STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THEIR CAMPUS LGBTQ+ CENTER

By

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ABSTRACT

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and similar identities (LGBTQ+) resource centers on college campuses provide services, resources, programming, and advocacy focused on gender and sexuality, especially minoritized genders and sexualities. As center staff enact this work at the individual and organizational levels, LGBTQ+ centers seek to promote students' thriving, especially among students with minoritized genders and sexualities. Although students are the animating reason for LGBTQ+ centers' existence, relatively little is known about how students experience and conceptualize campus LGBTQ+ resource centers. The purpose of this study was to understand LGBTQ+ resource centers from students' perspectives. Guided by a critical adaptation of an ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003), I undertook a qualitative study drawing on interviews with 15 students who felt in some way connected to their campus LGBTQ+ center. I also included data from observations and publicly available center documents. The participants were all current students at a Midwestern university where the LGBTQ+ center had at least one full-time staff member and a clear commitment to social justice.

The campus LGBTQ+ center often served as an important force in students' ecosystems. Students' ecosystems reflected common elements of university education (e.g., classes, student organizations, and friends), LGBTQ+ campus spaces, families and communities of origin, as well as broader forces including U.S. politics, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a number of oppressive systems. In the midst of highly variable, often unsupportive, and sometimes hostile

contexts, students found support and guidance through their LGBTQ+ center. Students experienced their center in five major ways: physical space, source of relationships, organizational navigation and tools, virtual presence, and symbol of institutional commitment. Students emphasized and interacted with each of these aspects in accordance with their needs as they navigated their academic pursuits and daily lives in the face of racism, cissexism, heterosexism, and a host of other oppressive forces. Ultimately, students' experiences with their campus LGBTQ+ center were frequently a means of survival and a boost towards students thriving on campus and in their lives.

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who imagine, demand, and build spaces for queer and trans people to thrive on campus and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was a large and collaborative project. It was possible because of the care, mentoring, and encouragement of many—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, LGBTQ+ students, and those who help LGBTQ+ students to see their power and possibility. I am profoundly grateful. May this work honor all those who have contributed to it.

My interest in LGBTQ+ centers stems directly from my own experiences coming out in college and beyond. When I first came out, I needed love, time, and space. Bowdoin College staff, faculty, and friends offered me grace in my early uncertainty. No matter its official name, 24 College was a place I could go and feel safe. A few years later, the University of Michigan Spectrum Center saw me through another round of exploration and growth. These spaces and the people within them taught me to love my queerness and to see the world in its beautiful complexity.

This study could not have happened without the Pride Resource Center (site and participant names are all pseudonyms). Thank you to the generous staff for welcoming me in and trusting me with access to your students and work, especially during such trying times. To my participants—Alice, C, Ceejay, Cobalt, Ellis, Finley, Grace, Hugo, Jake, Mouse, Nathan, Nicole, Robert, Zach, and Zion— thank you for entrusting me with your stories, hopes, hurts, and joys. You are wonderful humans and worthy of full, vibrant, loved lives.

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I have been blessed with family and friends who have supported me through the Ph.D. and many other adventures. To my parents, Julie and Bob Noble, thank you for instilling in me a deep love of learning and the belief that I could do hard, important things. You provided me with a strong foundation on which to build. This is just the beginning, though hopefully the last degree. To my aunt and uncle, Ruth and John Droescher, I am so grateful for the relationship we have nurtured. Thank you for your love, support, and excellent provisions. Kim, Karen, and Eric

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Cultural and identity-focused centers, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and similar identities (LGBTQ+) resource centers, often serve multiple institutional purposes. LGBTQ+ resource centers are recognized as sites of support and advocacy for LGBTQ+ students as well as drivers of change and inclusion in higher education institutions (Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2002). LGBTQ+ resource centers are a functional area of student affairs and a key player in enacting institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Patton et al., 2010). Yet, students' experiences with LGBTQ+ centers are largely absent from scholarly discourse and practitioner resources. The purpose of this study was to understand LGBTQ+ resource centers from students' perspectives.

The conceptual framework guiding this inquiry is a critical adaption of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993, 1995) ecology model and its application to postsecondary students (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Although ecology models do recognize societal forces and historical contexts, my adaptation intentionally incorporates insights from queer geographies (Browne, 2006; Freitag, 2013) and a Critical Whiteness analysis of campus ecology (Cabrera et al., 2016). Such an ecology model attends to the individual, their developmental processes, the environments and time within which they exist, and the role of oppressive societal systems in shaping the individual and their contexts.

I undertook a general qualitative study, informed by elements of phenomenological inquiry, utilizing interviews, observations, and documents as data sources. This methodological approach put the focus on participating students, their contexts and experiences, and how they make sense of those experiences (Gill, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Semi-structured interviews elicited students' experiences with their LGBTQ+ center as well as how they

conceptualized the center. Observations created opportunities to see how students engaged with their center as well as to situate the LGBTQ+ resource center's environments and work within its institutional context. Document analysis provided further examples of how the LGBTQ+ center communicated with students and created conditions to promote students' surviving and thriving during their time at the university.

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the background and problem statement before introducing the research questions and the study's significance. I also define LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ resource centers, key terms for this study. Subsequently, I describe my conceptual framework, a critical adaptation of an ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003), which seeks to address themes of multiple identities, meaning making, context, and oppressive societal systems.

Background, Problem Statement, and Research Questions

The first LGBTQ+ resource center[1] opened in 1971 at the University of Michigan (Burris, n.d.) and seven institutions[2] had centers by 1990 (Consortium, 2020a). Between 1990 and 2000, a number of institutions founded new LGBTQ+ resource centers, prompting practitioners and scholars to recognize LGBTQ+ centers as "new service units in the field of student affairs" (Sanlo, 2000, p. 485). These centers provide services, resources, programming, and advocacy focused on gender and sexuality, especially minoritized genders and sexualities. As of April 2022, the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals

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[1] When the University of Michigan's center was founded, it opened under the name "Human Sexuality Office" (Burris, n.d.). Naming conventions for offices and centers have evolved since 1971, reflecting shifting terminology and promoting greater inclusion of identities and communities, especially transgender communities (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014).

[2] According to the Consortium (2020a) center map, the seven institutions were University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1971); Minnesota State University, Mankato (1977); University of Pennsylvania (1982); University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1985); Grinnell College (1986); Princeton University (1989), and Western Michigan University (1989).

(Consortium; 2020a) reported 255 centers in the United States. Thus, approximately 15% of U.S. colleges and universities have an LGBTQ+ resource center (Greathouse et al., 2018).

LGBTQ+ centers have an overarching aim: "ensuring the vitality and flourishing of students of minority sexual orientations and gender identities" (Marine, 2011, p. 85). Indeed, centers can and do serve as important sources of support for students experiencing marginalization based on their genders and/or sexualities (Pitcher et al., 2018). How individual centers pursue this common purpose varies from campus to campus. Each center must respond to a multitude of shaping forces, including their institutional positioning and missions, institutional priorities, staffing levels, and campus and community needs (Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2000; Sanlo et al., 2002; Self & Hudson, 2015).

Centers enact their roles in multiple ways, which broadly correspond with counseling and support, education, assessment and evaluation, and advocacy (Marine, 2011). The counseling and support services function can take many forms, including mentoring, peer support, and meetings with individuals who are experiencing challenges (e.g., questioning their identities or experiencing discrimination or harassment). Centers often engage in education-related work for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ constituencies. They host speakers and events about gender and sexuality, offer ally development trainings, and consult with campus and community groups seeking to foster more inclusive and equitable spaces for LGBTQ+ people. Next, assessment and evaluation work typically involves assessing campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty. Information gained through assessment ideally informs campus changes and center programming. Centers' final major function is advocacy, which can include supporting policy and practice change (e.g., gender inclusive restrooms, gender and sexuality in nondiscrimination policies) as well as creating mechanisms to respond to bias incidents within their institution

(Marine, 2011). In addition to these four major functions, LGBTQ+ centers frequently maintain resource lists of local and national resources, advise student organizations, provide hangout space, provide access to LGBTQ+ books and periodicals, make safer sex supplies accessible, and host significant events such as Lavender Graduations[3] (Sanlo et al., 2002).

A multi-method extended case study and critical discourse analysis undertaken with six LGBTQ+ centers at public universities further nuances the functions and contexts of these centers (Self & Hudson, 2015). Self and Hudson (2015) created a spatial analytic matrix in which they crossed their three broad center functions of safety, legitimacy, and advocacy with centers' efforts around survival, development, and social and systematic transformation. This matrix emphasizes the interrelated and multilevel work LGBTQ+ centers may be engaged in at any moment. Not only do centers directly serve students, but they also have organizational and symbolic functions. LGBTQ+ centers advocate for policy change, advise institutional leaders, and partner with colleagues across campus (Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2002; Self & Hudson, 2015). Their existence also serves a symbolic purpose. Regardless of campus climate or substantive institutional support, an LGBTQ+ center suggests the institution is welcoming to members of LGBTQ+ communities.

The core purpose of LGBTQ+ centers is to support the thriving of LGBTQ+ students, yet center staff and institutional leaders have limited empirical research about students' perspectives of and experiences with LGBTQ+ centers. To date, most of the research on LGBTQ+ centers focuses on organizational development (Lenning, 2017; Sanlo, 2000; Sanlo et al., 2002), center leadership (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Sanlo, 2000; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019), and

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[3] Lavender Graduation is a graduation celebration or ceremony for LGBTQ+ students, designed to "acknowledge their achievements and contributions to the university as students who survived the college experience… It tells LGBT students that they matter" (Sanlo et al., 2002, p. 159).

institutional motivations (Lenning, 2017; Sanlo et al., 2002). Although two dissertations (Damschroder, 2015; Hartman, 2014) explored LGBTQ+ centers through research with students, students' stories and experiences are largely absent from peer-reviewed literature and research-to-practice publications from professional associations (Pryor et al., 2022). A notable exception is Pitcher et al.'s (2018) work on organizational sources of support for LGBTQ+ student success. Based on interviews with LGBTQ+ college students, Pitcher et al. (2018) found LGBTQ+ centers to be an important support system for students by "providing physical spaces, providing community and professional support, and serving as symbols of LGBTQ+ support and inclusion" (p. 123). Scholarship on campus climate for LGBTQ+ students often assumes the presence of an LGBTQ+ resource center improves campus climate. For example, the Campus Pride Index, a popular and accessible tool designed to assess LGBTQ+ friendliness of colleges and universities, uses the presence of a center as a major component in their campus climate evaluation (Campus Pride Index, 2020; Garvey et al., 2017).

In light of the gap in existing literature and the desire for research-supported practice, I conducted a study exploring the experiences of students who feel in some way connected to their campus's LGBTQ+ center. My research questions were:

RQ 1: How do students who feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center conceptualize the center in their ecosystems?

RQ 2: How do students who feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center understand and experience the center?

Significance of the Study

The first LGBTQ+ resource center celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2021. This center came into existence through societal change and student activism, paving the way for many

others (Marine, 2011). How much has changed since 1971? Although U.S. higher education has advanced in its recognition of and support for LGBTQ+ people, LGBTQ+ students continue to report chilly campus climates, disparate academic experiences, and challenges to their health and wellbeing (Greathouse et al., 2018). What do today's students need and want from their LGBTQ+ center? Are LGBTQ+ students flourishing, at least in part, thanks to their center? How might the experiences of today's students interacting with their LGBTQ+ center offer direction and focus for the next 50 years of LGBTQ+ centers?

This study intentionally focused on students because they are the primary reason for LGBTQ+ centers' existence and maintenance (Marine, 2011). By foregrounding student voices and experiences, this study provided rich insights into the students who feel a connection to LGBTQ+ centers and how they conceptualize the center within their ecosystems. This focus required understanding both the student in context (Renn & Arnold, 2003) and "the subjective ways in which actors experience institutions" (Suddaby, 2010, p. 16). While the study did not require participants to identify within LGBTQ+ communities, all participants did. Thus, this study contributes to scholarship on LGBTQ+ students as well as LGBTQ+ centers. These findings also inform both student-facing student affairs professionals and senior administrators as they seek to combat oppressive systems, including cissexism and heterosexism, which negatively affect all members of their institutions.

Definitions and Key Terms

In this section, I define the key terms shaping my inquiry: LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ resource centers.

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ is an adjective referring to minoritized sexualities and genders. The acronym LGBTQ+ stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus." The plus represents additional terms for minoritized sexualities and genders, such as pansexual, asexual, genderqueer, and nonbinary, which are not technically represented in this acronym. [4] There are many acronym permutations (e.g., LGBT, LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA+, LGBTQIA2S+), each of which denotes a slightly different set of identities while also often referring broadly to minoritized gender and sexuality communities. Indeed, sexual and gender minority (SGM) and people with minoritized identities of sexuality and gender (MIoSG) are alternative approaches, though less common as a means of individuals' identifications (i.e., one is unlikely to hear "I'm a part of the SGM community" rather than "I'm a part of the LGBTQ+ community"). In general conversation, many people in minoritized gender and sexuality communities use "queer and trans people" or "queer and trans communities," although some people in this community find the reclaimed slur "queer" to be offensive (GLAAD, n.d.). Language is constantly evolving, which is especially true for terms used to identify gender and sexual orientation in common and scholarly communication (Eliason, 2014).

Language decisions are important and complex. Throughout this text, I use LGBTQ+ as an overarching term for minoritized sexualities and genders while recognizing the limitations of this acronym. I also use "queer and trans" as an umbrella term when it is more in alignment with participants' language choices. Where authors and organizations employ different acronyms or terms, I maintain their original terminology.

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[4] GLAAD maintains a user-friendly "Media Reference Guide" (https://www.glaad.org/reference/terms) with a glossary and guidelines for speaking and writing about LGBTQ people. For a more in-depth discussion of language used for gender and sexuality and by LGBTQ+ people, please see Jourian, 2015.

LGBTQ+ Resource Centers

LGBTQ+ resource centers are offices at colleges and universities focused on providing services relevant to gender and sexuality, especially minoritized genders and sexualities. In scholarly literature, LGBTQ+ resource centers may also be referred to as campus resource centers, student support offices, or student services, with wide variation in naming across different campuses. As an alternative to "LGBTQ+ centers" as the general term for such an office, some have suggested "gender and sexuality resource centers (GSRCs)" (Lange, 2019, p. 60). However, GSRC is not a broadly recognized term, so I utilize the more common LGBTQ+ resource center language. The histories, purpose, and work of these centers are further described in Chapter 2.

The Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (Consortium; 2020a) set forth criteria for qualifying as an LGBTQ+ campus resource center. The center must have, at minimum, a half-time (20 hours per week) position filled by a professional staff member or a graduate assistant. The position's job description must involve "primary responsibility for providing LGBT services" if filled by a professional staff member and "must be solely dedicated to LGBT services" if held by a graduate assistant (Consortium, 2020a, para. 2). In other words, the staff must be fully dedicated to LGBTQ+ services and not performing these functions as an add-on to a full-time job in another area. The Consortium's criteria give some bounding to what counts as an LGBTQ+ resource center while also leaving plenty of space for centers to have a variety of characteristics adapted to their institutional contexts.

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Conceptual Framework

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To guide my inquiry, I critically adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993, 1995) ecological model of development and its application to postsecondary environments (Renn & Arnold,

2003). Recent studies of marginalized college student populations, including undocumented students (De La Cruz-Caldera, 2017) and Muslim international women (Yousafzai, 2019), have drawn on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to examine how individuals navigate, adapt to, and influence their environments. Incorporating queer geographies (Browne, 2006; Freitag, 2013) and Cabrera and colleagues' (2016) Critical Whiteness analysis of the campus ecology framework, I take a critical approach to understanding and applying an ecological model of student development.

Ecology of Human Development

The ecological model of development describes the process of human development as embedded in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1993, 1995). Known also as the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, this theory attends to the individual, their developmental processes, the environments they exist within, and the process by which these elements change over time. Bronfenbrenner (1989) defined the ecology of human development as

> the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 188)

Thus, development occurs through the interactions of a person with their environment. Developmental processes are not static, but rather evolve as the individual encounters increasing complexity across their changing contexts.

While Bronfenbrenner's work considers the individual over the course of their lifespan, higher education scholars and practitioners have adapted Bronfenbrenner's work on

developmental ecology to postsecondary students and their environments. Renn and Arnold (2003) proposed utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1993, 1995) PPCT model to develop an ecological model of student development. Specifically, they applied this ecological approach to campus peer culture, which "encompasses the forces and processes that shape individual and collective life on campus in terms of identity, group membership, acceptable discourse, and desirable behaviors" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 262). Subsequently, a number of scholars have applied and adapted the PPCT model to various populations and foci, including Native American students (Fish & Syed, 2018), undergraduate student experiences (Jones, 2018), and international PhD students (Elliot et al., 2016).

In the following sections, I describe the major elements of Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time model and its application to postsecondary educational environments (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Renn and Arnold's (2003) Application of Bronfenbrenner's Model to Postsecondary Contexts
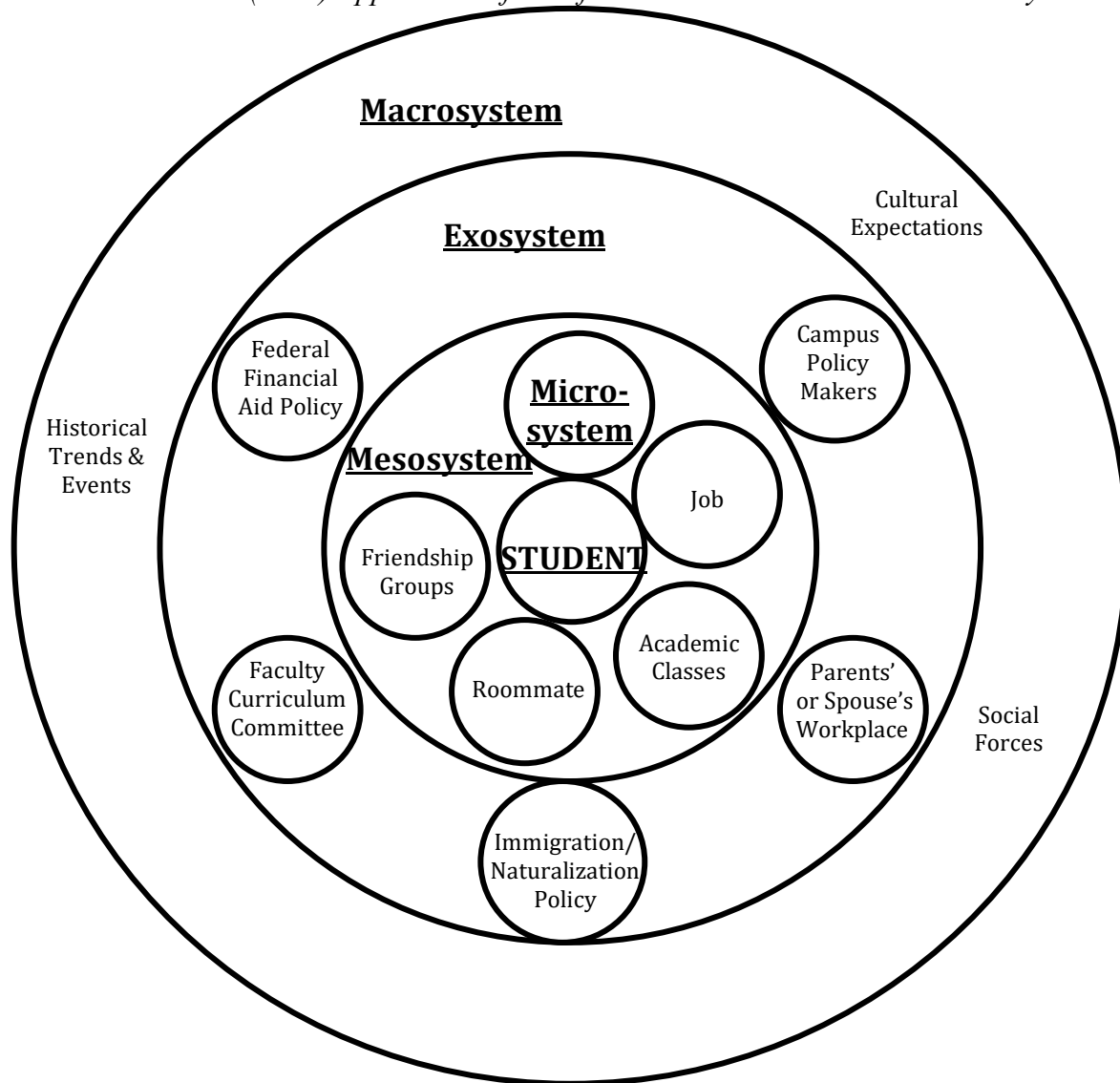
Note. From "Reconceptualizing Research on College Student Peer Culture," by K. A. Renn and K. D. Arnold, 2003, *The Journal of Higher Education, 74*(3), 268, (https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2003.11780847). Copyright 2003 by The Ohio State University (https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/uhej20). Reprinted with permission.

Process and Person

The ecological model of development's premise centers on the individual and their developmental processes. An individual's developmental process does not occur in a vacuum,

but instead through the interaction of the individual and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). This process "encompasses particular forms of interaction between organism and environment, called *proximal processes* that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795).

The person engaged in these developmental processes is not a blank slate. Rather, each individual has certain traits. These traits are referred to as developmentally instigative characteristics, "the attributes of the person most likely to shape the course of development, for better or for worse, are those that induce or inhibit dynamic dispositions toward the immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 11). The four types of developmentally instigative characteristics are (1) those that promote or inhibit certain environmental reactions, (2) selective responsivity, how individuals explore and respond to their contexts, (3) structuring proclivities, how individuals seek and respond to increasing complexity, and (4) directive beliefs, how individuals understand their agency within their contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Context

Within Bronfenbrenner's model, context is represented by four systems—microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems, which "describe the nested networks of interactions that create an individual's ecology" (Figure 1; Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 267). A microsystem is most proximal to the individual and refers to "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons… that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interactions with, and activity in, the immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 15). Although Bronfenbrenner (1993, 1995) emphasized microsystems as requiring face-to-face interactions, virtual spaces where individuals

engage in learning and identity construction can also serve as microsystems (Patton et al., 2016).

Microsystems for college students could include classes, workplaces, student organizations, friend groups, and families (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Just as the individual cannot be considered without attention to context, the individual's microsystems do not exist as discrete entities in the individual's life. Instead, the mesosystem describes the connections and interactions between two or more microsystems. When considering the mesosystem, "special attention is focused on the synergistic effects created by the interaction of developmentally instigative or inhibitory features and processes present in each setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 22). For example, a student's microsystems might include the LGBTQ+ center and a religiously affiliated student organization. The student's mesosystem, then, includes the interactions between those spaces where the student may be absorbing any number of cues about how these spaces approach questions of gender, sexuality, and religious practice.

Beyond the micro- and mesosystems exists the exosystem. Exosystems are settings that influence the individual, but the individual does not directly interact with or exist within. For example, college students may be subject to federal financial aid policy, immigration policy, or their guardian's or partner's workplace (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Each of these settings could exert pressure on a student and their more proximal systems, thus influencing the developmental possibilities present for the student.

The macrosystem is the furthest system from the individual and represents the overarching frameworks of the cultures and societies shaping the individual's micro-, meso-, and exosystems. Any analysis of an individual's macrosystem must pay particular attention to "the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures,

life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25). For example, a college student's macrosystem includes cultural beliefs about who can and should have access to postsecondary education on the basis of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and additional social categories (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Time

The final element of the PPCT model is time, which is represented by the chronosystem. The chronosystem represents the role of time at three levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). First, microtime refers to the most immediate and proximal role of time in the individual's context and developmental processes. Mesotime links these microtime experiences over longer periods, such as weeks or months. Finally, macrotime considers the era, generations, and broader societal moments shaping the individual's contexts, especially their macrosystem.

Applying an Ecological Model of Development

An ecological model of development offers an important tool for higher education practitioners and scholars. The model highlights the how and why of development in postsecondary environments, requiring attention to the individual, their proximal and distant contexts, and time. Accordingly, Renn and Arnold's (2003) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1993, 1995) PPCT model to postsecondary contexts provides a multifaceted and interconnected means of examining students' experiences with LGBTQ+ centers in the present study. However, existing conceptions of ecological models of development remain neutral about systems of injustice and oppression (Cabrera et al., 2016). As my study considers students who likely hold marginalized identities and campus spaces founded to address hostile environments, I next propose including critical perspectives into an ecological model of development in

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postsecondary education and provide an example of the adapted model based on a hypothetical student's contexts.

Toward a Critical Campus Ecology Model

The PPCT model and its adaptation to postsecondary educational contexts emphasize the role of society and culture in the macrosystem. Further, these models acknowledge individuals will interact with and be influenced by the contextual systems differentially (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1993, 1995; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Oppressive systems, such as white[5] supremacy, cissexism, and heterosexism, underlie societal structures. What would it mean to take a critical approach to the PPCT model? What could queering the model look like? In this section, I advance the critical campus ecology model (CCEM) with these questions at the fore.

