female	4
<b>Kinsey Identification</b>	
Exclusively Heterosexual	0
Predominately heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual	0
Predominately heterosexual, more than incidentally homosexual	0
Equally heterosexual and homosexual	1
Predominately homosexual, more than incidentally heterosexual	1
Predominately homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual	1
Exclusively Homosexual	3
<b>Self-Identification</b>	
Gay	3
Lesbian	3
Bisexual	2
Male	1
Female	2
Questioning	0

## APPENDIX I

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

*The purpose of this meeting today is to provide a safe place to the general campus climate, various experiences of sexual minority students on our campus, and the colleges' statement on diversity. The goal of this discussion is also to brainstorm ways in which the campus climate could improve to enhance the overall quality of life on campus.*

#### Academic/Classroom Climate:

*The first set of questions have to do with your experiences in classes and with peers.*

1. Do discussions of sexual orientation come up in your classes or with your peers?
2. How comfortable are peer interactions during these discussions? Respectful of differences of opinion? Hostility towards differences of opinion?
3. How skilled are faculty members at facilitating these discussions?
4. What impedes or prevents discussion of sexual orientation diversity taking place?
5. Should sexual orientation diversity be an issue discussed in class? Which classes?

#### Social Supports:

*Now we would like to discuss some other experiences at this college.*

6. Please take your time to think about and consider whether or not you would like to answer the following question. Have you ever had negative experiences concerning your sexual orientation while at this college?
7. If you have had negative experience(s), how have you resolved it/them? Who did you talk to? What resources did you utilize when resolving the issue? How satisfied are you with the resources and supports available to you? How satisfied were you with the response to the issue and how the situation was handled?
8. Have you had positive experiences on campus concerning your sexual orientation? If so, what were they like?
9. Do you feel as if there is a unified LGBTQ community? Would such a community of students improve our campus?
10. What other resources exists on campus to support LGBTQ students?

#### Environmental Changes:

*Thank you for sharing your experiences. Next, we wanted to take a look at the colleges' statement on a commitment to diversity. As you read, think about diversity in the context of sexual orientation.*

(Hand each participants a copy of Colleges' Commitment to Diversity)

11. How many of you were aware of this statement of diversity?
12. In your opinion, is this commitment to Diversity upheld?
13. Is there a problem with the acceptance of sexual minority students at this college?

14. What suggestions do you have for improving the campus climate for member of sexual minorities at this college?

#### Commitment to Diversity:

A diverse learning community is a necessary element of a liberal arts education, for self-understanding is dependent upon the understanding of others. We, the members of Rhodes College, are committed to fostering a community in which diversity is valued and welcomed. To that end, Rhodes College does not discriminate -- and will not tolerate harassment -- on the basis of race, gender, color, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and national or ethnic origin.

We are committed to providing an open learning environment. Freedom of thought, a civil exchange of ideas, and an appreciation of diverse perspectives are fundamental characteristics of a community that is committed to critical inquiry. To promote such an academic and social environment we expect integrity and honesty in our relationships with each other and openness to learning about and experiencing cultural diversity. We believe that these qualities are crucial to fostering social and intellectual maturity and personal growth.

Intellectual maturity also requires individual struggle with unfamiliar ideas. We recognize that our views and convictions will be challenged, and we expect this challenge to take place in a climate of open-mindedness and mutual respect.

(obtained from website: <http://www.rhodes.edu/Rhodes-College-Commitment-To-Diversity.cfm>)





**APPENDIX K**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUP**

Thank you for agreeing to participate. You are going to participate in a focus group discussion for about an hour. The comments made during the discussion group are going to be analyzed and used in order to gain a better understand of the campus climate at this college.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide at any time that you no longer wish to participate in the focus group discussion, simply notify one of the facilitators and you may leave without penalty. If you have any questions please direct them to one of the facilitators present.

In order to ensure that we correctly record the responses and comments made during the discussion we are going to use an audio recording device to ensure that we maintain the accuracy of your statements. Please note that your identity will remain confidential and at no point in time will your name or other identifying information be used when reporting data (instead we will make references such as “a sophomore commented...”), nor will your identity be disclosed to anyone other than the investigators working on this project.

**You should be aware, however, that whatever you say in the focus groups may be repeated by other focus group members as the facilitators’ are not able to guarantee that your comments will not be shared by the other focus group members.**

**CONSENT AGREEMENT FOR PARTICIPATING**

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You understand that all information will be kept confidential and will be reported in an anonymous fashion, and that the audio recordings will be destroyed after an appropriate period of time after the completion of this project.

Printed Name of participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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