Thus far, I have used "queer" as an identity signifier. It is, however, a much more complex word. Freitag (2013) characterized the act of queering as "re-defining the traditionally-held norms, binaries, beliefs, values, institutions, and structures" (p. 131). Queer space, then, can be characterized as "dissident, progressive, resistant, and claimed" (Freitag, 2013, p. 131). To queer a space or a model should not, however, suggest the prioritization of sexuality over other systems of power and oppression. Rather, sexuality must be understood alongside and in conjunction with socially constructed categories including race, gender, and class (Oswin, 2008). By these definitions, LGBTQ+ spaces, whether physical or relational, are not inherently queer spaces. An LGBTQ+ space focused narrowly on gender and sexuality within the confines of the existing heteronormative, cisnormative, and all other hegemonic normative systems fail to queer that space. In contrast, a queer space should involve "radical (re)thinkings, (re)drawings,

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[5] I do not capitalize "white" to describe a racial category in order to follow the example of many Black authors (e.g., Touré, 2011) and to recognize legacies of colonialism and slavery in the U.S. When referencing previous scholarship, I preserve the authors' capitalization choices.

(re)conceptualisations, (re)mappings that could (re)make bodies, spaces and geographies"
(Browne, 2006, p. 888). To queer this ecology model would require clear understandings of how
normative systems shape students' spaces and relationships and (re)imaginings of how the
student or their spaces and relationships contest dominant power structures.

Existing ecology models' analyses of the role of macrosystems on the other systems and
the individual do not attend to the role of power and privilege (Cabrera et al., 2016). Oppressive
systems permeate from the societal to the individual level, so macrosystem forces manifest these
oppressive systems in more proximal systems. For example, Cabrera and colleagues (2016)
recommend scholars "place White supremacy within the macrosystem of their analysis, White
privilege within the mesosystem, and grapple with the empirical tension of listening to White
student narratives while understanding that they are likely unaware of either" (p. 129).
Responding to Cabrera and colleagues' (2016) call for work with ecology models "to take better
account of structures of oppression" (p. 129), I explicitly include hegemonic oppressive systems,
including racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, and ableism, in my adaptation of
Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development (Figure 2).

These oppressive systems cut across each of the nested contextual systems and touch the
student. In Figure 2, the oppressive systems are represented by a solid wedge surrounded by a
broken, squiggly line. This depiction emphasizes both the real, material influence that oppressive
forces have on an individual's contexts as well as the fuzzy, permeable borders between the
oppressive systems and all aspects of the student's context. Oppressive systems are not an
inherent part of the individual, but they do touch the student and their contexts.

An Example Student's Critical Campus Ecology

AJ (they/them) is a multiracial, nonbinary, queer student in their sophomore year at a mid-sized, regional public university. AJ entered college knowing they were queer but had not yet disclosed their sexuality to others. In their first year, they learned about the gender spectrum and transgender identities. They came out as nonbinary at the end of their first year to their friends and family.

In the microsystem, AJ is taking a full-time course load, living on campus in the gender-inclusive living community, and working at one of the campus dining halls. They have wanted to be a doctor since they were young, so they are taking a lot of science courses and recently began volunteering at a local hospital. On campus, they are most active with the campus queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) student group, which meets weekly in the campus LGBTQ+ resource center.

AJ's mesosystem is full of connections and interactions between their microsystems. While they live with other trans and nonbinary students, the gender-inclusive living community residents are primarily white. Being around fellow QTPOC at least once a week makes a huge difference in their life. Their science courses and their dining hall job keep them very busy, so it can be hard to find time to volunteer. Yet, the hospital volunteering reminds AJ why they are taking pre-med courses, especially when labs run over time or when exams are hard.

Figure 2

Critical Campus Ecology Model
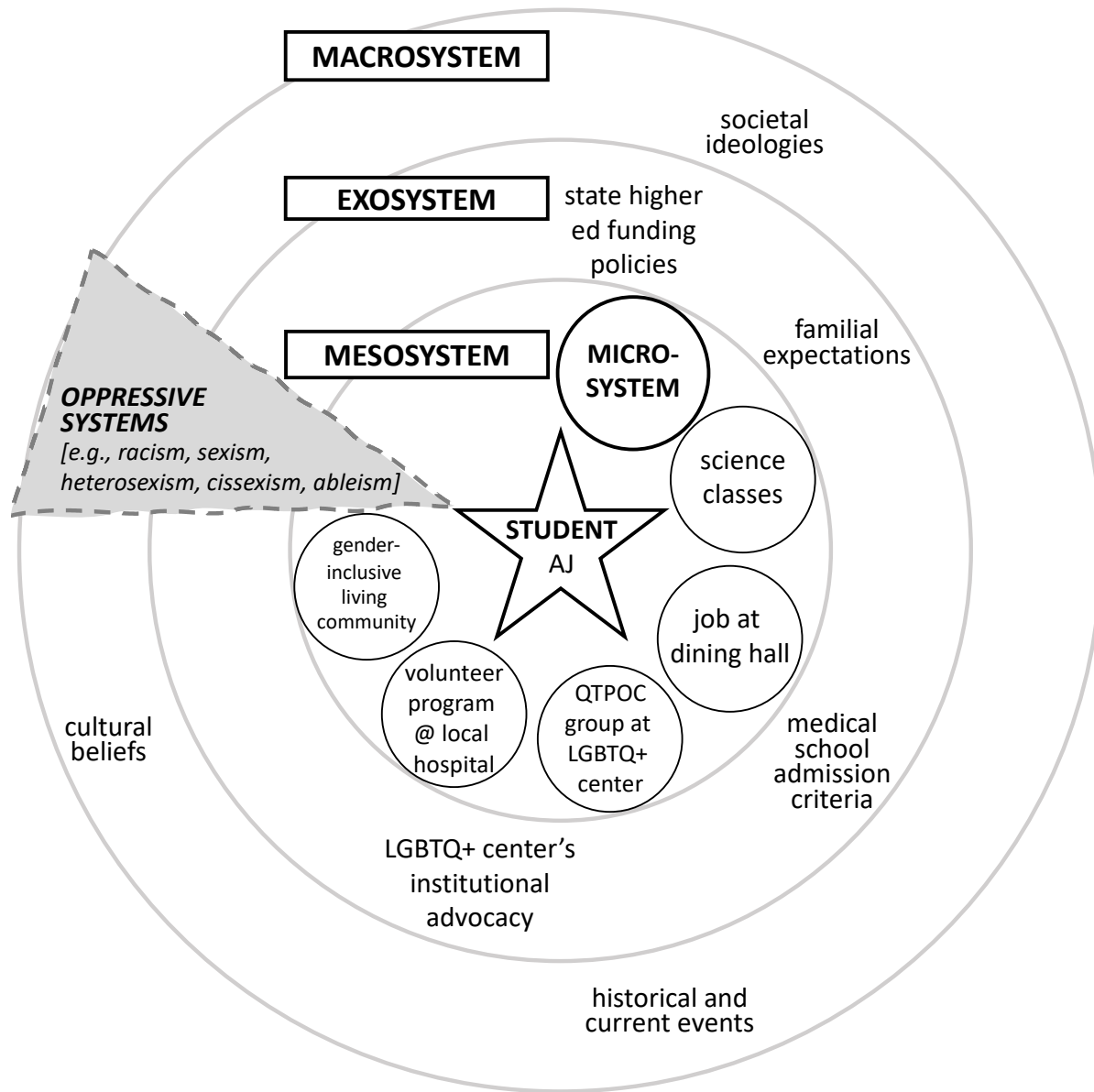
Note. Represents example student AJ's critical campus ecology. Adapted from

"Reconceptualizing Research on College Student Peer Culture," by K. A. Renn and K. D.

Arnold, 2003, *The Journal of Higher Education, 74*(3), 268,

(https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2003.11780847). Copyright 2003 by The Ohio State

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The exosystem shapes AJ's college experience and the choices they are making. Their state's appropriations for higher education continue to fall, which has led to a budget shortfall at their mid-sized, regional institution. Between AJ's family's excitement for them to become the first doctor in the family and the rigorous medical school admission criteria, AJ knows that their academic performance, volunteering, and overall resume need to be top notch, especially as someone with multiple marginalized identities. Their academic and cocurricular college experiences have been made a bit safer and easier now that they live in a gender-inclusive community (no more worrying about which bathroom to use in their living space) and they can have their chosen name (AJ) appear on class lists, rather than their birth name. AJ is grateful the LGBTQ+ resource center for advocating for these trans-inclusive policies over the last few years.

AJ's macrosystem includes the high-level forces that shape their life. Societal ideologies, cultural beliefs, and historical and current events are constantly present, even when AJ is not aware of them. For example, the United States' patriarchal and cisnormative beliefs about sex, gender, and sexuality have created rigid ideas about people of different genders sharing particular spaces, which have, in turn, become codified into building codes such as how many single gender restrooms must be designated in public buildings.

Finally, oppressive systems exist and act across each of AJ's contextual systems. Racism, sexism, and a host of other "-isms" emanate from the macrosystem and manifest in a variety of ways from the exosystem into AJ's microsystems. For example, the LGBTQ+ resource center's advocacy arises from the need to combat oppressive systems, especially heterosexism and cissexism, in physical and virtual spaces. Yet, LGBTQ+ centers are not immune from racism. They can and do perpetuate white supremacy, producing unwelcoming and unsafe environments for students of color under the banner of serving LGBTQ+ students (Johnson & Javier, 2017;

Miller & Vaccaro, 2016). The combination of heterosexism, cissexism, and racism produce a campus and societal climate in which QTPOC need to create safer spaces to be in community together and away from the onslaught of these oppressive systems for a short time each week.

Section Summary

In this section, I introduced the critical campus ecology model, which served as the framework for this study. In this extension of Bronfenbrenner's (1993, 1995) PPCT model, the CCEM explicitly attends to systems of power in an individual's ecosystem. The CCEM posits that oppressive systems influence all levels of an individual's context, though elements of an individual's system may also shape a given oppressive system. In Figure 2, I offered an example of a fictional student AJ's CCEM to demonstrate how the model might account for an individual's contexts and their interactions with systems of power and oppression.

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Chapter Summary

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LGBTQ+ centers enact multiple roles on a campus to support LGBTQ+ students' thriving. The critical campus ecology model, as demonstrated in AJ's example, provides a framework through which to examine how students conceptualize their LBGTQ+ center within their ecosystems. This study shifts attention from existing literature on LGBTQ+ resource centers' organizational development, leadership, and institutional roles, as detailed in Chapter 2, to focus on students' conceptualizations of their campus's LGBTQ+ center. In Chapter 3, I describe how my methodology and methods approaches serve to elicit students' lived experiences and meaning making about their campus's LGBTQ+ center as part of their ecosystem. I lay out my findings in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 focuses on students' varied ecosystems and how the campus LGBTQ+ center fits into them. Chapter 5 details students'

conceptions of their LGBTQ+ resource center, including and well beyond the physical center

space. Finally, I offer a variety of implications for practice, research, and theory in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to understand LGBTQ+ resource centers from students' perspectives. Many students who engage with their LGBTQ+ resource center are likely to identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. As such, this chapter reviews relevant literature about LGBTQ+ post-secondary students and LGBTQ+ resource centers. I begin with an exploration of LGBTQ+ students in higher education, focusing on their identities and experiences with campus climate, both in and out of the classroom. Then, I present literature on LGBTQ+ centers, including their histories, characteristics, purposes, leadership, students' experiences, and critiques.

LGBTQ+ Students in Higher Education

LGBTQ+ college students have been the subject of much scholarly attention in the last two decades (reviewed in Lange et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2019; Renn, 2010). In this section, I first define LGBTQ+ identities and discuss additional social identities that shape LGBTQ+ students' lives. Then, I examine LGBTQ+ student experiences and campus climates.

LGBTQ+ Student Identities

Communities with minoritized genders and sexualities are often referred to as a singular and unified community using the LGBTQ+ acronym and its variants (e.g., LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+). Gender and sexuality are separate, albeit related, social identities. Gender refers to how individuals interact with and manage their "conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). An individual may use one, multiple, or no terms to describe their gender identity, or internal sense of their gender, including transgender (trans) woman, trans man, cisgender (cis) woman, cis man, nonbinary, agender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming (Beemyn, 2019; Simmons

& White 2014). Sexuality, also called sexual orientation and sexual identity, signifies an individual's attractions to others. These attractions may be romantic, sexual, and/or emotional (Jourian, 2015). Common terms to denote sexuality include gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, straight, heterosexual, and asexual. Both gender and sexuality are identities shaped by social contexts, expectations, and norms. They are not fixed, immutable identity categories, but rather "interactive, fluid, and nonbinary continua" (Jourian, 2015, p. 21).

Homogenizing multiple LGBTQ+ communities into one may lead researchers to overlook the complexities and divisions within and among them (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Spencer & Patterson, 2017). While the acronym represents the most commonly known minoritized sexualities and genders, "LGBTQ+" is not all encompassing. Additional minoritized genders and sexualities, such as genderqueer, nonbinary, pansexual, intersex, and asexual, are often not specifically acknowledged in the common acronyms. Named and unnamed, these identities and communities have distinct subcultures, politics, and interests (Choudhuri & Curley, 2020). When considered with additional social identities such as race, socioeconomic status, and age, the multiple communities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella take on further nuances and divisions (Jourian, 2015). Sexualities and genders exist and develop in relation to individuals' other multiple identities, including race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Scholarship on students with minoritized genders and sexualities initially focused on gay and lesbian identities, later expanding to consider bisexual identities, and finally transgender identities (Renn, 2010). In a similar progression, this research base often tacitly assumed students to be "White, able-bodied, and middle-class" (Renn, 2010, p. 135) and has only more recently expanded beyond this narrow conception of who LGBTQ+ students are. Increasingly, scholars

are considering multiple and intersecting identities, especially race and ethnicity (see Duran, 2018, for a comprehensive review of scholarship on queer students of color) and disability (e.g., Miller, Dika, et al., 2021), in their work. By considering multiple identities, scholars and practitioners gain additional insights into students' experiences.

Student Experiences and Campus Climate

Scholars have attended to LGBTQ+ students' experiences in college both in and out of the classroom. Campus climate refers to the "current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution… [especially those concerning] the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). Tools such as individual campus climate assessments, national surveys, and the Campus Pride Index (CPI) facilitate institutions' abilities to consider different aspects of their LGBTQ+-inclusive policies, practices, and programs as well as offer information to prospective students about LGBTQ+-friendly institutions (Garvey et al., 2017; Marine, 2011). Positive experiences and perceptions of campus climate increase the likelihood an LGBTQ+ student persists in their studies and experiences more agency in disclosing their sexuality or gender (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Pitcher et al., 2018). In contrast, the perception of a chilly campus climate may prompt an LGBTQ+ student to mask their gender identity and/or sexuality, for example by avoiding known and visible LGBTQ+ campus spaces and not disclosing their identities (Greathouse et al., 2018). The act of concealing their identities may result in isolation and may compound the student's elevated risk of academic and mental health concerns (Greathouse et al., 2018). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students may not experience their institutions as having a singular climate. Instead, understanding both the institutional or macroclimate and the microclimates, including academic and co-curricular experiences, promotes a more full and

nuanced analysis of how LGBTQ+ students experience their educational institutions (Rankin et al., 2010; Vaccaro, 2012).

Institutional Climate

LGBTQ+ students report challenging campus environments and chilly climates. With attention to queer- and trans-spectrum student respondents, Greathouse et al. (2018) synthesized findings from seven national study datasets from 2016 and 2017:

> These [queer- and trans-spectrum] students were less likely to feel valued by their institution, feel that their sexual identity and gender identities were respected on campus, or experience a sense of belonging similar to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. More troubling, these students were significantly more likely to have experiences with harassment and discrimination and less likely to view their campus as safe and secure. (p. 38)

Unfortunately, these recent trends are consistent with a previous national study of campus climate for LGBTQ+ individuals (Rankin et al., 2010).

Discriminatory experiences are likely to contribute to more negative assessments of campus climate, which in turn "[interfere] with [LGBTQ+ students'] ability to live, work, and/or learn" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 9). Among LGBTQ+ people ages 18–40 who have attended or are presently attending a four-year college, 32.6% reported harassment, bullying, or assault during their college experience, in contrast to 18.9% of non-LGBTQ+ people (O'Neill et al., 2022Yet, few LGBTQ+ students generally, and trans and gender diverse students in particular, report bias incidents to their institutions for various reasons, including distrust for the institution (Thompson et al., 2021; Weise et al., 2021). Trans and gender diverse students often have more negative perceptions of campus climate than their cisgender peers and are more likely to experience

discrimination (Thompson et al., 2021). LGBTQ+ students often choose not only to not disclose their gender and or sexuality to faculty, staff, and peers, but also to change their behaviors and appearance to shield themselves from discrimination (O'Neill et al., 2022). For example, transgender and gender-nonconforming graduate students described navigating a cisnormative institutional climate and reported adjusting their gender presentation because of campus climate and concerns about their safety (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019).

Institutional policies can address or reify students' overall experiences of campus climate. Nondiscrimination statements, campus records, restroom and locker room access, as well as on-campus housing policies are all important components of creating a more welcoming institutional climate yet face legal and practical challenges on campuses (Perdue, 2015). When these aspects of a campus experience continue to signal to trans and nonbinary students that they are other and unwelcome, they may leave the institution (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019). Nondiscrimination policies communicate an institution's values and signal the intent to include people from minoritized groups (Pitcher et al., 2018). Students appreciate when their institution includes gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality in their nondiscrimination statements and notice when institutions fail to list these categories. Even with nondiscrimination policies in place, institutions may struggle to uphold their stated values in their systems and practices (Pitcher et al., 2018).

Student records and institutional information systems are frequently a challenge for trans students. Some trans students may choose to legally change their name and/or sex marker to reflect their identity, while others cannot or do not wish to take these legal actions (Perdue, 2015; Wentling, 2019). For those who do achieve legal name or sex marker changes, institutions generally have processes for students to update their personal information. Students who have

not or cannot legally change their names, however, face varied institutional policies about listing "chosen," "preferred," or "lived" name[6] on class rosters, institutional communications, learning management systems, emails, and student ID cards (Perdue, 2015; Wentling, 2019). While certain records require legal name and sex marker, many internal databases and records can be updated to reflect the student's chosen name (Perdue, 2015). When a student's legal (rather than chosen) name appears on campus documents visible to others, the student has a greater risk of being outed, misgendered, or challenged about their name and identity. Being outed or having their identity invalidated "can lead to the person feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable, or offended at best and encountering discrimination, harassment, or violence at worst" (Wentling, 2019, p. 124).

Sex-segregated institutional facilities spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and campus housing present further sites where institutions create and maintain conditions influencing students' experiences of campus climate. Bathrooms and locker rooms are particularly fraught spaces for trans students. Many trans students choose not to use publicly accessible bathrooms or locker rooms because of the risk of being misgendered, questioned about their right to use the facility, and removed from the space or even campus (Wentling, 2019). These spaces are frequently unsafe for transgender and gender nonconforming students, which negatively influences their physical, psychological, emotional, and academic wellbeing (Perdue, 2015; Seelman, 2016; Woodford et al., 2017). Campus housing is also frequently assigned based on students' sex markers, which presents a host of problems. A trans student might be assigned to an all-female floor or building despite being a man, immediately rendering

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[6] Although institutions may still utilize adjectives (e.g., chosen, lived, preferred) to differentiate when necessary between the name a person uses and their legal name, these modifiers are falling out of favor as they can imply that these names are not someone's "real" name. See (Fowlkes, 2020) for a parallel discussion about pronouns.

the trans student hyper-visible or prompting them to mask their gender identity (Woodford et al., 2017). Gender-inclusive housing is often provided on a case-by-case basis when the student self-advocates (Perdue, 2015). However, an increasing number of institutions offer a variety of gender-inclusive housing options (see Garvey et al.'s 2018 volume on trans*[7] inclusive housing policies and practices).

Classroom Experiences and Content

A number of influences shape academic experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals. These influences can come from broad sociocultural contexts external to the institution, institutional characteristics and policies, departmental features, and individual actors, including faculty, staff, and fellow students (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum and finding fellow LGBTQ+ students in those classes contributed to LGBTQ+ students' thriving (Hill et al., 2021). LGBTQ+ students are attuned to how professors talk to and about them as individuals and about LGBTQ+ identities. In one study, both undergraduate and graduate LGBTQ+ students reported encountering supportive faculty, although a few students shared some negative faculty interactions (Vaccaro, 2012). In contrast, studies focused on transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming students suggest the experiences of trans-spectrum students are often more negative than those of LGBQ+ students (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019; Pryor, 2015).

Trans* undergraduate students described a range of classroom experiences across studies (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017; Pryor, 2015). Some trans* students expressed frustration and discomfort when faculty failed to address offensive statements made by peers or

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[7] "Trans*," pronounced trans-asterisk, is an umbrella term for transgender and similarly identified people. While not all scholars or transgender people use the asterisk, those who do emphasize its representation of the fluidity of gender and appreciate the visual interruption for readers (Nicolazzo, 2017). I preserve the use of trans* when it is the term authors chose.

when faculty made such comments themselves. In these situations, these students described two possible responses: "stay silent and remain invisible; or assert dominance by using their identity as the only way to have their voice heard" (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 535). Both options require labor from the students, either in muting oneself and allowing problematic notions to spread or in gathering the energy to defend one's existence and experiences. Yet, trans* students also experienced respectful and inclusive classrooms where faculty used students' correct pronouns and intentionally included transgender topics into their courses (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017).

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) graduate students similarly reported varied academic experiences (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019). Binary transgender students experienced transphobia and misgendering by both faculty and peers in classes. Nonbinary students reported being misgendered even more often than their binary peers. The pressures of building academic and professional networks weighed heavily on TGNC students and often influenced them to remain silent for self-preservation (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019).

In addition to how students experience their learning spaces, curricular and course content may also influence students' experiences of campus climate. LGBTQ+ topics and identities are largely absent in curricula (Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Seelman, 2014; Taylor et al., 2018). Faculty express mixed perspectives on incorporating gender and sexuality topics into their courses (Novkov & Barclay, 2010; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Disciplinary differences likely play a role in faculty members' responses. Studies about field and disciplinary climates for LGBTQ+ people found the humanities and social sciences to be generally accepting of LGBTQ+ identities and people (Linley et al., 2018), while science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

(STEM) fields were less welcoming (Miller, Vaccaro, et al., 2021; Patridge et al., 2014). STEM disciplinary epistemologies and ontologies can "foster an environment in which LGBTQ issues and people are perceived as irrelevant" (Linley & Nguyen, 2015, p. 43).

While integrating LGBTQ+ topics into curricula and courses could suggest positive progress for academic spaces, Furrow (2012) found composition faculty and LGBTQ+ students who had taken first-year composition courses expressed discomfort with including LGBTQ+ identities and issues in academic spaces, although they affirmed the importance of including such topics. Discomfort, if arising from dissonance, is not a reason to avoid including gender and sexuality into curricula and course content when these topics are relevant. Rather, dissonance can be productively used to advance student learning and development without causing trauma (Taylor & Reynolds, 2019). Taylor (2020) proposed Furrow's (2012) findings could inform faculty development opportunities regarding LGBTQ+ topics, facilitating challenging conversations, and how students' identity development processes may influence their academic engagement with specific topics.

Co-curricular Experiences

Outside of the classroom, a number of services and support systems may exist for LGBTQ+ students. Institutionally sponsored resources can include LGBTQ+ resources (including LGBTQ+ centers), affirming counseling services, LGBTQ+-specific career advising, and student organizations (Nguyen et al., 2018). Both LGBTQ+ centers and LGBTQ+ student organizations serve as particularly supportive spaces and communities for students (Pitcher et al., 2018; Vaccaro, 2012). LGBTQ+ centers provide physical space, staff support, and peer community-building opportunities (Pitcher et al., 2018). Student organizations have a variety of

missions, including social, identity-affinity development, activist, and pre-professional (Pitcher et al., 2018; Vaccaro, 2012).

However, students can and do have negative co-curricular experiences. LGBTQ+ students experience harassment while going about their daily lives on campus (Rankin et al., 2010; Vaccaro, 2012). Queer members of cultural fraternities and sororities often had positive experiences, but some members felt compelled to adjust their behaviors to conform with their organization's gendered expectations or to mask their identities (Garcia & Duran, 2021a; Garcia & Duran, 2021b). Trans* students encountered others who would not engage with more expansive conceptions of gender beyond a cisnormative binary, which caused them to either distance themselves from these people or to have their genders conflated with their sexualities (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017).

Section Summary

LGBTQ+ students report a range of campus climates and experiences both in and out of the classroom. These perceptions can shape students' understandings of both themselves as well as their institution's willingness and ability to support them as full members of the community. In response to chilly climates and hostile environments, institutions have adopted a variety of organizational structures and programmatic interventions, including identity-based centers such as LGBTQ+ resource centers (Sanlo et al., 2002).

LGBTQ+ Resource Centers

Since the first LGBTQ+ center was founded at the University of Michigan in 1971 (Burris, n.d.), centers have served their institutions and students in a variety of ways. Fundamentally, LGBTQ+ centers seek to promote the thriving of LGBTQ+ students (Marine, 2011). In service of this purpose, the work of LGBTQ+ centers falls into four categories:

counseling and support, education, assessment and evaluation, and advocacy (Marine, 2011).

How centers enact this core mission and balance these areas of work varies, responding to

institutional expectations, student needs, and geographic contexts, among a host of other shaping

forces (Ecker et al., 2015; Marine, 2011). Although the majority of LGBTQ+ center literature is

descriptive and practice-based, scholars have increasingly engaged in empirical inquiry with

centers and their staff (Duran et al., 2022). In this section, I discuss the characteristics, histories,

leadership, as well as purposes and practices of LGBTQ+ centers. I conclude with critiques of

LGBTQ+ center practice.

Histories and Contexts

To understand the histories of LGBTQ+ centers, I first situate LGBTQ+ centers as the

descendants of specific forerunners in higher education: cultural and women's centers. With this

historical context, I then present an overview of LGBTQ+ centers' histories.

Cultural centers and women's centers

In response to sociopolitical pressures, including the civil rights movement and student

demands, the first African American or Black cultural centers were established initially at

predominantly white institutions (Patton, 2010a). Black cultural centers rapidly spread to

campuses across the U.S. in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond (Patton, 2010a). Institutions gradually

established cultural centers for Latino/a/x, Native, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities

throughout subsequent decades (Liu et al., 2010). Cultural centers have and continue to serve as

"counterspaces, a home away from home, and a haven in a hostile territory… [emerging from

students'] demands to ensure their experiences were represented and supported in the cultural,

academic, and social contexts of the university" (Patton, 2010b, p. xiv). Cultural centers serve

many functions, often in response to their institutional contexts and students' needs. Common

areas of work for cultural centers include cultural community building, education, engagement, student development, and environment enhancement (Jenkins, 2008).

Similarly, women's centers first appeared on U.S. college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s as previously all-male institutions became co-educational (Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2004). By the early 2000s, more than 400 women's centers existed across the country (Davie, 2002). In response to the misogyny and hostility women students faced on their campuses, women's centers became sites of refuge, community, and activism (Davie, 2002). Much like the heterogenous functions of cultural centers, women's centers adopted various focuses and areas of work, including feminist activism, education, leadership, promotion of diversity (especially around race and sexuality), policy and advocacy, sexual violence prevention and support, and individual counseling (Davie, 2002; Marine et al., 2017).

LGBTQ+ centers

Cultural centers and women's centers offered models for the institutional structures now known as LGBTQ+ centers. As a result of student and community pressure, the University of Michigan created the "Human Sexuality Office" in 1971 (Burris, n.d.). This office was the first office at a U.S. higher education institution to specifically serve gay and lesbian students. Between 1971 and 1990, only six other institutions created offices or centers focused on sexuality (Consortium, 2020a). In the midst of the HIV crisis and in the wake of hate crimes such as the highly publicized brutal murder of Matthew Sheppard in 1998, a wave of centers opened in the 1990s and early 2000s (Sanlo et al., 2002). New centers continue to open today because the services they provide remain vital, yet some centers have closed due to lack of institutional resources and politically motivated challenges (Consortium, 2020a; Jeffries & Boyd, 2021). Although some campuses have been proactive in creating spaces for people with minoritized

genders and/or sexualities, most institutions established LGBTQ+ centers in the wake of harassment incidents or in response to the demands of campus constituents (Sanlo et al., 2002).

The early centers focused almost entirely on sexual orientation to the exclusion of gender. By the late 1990s, centers began to recognize the distinctions and connections between sexuality and gender (Beemyn, 2002). As centers engaged with both sexuality and gender, which had previously been merged under sexual orientation in centers, as well as in dominant public narratives, they increasingly attended to transgender, nonbinary, and gender expansive individuals in the late 1990s (Beemyn, 2002). However, LGBTQ+ centers continue to exhibit vestiges of this history focused on sexual orientation and may struggle to address the needs of transgender and nonbinary people at their institutions and in their communities (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014).

Challenges to securing funding, broad public support, and space on campus have threatened the establishment and maintenance of LGBTQ+ centers (Marine, 2011; Beemyn, 2002). For example, activists at Oregon State University (OSU) successfully acquired a $7,000 budget for their fledgling center in 2001 (Ryan, 2005). By 2004, a new and more permanent office serving OSU's LGBTQ+ students opened with a budget of over $120,000. OSU's efforts faced significant opposition based on the use of public funds to establish such a center, but student activism and administrative efforts to demonstrate the need for a center prevailed (Marine, 2011).

LGBTQ+ centers, along with cultural centers and women's centers, arose from student activism and students' needs in the hostile social and campus contexts. Although the first LGBTQ+ center was founded not long after the first cultural centers and women's centers, LGBTQ+ centers took decades to spread as widely as their predecessors.

Characteristics

More than 250 higher education institutions in the U.S. and Canada have an LGBTQ+ center on their campus (Consortium, 2020a). Centers can be found at institutions across varied institutional types, sizes, governance arrangements, and geographies (Consortium, 2020a). However, they are most likely to be found at public 4-year institutions in the West, Midwest, Great Lakes, and Mountain regions, and especially among those with higher selectivity, greater financial resources, large student body populations, and locations in liberal-leaning states (Fine, 2012).

LGBTQ+ centers are positioned and resourced in a variety of ways within their different institutions. According to the Consortium's (2018) most recent self-study (with a response rate of approximately 27% of members), respondents' reporting lines were primarily through student affairs divisions (52%), the dean of students (28%), or the chief diversity officer (24%). Half of respondents enacted their LGBTQ+ center work from a "separate LGBTQ program" while nearly 30% worked "within a diversity/cultural/multicultural/inclusion based program" (p. 18). Although some LGBTQ+ programs affiliated with the Consortium do not have a dedicated center or office space, those with a physical space typically have lounge areas and private offices. Nearly all respondents' offices seek to serve undergraduate students (99%) and the majority also aim to attend to graduate students (80%). Notably, "for some offices, their mission was primarily to serve students but that they ultimately supported many other groups" (Consortium, 2018, p. 21), including faculty, staff, alumni, community members, local educators, summer guests, and prospective students.

Purposes and Practices

LGBTQ+ resource centers aim to facilitate the thriving and success of LGBTQ+ students. Centers pursue this goal in a variety of ways, including direct student services and institutional policy and climate change efforts. Of the four major areas of LGBTQ+ resource center work, counseling/support and education frequently occur at the individual level while assessment/evaluation and advocacy focus on organizational and institution-wide change (Marine, 2011). Certainly, these categorizations are not absolute. Individuals benefit from organization-level interventions and institutional changes influence individuals' experiences.

Counseling/Support

LGBTQ+ centers' counseling and support functions seek to empower students to explore and affirm their genders and sexualities, along with their other identities (Marine, 2011). Centers enact this work through building community and sharing resources. To foster student-to-student connections, centers might offer a peer mentoring program, identity-focused discussion groups, and social events (for example, Vanderbilt University's LGBTQI Life Affinity Groups; LGBTQI Life, 2020). Connections between students and faculty, staff, or alumni are also important. University of Michigan's Spectrum Center (2022) facilitates these mentoring and professional relationships in multiple ways, including Mentoring and Personal/Professional Support (MaPPS), which facilitates mentoring relationships between students and LGBTQ+ faculty and staff, and Togetherness: QTBIPOC Dinners, free dinners for students hosted by faculty and staff. Centers also form relationships with campus and local mental health providers, such as the counseling and psychiatric services liaison at Michigan State University's Gender and Sexuality Campus Center (n.d.).

Support also occurs through resource access and sharing. Frequently, these resources take the form of information. Center websites collate campus, local, and national resources, making these curated resources easily accessible to anyone with internet access. For example, the University of Minnesota's Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans Life (2022) maintains separate on- and off-campus resources, as well as information about funding opportunities, trans-inclusive data collection practices, and all-gender restroom signage. Additionally, many centers have libraries of gender- and sexuality-focused books and media, providing "materials not available within the institution's main library system and, possibly, a safer place in which to utilize them" (Sanlo et al., 2002, p. 87).

Education

The education component of an LGBTQ+ center's work happens at the individual level, serving both LGBTQ+ students and non-LGBTQ+ people. Some educational programming is directed at LGBTQ+ communities, especially students, such as speakers and film screenings. More frequently, educational offerings' intended audiences are non-LGBTQ+ people. Ally development trainings, also called safe zone programs, are workshops that introduce LGBTQ+ identities and topics, as well as strategies for attendees to serve as allies for LGBTQ+ communities (Sanlo et al., 2002). Commonly, attendees receive a sticker for their workspace to publicly demonstrate their support for LGBTQ+ communities (Poynter & Tubbs, 2017). One educational session does not make someone an ally, but it can begin a process of learning and reflection. Ally development trainings seek to improve campus climate, although they "cannot be the sole response to creating an inclusive campus climate" (Poynter & Tubbs, 2017, p. 13). Centers may also coordinate speakers bureaus or panels, through which LGBTQ+-identified people share their stories and respond to questions. Faculty often request speaker panels for class

sessions when they are relevant to course discussions (Sanlo et al., 2002). The Purdue University LGBTQ Center's (2022) Speakers Bureau program, for example, describes these sessions as having the potential to "break down stereotypes, build safer spaces on and off campus, and promote dialogue around challenging ideas" (para. 1).

Assessment/Evaluation

LGBTQ+ centers engage in assessment and evaluation practices to ascertain the campus LGBTQ+ communities' experiences, needs, and issues. Based on these efforts, centers can design interventions and programs to address concerns (Marine, 2011). While this area of work commonly takes the shape of campus climate assessments, archival and oral history projects such as the one currently underway at Texas Tech University (Office of LGBTQIA Education & Engagement, 2022) also serve the purpose of documenting individuals' experiences and campus contexts as they relate to LGBTQ+ people at the institution.

Advocacy

LGBTQ+ centers' advocacy work includes two overarching goals of adapting institutional environments and policies to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ communities and addressing bias incidents both proactively and reactively (Marine, 2011). In order to change institutional environments and policies, LGBTQ+ centers collaborate with colleagues across campus, including residence life, facilities, athletics, and the registrar. Areas of advocacy work have included bathroom and locker room facilities, gender-inclusive housing, nondiscrimination policies, insurance coverage, and name change policies (e.g., Garvey et al., 2018; Perdue, 2015). For example, thanks to the work of the Sexuality, Women, and Gender Center, Bowdoin College (n.d.) implemented the Lived Name Initiative so individuals could specify a "lived name," rather than legal name, and pronouns to appear on identification cards and across campus systems.

The literature on LGBTQ+ campus resource centers offers insights into the characteristics, histories, structures, leadership, and functions of these organizations. However, students' experiences are conspicuously absent, despite LGBTQ+ centers existing to promote students' success and thriving.

Center Leadership

Much of the literature on LGBTQ+ centers focuses on centers' leaders and staff members. In the late 1990s, the Consortium counted 49 member LGBTQ+ campus centers (Sanlo, 2000). Of those 49 early centers, approximately half had a full-time director and the other half were led by a faculty member, staff member, or graduate student on a part-time basis.

In the first peer-reviewed article about LGBTQ+ centers, Sanlo (2000) surveyed full-time directors of LGBT Campus Resource Centers (LGBT CRCs) to garner the qualifications for LGBT CRC directors in "this new career option in student affairs" (p. 485). From her survey of current full-time directors, Sanlo found new LGBT CRC directors should have deep understandings of both college student development and LGBT issues and people, programming experience, and dedication to advocacy. Nearly two decades later, part-time graduate assistants continue to be the sole professional staff member overseeing LGBT centers at a number of campuses (Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019). These graduate assistants still report a lack of formal education, training, and professional development opportunities. Many felt their institutions and supervisors operated from the assumption "that because of having identities of being sexual minorities … or a straight ally that they were equipped to handle their roles" (Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019, p. 131). This assumption, coupled with little supervision, limited funding, and constrained time, contributed to a feeling of being ineffectively positioned to adequately serve LGBTQ+ students.

As the sole professional staff member for the campus LGBTQ+ center, these graduate assistants grappled with how their privileged and minoritized identities as well as their graduate student status influenced their work in their centers (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020). Students experienced marginalization based on their identities and on their work in their LGBTQ+ center. Given the limitations inherent in their part-time role and institutional positioning as a graduate assistant, "participants noted that the existence of an LGBTQRC with a GA running it seemed like an empty gesture toward LGBTQ+ work on campus" (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020, p. 527). In other words, the institution could claim it supported LGBTQ+ students on campus through the center without giving the center adequate resources to support students and advance institutional change.

Johnson's (2013) reflections on the professional and personal implications of directing an LGBTQ+ center further illuminate the weight of leading an identity-based center. Johnson described himself as "a sexually-fluid, multiracial, Christian man" and the director of an LGBT center" (p. 3). However, because he did "not identify with any of those letters listed in the acronym" (p. 4), Johnson experienced conflict with others, including members of the center staff, about his identities and his fitness to lead the LGBTQ+ center. Furthermore, his visibility as the LGBTQ+ center director and a non-heterosexual person on campus and within the local community meant he did not have anonymity in his personal life, including in religious spaces where he feared rejection based on previous experiences.

As Johnson's (2013) example suggests, LGBTQ+ center leaders continue to navigate their own identity development processes and learning. Learning about one's own identities as well as others' identities was a key component of how different identity-based center directors, including the LGBTQ+ center director, effectively worked together at one institution (Travers,

2009). Especially in the absence of deep literature bases for leading racial-, ethnic-, gender-, and sexuality-focused justice work through campus centers, the directors valued the dialogue, learning, and trusting relationships that promoted collaboration and sustained these directors as they served their communities (Travers, 2009).

LGBTQ+ resource center leaders initially found their main source of professional support through the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (the Consortium). This organization developed from the Campus Project, a component of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (now the National LGBTQ Task Force) in 1987 (Sanlo et al., 2002). The Campus Project, and subsequently the Consortium, created networks of LGBTQ+ resource center directors with the goal of supporting centers and other efforts to improve campus climates for LGBTQ+ students. The Consortium (2020b) has grown as the number of LGBTQ+ resource centers has increased and continues to work toward "higher education environments where LGBTQ people, inclusive of all of our intersecting identities, are fully liberated" (para. 1). They offer networking and professional development opportunities, conferences and meetings, as well as active listservs and forums. Recently, a Consortium working group issued a set of 12 core competencies intended to guide center practitioners and campus leaders as they establish and further develop their LGBTQ+ centers (Bazarsky et al., 2022).

In addition to the Consortium, the two predominant student affairs professional organizations, ACPA and NASPA, offer opportunities for networking, community building, and professional development. Both organizations have subgroups specific to LGBTQ+ identities and issues—ACPA's Coalition for Sexuality and Gender Identities and NASPA's Gender and Sexuality Knowledge Community (ACPA, 2018; NASPA, n.d.). Through these interest groups as well as conference presentations, LGBTQ+ resource center professionals and other

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practitioners who support LGBTQ+ students gather to learn, connect, and work towards liberation (Pryor et al., 2017).

Students' Experiences with Centers

Literature about students' experiences and perspectives on LGBTQ+ centers is limited and remains largely absent from peer-reviewed outlets. In a dissertation study of three LGBTQ+ centers located at Midwestern universities, undergraduate students felt that having a campus LGBTQ+ center improves campus climate (Hartman, 2014). Though participants had varied experiences of their campus' climates, they found their respective LGBTQ+ centers to be a homey space on campus where students could hangout, find community, and learn about their identities. However, Hartman observed a paucity of visitors coming to centers to just hang out, and those visitors who did hang out may have created exclusionary environments. Damschroder (2015) interviewed students along with center staff and university administrators at three institutions to demonstrate the "essential value" (p. 16) of LGBTQ+ centers to the mission of their institutions. Both of these dissertations take a broad approach to exploring the importance of LGBTQ+ centers with attention to students' varied experiences.

Critiques of LGBTQ+ Center Practice

LGBTQ+ centers are important yet imperfect organizations. LGBTQ+ centers engage in identity-focused work, especially but ideally not exclusively about gender and sexuality (Marine, 2011). Transgender, nonbinary, agender, and similar minoritized genders are too often marginalized even in center work, where center naming and programming suggest nominal understandings of and limited support for trans* people (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Similar to other LGBTQ+ community spaces (Vo, 2021), campus LGBTQ+ resource centers are known as often white-centric and hostile to people of color (Ortiz & Mandala, 2021). Both students and

LGBTQ+ center staff of color have experienced this phenomenon, finding their campus

LGBTQ+ center to be exclusionary and unsafe for them because of their racial and ethnic

identities (Johnson & Javier, 2017; McCoy, 2018; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016; Ortiz & Mandala,

2021). As Self (2015) articulated, "identity movements, while politically deliberate and

culturally galvanizing, prioritize the experience of a shared subjectivity and in doing so

marginalize other subject positions" (p. 12). In other words, foregrounding gender and sexuality

in LGBTQ+ spaces may be desirable for organizing and creating community, but it also

encourages the relegation of other minoritized identities to the margins of the margins.

Underlying the real and devastating exclusion of multiply marginalized people in many

centers, coloniality and neoliberalism in higher education (and broader society) influence center

practice (Lange, 2019; Self, 2015; Self & Hudson, 2015). In a critical discourse analysis of

foundational texts about developing and running LGBTQ+ centers, Self (2015) found a lack of

substantive theorizing about interlocking systems of oppression. Instead, the center literature's

reliance on identity and multicultural frameworks advanced homonormative whiteness, which

"naturalized and reproduced the fiction of the white, cisgender, male, gay body" (p. 30). These

theoretical underpinnings manifest in LGBTQ+ center leaders' understandings and enactment of

their work within their institutional contexts (Self & Hudson, 2015). LGBTQ+ center work

requires both resistance to dominant ways of being and knowing while also being "beholden to

universities and administrators interested in maintaining order on campus" (Self & Hudson,

2015, p. 238). Lange (2019) advanced strategies through which gender and sexuality resource

centers might enact more place-conscious frameworks as a means of challenging coloniality and

neoliberalism in center work. Ultimately, critiques of LGBTQ+ centers acknowledge the

complexities and necessities of this structure and their work while simultaneously calling for

centers to be bolder in pursuing intersectional, equity-minded, and just work at the individual and systemic levels.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature about LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ resource centers in higher education. LGBTQ+ students in higher education have been increasingly the subject of scholarly attention. Students' experiences and perceptions of campus climate vary based on their genders, sexualities, other social identities, and student statuses. LGBTQ+ centers developed in response to student needs and within shifting sociopolitical contexts. Scholars have considered center leadership and the multiplicity of roles LGBTQ+ centers can serve. Yet, these spaces are open to productive critique such that they might promote the thriving and liberation of all, not just the most privileged within LGBTQ+ communities.

Notably, scholarship on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students' perspectives on centers is rare. The abundance of campus climate work offers important insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Yet, it largely operates from the assumption that LGBTQ+ centers promote improved campus climate, but rather based on the purpose and activities of centers. How do students experience their LGBTQ+ center? What do students get out of their interactions with the center? The proposed inquiry into students' conceptions of their campus LGBTQ+ resource center seeks to address this gap in the literature.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This project explores how students who feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center conceptualize the center in their ecosystems and how they understand and experience the center. In Chapter 1, I introduced my conceptual framework of a critical campus ecology model, which applies a critical lens to Renn and Arnold's (2003) postsecondary adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993, 1995) ecological model of development. Aligned with this conceptual framework, in this chapter I describe my qualitative study. I begin with a discussion of my research paradigm and qualitative methodology informed by interpretive phenomenology. Then, I detail the research design, trustworthiness strategies, and delimitations of this study.

Research Paradigm

I approach this study from a critical humanist perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). By drawing on the critical paradigm, this project seeks to interrogate sites of power and social structures "to discover what is just and to take action" (Sipe & Constable, 1996, p. 158). The humanist paradigm focuses on individual perspectives and agency, with the underlying epistemological stance that knowledge is constructed by individuals (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). By situating this study in a critical humanist perspective, I foregrounded my participants' experiences and meaning making processes while contextualizing them within and challenging oppressive social structures.

As the researcher, I actively participated in drawing out participants' knowledges and in co-creating knowledge with participants during this study. Further, I have my own constructed and situated knowledge, which also infuses this study. My presence in the study and in this resulting text is a common feature of humanistic inquiry. Indeed, "usually, the researcher is

present in many ways in the text… Humanistic inquiries usually reveal humanistic researchers"
(Plummer, 2008, pp. 483–484). Similarly, both participants and I are subject to and agentic
within power structures. Even as I seek to name and interrogate the power and social structures
shaping and being resisted by my participants, I acknowledge my limitations and ongoing
(un)learning about oppressive structures and justice.

Methodology

I adopted a qualitative methodological approach, influenced by the interpretive
phenomenological research tradition. Qualitative research is a broad, interpretive, and
naturalistic approach to studying phenomena in the real world (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).
Through qualitative methodologies, researchers seek to respond to questions about people, their
contexts, and social structures—topics that cannot be quantified (Berg, 2008). Phenomenological
research "[seeks] to understand the lived experiences of a small number of people" (Rossman &
Rallis, 2017, p. 81). Interpretive phenomenological methodologies are particularly focused on
the individual, their experiences, and the meanings individuals make of these experiences (Gill,
2014). In the interpretive phenomenological tradition, the researcher is present in the research
process and resulting text as they engage in interpretation of individuals' experiences. A
qualitative approach aligned with this study's focus on students' experiences and understandings
of their campus LGBTQ+ center. I drew on insights and approaches from interpretive
phenomenology to further sensitize myself to individuals' experiences and their meaning making
of those experiences.

Research Design

My primary data source was semi-structured interviews with 15 students who felt in
some way connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center at a university in the Midwest.

Additionally, I completed observations in and collected documents from the LGBTQ+ resource center as complementary data sources. In this section, I describe the site, sample, data sources, data analysis, trustworthiness strategies, and study delimitations.

Site

To identify my host center, I considered centers at 4-year public institutions in the Midwest with at least one full-time professional staff member. LGBTQ+ campus centers are most likely to be found at 4-year public institutions in certain regions of the U.S., including the Midwest (Fine, 2012). Given the challenges experienced by part-time graduate assistants serving as the sole staff member in their campus's LGBTQ+ center (Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019), I wanted to work with a center with more robust staffing and capacity for a broad range of functions. Additionally, I intentionally looked for a center with a clear investment in social justice, especially racial and economic justice. Evidence of these orientations to social justice work included offering programming specifically for queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) students, centering QTPOC voices when inviting speakers, and provide access to free safer sex supplies and menstrual products. A center with these characteristics was likely to provide a variety of opportunities for students to engage with it, including consistent open hours in the physical space, a variety of social supports, educational and advocacy opportunities, student employment, and resources for LGBTQ+ student organizations.

I partnered with the Pride Resource Center[8] ("Pride" or "the Center"), an LGBTQ+ resource center at a public university ("the University") in the Midwest to conduct this study. Pride has a small but strong professional and student staff, including staff members who identify as trans and as people of color. It has a small office in a reasonably central building on campus.

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[8] All names of participants, offices, and organizations are pseudonyms.

However, the Center's physical space was closed for the duration of this study's data collection (October 2020 through March 2021) due to the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The University held nearly all courses online and residence halls were only open to students demonstrating housing need. Pride pivoted to virtual programming in Spring 2020, so students were generally accustomed to new and evolving ways of engaging with the Center when they spoke with me.

I met with Pride staff members when they were considering my request to conduct this study about their center and with their students. We continued to communicate as needed throughout data collection and analysis. I shared back insights and summaries of what I learned out of gratitude and with the desire to continue to support their good work.

Sample

My sample consisted of 15 current University students who felt in some way connected to the Pride Resource Center. I recruited students through Pride's email newsletter and through directed outreach from Pride staff members to potential participants. Throughout, I utilized theoretical sampling, a purposive sampling strategy where the researcher selects participants during data collection and analysis to identify heterogenous participants and experiences (Robinson, 2014). In addition to the open call in the Pride newsletter, I worked with Center staff to recruit students with differing interactions with the Center as well as a variety of social identities.

I set two criteria for inclusion in this study. First, participants had to be either undergraduate or graduate students in at least their second year of study at the University. Second, students had to feel in some way connected to the Pride Resource Center. Student connections to the center could develop in various ways, including through accessing the center's

website or social media accounts, attending events hosted by or in the center, or being employed as an undergraduate staff member. During the recruitment process, I asked potential participants to complete an intake form that explained these two criteria. If students agreed they fit these participation criteria and submitted the intake form, then I considered them connected to Pride. Although I anticipated these students might identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, I did not restrict participation based on a student's gender or sexuality.

Ultimately, this recruitment and sampling approach yielded 15 participants (Table 1). This sample size was "sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted," yet large enough to "[provide] scope for developing cross-case generalities" (Robinson, 2014, p. 29). By student status, 13 participants were undergraduate students[9] (4 in their second year, 5 in their third year, 2 in their fourth year, and 2 in their fifth year) and 2 were graduate students. Students described their gender, sexual orientation, racial, and ethnic identities in a variety of ways. I preserved their language in Table 1. Broadly, five participants identified their genders as transgender, six as nonbinary, two as women, one as agender, one as gender non-conforming, one as queer, and one as possibly genderfluid. Regarding sexual orientation, six participants identified as queer, four as lesbian, four as bisexual, three as asexual or ace spectrum, one as gay, and one as straight. By race and ethnicity, ten participants identified as white; four as mixed, biracial, or multiple identities; three as Black or Afro-American; three as Hispanic, Puerto Rican, or Mexican; and two as Asian or Japanese. (Totals for identity categories exceed 15 because participants could belong to more than one group within each category.) All 15 participants were invited to complete a two-interview sequence, and 14 students completed both interviews. For each

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[9] First-year undergraduate students were excluded from this study as they would have been University students for a very short period and without the possibility of having interacted with Pride in person.

interview, students were given a gift card ($20 for the first interview, $30 for the second) as a token of appreciation.

Table 1

Study Participant Demographics

Participant	Pronouns	Student Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race & Ethnicity
Alice	she/her	2nd year undergrad	transgender female	lesbian, queer	white
C	she/they	3rd year undergrad	non-binary	queer	Black
Ceejay	they/them	3rd year undergrad	queer (nonbinary)	queer (bisexual, ASpec)	Afro-American
Cobalt	they/them	2nd year undergrad	non-binary lesbian	lesbian	white
Ellis	she/they	5th year undergrad	nonbinary	bisexual	white
Finley	she/her	graduate student	gender non-conforming female	asexual	white
Grace	she/her/hers	graduate student	cis woman	queer	white
Hugo	thon/thon/thons	5th year undergrad	agender	asexual	white
Jake	he/him/his	4th year undergrad	transgender man	straight	white
Mouse	they/she (no preference)	3rd year undergrad	nonbinary	queer/lesbian	white
Nathan	he/him	2nd year undergrad	trans	bi	white
Nicole	she/her	3rd year undergrad	woman	lesbian	Hispanic & Asian
Robert	he/him/his they/them/their	4th year undergrad	non-binary male	gay	mixed (Black, Puerto Rican, & Mexican)
Zach	he/him/his	2nd year undergrad	transgender male	bisexual	biracial (white/Japanese)
Zion	he/him	3rd year undergrad	transgender male/ possibly genderfluid	queer	mixed, Hispanic

Note. Students selected their own pseudonyms. I preserved the language students used to describe their identities.

Data Collection

I gathered data through in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. As the primary data source, interviews provided the opportunity to "elicit the participant's worldview" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 155), which was central to addressing students' connections to, understandings of, and experiences of their campus LGBTQ+ center. The addition of observations and documents corroborated and complicated participants' experiences as well as served a source of information for describing the LGBTQ+ center, especially in its virtual form.

In-depth Interviews

I invited each of the 15 participants to participate in the two-interview sequence. Fourteen students ultimately completed both interviews, resulting in 29 interviews total. Interviews were held virtually and recorded through Zoom video conferencing software. Interviews lasted between 29 minutes and 88 minutes, averaging 51 minutes. After each interview, I transcribed the conversations with the assistance of Otter.ai, a speech-to-text transcription software. For each transcript, I wrote brief memos introducing the participant, summarizing key points of our conversation, and posing any lingering or emerging questions. As part of my member checking procedures, I sent students their transcripts with my short memos after each interview and invited their feedback. Multiple students responded with adjustments, clarifications, and further thoughts for this study.

I conducted interviews using a semi-structured approach, which gave both organization to the inquiry and flexibility for further probing questions and unexpected conversation directions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Drawing on the progression of in-depth phenomenological interviews, I structured the interview protocols (Appendix A) to attend progressively to

participants' relevant life history, experiences with their LGBTQ+ center, and their meaning making about their experiences (Appendix B; Seidman, 2013). To allow adequate time for these topics and for continued reflection on my and participants' parts, full participation consisted of two interviews per participant.

In addition to interview questions, I invited participants to reflect on their ecosystems using a blank version of the critical campus ecology model, excluding oppressive systems (see Appendix A), during their first interview. Between each participant's first and second interview, I entered their responses into the model graphic. I showed each participant their personalized model at the beginning of their second interview. I then asked participants how they saw systems of power and oppression shaping their lives. Using the model graphic in both interviews created opportunities for students to share and reflect on the forces shaping their worlds, including the oppressive systems called for in the CCEM. Further, reviewing the personalized model in the second interview allowed for in-process member checking.

Observations

Observations were a valuable complement to in-depth interviews for this study. They provided additional data about the LGBTQ+ campus center's context, setting, and activities. Observations challenged me "to move beyond the selective perceptions of both [the researcher] and the participants" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 170). Yet, my plans for observations required major revisions due to the virtual nature of Pride's services. With COVID-19 pandemic precautions in place, the in-person Center was closed so I could not meet up with participants when they were going to grab lunch, hang out, or attend a meeting in Pride's common room. Instead, I worked with Pride staff to identify appropriate virtual hangout spaces where I could be a participant-observer. Ultimately, I attended four sessions of an hour-long weekly drop-in

hangout hosted on Zoom. In these spaces, I interacted with the students who chose to attend those particular sessions and did not overlap with any of my participants. I maintained a fieldwork journal with observation notes, focusing on who attended, what they talked about, and how the staff facilitator created space for attendees. I did not record these sessions.

Document Analysis

In the virtual landscape, gathering and analyzing documents became important for my understanding of how the Center presented itself and with which materials students might be interacting. Students repeatedly praised Pride's newsletter as a source of information and sense of community. Accordingly, I collected 18 weekly newsletters, which spanned the weeks when I was actively interviewing student participants. Newsletters varied in length, but often included an update from staff members, Pride event and program advertisements, additional University events, and opportunities for students (e.g., jobs, internships, and research studies). Although I chose these documents for how they are used by students, I analyzed them based on their content (Prior, 2019). These documents were particularly valuable for triangulating and contextualizing interview data.

Data Analysis

My data analysis was inductive, "[searching] for salient categories within the data themselves" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 240). An inductive approach aligned with my qualitative methodology informed by interpretive phenomenology because it allowed for the individuals, their experiences, and their meaning making to guide the analysis and findings (Gill, 2014). As this study takes a novel approach to studying LGBTQ+ students and their experiences with their campus LGBTQ+ center, I wanted to remain open to what new, unexpected, and multiple insights from the data rather than approaching analysis from a more foreclosed stance.

I began my data analysis by immersing myself in the data sources—interviews, observations, and documents—and coding these materials. Coding is an analytical process that "[allows] the researcher to communicate and connect with the data to facilitate the comprehension of the emerging phenomena and to generate theory grounded in the data" (Basit, 2003, p. 152). I completed my coding in Dedoose, a software program designed to facilitate qualitative research. I utilized in vivo coding for the interviews and open coding for observation notes and document analysis. In vivo coding seeks to preserve participants' language in the codes themselves and is well-suited to inductive inquiry (Saldaña, 2011). Open coding is the process of breaking raw data into smaller chunks and coding these chunks into concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Where in vivo codes use participants' own words whenever possible, open codes could be more descriptive. In combination, these coding processes facilitated my identification of patterns and themes.

Once I coded my data, I reflected on early patterns in the data and how they related to my research questions. I reviewed my codes and notes I made during coding, outlined categories, and began constructing themes. Informed by the critical campus ecology model as a framework and guided by my research questions, I continued to move in and out of working with raw data, codes, and categories as I refined and nuanced my themes.

Positionality

My positionality as a member of LGBTQ+ communities, a beneficiary of LGBTQ+ centers, and a former LGBTQ+ center practitioner directly influenced this study. I am a white, cisgender, queer woman. I came out as queer in college and greatly benefited from the patient, steady guidance of my college's LGBTQ+ resource center directors and the connections I made in the center's community. My identities, commitment to social justice, and professional interests

led me to work in a different LGBTQ+ center during and after my master's program. I have also

worked at an institution without an LGBTQ+ center and observed the challenges LGBTQ+

students had in finding space and support, even at a liberal and LGBTQ+-friendly campus and

surrounding region. These experiences informed the research questions I posed, the

methodological choices I made, the ways I interacted with participants, and ultimately the

analyses I put forth in this dissertation. I could access LGBTQ+ spaces as an insider. I shared my

own identities and experiences with participants when appropriate as a means of building

relationships, bringing my full self to these interactions, and subverting common researcher-

participant hierarchies.

I conducted this study of students and LGBTQ+ resource centers with the explicit belief

in the power of LGBTQ+ resource centers to serve students and institutions. Yet, I do not

unreservedly endorse LGBTQ+ resource centers. As with any organization pursuing justice and

liberation, centers and their advocates must engage in honest, critical, and sometimes difficult

reflection about the opportunities and challenges in their work. I undertook this study with great

respect, admiration, and hope for LGBTQ+ resource centers and the people they serve. Further, I

hoped that this study could in some way support their work by shining a light on the successes

and challenges of LGBTQ+ center practice informed by students' experiences and

understandings of centers.

Trustworthiness

A trustworthy study is "one that is credible and useable ... The process is deliberate,

intentional, transparent, mindful, and ethically conducted" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 51). To

increase the trustworthiness of this study, I utilized several strategies to enhance the rigor and

credibility of this project: member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, and researcher reflexivity.

Member Checking

Member checking is the process of sharing the data and interpretations with participants so they may review the documents and provide feedback to the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I offered participants the chance to read, edit and comment on their interview transcripts (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Member checking served multiple purposes. First, it ensured that participants had agency over what they shared and the opportunity to clarify, amend, and remove text. Further, participants could respond to my interpretations of what they shared to verify I had understood them and was accurately capturing their intended message. Finally, it served to reduce the power imbalance between me as researcher and participants. Member checking situated them as knowers and co-constructors of knowledge in this study.

Peer Debriefing

I worked with a peer reviewer who reviewed my data and analyses (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This reviewer was familiar with LGBTQ+ campus resource center practice and scholarship but was not directly involved with this project. They examined my data sources, coding decisions, and analysis. They offered written feedback about where they disagreed with my coding decisions and where they saw opportunities for additional or alternative analyses. Further, we met via Zoom to discuss their feedback. The peer debriefing process required me to be open to other insights from and interpretations of my data. My analysis is stronger thanks to this process and their labor.

Triangulation

Triangulation requires the researcher to utilize multiple sources or types of data to build their themes and analyses (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). As detailed in my data collection process, I used a variety of data sources and serial collection of data (i.e., interviews of multiple participants, two possible interviews with each participant, observation data, and documents). By systematically considering these data sources together, I could identify common experiences and perspectives as well as moments of divergence. My findings are more credible having been drawn from multiple student interviews and supported by observations and Center documents.

Researcher Reflexivity

My final trustworthiness strategy was researcher reflexivity, through which "researchers report on personal beliefs, values, and biases that may shape their inquiry" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). I began this process by drafting an initial positionality statement. From research design processes to writing this manuscript, I have continued to reflect on the identities, beliefs, assumptions, and biases that shape my inquiry. For example, I was careful to not rely on my own experiences as a student and a professional in LGBTQ+ centers to make sense of my participants' experiences. Rather, I asked follow-up questions during interviews to elicit participants' understandings and meaning making processes.

Delimitations

In alignment with my critical humanist paradigm and qualitative methodological approach, this study considered one LGBTQ+ center on a single campus through the experiences of a small number of participants and the researcher (me). My design choices and circumstances, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessarily bound this study's findings and analyses to a particular place during a specific period with certain individuals. While this study will not be

generalizable, generalizability was never the goal (Schofield, 2002). Instead, I hope this study resonates with students, practitioners, administrators, scholars, and policy makers well beyond my participants' specific contexts. To that end, I aimed to provide adequate context and thick description of the findings such that readers can assess this study's applicability to their environment (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced my critical humanist paradigm and qualitative methodological approach, informed by phenomenology. This study occurred in partnership with the Pride Resource Center, an LGBTQ+ center at a midwestern university. I conducted 29 interviews, observed 4 online Center-run hangouts, and collected 18 documents. I then engaged in inductive analysis of these data sources. To promote trustworthiness, I used member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, and researcher reflexivity strategies. In Chapters 4 and 5, I share the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' ECOSYSTEMS

This study seeks to understand LGBTQ+ resource centers from students' perspectives. Using a critical ecology framework orients this study and me as the researcher to students' contexts—the forces shaping students' lives and how these forces contextualize students' conceptualizations, experiences, and understandings of their campus LGBTQ+ center. In this chapter, I situate students' experiences in their ecosystem to describe and analyze the environments and forces shaping students' experiences at the University. Using the critical campus ecology model, I begin with the most proximal forces in students' ecosystems, moving further out through their meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. I then detail the prevailing oppressive systems that students identified as most influencing their lives, especially at the University. This discussion frames how the Pride Resource Center fits into participants' ecosystems.

Exploring Participants' Ecosystems

In Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993, 1995) process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, the individual exists within their own context of nested environments. The model categorizes these environments from nearest to furthest from the individual. The critical campus ecology model guiding this study adds an additional component to the PPCT; it includes specific attention to how power and oppression systems influence each layer of context and the individual in the center. In this section, I aggregate participants' stories within the model's contextual layers, from their microsystems to their macrosystems, to illustrate the complex and interconnected environments in which students live and learn. I represent these ecosystems in Figure 3. Additionally, I draw out how students experienced oppressive systems shaping their worlds.

Figure 3

Participants' Aggregated Critical Campus Ecosystem
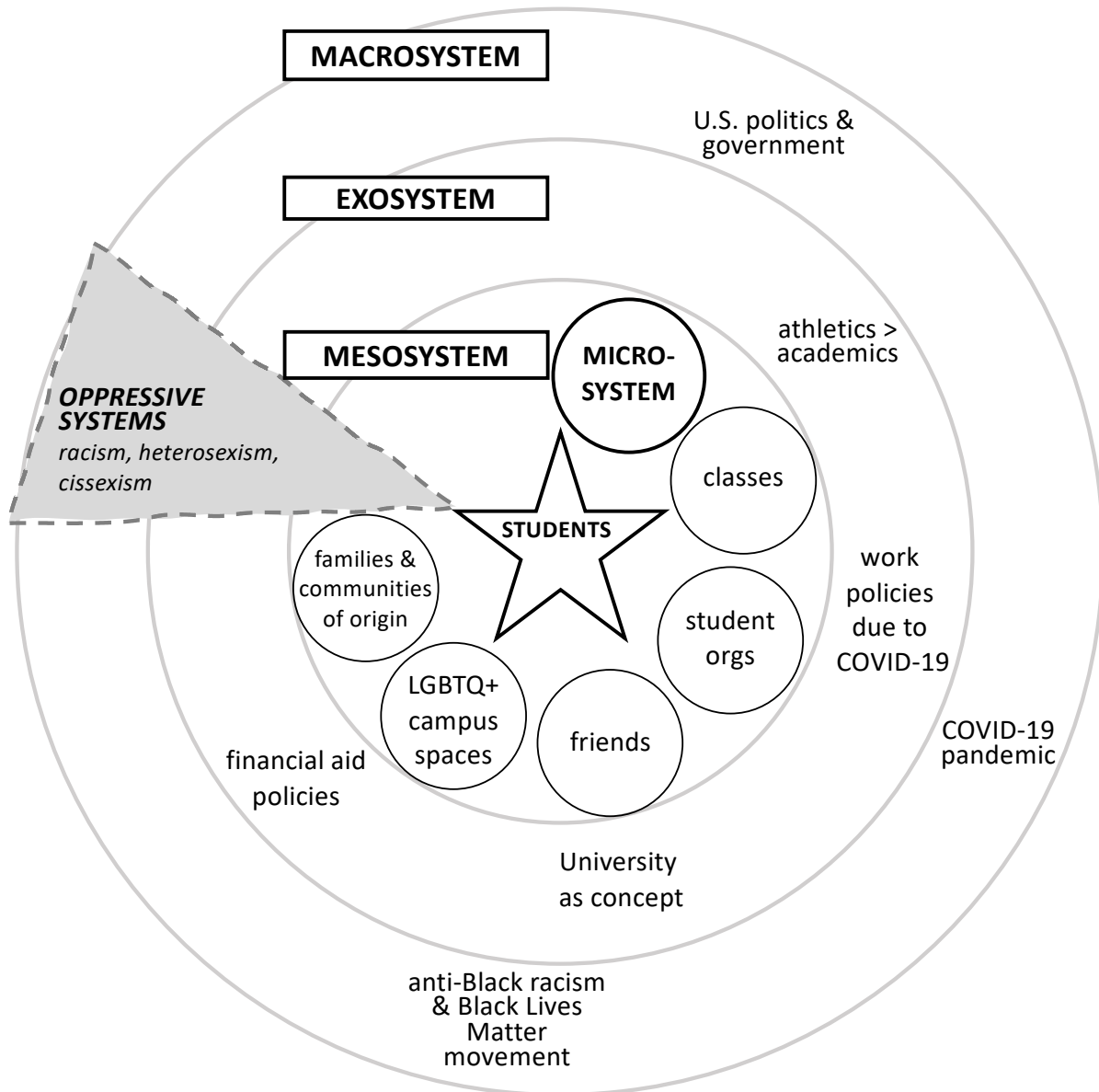
Microsystems

Students' microsystems are those environments and interactions that students have on a regular basis (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). These microsystems "invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interactions with, and activity in, the immediate

environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 15). Oppressive systems manifest in students'

microsystems in myriad ways, including through interpersonal interactions, spaces rendered

(in)accessible, and students' needs for supports. In general, college students' microsystems often

include classes, friends, work, student organizations, and families (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Participants in this study reported these microsystems, with each student sharing their own

combinations and different emphases on which of their microsystems were most present or

important to them.

For the purposes of this study, I highlight three generalized microsystems from students'

individual microsystems to illustrate the rich and complex contexts in which participants learn,

live, and develop. First, I describe the microsystems associated with common elements of a U.S.

university education, including classes, student organizations, work, and living arrangements.

Next, I discuss LGBTQ+ campus spaces as a salient microsystem for participants. Finally, I

detail the role of students' families and communities of origin in their microsystems.

Common Elements of a U.S. University Education

When asked to describe their day-to-day lives, students placed many expected elements

of a U.S. university education in their microsystems. Classes, student organizations, friends,

work, and living arrangements were common themes across students' year at the University as

well as undergraduate and graduate levels. Students understood some of their experiences in

these microsystems as identity-neutral while other microsystems were clearly influenced by their

identities. In this section, I focus on classes, student organizations, and friends as they are the

most relevant to the present study.

Classes. Nearly all students included a reference to classes, school, or academic

experiences when describing their day-to-day contexts. As data collection occurred during the

COVID-19 pandemic when the University had moved most courses and University functions to virtual formats, multiple students discussed the peculiar way they were engaging with their courses from their residence halls and apartments. Nicole found attending "Zoom University" to "[take] so much more time, effort, and energy for me compared to regular in-person schooling, leaving me drained and without energy or interest to do the things I love."

Through classes, students engaged with new ideas and resources. Several students discussed how their classes about gender and sexuality have influenced them. Mouse shared, "I found quite a few good books on just like gender and stuff, which I've mostly found through my classes in [the women and gender studies department]." Similarly, Nicole is "taking LGBTQ studies… from that class, I've learned so much about the community and the history of our community and so many things that I never knew before when I was not a part of this community."

Courses did not always yield positive learning environments. In one of Robert's courses, he noticed white students willingly reading and discussing "a play that concerned incest and bestiality." Yet, when assigned a short play about Mexican assimilation in the U.S. and a play about a Black businesswoman's experiences, Robert found:

> my peers made a decision not to read either of those… And from neither of the plays, he didn't, my professor didn't ask any philosophical questions or anything like that. He asked things that were straight from the text, that you go and do the find search bar function and find it in the text… And I was the one answering all the questions. I found myself in a position where I just, I'm like, 'okay, this is [the] second play, I'm not doing this all semester.' And I called the class out about it. I called out the department about it. Because I'm like, why is it when it comes to race that we shy out of this conversation?

Robert expressed frustration and disillusionment with his classmates' and professor's lack of engagement with racialized course content. As a Black, Latino, and gay person, Robert could not ignore the power dynamics at play in this classroom and department.

Trans students also experienced oppression in classroom settings. Alice, a trans woman, shared a particularly striking example of being misgendered:

> my first-year English professor, almost definitely a straight guy. He just has big time straight guy energy… He never once thought to ask the fucking student who came in dressed like a woman, wearing lipstick and eyeshadow every day. Never thought to ask that student her pronouns. So I was he/him for that entire semester. I don't know what he thought. Was he just like, 'oh, one of my students is a drag queen?'

A year later, Alice reported this experience with equal parts bafflement and humor. Yet, I can only imagine what it took for Alice to sit through this course knowing she would be constantly publicly misgendered and rendered other. Stories such as Alice's get passed among trans students on campus. Hugo acknowledged that thon,

> [had] been very lucky and not getting shitty teachers, because a lot of the other students in [the trans student organization] that I know of have gotten teachers who were shitty, or there been a student in the class who said something shitty, and then the teacher didn't really do anything about it. And they [trans students] actually do keep a document of people's experiences with certain teachers in regards to gender stuff, and like, 'Oh, this person, like will like misgender students,' or 'this person was like very good about pronouns and understanding.'

Although not all trans students experience transphobia directly in their classrooms, they are keenly aware of its specter in their academic spaces and use collective knowledge to choose more trans-affirming academic spaces.

Student organizations and activities. Many students in this study were actively involved in student organizations, from attending events to serving on executive boards. These student organizations focused on a broad range of topics and identities, including LGBTQ+ identities, racial and ethnic communities, religion, mental health, as well as academic and pre-professional interests. For example, Nicole co-founded a group dedicated to advancing student mental health. Hugo has participated in multiple LGBTQ+ student organizations, including as a leader of the asexual group and a member of the trans group. In a more unusual example, Mouse "[tried] out a couple different clubs. Like I tried the [paranormal activity group] … I went on one investigation with them that ended up just being like 60 college students in a cemetery, which is not ideal ghost searching circumstances."

Additionally, multiple participants discussed their involvement in Greek organizations. C is the president of their initiate class for an academic honors fraternity. They "spend a large amount of time talking to the brothers of that organization as a part of my initiate process… they take their process very seriously." Jake joined a fraternity in his sophomore year,

> That was before I was on testosterone… But it's a co-ed fraternity… I felt as though no all-male fraternity would let me in, so I actually rushed the fraternity as my birth name even though I was out to everyone else. And then once I got in, and I knew that I was like, secure in my position, I came out and there were no issues. Everybody was really

respectful… And I actually just got a Little[10] last week, which is very exciting for me because I wanted one so bad.

After being "not well received" by Black and Latino fraternities, Robert is now the president for "the gay fraternity," which "was founded by gay men, for all men." Joining his fraternity was particularly important to him at the time because he had gone through a devastating friend break-up and "I didn't have friends after that, until I joined my fraternity." For C, Jake, and Robert, participating in their respective fraternities has been incredibly important, offering them community and leadership opportunities.

Friends. Participants found friends in a wide variety of spaces—from random housing assignments to student organizations. They also maintained friendships from before attending the University. Certainly, participants' friends were not all queer and trans people, but those friendships were particularly salient for them.

Students expressed delight, relief, and appreciation for finding fellow queer and trans students on campus. Alice shared,

> It's been my favorite aspect of being at [this university]. And probably the most influential, the most impactful for me was being able to find the queer community, find friends who actually understand me when I talk, find people who want to be around me and who don't think I'm weird.

Cobalt met their girlfriend through a socially focused LGBTQ+ student organization, and their girlfriend got them involved in the trans student organization. C would go to Pride to "hang out and do homework and just read and just chat with the regulars like an old person." LGBTQ+

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[10] In Greek Life, a "Little" refers to a new member who is paired with a more senior member or "Big." Through these Little/Big Sibling relationships, Bigs help orient and mentor Littles as they adjust to their Greek letter organization's culture and practices.

student organizations and Pride helped students to build community, from casual chats to deep friendships to romantic relationships.

Several students did find queer community outside of these formal LGBTQ+ spaces. For example, after transferring to the university from the local community college, Ellis

> built up a friend group around me that happens to be very queer. I have a queer roommate, I have a bunch of queer best friends that part of it is like, we lived in the dorms together. [There was a] very loud queer population that lives in these dorms that I happen to become friends with.

Mouse "moved here [to the University] with two of my very close friends [from high school] who I live with right now." These high school friends turned out to also be queer, so Mouse has had a consistent group of queer friends throughout college.

Some students shared their struggles to establish and maintain friendships. Zach expressed a deep desire to find lifelong friendships in college. In light of the pandemic, however, he has struggled to maintain friendships:

> the friends that I made last year [in my first year], we stopped communicating. Like, we were communicating over the summer, and then school started and then it kind of stopped from there. And you know, it goes both ways. Like I didn't try to reach out which I should have but, um. Yeah, it just didn't go—but it didn't go that way. But I did make one friend from a running club… actually, we zoomed and had a chat over how the pandemic has influenced our running. So that was kind of nice to talk to him… I did attend some clubs via zoom. But to me, it just wasn't the same.

Although Jake has found good friends in college, "one of the areas of my life where I'm not super fulfilled is like, I don't really have any friendships with other trans people… I feel like I have issues that I deal with that my cis friends don't."

Participants' microsystems reflect common elements of U.S. university educations. Students navigated classes, student organizations and activities, and friends, as well as work and housing arrangements. Although each of their ecosystems and specific microsystems was unique, their individual experiences taken together suggest the potency of how identity can shape students' experiences of their daily surroundings. Many students, regardless of identity, have encountered new ideas through their classes, gotten involved in student life, and searched for community in college. However, participants' identities, especially gender, sexuality, and race, clearly influenced their experiences in these common microsystems.

LGBTQ+ Campus Spaces

Students cited multiple ways LGBTQ+ campus spaces appeared in their microsystems. Students have built LGBTQ+ connections and community through registered LGBTQ+ student organizations, the Pride Resource Center, and Center-run student groups. Students' friend groups, especially those that were predominantly queer and trans, frequently developed through relationships built in these more formal LGBTQ+ spaces.

The University boasts a number of different registered LGBTQ+ student organizations, ranging from socially focused to identity-based organizations. Many participants in this study were past or present members, if not executive board (e-board) members, of one or more LGBTQ+ student organizations. Ellis's friend brought them to an LGBTQ+ organization's meeting soon after they transferred to the University and they

managed to get myself on e-board. And it was interesting. It was definitely really cool to

like, be thrown so, I guess violently, into like the ongoings of like a set-up social group…

the board meetings were interesting because I got to meet all these people that had been

much more invested and involved in you know, queer life on campus… I was only on

the board for the one semester, but it was, it was good.

Zion, a co-founder of multiple LGBTQ+-related organizations, reflected on his leadership

trajectory,

I tend to choose leadership positions based on my identity affiliations and that space… I

was involved with [the LGBTQ+ social group] and right off the bat, it was very

successful. But I saw that [the trans organization] was struggling, despite being

established for quite a while. And so, I stepped down from my position within [the social

group's] leadership and moved on to [the trans group's] e-board, just to like, preserve that

resource for people like me. Because social clubs are great and all, but when you don't

need like… [pause] they just didn't need as much help as other organizations did.

For Ellis, Zion, and many others, participating in LGBTQ+ student organizations helped students

to find queer and trans spaces on campus and to give back to their communities.

Many students also engaged with Pride Resource Center on a regular basis. Sometimes,

those interactions occurred primarily through online outlets, such as weekly email newsletters or

the Discord[11] channels that students created as the University pivoted to virtual modalities in the

face of COVID-19. For example, Zach shared "as soon as I get the notification in the mail, I

pretty much read it [the newsletter] from top to bottom, even though they can get quite lengthy."

Students may have felt this way before the pandemic, but the newsletter's role became especially

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[11] Discord (https://discord.com/) is an app-based social media platform through which "servers" or groups form by invitation.

important once the physical office closed. Nicole had not previously subscribed to the newsletter, but that changed during the pandemic "because I wasn't able to go there anymore and figure out what's going on." The newsletter offered center announcements, encouragement from staff, and a host of opportunities (e.g., events, resources, supports, research studies, job postings).

In addition to the newsletter, the Center also utilized Discord to stay in touch with students and to share information about Pride happenings. Although the Discord servers were largely student-run, Pride staff co-moderated several and students welcomed staff members' presence. Robert confided, "you also get information in the newsletter, but I like to think that we get information first because we're in the Discord." Even if students, including Zach and Nicole, had not recently attended virtual events, or otherwise interacted with Pride since the pandemic started, the newsletter and Discord servers functioned as a consistent and welcome tie to the Center.

Other students would hang out in Pride's physical or virtual spaces, attend Pride-run groups (such as a group for queer and trans students of color), or connect one-on-one with staff members. Ceejay participated in a program for first-year students, "which helped me find a lot of folks, especially the queer folks I know on campus." Zion did not know "where or how else I would find a community of people like me" except in the Center.

Pride's physical space was important to many students. As interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when campus was largely shut down, they reminisced about dropping in for meetings, events, and a snack or beverage (available in Pride's "café") between classes. Yet, as Robert's reflections encapsulate, many connection points to the Center come from the staff:

I would say because I miss the space, I feel connected … if it's a matter of do I feel

connected to the space? If it's outside of that context [everything being virtual because of

COVID-19], then I would say probably not. I feel connected to the staff.

When asked to describe elements of his life using the critical campus ecology model, Zion made

a distinction between the close proximity of his interactions with a particular Pride staff member

and the slightly more distant relationship he maintained with the Center (as a physical and

conceptual space) overall.

As an important contextual note, students were not always clear on the difference

between the Center, Center-run groups, and student organizations, as well as who is hosting a

particular event. For example, Grace shared:

And I think [Pride] probably, I don't know, feels like a little bit separate from even other

groups or clubs, because clubs don't really have a whole center. And so, I would -- Yeah,

I would say making that distinction, because I feel like there are multiple group clubs that

are kind of based in the Center, maybe. And I don't really know where those lines are…

Ceejay met a Pride staff member at "[Pride's new student group] meetings. Then I saw [staff

member] again at [Pride's group for students of color] … I definitely like connected with [staff

member] through a lot of different student orgs and such." Here, Ceejay refers to Center-run

student groups as student organizations, but they are not registered student organizations. Zach

explained his understandings of these distinctions as, "[the social LGBTQ+ club and the trans

student organization] were more geared towards… it's like, a club from students for other

students, while Pride is like adults that have more experience or knowledge in helping people."

Certainly, these distinctions can hold meaning for students, Pride, and my analysis. For

example, students who have had a negative experience in a student organization may not trust

Pride (or vice versa). On the flip side, Zach "was really glad to find all of the different types of clubs that I could be a part of," including Pride. As I approached my analysis, I was careful to report and interpret students' stories and reflections as they were shared with me. Ultimately, whether Pride, student organizations, or a collaborative of the Center and student organizations hosted a particular event (for example) is less important than students' understanding and meaning making of that experience. Further, the blurring of these distinctions suggests students experience LGBTQ+ campus spaces as interconnected and multifaceted.

Nearly all participants (14 of the 15) included LGBTQ+ campus spaces in at least one of its many forms in their microsystem. Students talked about the role of Pride in their everyday lives, from the role of specific staff members to the weekly newsletter to Discord channels. They also shared about their involvement in LGBTQ+ student organizations as members and as leaders. Woven through these reflections, finding LGBTQ+ community and friends was an important and intentional pursuit for each student in their daily lives.

Families and Communities of Origin

Students' families and communities of origin also played significant roles in students' microsystems. While some families and communities have been largely supportive of participants' gender and sexuality disclosures, others have been less than supportive. Another group of students has chosen to not share about their identities with their families or to mask certain ways of being in their communities of origin for other reasons.

For some participants, families have been a source of affirmation and support as students have come into their sexualities and gender identities. Zach's parents have been supportive since he was outed by his doctor's office: "that's why my parents started taking [my trans identity] seriously. And that's how I got the help that I needed to get to where I am." Nicole expressed

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gratitude for her family's response, "I'm so, so thankful that my family is very supportive and like, accepts me," especially because "some people don't have that experience." Unfortunately, Nicole was right; many participants did not have similar positive experiences.

Several students have especially challenging relationships with their families. Jake considers himself close with his parents, but less so now because

> they don't refer to me as my—now it's my legal name, I changed it—or the pronouns that I go by… before that, we would just talk about more things. And now I can't talk to them about that thing… They're not stopping me from being trans…They just don't like it.

Another participant, whose relationship with their mom "wasn't the strongest to begin with," became financially independent after they were "outed to my mom by CVS… they called her instead of me when my [hormone] prescription was ready." Nathan's parents have not been accepting. His mom urged him, "don't change your name. Nobody's gonna call you the right pronouns because who would?" His dad tried to convince Nathan that his prescription for gender-affirming hormones would raise insurance rates for everyone at his company. Nathan's extended family has been trans-friendly, however, so "there's social pressure" for his parents to use his name and otherwise "we just don't talk about it… And I just don't tell them anything about me basically." Alice's family

> just kind of don't love that I'm trans… I remember when I told them my new name, my stepmom said, 'don't use that one—you sound like a stripper.' So, I use it even harder now to spite her… they don't appreciate that my partner is nonbinary… my stepmom, she kind of sucks, but she was making fun of my partner's pronouns. And that that wasn't very cool… I think they don't totally understand it as a lesbian relationship, because they still kind of see me as a heterosexual guy.

Families' dismissal and outright rejection of students' identities caused great hurt, distance, and fractured relationships.

Another subset of participants is not explicitly "out" in all aspects of their lives for a variety of reasons, especially related to their families and communities of origin. Grace's religious upbring continues to have a profound effect on her identity exploration and desire to come out, "I grew up very much like 'no, gay bad, gay doesn't exist. You choose gay, you choose gay, and I am not gay.'" As she has come into a queer identity, she is reticent to think about her sexuality or disclose it to others, "I'm like, soft out. I'm out to some of my close friends, but not some of my closest friends," and certainly not her parents. C is not out to her mom and that side of her family because:

> my mom is a minister. My grandmother is a devout Catholic. So that really doesn't mix. And some of my family's very Southern so that there's a lot of internalized homophobia… Almost all my friends know, but with my family, I'm very discreet. I get away with the way I present more because they're like, 'oh, like, that's just what she does. She's a little different. Just a little quirky. You know, buying shirts. In the men's section' or whatever, so like, I can present the way I want, but they just don't… But it's just like oblivious to them.

Similarly, Finley's family and communities of origin also continue to shape her disclosure processes:

> Being queer in those types of cultures [Southern, Catholic] is not really acceptable… those societal factors also play into family factors… I think I express myself, like, present myself externally as [gender] non-conforming. But I also, it's not a label that I've used

for myself in any of these communities, just because of that fear of being oppressed in

ways that I don't want to really experience.

Hugo expressed that thon would "really like to be at ease with like telling my family that I would

want to change my name" without feeling like "I need to have all those legal documents there

being like, 'oh, well, this is my name now. You can't do anything about it, deal with it,' as

opposed to like, 'oh, I want this.'" Although each students' contexts and experiences are distinct,

they share a protective stance around disclosing their sexualities and genders in part due to their

expectations about how their families and communities of origin will respond to these aspects of

their identities.

Families and communities of origin, no matter how geographically close or distant,

played an important role in many participants' microsystems. For some students, families have

been supportive of their genders and sexualities. Unfortunately, a number of other students'

families and their communities have not been accepting of their LGBTQ+ identities. Indeed,

many of these students have faced outright hostility and harm, especially from their parents.

Further, several students shared how their communities, especially those with strong ties to

religion, shape how they approach disclosing their identities.

Section Summary

Though each participant's set of microsystems reflects their unique immediate contexts,

there are a number of themes across the sample. Taken together, these microsystem themes offer

insights into the daily lives of LGBTQ+ students who seek out their campus LGBTQ+ center.

Students discussed many anticipated components of U.S. university life, including classes,

student organizations, and friends. Of particular relevance to this study, students frequently

identified various elements of LGBTQ+ campus life as part of their microsystems. Families and

communities of origin are another common component of many students' microsystems, yet these forces take on a heightened role for LGBTQ+ students. Though some students identified their families as supportive, many others found their families and communities of origin to be anywhere from challenging to outright harmful.

Mesosystems

Mesosystems are the interactions and connections between multiple microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). As microsystems interact with each other in the mesosystem, conflicts may arise as oppressive systems influence different microsystems. For example, a student might choose to hide pictures of their partner and any queer or trans décor when their parents come to pick them up for break. Another student might ask their friends to use different pronouns for them in different spaces (microsystems) depending on the student's perception of how trans-affirming particular places might be.

For many of the students in this study, they experienced University-based microsystems as either not significantly interacting or as co-existing well. For example, Robert's "fraternity and my personal social life has come together in a beautiful way." He can be himself with his fraternity brothers, so his fraternity involvement feels aligned with and affirming of the other pieces of his social life. Tensions in students' mesosystems typically rose between University-based and family- or community-of-origin-based microsystems. Finley experienced her microsystems as "siloed," where "family obviously doesn't come and hang out with me in the lab… within the queer community, I don't know anybody who even like really is in my field." Even as her microsystems seem largely disparate, they do influence each other. For example, Finley described her family and community of origin as steeped in Southern and Catholic values. Those values and associated communities have come into conflict with her personal and

academic communities. As she navigated these tension points between microsystems, she reflected, "it's just interesting to be increasingly exposed to some of those ideas and feel how my own thoughts and visions have shifted." While Finley's experiences of this aspect of her mesosystem prompted reflection, curiosity, and evolution, not all participants found their mesosystems to be as positive. As previously described, Nathan was able to access gender-affirming medical care at the University, but his parents tried to guilt him out of using it. He experienced conflicting messages and values between trans-affirming spaces at the University and his parents' rejection.

Students were often unsure of how to answer my interview question about how the things in their daily lives interacted, if at all, with each other. Their mesosystems are highly complex, fluid, and often uninterrogated. Broadly, students experienced their campus-based microsystems (e.g., classes, friends, student organizations) as peacefully co-existing if not always overlapping. In contrast, multiple students described tensions in their mesosystems arising from conflict between their microsystems at the University and their families or communities of origin.

Exosystems

Exosystems are another layer more distant from students' daily lives. They represent forces influencing students and their microsystems, but students do not interact with elements of their exosystems directly (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Systems of oppression often influence students' exosystems through policies and practices that trickle down to students' more immediate contexts. For example, a required course for a student's art major might require students to travel for gallery tours without offering financial assistance for trip. The student then must take off time from work, losing hours for the week, while also needing to pay for travel expenses.

Participants were certainly aware of larger campus forces shaping their experiences and the experiences of those around them. For example, students with financial need contended with financial aid policies (C, Ceejay, Cobalt, Zion). Ellis expressed frustration at the University's emphasis on athletics to the detriment of support for academics. Mouse and Ellis cited university and federal work policies in response to COVID-19 as reasons for not continuing to work on campus. Notably, the University as a concept also functioned as an exosystem for a number of participants. Students had a complicated relationship with the University as an amorphous entity, which manifested in conversations about feeling valued by the institution.

Most students did not necessarily feel valued by the University itself, but rather in "small pockets of good" (Finley). Nicole echoed these sentiments, "In my individual [academic] colleges and with the people that I work with closely, I feel valued. And I feel like I belong here… I don't feel valued by the University overall." As Nicole alludes to, the corollary to these positive pockets is that there are specific spaces and sometimes an overall sense that participants are not valued or fully welcome at the institution. Ceejay shared,

> at an institutional level, I don't feel much valued. Again, every semester, I have to fight for my ability to attend [this university]. And then also just like, to get to be able to do like certain things that a student does, for me is like, really, really, fight to the finish for it. But I do feel valued by the folks and programs and departments that I'm in… Again, a lot of people like send me information or opportunities, different resources, or just a fucking hand… And so, I do feel like highly loved on that.

Although some students did feel valued or at least not "explicitly valued, but I also don't feel devalued either" (Hugo) at the institutional level, many clearly did not. This overall sense of not feeling valued, supported, or invested in by the institution was not inherently tied to students'

social identities and may not be unique to LGBTQ+ students. Yet, it does suggest that queer and trans students do not experience a warm welcome or sense that they matter to the institution.

Students described multiple exosystems influencing their time at the University. Financial aid policies, employment policies, and institutional priorities are common examples of exosystems. Students' understandings of and relationship to the University as a concept is a more intangible exosystem. However abstract it might be, the University as a concept, especially as students reflected on their relationship to and valuing by the institution, clearly loomed large for many students.

Macrosystems

Macrosystems are the most distant from the individual and include societal, cultural, and historical forces shaping students' contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1993). Students' macrosystems are rife with oppressive forces. One such force, white supremacy pervades U.S. culture and history, shaping not only higher education policies and practices (e.g., admission, financial aid, curriculum) but also the society students navigate daily (e.g., racist sentiments and violence; housing and workplace discrimination).

Data collection for this study occurred from October 2020 through March 2021, a period of time that included the 2020 presidential election, the January 2021 Capitol Riot, the 2021 presidential inauguration, and the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic. Students often referenced at least some of these events, as well as examples of anti-Black violence, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, anti-LGBTQ+ policies, and climate change, as components of their macrosystems. In this section, I describe the most common macrosystems students described: US politics and government, anti-Black violence and the Black Lives Matter Movement, as well as

the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout, I highlight moments when these macrosystems interacted with students' genders and sexualities.

U.S. Politics and Government

U.S. politics certainly shaped recent campus experiences. It appeared in 10 of 15 students' ecology models during interviews. Ellis shared she has been "[forced] to pay a lot closer attention to politics than I ever previously wanted to—or had to… it's educated me a lot, but also left me with a lot more concerns and anxieties."

Some students have the perspective of being on campus during both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Robert experienced physical violence and verbal threats after Donald Trump's election. After the 2016 election, they were threatened on campus, "a girl on the phone walking behind me… comes and grabs me and jerked me around. And tells me, 'you need to be careful, because Donald Trump is president now. So you need to watch yourself.'" Thus, when the 2021 inauguration fell during one of their classes,

> my professor asked me something, and I'm like, 'I'm sorry. As a person of color, this is too important to me to miss.' … when Kamala Harris got sworn in, I cried. I cried. And I was, I was a boohoo mess for the rest of the day… because when Kamala Harris and Joe Biden got sworn in, it was a relief, finally, of this is over. This is finally over.

Finley's political views and identification have shifted over the Trump administration's tenure. She reflected,

> I will say for all of the terror and bad stuff that has happened over the past four years, I think it is positive in a lot of ways for people like me waking up to like 'oh my God, is this is this really the person that I thought my ideals were with before?' There's no way

you know -- I would say that I for a while identified as a conservative person, but I do not really feel that way anymore.

The Trump presidency and the 2020 election loomed large in students' consciousnesses, shaping how they moved through their microsystems and prompting significant self-reflection.

In response to recent Supreme Court appointments (Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett), Ellis took some time away during the semester to pursue "more long-care [sic] birth control. Because I am terrified of having that taken away from me." They also shared their concerns about the courts "overturning things like legalized gay marriage, because I don't know what gender a partner of mine might end up being and not being able to legally marry just because their birth certificate says this, that terrifies me." This moment in US history and politics has shaped participants' understandings of self, choices, and campus experiences.

Anti-Black Violence and Black Lives Matter Movement

For non-Black students, attention to anti-Black violence during the summer of 2021 continued to weigh on them and influence their thinking. For Zach as a biracial person,

> The Black Lives Matter movement—that definitely did make me think about race differently, because it made me realize about the struggles that I went through, like when I was in high school, or even middle school, of just being biracial in general, and how that, how others perceive me through that. And I guess I kind of, I thought about the past and tried to break it down, so that I could digest it and try to figure out something more about myself.

As a white person and aspiring public health practitioner, Ellis attended BLM protests and learned that the biggest thing they could do was "just listen to what [Black people and people of color are] asking for."

Yet, for Black students, the visibility of this violence and the realities of living while Black had very different effects. Robert shared,

> I would say the influx of Black men losing their lives have shaped me… This past summer, I was working with DoorDash and I had bills to pay… I was genuinely afraid, going out to DoorDash, because I was afraid that someone driving would decide, 'Alright, today is your turn to die.' Or I would go to deliver food to someone's house and either them or one of their neighbors, because it's predominantly white up here would decide 'okay, today is your day to die.' So, I would say it shaped me in the sense of instilling fear.

The news coverage and public discourse about Black lives and the brutality they face in the US had differential effects on students, often related to their own racial identities. These differential effects were nonetheless significant for students.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic rocked the world beginning in early 2020, causing widespread illness and death. In response, many communities shut down whatever in-person activities they could to reduce transmission and keep people safer. The University moved nearly all classes to virtual delivery and greatly reduced in-person services (including housing) beginning in March 2020. Students frequently included COVID-19 in their macrosystems, citing its influence on the world and in their individual lives.

COVID-19 directly influenced students' academic plans. For example, Hugo "was planning to do a study abroad program to Germany, but that fell through because COVID, but I got real close." Similarly, Mouse

had been intending to do a women and gender studies minor, and do this study abroad in Amsterdam, like do it over last summer or this fall, but that obviously couldn't happen. So, I just kind of like threw that out of the plan and decided that I was going to graduate in the spring.

For Nicole, the pandemic prevented her from working in her research lab. She reflected, "I've missed out on a lot of experience, and I don't really feel prepared to go to graduate school immediately after I graduate, which is scary because that has been my plan all along." From canceling study abroad plans to graduating early to reevaluating post-graduation plans, the COVID-19 pandemic loomed large in students' macrosystems with clear consequences for their University experiences.

Students also faced challenges with families and housing when the University closed on-campus housing except for students with extenuating circumstances. Ceejay's housing plans changed because of COVID-19, "I don't stay on campus. I have returned to staying with family, which is completely different. Because like, again, soon as I graduated from high school, I left home and kind of like, never looked back." They are continuing their studies while working and helping with their young cousin with school. Others petitioned to stay on campus in order to continue their studies without the barriers to success that living with family or securing alternative housing would have presented. For example, Robert applied to remain on campus as an accessibility accommodation. Nathan used Pride's "pointers on how to apply [for on-campus housing] if you were trans and felt like your home wasn't a good place."

Even as Nathan experienced challenges related to the pandemic, he also reflected on the benefits it had offered him as a trans person. Since moving to virtual classes in COVID-19,

there's a lot less social pressure. I definitely felt in person, there was a lot of discomfort, or anxiety and pressure around looking a certain way… I felt like, I kind of had to be on my game to even register as any type of trans to, hopefully, maybe, avoid being gendered at all. Or like, especially with stuff like bathrooms, that was kind of unavoidable last year [before the pandemic]. And I would be really uncomfortable, and I would use the women's restroom. And so now it's like, I don't have to deal with people even seeing me for a lot of my classes. For a lot of my group work last semester, they didn't even know what I looked like until the last day when we would present and turn on my cameras, which is like it's pretty nice and relieving to not have to deal with questions of like, 'are you male or female?' or just being pulled aside by teachers to ask my pronouns awkwardly. Or even other students, ugh, they're so awkward about it… Not having to, yeah, sweat about that. Especially bathrooms now that I've medically transitioned and I'm in a more like, a really tough zone of, I don't know where I would be going… So pretty lucky to be able to avoid that for now.

Although most students focused on the negative aspects of COVID-19, Nathan's perspective offers an important reminder of potential silver linings for some students. In his case, he felt less pressure to enact his gender presentation in a particular way, less singled out in academic settings, and safer when not needing to navigate gendered public spaces like bathrooms.

Section Summary

The US political system, anti-Black racism and the Black Lives Matter Movement, and COVID-19 were common macrosystems shaping students' lives. Although macrosystems exist at the societal and cultural level, they can have a direct influence on students' lives. Furthermore, these forces often interact with and reify the oppressive systems at play in society.

Oppressive Systems

The contribution of the critical campus ecology model (CCEM) is its explicit attention to systems of power and how these oppressive systems shape individuals' contexts. Oppression refers to "the disadvantages and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young, 1990, p. 41). Students cited a number of oppressive systems shaping their contexts, including racism, sexism, cissexism, heterosexism, and classism. In this section, I explore students' experiences with racism, heterosexism, as well as cissexism as the most salient and common forces students described. These and other oppressive forces are constantly and insidiously enacted in society, often working in complex, simultaneous, and intersecting ways.

Racism

Students, especially Black students, in this study spoke at length about how race influences their experiences at the University and in their lives broadly. For participants of color, our conversations about race centered on issues of representation, outright racial hostility, and race in LGBTQ+ spaces. In contrast, conversations with white students focused more on their racial identities and their relationship to advancing racial justice.

Students of Color. Students of color have a keen awareness of who is or is not in a particular space. Nicole, who proudly identifies as a woman of color (Asian and Hispanic), pays close attention to,

> if there's other people of color in the spaces that I'm in… that's also a reason why I want to go into science, it's because I don't see enough people who look like me in the field that I'm interested in.

C has found campus LBGTQ+ spaces to be predominantly white: "sometimes it's just like this room [the trans student organization] is a little too white for me. Like I'm not in the mood folks." At the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race, C remains vigilant about how she engages with specific spaces and people as she seeks community. Representation plays an important role on a predominantly white campus, but it is far from the only way race shows up in students' contexts.

Robert, who identifies as Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican, and is often read as Black, has had many negative racial experiences on campus, including previously described incidents in class and while walking on campus. Unfortunately, Robert has also struggled to find space within communities of color, specifically the Multicultural Greek Council, "I was not well received by the fraternities in the Divine Nine.[12] Um, I guess I'm too feminine for them… And I was not received by the Latino fraternities. Because, again, too feminine, too gay, but I'm not Latino enough for them." Here, Robert encountered not only encountered racism, but also heterosexism and cissexism. As a Black student, C is cautious about being seen in LGBTQ+ spaces because

> most [Black] people are from the [same city]. Most people know people like through a
> friend or through a cousin or like everyone knows someone at the University, basically.
> And so with that comes the fact like, 'Okay, if I'm seen at this event…' or 'Okay, like, I
> don't want to talk openly about this in this Black women's group chat, because my god
> sister is in here, and I don't know what she's gonna say to her mom, or what she's gonna
> like run back and tell an auntie of mine, or something.' So, it's just being mindful of how
> I present and what information I give out to people, who I'm talking to.

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[12] The Divine Nine refers to the nine Black Greek letter organizations comprising the National Pan-Hellenic Council. See Ross (2001) for a comprehensive history of these nine fraternities and sororities.

Students of color, especially Black students, must constantly navigate their intersecting racial, sexual, and gender identities.

Race in campus LGBTQ+ spaces is often complicated. For example, Robert felt othered and excluded from Pride because of his racial identity during his first year at the University. Several years later, after both staff and student turnover, he now holds Pride "in esteem… since [the new staff] have been doing this thing, it's been a lot more welcoming and inviting." Indeed, from Ceejay's perspective, Pride "often centers queer POC in a way I don't see a lot of other spaces doing, which is very comforting." C has found LGBTQ+ spaces to be generally welcoming and supportive, but "even within [the trans student organization], I'm the only Black person that attends currently. So, I appreciate the camaraderie, but like sometimes, I have a very different experience than a lot of these people ever will." Race clearly influences general campus and LGBTQ+-specific spaces. Students of color are attuned to who is in space, whether they are safe to be there at all, and if they can bring their full selves to certain spaces.

White Students. White students often acknowledged race by naming their own racial identity. Some students expressed deepening understandings of their racial identity and their role in disrupting racism. For example, Cobalt reflected,

> I don't want to say that 'being white is important to me' because that very much sounds like some racist dog whistles. But I do think that acknowledging my privilege as a part of who I am, and especially my racial privilege, um, it's something that shapes my identity, and I think shapes the way I try and interact with the world and try and like, consume information and conduct myself.

Ellis attended multiple Black Lives Mater protests and was particularly struck by multiple Black people's and people of color's message of "just listen to what we're asking for." She intended to do just that in her desired public health career.

In contrast, others were just beginning their learning about race. Grace described her race as, "I'm white. That's not really an identity." She had engaged with several of Pride's "meetings, opportunities to discuss" because she "was trying really hard. I don't know what else I can do to be helpful but learn. I'm gonna learn stuff." White students' nascent racial understandings are a common manifestation of white privilege (Noble & Renn, 2021). As members of the dominant group, they have rarely needed to contemplate their racial privilege, their complicity in racism, or their role in dismantling it.

Heterosexism

Participants encountered heterosexism, which maintains the primacy of heterosexuality, in a variety of places. Students rarely knew queer or trans professors on campus. In academic spaces, students did not feel as if they could readily identify other queer and trans people. As Finley put it, "it's not like you walk into your lab and you say, 'all right, who else here is not cis hetero?'" Instead, there is an assumption that everyone is straight by default. Grace encountered a related dynamic, "there are a couple of people in our department that like everyone kind of knows, like, 'oh, Doctor whoever is gay,' but we don't talk about it." In this case, the heterosexism manifested as a "closeted" culture where Grace was curious about the realities of being queer in academia but did not feel she could ask.

Students also experienced particular cultural institutions upholding heterosexism. As described in the families and communities of origin microsystem section, religion often functioned to discourage multiple students (C, Finley, and Grace) from exploring or disclosing

their sexual orientations and gender identities. Grace reflected, "I have a lot of internalized homophobia, as we all do. But church does not help." Grace's statement offered an important reminder that heterosexism is pervasive, and people internalize homophobic attitudes in general. Religious communities, among other institutions, capitalize on and further entrench these attitudes.

Cissexism

Cissexism persists in a world where cisgender people are the dominant group, and the assumption is that an individual is cisgender. Transgender students shared numerous examples of how cissexism permeates into many aspects of their lives. Notably, the few cisgender participants did not discuss their cisgender privilege at length if at all.

Trans students reported being misgendered and deadnamed in day-to-day life—in the dining hall (Nathan), their residence hall's mail room (Alice), through IDs and campus systems (multiple), and in class (Alice, Nathan). Nathan described his experience at the university: "I would say overall, my main issue has been trans stuff. I'm good in classes. I've been learning, enjoying like work, but then it's just like, there's always something that's waiting around the corner for me." He has come to expect "any interaction I have outside of like... basically, me and friends is like, my safe zone. And then everything else is like I expect a struggle. That's where I go to get hurt." Here, Nathan is not necessarily referring to a specific place but any context outside of his "safe zone" with trans-affirming friends. This ongoing hurt, misgendering, and othering based on gender identity and presentation engenders a deep distrust of the institution and cis people among trans students.

The University has made some public attempts to demonstrate support for trans students. For example, Zach shared his appreciation for the University posting on their Instagram for

Transgender Awareness Day. Yet, when relaying this example, he said, "*despite the backlash in the comments*, I think it was just really nice that they [the University] do stand with transgender people, and they value our identities on campus and out" (emphasis added). Zach's story is an example of the unevenness of trans inclusion—and the pervasiveness of cissexism—at the institution. While the University's official Instagram page might celebrate transgender people in that post, some in the broader community responded with "backlash" against this positive message. Zach felt seen by the institution and could ignore the negativity from community members. Others could not ignore the transphobia they faced while just going about their lives on campus. Both approaches and responses are valid and reveal the ongoing harm faced by trans students on campus.

Although trans students certainly found positive, supportive environments and people on campus, their experiences with cissexism were frequent. Trans students navigated hostile spaces and people in academic and co-curricular environments as well as while simply engaging in daily life (eating, living, walking on campus). They also reported not feeling valued or seen by the institution.

Intersectional Understandings of Oppressive Systems

Although I have presented these oppressive systems individually, I do not intend to convey that these and other systems (e.g., classism, nativism) work independently of each other. Oppressive systems build upon and reinforce each other, further subjugating those who live at the intersections of particular identities. Black feminist thinkers, including Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2000), advanced these conceptions of power's mechanisms and real-life manifestations to explain Black women's experiences of marginalization on multiple identity fronts. Rather than being additive, Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality posits that women of color's

experiences are amplified at the intersection of their race and gender. Further, a single-identity analysis (i.e., solely on the basis of race or gender) cannot adequately capture the specific locations and experiences of those holding multiple marginalized identities.

In the preceding sections, I have noted specific moments where multiple oppressive systems are acting together to shape an individual's experiences. For example, C sought space and community away from the cissexism of society in the trans student organization only to find that student organization to be almost exclusively white. Thus, C experienced the magnified effects of both racism and cissexism, setting their experience of the trans student organization apart from their white trans peers. It is both important to acknowledge the specificities of how different strains of oppressive systems manifest and to grapple with the complex intersections of these oppressive systems.

Section Summary

Oppressive systems act on and within each contextual system. In this section, I focused on students' experiences of racism, heterosexism, and cissexism, though these systems should be understood as reifying and interconnected. Students' examples were typically anchored in their microsystems with connections to the other system levels. These three oppressive systems, among others, fundamentally shape students' experiences of learning and living in the University community.

Chapter Summary

In exploring students' connections to and conceptions of their campus LGBTQ+ center, we—the students and I—had to first grapple with the variable and too frequently hostile campus environments and some of the major contexts shaping their worlds. In this chapter, I provided an overview of many of the major forces shaping students' lives and their campus experiences

through an aggregated critical campus ecology model. Students navigate complex campus, familial, community, national, and global contexts. They are looking for support and guidance as they make sense of their worlds, relationships, and identities. Pride is one of the spaces they turn to for these purposes. It serves as an "oasis" (Zion) in the midst of complex, often unsupportive, and sometimes hostile contexts on campus and well beyond. In the following chapter, I analyze students' understandings of and experiences with the Center.

CHAPTER 5: STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THEIR LGBTQ+ CENTER

For the majority of participants, the Pride Resource Center functioned as a microsystem within their individual ecosystems. Yet, the ways students conceptualized Pride were multiple and varied. For some, Pride offered them a physical place to be more fully themselves on campus. Other students found important and sustaining relationships through the Center. Pride also offered students a treasure trove of resources and advocacy efforts to help them navigate their lives and contexts, especially at the University. Before and certainly during the COVID-19 pandemic, students relied on Pride's emails and virtual spaces to maintain their connections to the Center. Finally, students described the power and limitations of Pride's existence on campus—the importance of knowing that such a place and its dedicated staff were there to support them and students like them at the University paired with skepticism about the University's investment in supporting LGBTQ+ students. In this chapter, I detail the major ways students conceptualized, understood, and experienced their LGBTQ+ center: physical space, source of relationships, organizational navigation and tools, virtual presence, and symbol of institutional commitment. I also share narratives from students whose experiences did not meet their expectations for Pride.

Physical Space

Pride's physical office space was important to many students. Participants reminisced about dropping in for meetings, events, and a snack or beverage (available in Pride's "snack bar") between classes. Certainly, the fact that Pride's office space (and the vast majority of in-person campus spaces) was closed during this study's interviews as part of the University's COVID-19 precautions informed students' responses. Ellis summarized her desire to return to Pride's physical space as, "I want to exist in a purely queer space and be purely queer."

Students were quick to describe their experiences in Pride's physical space, located in a central building on campus. Its office space is small, tucked away down an unremarkable hallway. The Center comprises a common area for hanging out and a couple staff offices. Zach described his impressions of the space:

> I was surprised how comforting it felt. They have a lot of chairs and snacks there. And it was just kind of like a lounge room, which I wasn't expecting. A lot of rooms in the building looked like a classroom. So, to come into this room and see like carpet and tables and a couch, it was kind of homey feeling.

Multiple students remarked on how colorful and comfortable the space is. Nicole shared, "I really love how bright it is… like how it's just like really like a comfortable space, both in terms of the furniture and also just the energy and the vibes that I get from the Center."

> Having a comfortable, homey, colorful place to drop into, hang out, and access resources mattered to students. Nicole would go to Pride to grab a coffee after yoga. C would head to Pride to "hang out and do homework and just read and just chat with the regulars like an old person." Hugo shared,

> There were always snacks, and you could like, get a warm apple cider or hot chocolate or something. And the Pride staff was always super-duper friendly. They had a needle exchange while they were still open… They always have safer sex packets… it was always very welcoming and very warm.

Pride served as a physical space where they knew they would reliably find literal and figurative sustenance on campus. They could come to the Center to chill, grab a snack, and use whatever resources they might need.

As a welcoming and homey office space, Pride offered a physical place where students felt they could be (more) fully themselves. Ellis found the Center to be "a space that I enter in that I can be unapologetically queer," it was "a safe place for me to go. And literally, they're not going to judge me. It's a room full of queer people; they're not going to judge me." In the Center, Ellis also experienced people asking earnestly and caring about chosen names and pronouns, which

> was very strange, because so many other areas of [the University] that I had been in via a workspace or school space, like, pronouns hadn't necessarily been something that were just thrown into the conversation so casually… And it was a good change, but it was just very bizarre at first, in terms of like, wow, [the people in the Center] really want to, they really want you to, like, sink in and be comfy.

Here, Ellis found Pride's physical space "comfy" because the people in the Center sought to be respectful of others' identities. Ceejay "really [goes] there [to Pride] for comfort … I can authentically be myself when sitting in there. I don't have to worry much." This statement alludes to a similar experience—Ceejay goes to the Center to just be themself without much concern about how others will perceive or treat them. Ceejay's and Ellis's quotes exemplify how Pride's physical space combines with the Center's expectations and norms of behavior to create a welcoming, comforting, and homey environment amid microaggressions and sometimes hostile spaces (campus and otherwise) students experienced in their overall ecosystems.

Source of Relationships

The Pride Resource Center addressed multiple relational functions for participants. Students turned to the Center for guidance as they navigated their identity exploration and development processes. Pride also aided students' pursuits of relationships with queer and trans

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peers. Further, students' relationships with Pride staff served as significant sources of connection and support for students. Finally, Pride facilitated interactions between participants and LGBTQ+ adults, creating possibility models for students who sought examples of what life could look like after their time at the University.

Self and Identity Exploration

Many participants needed space to build a relationship with themselves, especially in relation to their genders and sexualities. Students turned to Pride as they engaged in identity exploration or as they needed identity-based resources. Mouse found Pride's booth at an orientation event and signed up for their newsletter immediately because "they were like, one of the only groups that seemed LGBT-focused." Finley initially interacted with Pride when she enrolled at the University for her first degree but did not feel the need to really engage with them. Fast forward to her second degree and some different life circumstances, Finley was experiencing challenges in her relationship, prompting her

> to explore my identity more and really kind of find labels that I felt were fitting to me at the time … So that was really my initiative to go in and say, I need to find a way to be more connected with these people [in the LGBTQ+ community and the Center] and find the resources I need to look a little bit deeper into my identity and just be comfortable with it, like find a space where I can be comfortable and feel accepted.

Jake shared his impressions,

> I think it's really helpful for people who are either questioning their identity, coming to terms with their identity. Because at least when I was and when other people I have known have been [questioning our identities], it's just a very affirming space.

Pride functioned as a space where students often chose to learn about identities, especially as they redefined their relationship to these identities, and to receive support for their identity development work.

As students explored and came into their identities, Pride could be particularly valuable when that process felt uncomfortable. Grace was earlier in her engagement with Pride, turning to the Center "because I'm not super set in my identity… I'm just exploring… I feel like someone who has a lot of work to do and exploring identities." For her, Pride "plays a part in helping me think about this thing that I like to avoid. Because I don't want to think about sexuality. I don't want to. I don't want to think about that at all. Because that's hard." Having grown up in a strongly religious family where queerness was not welcome, Grace evaded exploring her sexuality until recently. She continued to feel dissonance and discomfort around her sexuality, yet she actively chose to engage with Pride. Ultimately, Grace credited the Center as "[helping] to make [the University] somewhere where I can explore my identity as part of the LGBTQ community."

Peer Friendships and Community

Pride frequently serves as a conduit for students to build relationships with fellow queer and trans students. Often, Pride was the primary site for finding queer and trans community on campus. If Pride had not existed on campus, Finley shared,

> I think I would have just had more trouble finding somewhere where I really felt like I existed and mattered as far as like gender and sexuality… I think it would have been harder to, like, connect with people who shared the same identities. Yeah, you know, it's not like you walk into your lab and you say, 'all right, who else here is not cis hetero?' It's tougher to just like find people on chance encounters, you really have to be deliberate

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about it. And not having a center would have really just not even allowed for a lot or any of those connections.

Zion did not know "where or how else I would find a community of people like me" except in the Center. His favorite part of Pride is

people and the community. When we meet in the Center, or meet in a group led by the Center, everyone knows that they have the same goal, and that is to make the LGBT experience better, if not now, then for people who come after us… I think everyone involved [with Pride] is just like a really great person who really strives towards doing their best for the community. And it's, it's refreshing and inspiring to see that.

Participants found new friends and maintained community through Pride. They appreciated the Center as a physical and conceptual space where they were more likely to meet peers with similar life experiences and commitments to LGBTQ+ communities.

The friends and community participants made through Pride kept them coming back to the Center and helped them find their place at the University. Alice understood one of Pride's main activities to be "mostly just supporting [queer students], letting them know that like, there is a community here and sort of forming that community, so students know where to go when they can't find people." Ceejay participated in a program for first-year students, "which helped me find a lot of folks, especially the queer folks I know on campus."

At various points in participants' time at the University, students actively wanted to find community, friends, and potential partners. They turned to Pride, hoping it would be a place where they might find people. Finley found the Center to be "a safe place to go into for any kind of socialization or just to, you know, just to sit and listen." Jake thought Pride might help him find a date:

I've always been attracted to women. So, before I came out as trans, I was identifying as

a lesbian… And honestly, I thought it would be a good place that go to find a girlfriend

or something. That did not happen, but I just thought it would be cool to talk to other like,

gay people or trans people.

As Zach wrote in an email to me after our second interview, he "wanted to make lifelong

friendships" when engaging with the Center and campus LGBTQ+ groups. These lifelong

friendships have not formed quickly, yet

I did make a good sum of friendships due to seeing them once at [different student

organizations], but it wasn't until we went to the drag show and the coming out event that

we got close… After that, we would see each other at [group meetings and events] where

we stayed late, and all hung out together. We are friends on snapchat and even have each

other's phone numbers so it still might be possible that my expectation of life-long

friendships will be fulfilled… I wanted to mention it because [Pride] was the reason that I

had all those experiences and deepened our bond with one another.

Some students were delighted to find community space in which to socialize and not feel judged.

Other students had more specific hopes for romantic, sexual, and platonic relationships. Even

when those connections did not work out as planned (at least immediately), students appreciated

the opportunity to meet and get to know fellow queer and trans students.

Pride functioned as a source of community. Finley had not fully understood the value of a

"resource center" when she thought of resources as a "book … pamphlet or you know, just like

some kind of informational resource." As she interacted with the Center, she realized

"community could be a resource," too. Although not everyone found the friends and romantic

and/or sexual partners they were hoping to, many students did find meaningful community and

relationships through Pride. Pride also helped students connect with LGBTQ+ student organizations. Alice emphasized Pride's role in "supporting [queer students], letting them know that like, there is a community here and sort of forming that community. So students know where to go when they can't find people."

Student and Staff Relationships

Relationships with staff fostered participants' sense of connection to the Center. Hugo declared Pride staff "feel a whole lot like family." This sense of staff members' care and stability has been especially important for thon whose family of origin has been a source of pain and uncertainty due to a family member's substance use disorder. When asked about their favorite part of Pride, Ceejay responded,

> I think this is really cliche, but like the folk in the Center. I think they're super helpful
> and affirming. And I really just appreciate and admire the things that they do. I want to
> specifically highlight [a particular staff member] because I just -- to me, [this staff
> member] has been like, a constant check-in point within the Center and just helps me
> with things considering my life or my college career and such.

When asked to describe elements of his life using the critical campus ecology model, Zion made a distinction between the close proximity of his interactions with a particular Pride staff member and the slightly more distant relationship he maintained with the Center (as a physical and conceptual space) overall.

A number of students count Pride staff members as friends. Alice shared, "I would consider myself to be friends with all of their staff." Similarly, Grace does not feel "super connected" to Pride as a whole office, but "I feel connected specifically to [this staff member]. If [they are] there, I'm like, I have a space here. Just because we have a connection." For Ceejay, a

particular staff member "has been a constant check-in point within the Center and just helps me with things considering my life or my college career and such." These relationships seem genuine and two-sided. According to Nathan, "if we go for a long time without talking, they'll be like, 'I miss you.'" He feels cared about and like "I definitely am friends with the staff." Staff members are caring adults and friends to their students, and students appreciate the staff's steady and warm presence in their lives.

Pride's staff has turned over during the last five years, prompting changes in the Center. Robert, a senior who had negative experiences with Pride as a new student, now holds Pride "in esteem… since [the new staff] have been doing this thing, it's been a lot more welcoming and inviting." Today, he "can go to them for any and everything" and "I would say [the staff] are like the best parts of the center to me." Where he had previously felt excluded because of his Blackness, Robert now feels connected to and comfortable in Pride because of the new staff's leadership and efforts to serve students who are most likely to experience marginalization. He reflected, "if it's a matter of do I feel connected to the [Pride] space? If it's outside of that context [everything being virtual because of COVID-19], then I would say probably not. I feel connected to the staff."

Access to LGBTQ+ Adults

Pride also offered students the relatively rare opportunity to knowingly meet and to be in community with LGBTQ+ adults. Certainly, Pride staff's identities as queer and trans people mattered to students. Ellis appreciated having adult role models in Pride staff:

> seeing people being queer and still lead academic professional lives… it was huge for me, because I'm like, there is space for me to do this… people always are arguing about representation, representation, representation, but it's so important to see people who are

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like me, in these positions, in being able to, you know, make an impact on [the

University's] campus to make it more comfortable for people of all identities to have a

space.

Alice was delighted by the representation of queer and trans people on staff,

it was made abundantly clear to me pretty early on that they were queer. So that was like,

checkbox, you know, you go around the room, and everyone introduce themselves with

their pronouns, and I'm like, 'Oh, cool. [Multiple of the] staff of the Center uses

they/them pronouns.'

However, Nathan also observed a staff member being misgendered, something he has also

painfully and frequently experienced. This misgendering of a Pride staff member worried him,

"it's kind of scary. I don't want to keep being in a bad situation for the rest of my life. And I

know [this staff member being misgendered is] not uncommon."

Students also valued witnessing queer and trans people living and succeeding. Zion

shared similar reflections about Pride events,

sometimes they'll have [events] with more adult queer people who have established

careers and who are really successful and all that. And it's really nice to see that people

like, you know, survive and are successful and functioning members of society and such.

Nathan appreciated seeing older queer and trans people "just living" and being "so lively and

cool." In a world and on a campus where queer and trans success is not always visible or

celebrated, interacting with LGBTQ+-identified Pride staff and invited guests offers students

possibility models and reassurance that they, too, can find purpose and success as LGBTQ+

adults.

Organizational Navigation and Tools

Pride served multiple organizational roles, shaping students' experiences with campus broadly and LGBTQ+ life at the University. As C described it, Pride is "literally a resource for anything and every issue you can think of having … identity related or not." Students turned to the Center for a variety of organizational reasons, including assistance navigating the University and advocating for policy change as well as support for LGBTQ+ student organizations.

Institutional Navigation and Advocacy

Students relied on Pride to access institutional resources and spaces during their time at the University. Pride staff are "just literally an endless and abundant resource, kind of like your University Google but more personalized" (C). Some students found the Center when looking for specific help navigating the University. Ceejay found Pride while "looking into like, how does [the University] provide for folks of marginalized experiences." Alice learned about Pride from a University sub-Reddit when

> asking how to get into gender inclusive housing as a trans person… And someone who
> I'm now friends with messaged me, and he was like, 'okay, you can do this, this, and this.
> You can contact Pride for some help.' And I was like, 'there's [an LGBTQ+ center]?'

Not only does Pride offer these resources and information, as Nathan emphasized, "at the same time, [Pride staff] upkeep those resources." Pride helps students understand and negotiate the University in many arenas, such as scholarships, housing, name changes, and health care.

Scholarships

Financing their education was an important consideration for multiple participants. Pride offers a handful of scholarships, which helped students enroll or stay enrolled at the University. C felt "very connected to the Center. I mean, that's part of the reason I got to go to [the

University]. Because they gave me that very generous scholarship my freshman year." These scholarships also served as a means for students to learn about and get connected to Pride. Ellis shared,

> I didn't even know we had one [an LGBTQ+ center] on campus until I want to say, a year, year and a half ago, and found out. I was like, 'holy crap, we have something like this?!' … And I think it was like a scholarship or something that they sponsored.

In addition to Pride's own scholarships, the Center helped students find other scholarships. As Hugo shared, "[Pride] clued me into particular scholarship that I got this year that's actually paying for one of my spring courses, which is very nice." The Center contributed to students' ability to access and persist at the University through their sponsored scholarships and by advertising other funding opportunities to students.

Housing

On-campus housing at the University is a challenge for many students, especially trans students and those with additional housing needs. Pride has worked at both the individual and institutional levels to increase the likelihood that students have safe and respectful places to live on campus. Additionally, Pride was instrumental for multiple participants to be able to access on-campus housing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trans students faced particular barriers to living on-campus because of the opaque process to request non-sex-segregated housing. Nathan initially found out about Pride when looking for housing information as an applicant, having "[Googled] just like '[University] transgender housing' or something like that." C suggested asking Pride for help if "maybe you're looking for a roommate on campus, you know, and you don't feel comfortable rooming with someone who is cis or, you know, worried about coming out to a roommate." Thanks to the work

of both the Pride Resource Center and the transgender student organization, the University

changed their housing options for transgender students and students who do not wish to live in

sex-segregated on-campus housing in recent years.

When the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the University to close on-campus housing to

students unless they petitioned to stay, students turned to Pride for individual help navigating

these uncertain and changing university policies. Pride guided Nathan through the application

process, giving him "some pointers on how to apply if you were trans and felt like your home

wasn't a good place." His petition was ultimately approved, but then he realized Housing would

require him to present his government ID to move in. Again, Pride staff advocated for Nathan to

be able to move in with documentation using his chosen name, rather than his legal name. Robert

also petitioned to live on-campus with assistance from Pride. He expressed gratitude for their

advocacy, "I would not be in this dorm without [Pride staff], even with my [disability]

accommodation. This room is [a disability] accommodation for me and I still, I would not be on

campus this year without them." Instead of working with the Disability Services Office, Robert

turned to Pride for help. Both Nathan and Robert relied on Pride's intervention to navigate

complex campus systems.

Name Change Processes

For many trans and nonbinary people, changing one's name is often an important part of

claiming and affirming their identity. Unfortunately, name change processes, both at the

institutional and legal levels, are frequently a source of challenge and frustration for trans

students. Multiple students credited Pride for guiding them through these processes.

According to Nathan, one of Pride's institutional advocacy areas is "making sure that

preferred name is actually showing up where it should be." Unfortunately, Nathan has run into

issues with different systems around campus not communicating with each other, resulting in his

dead name displaying. As his relationship with the Center has grown over the past year, he now

> [talks] to [a specific staff member from Pride] to touch base on advocacy stuff, or to
>
> express an experience I had that kind of needs some attention. Usually something like,
>
> 'this system still uses dead names, and I talked to IT, and they said they wouldn't fix it,'
>
> stuff like that.

Struggles with IT and other campus units to have his preferred name, rather than his legal name,

displayed continued, but Nathan took some comfort in having a point of contact in Pride who

could advocate for him at the institutional level.

> Although the legal name change process is well outside of Pride's control, Pride staff

helped students move through that process by providing information and personal experiences.

Ellis shared their experience,

> going through the whole name change process has been something I've wanted to do for
>
> as long as I can remember. But not knowing how to do it and being able to be like, 'wait,
>
> no, there's literally a resource center that's here to help me'… emailing [a Pride staff
>
> member] and being able to talk with them and being like, 'Can you help me with this?
>
> Because that's what your job is.' And them being like, 'absolutely.' And having that
>
> resource of being like, 'Alright, here's where you're gonna fill out your first paperwork,
>
> this is where you're going to send it, it's probably going to cost around this much, it
>
> might be a little bit more might be a little bit less,'… someone opened the door for me,
>
> essentially, in terms of like, here's how you're going to do it… it's so nice.

Without the Center's help, Ellis "definitely would still be struggling with my name change."

They were particularly grateful for the timely assistance because it "was really important to have

my name be reflected how I wanted on my diploma," which would not have been possible at the University without a legal name change.

Health Care

Pride supports students' access to health care in several ways. They advertised multiple physical and mental health events and resources through their newsletters. In the Center, they have "safe sex stuff… they also have pads… a sharps container" (Nathan). Pride also shares information about "where you can get tested for such and such STDs and all that" (Hugo).

Trans health care was particularly salient for multiple participants. C shared, "especially if you are someone who is trans or nonbinary and trying to medically transition, [Pride] can point you in the right direction." To support trans students seeking medical transition, staff "try to keep track of some of the better doctors at [the campus health center] to talk to in regards to trans services" (Hugo). Yet, Nathan still faced "terrible experiences" with the campus health center and one of the supposedly trans-affirming doctors.

Support for LGBTQ+ Student Organizations

LGBTQ+ student organizations and Pride are important forces in the LGBTQ+ ecosystem at the University. They support each other's existence and ongoing functioning. Pride offers space, guidance, and coordination assistance to LGBTQ+ student organizations. In turn, student organizations participate in assisting with planning events and sometimes contribute to Pride events' budgets.

The Center brings together LGBTQ+ student organization leaders several times during the semester for the Student Org Leader Gathering to facilitate intergroup and Center-group collaborations. Alice described what happens at a Leader Gathering:

so, we would all get in a room. We would all get in the Center, more specifically. Then

we sit around, we introduce ourselves, and we talk about what our organizations have

been up to recently. And then we get to things like event planning for the entire

semester… And then also people being like, "We want to put on this kind of event, but

we don't have the resources." Then, and then probably one of the [groups] would go like,

'we have extra money. You can have some.'

Zion found these meetings to be very useful for his organization and personally:

[it] also really helped with peer-to-peer interaction. Because sometimes groups will have

really similar ideas and will be like, 'oh, instead of wasting both of our funding, like,

individually, we can combine resources and probably put on a better event than we would

have alone.' [pause] The Center also makes sure to have updated contact information for

all of the student-led groups… that has helped me connect with people.

Leader Gatherings are an opportunity to build strong working relationships between Pride and

the LGBTQ+ student organizations. These meetings facilitate much of the behind-the-scenes

work of creating a robust and thriving network of LGBTQ+ spaces and calendar of LGBTQ+

events.

In addition to Leader Gathering's high-level coordination, Pride and the LGBTQ+

student organizations refer students back and forth to each other for various reasons. As an

executive board member for one of the LGBTQ+ groups, Hugo described the interactions

between thons group and the Center: "they advertise through us, we advertise through them. And

then we could also send students their way in case like, they had an issue that the Center was

better equipped to deal with than us." For Zach, Pride created opportunities through "which I

found a bunch of other clubs and resources. And it's made me feel a lot more valued than at my

old school where they didn't have like a LGBT anything, like club-wise." One of the ways Pride connects students to campus LGBTQ+ organizations is to advertise their existence and events through the Center's newsletters.

<div align="center">**Virtual Presence**</div>

Pride maintained a virtual presence, which students credited for keeping them informed about Center, campus, and world events. This function pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, but Pride's virtual offerings increased notably in response to pandemic-related in-person closures. Although I learned about the Center's virtual presence from students who felt connected to the Center and who were willing to participate in this study, I suspect many students who were not comfortable being seen in the Center could still partake in Pride's opportunities to learn, access resources, and feel part of a community without necessarily having to "out" themselves thanks to the anonymity afforded by some virtual offerings. In this section, I describe students' reliance on Pride's enduring virtual presence through their website and newsletter as well as students' virtual experiences during COVID-19.

Website

Pride's website offers an abundance of resources for prospective and current students. It serves as one of the major gateways for students to learn about the Center's work and resources. Nathan turned to Pride's website as an incoming trans student in need of guidance,

> I had been looking up preferred names. And I had to figure out housing as well. And that was all through their site. So, I knew it was gonna be really a useful resource… their site is like the—like for a new student, like that's, that's, that saved me… it's not just a site of resources, it's literally resources they created, like with housing.

Nathan continued to use the Center's website as a current student and respected the work behind

its intentionally curated resources. Ellis sought out Pride's website after learning about the

Center's scholarship opportunities,

> And so I went to the website, and I was like, 'oh, wow, this is like, this is like a real deal
>
> that has its own little office space on [campus].' And, so that that was like my first
>
> [interaction with Pride] and then I was like, 'oh man, you know what, I bet it's really
>
> cool. I should go visit'

Subsequently, Ellis started to visit the in-person Center space and turned to their website for help

with their legal name change. After they successfully changed their name, they reached back out

to the Center to offer to create an expanded guide to legal name change so others could benefit.

Newsletter

Students cited Pride's weekly email newsletter as a must-read and an avenue to stay

informed. Mouse has been getting the newsletter since they signed up for it during orientation.

Zach shared "as soon as I get the notification in the mail, I pretty much read it [the newsletter]

from top to bottom, even though they can get quite lengthy." Jake, who has had a mixed

experience with Pride, recommended

> at least signing up for the emails, because even if somebody doesn't want to be super
>
> involved, at least they can look at what's going on just to see what's going on. And if
>
> they're interested, they can check out specific things.

Students may have felt this way before the pandemic, but the newsletter's role became especially

important once the physical office closed. Nicole had not previously subscribed to the newsletter,

but that changed during the pandemic "because I wasn't able to go there anymore and figure out

what's going on." Grace, who got started interacting with Pride during the pandemic, described it

as "one of those emails that I'm like, okay, gotta look through this. There are going to be things that I might want to do. Should look at"—high praise from a busy graduate student. The newsletter offered center announcements, encouragement from staff, and a host of opportunities (e.g., events, resources, supports, research studies, job postings).

COVID-19 Efforts

When COVID-19 prompted the University to shutter as much in-person activity as possible, Pride needed to pivot quickly to fully virtual offerings. The existing website and newsletter remained integral to their work. Pride also incorporated new platforms, such as Discord and Zoom, to accomplish their work.

The Center utilized Discord to stay in touch with students and to share information about Pride happenings. Although the Discord servers were largely student-run, Pride staff co-moderated several and students welcomed staff members' presence. Robert confided, "you also get information in the newsletter, but I like to think that we get information first because we're in the Discord." Even if students had not recently attended virtual events or otherwise interacted with Pride since the pandemic started, the newsletter and Discord servers functioned as a consistent and welcome tie to the Center.

Pride hosted several drop-in Zoom chats with different foci each week as well as one-time events. The weekly drop-in events were more formalized and time-bound than Pride's casual in-person atmosphere where students were welcome to stop in to chat, hang out, eat lunch, or get resources during the Center's business hours. In the midst of stressful and uncertain times, some students appreciated these virtual drop-in spaces. For example, Robert logged on to a Pride hang out while simultaneously in class, "I told [the group], I'm in class right now but I really

need this." One-time events proceeded largely as they would have if held in-person, except they occurred via Zoom or streaming on social media.

Virtual events posed challenges for students accustomed to a primarily in-person Center. Although students like Nicole and Finley could now attend more Pride events thanks to the lack of additional travel time, many students cited their busy schedules and programs hosted "at times where it is very difficult to attend" (Zion) as a significant barrier to being able to participate. Students also cited limitations to gathering and building community over Zoom. Ellis shared, "I'd love to join some of the like discussions that they have every week. It's just discomfort with digitally being in those spaces, I guess. Because I like interacting with people face to face." Mouse was intrigued by the virtual offerings, but "I don't know if it'll be weird if everyone else knows each other." Grace, a self-described "good talker," found the virtual space made her

> a little bit anxious… partially because very specifically, some people don't know how to
> set their pronouns or change their name on zoom… if I've missed the introductions,
> we're out of luck… You don't want a dead name [some]one, so you don't want to
> misgender.

Finally, C named their need to monitor the time they spend on video calls, "I'm tired of Zoom, we're going to be done for the night. Like, I'm not gonna force myself to go to every meeting, every talk."

As much as students knew about, appreciated, and sometimes utilized Pride's virtual spaces created in response to COVID-19 precautions, they talked wistfully and hopefully about being able to return to the Center's office space to study, snack, and be in community. Pride staff shared this sentiment, writing in the newsletter:

Among the things I miss are: students dropping into my office with gossip; students

napping on the couch between classes; students watching weird YouTube videos on our

TV while I'm trying to write newsletters. But as much as I miss the office, a center is

made of people, not walls.

Pride is indeed "made of people, not walls." During an unprecedented and difficult time, students

continued to forge and maintain connections with the Center virtually.

<center>**Symbol of Institutional Commitment**</center>

Students' descriptions of the Pride Resource Center suggest the Center also served a

symbolic role in their lives and on campus. Pride functioned as the focal point for LGBTQ+

community, identities, and issues on campus. Whether students had just started to explore their

identities or had been out for years, they valued having a University-supported office dedicated

to serving LGBTQ+ students. Yet, students were keenly aware of the meager support offered to

the Center by the University, as evidenced by the Center's physical space, funding, and staff

resources.

Pride was known as the hub of LGBTQ+ community on campus. The draw of community

sustained multiple students' connection to the Center and functioned as some students' primary

attachment to Pride. It is where students go to "find a community of people like me" (Zion) and

to be "purely queer" (Ellis). Although Jake "[didn't] feel personally connected to people in the

Center," he did "feel connected to like, the Center as a whole because I am within the

community and I partake in some of the events that they put on." Although he does not feel

connected to others through Pride, Jake does derive connection through shared LGBTQ+

identities in the Center. It was a place he knew he belonged, even if he had not established strong

bonds with people there. Shared identity space can be a powerful force, especially for members

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of marginalized communities looking for space to explore their identities and to find others with shared experiences.

Students understood Pride's existence to mean the University cared about their sexualities and gender identities and experiences as LGBTQ+ students. As Nicole put it, "I feel comforted just the fact that [Pride] exists. That just makes me feel like, as a member of the community, like we are valued enough to have this space on campus." Nathan credited Pride's advocacy work as "the only reason I've had any type of livable experience here." Zion summed up how much of a balm Pride is to him, "I feel like it's an oasis… This is a space where I'm accepted for who I am. And I don't have to put up any walls to justify anything about my identity." Pride offered students both the idea of and some material conditions for respite from the hostility they faced in their campus and broader contexts. Despite participants not generally feeling valued by the University, the University did convey some amount of recognition and care for LGBTQ+ students by maintaining the Center.

Yet, students were also quick to point out the limitations to the University's support. Cobalt appreciated "all of the change and amazing work [Pride staff] are able to do on literally pennies" and pleaded through this research, "please give Pride more money and hire more people so they can do more amazing work." Similarly, Alice found the Center to be "unassuming," describing her impressions,

> I guess I sort of had this correlation between the size and the sort of like the apparent funding that the University gives. Because you can tell how much the University puts into a program. So I was like, 'Okay, so this is like, they're cool, but it's mostly just so the University can say they have one.' And then I actually like interacted with them. And I was like, 'wait, no, this shit is rad.'

Cobalt, Alice, and other students were careful to praise the Center, its staff, and their work while also critiquing the institution. Students questioned the depth of the University's support. Yes, the University appeared to value LGBTQ+ students by maintaining the Pride Resource Center. However, students asserted that this support was shallow and insufficient for the scope of need on campus. Ultimately, some students perceived the Center as symbolic of the University's care while others understood the Center's conditions as symbolic of the University's disinterest in substantively supporting LGBTQ+ students.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Most participants expressed gratitude for, satisfaction with, and feelings of connection to Pride. However, Jake's and Mouse's desires for connection to and benefit from Pride did not work out the way they had hoped. They were disappointed and resigned, but they did not express anger or blame towards the Center. Their experiences highlight the difficulties of meeting the needs of all LGBTQ+ students and the importance of community for marginalized students.

Jake, a fourth year at the time of our interview, had been interacting with Pride since he was a first-year student. He read the newsletter regularly and attended events when they were interesting or relevant to him. He also appreciated the resources available at the Center – both those he has accessed (such as a clothing swap) and those that have been less relevant to him (e.g., safer sex and menstrual supplies). Yet, he shared,

> if I could change anything, what I really want is to feel represented in those spaces. And I
> don't know how much of that is up to the Center and how much of that is up to just the
> demographics of people who attend the University or are around to visit the Center or
> those clubs.

His ultimate desire for connection with Pride was friendship: "I just want to make some trans friends and talk to them."

Despite trying multiple times over his time at the University, Jake did not find trans friends. In general, forging trans friendships was,

> one of the areas of my life where I'm not like, super fulfilled is I don't really have any friendships with other trans people… I feel like I have issues that I deal with, that my cis friends don't deal with… I have one good [trans] friend that we met on Twitter a couple years ago, and sometimes will FaceTime, but I haven't found that same connection with anybody in within [Pride].

As much as Jake has interacted with Pride, it had not been the experience he hoped for, "it wasn't really for me… like me, personally, didn't feel super at home there. But that's not to discredit that, obviously, a lot of students do. And that's great." Although Pride did not facilitate the trans friendships Jake wanted, he could hold that disappointment in tandem with recognition that Pride does help others feel more at home and connected.

Mouse, a graduating third-year student at the time of our interview, read Pride's newsletter, followed the Center on Instagram, and attended an event at Pride. Much like Jake, she was hoping to find friends through the Center. Unfortunately, Mouse was the only person to attend the movie screening and chalked this experience up as "one in another series of failed attempts to make friends." As Mouse navigated her identities and experiences, she would have liked to broaden her circle because "my friends don't always have like a lot of advice or like, ability to really relate to what I'm going through" regarding gender and sexuality. When asked if they feel connected to Pride, they responded,

> Mouse: I guess not. Maybe, like sometimes.

Chelsea: Tell me about that.

Mouse: Um, like, when I see that they're doing something really cool. Or like, something that I'm interested in doing, I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, I feel connected enough to do that.' Although I usually end up not doing things, even if I'm interested in them. But as a whole, I guess not, since I don't end up attending most of those things. I think I'd like to feel connected to it.

Mouse had glimmers of feeling connected to Pride, but they had not been able to forge strong connections to Pride or other LGBTQ+ community.

Both Jake and Mouse made attempts to stay up to date with Pride and to find friends through the Center. Yet, both came up short of that goal and they did not feel their desired connection to Pride. Mouse's suggestion of what they would like to see changed at the Center was "more programs for people who are really kind of unfamiliar with the Center or trying to build community." Jake wondered "if there were other people going to this [Pride and related events], that also didn't feel super connected. And they left, and I could have felt connected to them." Jake's and Mouse's reflections on their connections (or lack thereof) were wistful and bittersweet. In their cases, connection to Pride was predicated on finding and building community. They could see the value in the Center and yet it did not quite work for them. They would have liked different outcomes but did not hold particular animosity towards the Center.

Chapter Summary

Students conceptualized the Pride Resource Center in multiple and varied ways. Pride offered students a physical place to be, relax, socialize, and access its many resources. Students established and maintained nurturing relationships with themselves, their peers, Pride staff, and LGBTQ+ adults, which helped connect them to the Center and to sustain them during their time

at the University. Pride enacted many organizational roles, aiding individual students in navigating the University, advancing policy changes to benefit LGBTQ+ communities and the campus community, and supporting LGBTQ+ student organizations in their work. Pride's virtual functions mattered before the COVID-19 pandemic but took on a new level of meaning and import in its wake. Finally, students identified Pride's multiple symbolic purposes, including as a community hub and evidence of the University's (lack of) care for LGBTQ+ students.

Ultimately, students' experiences with Pride were frequently a means of survival and a boost towards students thriving on campus and in their lives. Pride serves as a multifaceted support for students as they come into their identities and exist in spaces that may not be welcoming or affirming. The Center staff connect students to resources, listen to students' stories, ask about assignments, amplify students' voices, and advocate on behalf of individuals and the common good. This work matters to students. Finley observed, "Pride is there if I need [support]… I think they would move mountains if they needed to, for anyone who came to the Center, no matter how big or small the need was."

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

LGBTQ+ resource centers are widely understood to be important sites of support for LGBTQ+ postsecondary students. Yet, most scholarly attention paid to LGBTQ+ centers focuses on center leadership and staffing (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Pryor et al., 2017; Sanlo, 2000; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019), while practitioner resources often attend to the structure of building and maintaining centers (including areas of work and common programmatic interventions; e.g., Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2019; Sanlo et al., 2002). Students' experiences with LGBTQ+ centers are largely absent from scholarship, despite students being the animating reason for centers' existence and work (Marine, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to understand LGBTQ+ resource centers from students' perspectives. My guiding research questions were: how do students who feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center conceptualize the center in their ecosystems? How do students who feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center understand and experience the center? Through a qualitative study guided by the critical campus ecology model, I explored the contexts, connections, understandings, and experiences of 15 participants who feel in some way connected to their campus LGBTQ+ center. In this chapter, I offer a discussion of findings as well as implications for practice, theory, and research.

Discussion of Findings

In many ways, higher education in the 2020s looks very different than the 1970s when the first office focused on gay and lesbian students opened. Identity terms have shifted and expanded; LGBTQ+ communities have greater visibility (Rankin et al., 2019). Yet, many aspects of LGBTQ+ undergraduate and graduate students' experiences and needs remain similar.

Campus LGBTQ+ resource centers remain a critical support for students as they explore their identities, seek community, and navigate their lives on and off campus.

The findings of this study about students' conceptions, experiences, and understandings of their campus LGBTQ+ center include both individual-level and organizational-level analyses. In Chapter 4, I described participants' aggregated ecosystems by using the critical campus ecology model. In Chapter 5, I explored the five major conceptions of LGBTQ+ campus centers as understood by students who felt in some way connected to their center. By focusing on both the individuals and the organization, I could present a fuller picture of students' experiences with and understandings of the Pride Resource Center.

As students navigated their lives on and beyond campus, they turned to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center looking for a place to be themselves, to find friends and community, to access support and resources, and to survive (if not thrive) at their institution. These needs and wants seem standard—things any student might be looking for during their time in higher education. Yet, as detailed in Chapter 4, participants too often faced hostility, rejection, and violence because of their genders and sexualities. In their microsystems, including with friends and family, participants reported a mix of supportive and negative influences. Campus environments similarly presented a range of supports and challenges for students, often resulting in students feeling unvalued by the University. Transgender students and students of color especially shared more negative, exclusionary, and harmful experiences on campus. Students also reported being highly aware of and influenced by their sociopolitical contexts, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic and a highly divisive presidential election.

These findings align with previous studies in which LGBTQ+ students reported varied experiences depending on their identities and specific contexts (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey,

2019; Greathouse et al., 2018; Vaccaro, 2012). Within and across these layers of contexts, my participants grappled with their identities, lived experiences, and roles in their communities, often with the help of Pride's space, staff, and programmatic offerings. Participants' needs and wants for their LGBTQ+ center carry a particular urgency. Today's LGBTQ+ students need and want access to space, community, and resources responsive to and inclusive of queer and trans communities.

My focus on students and their ecosystems provided evocative snapshots of students' experiences at the University and beyond. These snapshots offered important context for how LGBTQ+ students experienced and understood Pride. I identified five overarching ways students conceptualized their campus LGBTQ+ center: physical space, source of relationships, organizational navigation and tools, virtual presence, and symbol of institutional commitment. Pride served as a physical place to be on campus (when the office was not closed due to COVID-19 precautions). Many students felt welcomed, comforted, and sustained by their time in the Center's physical space. Pride's relational functions spanned identity exploration, peer relationships, student-staff relationships, and access to LGBTQ+ adults. These relational aspects served to nurture students' sense of self and connection to others holding similar identities. Students turned to Pride for organizational assistance, including institutional navigation and advocacy, as well as support for LGBTQ+ student organizations. Even when other offices existed to address a given situation, students often called on Pride to help them access the resources and services they needed. Pride offered some virtual connection options and resources, which greatly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Pride functioned as a symbol of the University's care for LGBTQ+ students, even when students criticized the depth and sincerity of that care. These five functions helped to sustain students during challenging times,

made college a more livable space, and promoted students' overall identity development and wellbeing.

This study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Pride Resource Center's physical office was closed, yet these findings are largely in alignment with scholarship on the histories, purposes, functions, and roles of campus LGBTQ+ centers (Hartman, 2014; Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2002). LGBTQ+ centers are a physical place, yet they are so much more. This statement was true when students could gather in person and was particularly evident when the physical center space was not accessible.

Although individuals, families, campuses, and the world have progressed in their understandings of gender and sexuality, much work remains until people no longer face exclusion, rejection, or violence for their identities. Institutional environments and community members make flourishing quite the challenge for many LGBTQ+ students. LGBTQ+ centers can be an oasis, reprieve, and support in the face of such hostile conditions. Among participants in this study and for so many others, students' connections to their campus LGBTQ+ center were overwhelmingly sustaining, nurturing, and affirming. Students gained perspectives and guidance as they made sense of their identities, relationships, and the world. Further, Centers supported students' wellbeing and capacity to remain enrolled.

In Chapter 1, I posed a series of questions to express the significance of this study. The final question, "How might the experiences of today's students interacting with their LGBTQ+ center offer direction and focus for the next 50 years of LGBTQ+ centers?," requires urgent attention. However, perhaps a better focus would be on how institutions must change in the next 50 years to be less awful for students at the margins. Institutions must engage in honest reflection about their histories and present environments for students and make changes to serve all

students better. LGBTQ+ centers have a role to play in institutional change, but institutions cannot solely rely on center staff members who are already overworked and under-resourced to enact this work (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019). Institutions must invest time, energy, and resources into making all learning environments more equitable and inclusive—especially for those holding minoritized genders, sexualities, and additional identities—such that a study like this one does not find similar things about students' experiences on campus in 5 years, let alone 50 years. With these findings and analysis as a foundation, I offer implications for practice, research, and theory.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have clear implications for practice. As LGBTQ+ centers exist within their own contexts, I present these implications beginning at the center level and expanding to address student affairs divisions, institutions, and professional organizations. Although I offer extended implications for LGBTQ+ center practice, the most significant of my implications rest at the divisional, institutional, and professional organization levels. LGBTQ+ centers have opportunities to shift and improve their practice, but I operate from the assumption (one shared by this study's participants) that centers are doing the best they can within their contexts and available resources. Supervising divisions, institutions, and professional organizations have the opportunity and obligation to create more favorable conditions in which LGBTQ+ centers do their work and in which LGBTQ+ students can learn, grow, and live.

LGBTQ+ Center Practice

In this study, students turned to their campus LGBTQ+ center to hang out, to find community, to learn about themselves and others, and to access resources for navigating their identities and campus contexts. Utilizing the five major ways students conceptualized LGBTQ+

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center work I described in Chapter 5, I offer specific implications and recommendations for LGBTQ+ center practice.

Physical Space

Most participants felt comforted and welcomed by Pride's physical space. Their appreciation for the space had little to do with (and was perhaps in spite of) the Center's square footage. Rather, the Center felt "homey" with its lounge space, snacks, and colorful decorations. LGBTQ+ centers should consider how students experience and use their physical space when making design decisions. Although budgets for furnishings and décor are likely limited, it may be possible to add comfy pillows or to showcase student artwork to make the center space feel cozier and more personalized. Centers should also consider the resources they make available in their space. For example, students knew they could access a variety of free safer sex materials— not just external condoms—at Pride. Having snacks not only builds community, but it can also help address food insecurity. Sharps containers can signal to trans students (and other people who need to use injectable medications) that it is a safe place for them to take care of their medical needs.

Source of Relationships

Participants expressed a desire for community, specifically finding LGBTQ+ friends, potential partners, and role models. Centers should continue to proactively create opportunities for students to meet new people and to strengthen existing relationships. Orientation as well as first-year and new student programs are common examples. Additional opportunities include LGBTQ+-focused programming, general social events, events specifically to meet other LGBTQ+-identified people, drop-in hours at the physical or virtual center, and online communities (e.g., Discord). Center staff should be mindful that students of any type and stage

(e.g., continuing undergraduate students, graduate students) may be looking for such connections and create opportunities specific to these populations.

Centers work at multiple levels to aid students in accessing identity exploration and campus resources. Students often (un)learn about many identities and ways of being—their own and others'—through their center. Staff should be prepared for the heavy lift of facilitating this work across multiple dimensions of identity and with great attention to the dynamics of power and privilege at play for each individual. To do so, staff should commit to doing their own ongoing identity work, to clarifying their own values and commitments, and to intervening whenever necessary to reduce harm to those most marginalized. The critical campus ecology model (CCEM) is a useful tool for staff as they consider students' ecologies, their own ecologies, and their relationships to power as individuals and within their institution.

Organizational Navigation and Tools

Often, center staff work one-on-one with students in need of specific campus supports, for example Ellis's name change process or Alice's and Nathan's trans-inclusive on-campus living arrangements. This individual work is invaluable, yet time consuming. It also often requires center staff to have productive working relationships with offices (or perhaps key allies within offices) across campus. In addition to this one-on-one work, center staff should advocate for policy changes within other offices and at the broader institution to create sustainable change and reduce the need for individual advocacy. For example, if there is a clear gender-inclusive housing option with transparent and known application processes, then there is little need for center staff to work individually with trans students seeking on-campus housing and trans students are less othered in the housing process. Notably, campus offices can—and should— implement LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and practices. They may want or need to consult with the

LGBTQ+ center, but the center cannot advance these efforts alone. The responsibility of creating a more inclusive institution belongs to all members of the institution, not only those working in identity-specific offices and programs.

Virtual Presence

Students are bombarded with information and opportunities from their institutions, so staff and administrators must find strategies to effectively disseminate information to students (Ammigan & Laws, 2018; McCarthy, 2020). Participants overwhelmingly affirmed the usefulness of a regular high-quality email newsletter. Pride's newsletter arrives weekly during the academic year, full of Center updates, events (hosted by the Center, student organizations, and other campus entities), helpful resources, as well as opportunities for work and research. Students also appreciated alternative avenues for learning about Center happenings, including Discord and other social media platforms. These virtual communications are a significant amount of work, yet they served a vital role for connecting students to the Center and important resources.

Pride transitioned to fully virtual offerings for a period during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, they had operated as a largely in-person center. As similarly situated LGBTQ+ centers return to in-person programming, I urge these centers to maintain virtual options when possible to increase the accessibility of their programming. For example, students may not be able to attend an event in person if it is being held across campus from their classes, lab, or job. Similarly, commuter students may not be able to make the trip to campus for an event. Additionally, some students may not feel comfortable or able to be seen in LGBTQ+ center spaces because it could be perceived as their disclosure of an LGBTQ+ identity. If the event can also be livestreamed, any of these students may participate and benefit from the center's

programming. Certainly, providing both in-person and virtual options creates additional work and expense for centers, so centers should prioritize key events as needed. Primarily in-person centers could also create specific virtual offerings (e.g., drop-in hangouts, discussion groups) tailored to those students who might not be able to access the center in person.

Symbol of Institutional Commitment

Institutions must demonstrate their investment in LGBTQ+ students through their actions and budgetary allocations. Participants were keenly aware of Pride's small space, shoestring budget, and understaffing. Institutions can demonstrate their commitment to LGBTQ+ students and community members by funding the LGBTQ+ center to be staffed sufficiently and to be able to respond to students' and institutional needs. Further, institutions should consider the optics of where the LGBTQ+ center is located on campus. Is the LGBTQ+ center located near other identity centers and student services? Is the center easy to find while also private enough for those concerned about being outed when seen in the center? A center's ability to tend to their physical space and to advance their relationship building, organizational navigation, and virtual presence work requires sufficient institutional supports.

Finally, it is necessary to affirm that centers do not and cannot meet all needs for all people, especially when those needs are the result of campus and societal problems. This affirmation does not diminish the work centers do or the need to continue to improve that work. Rather, centers cannot be the sole place for LGBTQ+ students to exist fully and authentically on campus, nor can center staff be the only people responsible for LGBTQ+ student inclusion and well-being on campus. Each institution must have multiple places for LGBTQ+ students to be seen, valued, and served.

Student Affairs Division Practice

Many LGBTQ+ centers are situated within their institution's student affairs division. I direct the following implications for practice at student affairs divisions or the applicable division within which a given campus's LGBTQ+ center is housed. Additionally, though this research focused on LGBTQ+ centers, these recommendations are likely applicable to other identity centers if specific community needs are taken into consideration as well.

Repeatedly, students in this study spoke of Pride's small physical space, which suggested a lack of institutional care and limited the Center's ability to host events or welcome large numbers of students. To support LGBTQ+ centers' physical space and resources, student affairs divisions should think about location and space allocations. How does the current center space facilitate or constrain the center's work? What messages do students perceive about the division's or institution's valuing of the center and the population it serves? Certainly, a center's location and space allocations are often hard to change. However, when there is a redesign of the current space or a reshuffling of office spaces, it may be possible to offer the center a different location or funds to improve their current space.

Student affairs divisions have a multitude of opportunities to materially support the work of LGBTQ+ centers. For example, they should allocate the center a budget with sufficient funds both to staff the center adequately and to cover the center's expenses for programming and supplies. Budgets are a perennial challenge at all levels of higher education and within an institution. Yet, participants were keenly aware of the paucity of Pride's budget and understood it as a reflection of a lack of care for LGBTQ+ students.

Student affairs divisions should proactively advertise and affirm the LGBTQ+ center's existence and good work. Students found Pride through many avenues, including friends,

scholarships, Google searches for name and housing policies, and orientation. Student affairs should continue to host the center at its events (e.g., orientation, campus resource fairs) and amplify its work through their communications (e.g., newsletters, social media). Further, the division can support collaborations between the LGBTQ+ center and other units such as fellow identity centers, housing, and campus activities. Such collaborations may help steward limited funds more effectively and create greater awareness of the LGBTQ+ center on campus.

Students turned to Pride staff for help navigating and making change at the University. For example, Robert turned to Pride staff rather than the Disability Services Office or Housing when they needed accessible on-campus housing. Student affairs divisions should foreground their commitment to serving all students, especially those who are most marginalized. To do so, they may choose to any number of strategies such as specifically naming their commitment to these marginalized populations in their mission statement, invest in trainings for staff, and create and uphold policies and practices to remove barriers for marginalized students. Each of the division's offices and programs must enact this commitment in their work. Staff of various offices should cross-train so that they might be able to help a student and honor the student's multiple identities without having to refer them out to multiple other offices. For example, staff leading a first-generation scholars program should also be able to share resources about how to update one's name in campus systems and where to find prayer rooms for Muslim students.

Pride also engaged in significant advocacy and policy change work on behalf of students. The division of student affairs should proactively lead efforts to change policies on campus that exclude and oppress people on the basis of gender, sex, and sexuality (as well as other social identities). For example, the division could advance a gender inclusive housing and facilities policies.

Institutional Practice

Students shared their mixed experiences on campus and with the University. They frequently felt un-valued by the University and microaggressed in many campus contexts. Yet, participants recognized Pride's existence as a sign that the institution did care about them to some extent. Institutions must pursue strategies to support LGBTQ+ students and the campus LGBTQ+ center, conveying their investment in LGBTQ+ students through their actions.

This study demonstrated the vital roles that LGBTQ+ centers serve on campus. For institutions with an LGBTQ+ center, administrators should evaluate how they can meaningfully support the center, especially through budgets, staffing, and office space. Centers, including Pride, find creative ways to create broad impact with limited resources. Students both appreciate this exceptional work and question why the institution does not more adequately resource the center. Administrators should work with center staff to best understand the needs of the center and the students it serves when setting and acting upon a plan. For institutions without an established LGBTQ+ center, administrators should consult with campus community members and consider proactively establishing a center, rather than waiting to react to a bias incident or student demands (Sanlo et al., 2002). When planning to establish a center, institutions should prioritize funding a professional staff member rather than relying exclusively on part-time graduate student labor (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019).

Institutions would do well to recognize and compensate LGBTQ+ center staff as professionals engaged in both specialist and generalist roles. This compensation should be accounted for in the budget allocations for the center. Students in this study looked to Pride staff for identity-related guidance, such as navigating the intersections of queerness and Black identity (C) and the legal name change process (Ellis). Additionally, students turned to Pride staff

members for assistance with campus life and systems, including housing (Alice, Nathan, Robert), information technology (Nathan), and health and well-being (Hugo). For these more general purposes, there are already dedicated staff in these areas. Yet, students felt more comfortable or better served by working, at least initially, with Pride staff. It is also very possible that LGBTQ+ students seek and find support for their genders and sexualities outside of the LGBTQ+ center. In both cases, this seeming redundancy holds adaptive and responsive functions, proving enormously valuable for serving students where they are and when they need it.

Ultimately, institutions have an obligation to serve their students. Beyond supporting their campus LGBTQ+ center and center staff, the institution must also actively work to become more welcoming to LGBTQ+ students such that they have equitable opportunities to learn, grow, and exist as their full selves throughout campus. For example, institutions should work to build the capacity for faculty and staff outside of the LGBTQ+ center to be able and willing to support students' LGBTQ+ identity exploration. Based on the stories shared through this study, faculty and staff have much learning to do about gender, sexuality, and other minoritized identities. Students experienced microaggressions everywhere from their classrooms to dining halls to the mail room. In addition to non-discrimination statements and other affirmations of valuing queer and trans campus community members, the institution should invest in creating conditions where LGBTQ+ students (and faculty, staff, and alumni) are respected and valued. At a more individual level, this work could look like anti-bias and anti-oppression workshops and office-level commitments to serving students equitably. At the institutional level, administrators should work with units across campus to identify and ameliorate policies with disparate impacts on LGBTQ+ communities, including name change and chosen name policies, gender-inclusive facilities access policies, and financial aid awarding policies.

Association Practice

On campus, LGBTQ+ center staff often have few other identity center professionals with whom they can consult about their work and the issues they are facing. To find community, guidance, and professional development, center staff often turn to professional associations such as the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (Consortium), ACPA – College Student Educators International (ACPA), and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). These associations should provide resources for LGBTQ+ center practitioners to continue their learning. Continuing education about identities, including and well beyond gender and sexuality, is perhaps obvious but no less necessary. Participants' experiences with their racial, class, and religious identities in the Pride Resource Center and in their lives generally suggest that these identities may be particularly salient and ripe for attention among LGBTQ+ center staff.

Associations should offer professional development opportunities around coalition building on campus so center staff may more effectively partner with other campus entities to advance the LGBTQ+ center's good work and aid students with things outside of the center's purview (e.g., accessibility accommodations, student food pantry, health center). Further, associations should endeavor to support center staff's on-campus advocacy. They can publish position statements about current events and recommended policies. Additionally, associations should sponsor research about LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ centers with particular attention to students holding multiple marginalized identities as well as varied institutional contexts for students and centers alike. Finally, associations should champion members' learning about and commitment to supporting students experiencing marginalization, including and beyond gender and sexuality. Creating more equitable and inclusive higher education spaces must also include

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attention to those working across institutional roles, not only in LGBTQ+ and similar identity-focused centers.

Implications for Theory

To serve as the framework for this study, I introduced the critical campus ecology model (CCEM), an adaptation to Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993, 1995) ecological model of development and subsequent application to postsecondary contexts (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Based on my theoretical development and application for this study, I offer two major implications for future use of the CCEM. First, the CCEM created a dynamic framework for shifting perspectives between the individual and an organization in their ecosystem. Second, the CCEM required explicit attention to power structures and their manifestations across systems within a student's context.

One of the strengths of Bronfenbrenner's model and its derivatives, including the CCEM, is how it sensitizes researchers (and practitioners in different circumstances) to the individual and their specific contexts. It is not overly mechanistic or explanatory, but rather descriptive at a particular moment in the individual's life. In this study, I relied on the CCEM to orient me to students' particular and shared experiences of the University—a familiar application of Bronfenbrenner and similar models focused on individual-level dynamics (e.g., De La Cruz-Caldera, 2017; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Yousafzai, 2019). I also used the CCEM to garner insights into the role of the Pride Resource Center in students' ecosystems, effectively inverting the common approach to foreground a specific organization. By using both approaches, I could shift my focus between the individuals and the organization of interest, yielding a more multidimensional and dynamic understanding of the relationship between students and their campus LGBTQ+ center. This approach to Bronfenbrenner-derived models and other theories

attending to both the individual and organizational levels may be particularly generative for future research.

The major scholarly contribution of the CCEM is its attention to structures of power and oppression at all levels of an individual's ecosystem, from microsystems to macrosystems. Using the CCEM as a framework was valuable as a means of directly naming and addressing systems of power in students' ecosystems as well as in the need for and nature of Pride's work. As part of the interview protocol, I asked students about how "systems of power and oppression" showed up in their lives. Their answers were revealing about how students made sense of their marginalized and privileged identities, the forces shaping their worlds, and how they understand their places within these worlds. Future research and practical applications could utilize the CCEM as a tool for reflection, identity exploration, and social critique.

Additionally, the CCEM could be further applied and honed to interrogate systems of power more effectively. It can be hard to disentangle power's multiple and insidious workings, especially when one is living within and through them. For example, I found students had varying comfort and facility discussing "systems of power and oppression" during our interviews. It was a big question with many potential responses for each student. Researchers and practitioners may find focusing on a specific force, such as classism or heterosexism, allows for a more directed and rich analysis. If choosing to focus on a single manifestation for analytical purposes, it is important to acknowledge that one manifestation exists as overlapping and interconnected with other systems of power and oppression.

Implications for Research

This study offers several implications for research. These implications center on accounting for context within methodological and methods choices as well as the state of

research about and with LGBTQ+ resource centers. I also recommend future research directions for scholarship about and with LGBTQ+ students, LGBTQ+ centers, and institutional efforts to support students with minoritized identities.

For this study, I adapted and used an ecology model to orient myself to students' multiple layers of context and power systems throughout my study design, data collection, and analysis. Thanks to my framework and methodological choices, the findings and analysis from this study are richer and more grounded in the colorful contours of students' lived experiences. What students experienced beyond Pride's physical and relational boundaries clearly influenced students' connections to and understandings of the Center. Although this specific framework and methodological approach is not suitable for all research questions, I urge scholars to find ways to attend to context and situatedness in research, especially when seeking to interpret people's choices and experiences.

Turning to topical implications, I argue there is continued need for attention to LGBTQ+ resource centers through empirical research. This study spotlights students' connections to, understandings of, and experiences with LGBTQ+ centers, a focus that is not well represented in empirical research. As LGBTQ+ centers and LGBTQ+ student organizations are an important source of organizational support for students (Pitcher et al., 2018), these spaces and relationships are worthy of further attention. Although this study foregrounds students, its findings suggest the importance of center staff, including attention to their personal identities and professional capacities. Recently, scholars have considered some aspects of LGBTQ+ center staff experiences (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019). These studies begin to document and theorize about the conditions and needs of graduate students who serve as the sole staff member for their campus LGBTQ+ center. Further scholarly attention to staff experiences,

especially at differently resourced and staffed centers, would offer valuable insights into the possibilities and complexities of LGBTQ+ center practice, institutional conditions, and student needs.

The critical campus ecology model is particularly well suited to continued research on LGBTQ+ centers. The CCEM creates the possibility of considering the individual within the context of their organizational membership as well as the organization through those who belong to or interact with it. Simultaneously, the CCEM requires the researcher to be sensitized to how oppressive systems influence the individual, the organization, and the relationship between them. Research on centers with the CCEM could include center staff's reflections on their own professional practice in the context of their institution. An ecological analysis of an LGBTQ+ center's (or other office's and program's) positioning within its institution could be particularly useful for identifying opportunities and constraints for the center and the institution, root causes of the constraints, and the levers of change accessible to different stakeholders.

This study, situated within an LGBTQ+ center, also highlighted the continued need to consider and advance the work of identity centers and identity-centered work in higher education. Identity centers, including cultural, women's, and LGBTQ+ centers, serve key functions on campus—for students holding minoritized identities as well as for other campus community members and overall campus climate improvement efforts. Yet, there is relatively scant empirical research and theorizing in and about these centers. As scholars and practitioners work to create more inclusive, just, and liberatory environments in higher education, existing identity centers and identity-centered work are valuable resources and sites of knowledge.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study raises a number of areas for additional research. Future research could focus on (1) LGBTQ+ students who do not engage with or feel connected to their campus LGBTQ+ center, (2) students' experiences of building LGBTQ+ community on campuses without an LGBTQ+ center, (3) students' experiences with less well-resourced and staffed LGBTQ+ centers (e.g., centers run exclusively by a part-time staff member or a graduate assistant), and (4) institutional efforts to create conditions for students holding minoritized identities to thrive.

I advocate for future research to continue to explore students and their varied relationships to LGBTQ+ centers. This study's inclusion criteria required students feel in some way connected to their center. Even with this criterion, there was considerable variation among students' connections to and experiences with Pride. Several students interacted with the Center without feeling the connections they desired. The corollary to this study is an exploration of LGBTQ+ students who chose not to engage with their campus LGBTQ+ center or those who might interact but not feel a connection to their center. Both of these populations may offer further actionable insights into LGBTQ+ center practice and institutional supports for LGBTQ+ students.

Another potential study could explore how LGBTQ+ students attending institutions without an LGBTQ+ center go about building formal and informal LGBTQ+ communities. Approximately 15 percent of institutions in the U.S. have an LGBTQ+ center (Greathouse et al., 2018), so the majority of students do not have access to a campus LGBTQ+ center. How might they find fellow LGBTQ+ people, an animating desire of many of the students in this study with an LGBTQ+ center? How do these students navigate campus and community spaces, especially

when their LGBTQ+ identities become especially salient (e.g., accessing medical care, navigating lived and legal name changes)?

Students in this study clearly and repeatedly called for greater institutional support for Pride. Their calls were certainly grounded in real student and campus needs, yet Pride has more staffing and resources than many other LGBTQ+ centers. A future study could focus on student connections to campus LGBTQ+ centers with fewer resources and staff members. I wonder how students at less well-resourced centers understand their centers' capacities to show up for the many possible functional areas of LGBTQ+ center work (Marine, 2011, Sanlo et al., 2002) and their institutions' valuing of LGBTQ+ students.

Finally, this study focuses on a particular manifestation of how institutions seek to create conditions for students' thriving, especially students holding minoritized identities. As student populations in higher education shift (as they have been for decades; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), higher education practitioners and researchers have an imperative to continue to interrogate, improve, and, in some cases, completely overhaul our policies and practices. For LGBTQ+ centers as well as their fellow identity center and identity-focused program colleagues, this research could focus on their institutional positioning, specific practices, or student and staff experiences. An expanded empirical base for practitioners and administrators from which to draw could further contextualize identity-focused work, making it more legible especially to other staff, administrators, and perhaps external funders.

Summary

In this chapter, I offered implications for higher education practice, the critical campus ecology model, and research about LGBTQ+ resource centers. At the heart of these implications

and future research directions is a call for higher education institutions, practitioners, and scholars to attend carefully to LGBTQ+ centers and similar identity-focused organizational structures in order to create more equitable, just, and liberatory environments in which students may learn and grow. To respond to these calls, stakeholders at all levels and throughout institutions should consider their campus environments and climate, the staffing and infrastructure required for such work, as well as students' needs, experiences, and identities.

Most students in this study found great value, comfort, and connection through their interactions with their campus LGBTQ+ center. The Pride Resource Center served as a place for students to find community, to seek guidance from staff and peers, to be unabashedly themselves, and to make sense of their worlds. This place and space were particularly valuable when understood within students' ecological contexts, which included chilly campus contexts, challenging family dynamics, discriminatory and divisive sociopolitical contexts, and blatant oppression, including racism, cissexism, heterosexism, and classism. LGBTQ+ centers can serve as a nurturing "oasis" and safe harbor for many students. Students find personal growth, strength, encouragement, and success through their connections to their campus LGBTQ+ center.

APPENDICES

Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

Interview 1 – Campus Ecology & LGBTQ+ resource center

Thank you for taking the time today to talk with me! I am a PhD candidate at Michigan State University and I identify within the LGBTQ+ community. I am studying students' connections to their campus LGBTQ+ resource center. Today, I'll be asking you about you, your experiences at [institution], and the [institution's LGBTQ+ center].

This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be recorded. I'll also be taking notes as we talk because it is helpful for me. You've already returned your consent form – thank you. I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question or to discontinue the interview at any point.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What interested you in this study about students and LGBTQ+ centers?

2. Student's Background
    a. How would you describe yourself?
    b. Which of your identities are most salient to you? How do these identities show up in your life?
    c. Why did you decide to attend [institution]?
    d. How would you describe your time at [institution]?

3. Campus Ecology
    a. I would like to learn more about your life as a student at [institution]. Using the graphic I'm going to share with you [using screen sharing on Zoom], I'm going to ask you about your day-to-day life and things that influence it.
        i. Filling in the model:
            1. On the screen, there is a graphic of concentric circles with the student – in this case, you – in the middle. The innermost circle represents your daily life – where you spend time, who you spend it with. What would be in this circle for you?
                a. Examples: classes, friends, work, family, student orgs, volunteering
            2. How do these elements of your daily life interact with each other, if at all?
            3. The next circle represents things that you might not interact with on a regular basis but influence your experiences as a student. What would be in this circle for you?
                a. Examples: financial aid, immigration policy, grad school admission criteria, curriculum requirements

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4. The biggest circle represents major things shaping your world –
things like historical and current events or cultural belief systems.
What would be in this circle for you?
a. Example: forces in society, current events, cultural beliefs
ii. If student does not mention, ask: where would you put the LGBTQ+
resource center? Why?
b. Do you feel valued at [institution]? Do you feel like you belong here?
i. Tell me about a time you felt valued [or not] / like you [did not] belong.

4. LGBTQ+ Center
a. How have you interacted with the center?
i. Why did you first interact with the center?
ii. Have your interactions changed during your time at [institution]? How?
b. How would you describe your connection to the center?
c. How would you describe the center to someone who had never heard of it?
i. What does the center do?
ii. Who does the center serve?
iii. What is the center's space like?

5. As we wrap up today, is there anything else you would like to share?

Figure 4

Graphic for Interview 1, Question 3
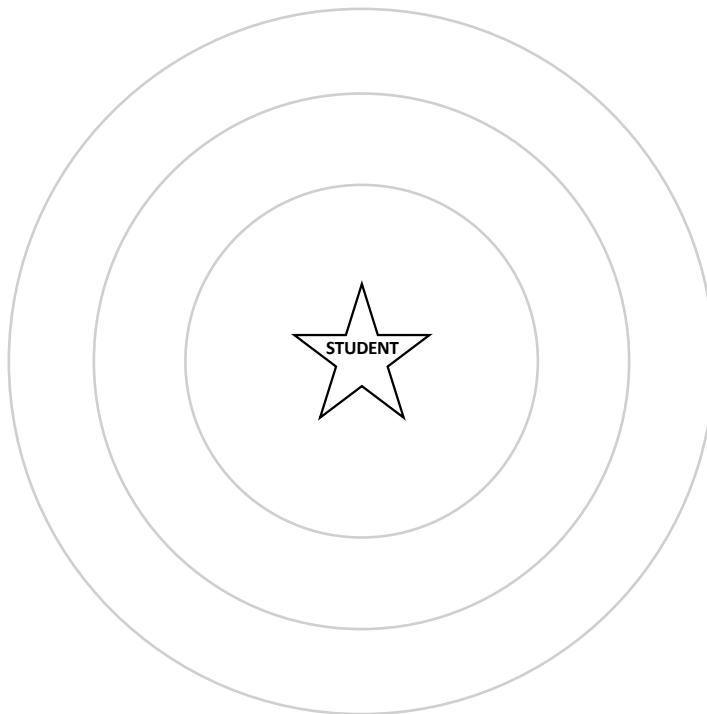
Interview 2 – LGBTQ+ Center Experiences & Meaning Making

Thank you for taking to talk with me again! As you know, this is the second interview for my study about students' connections to their LGBTQ+ campus center. Today, I'll be asking you more about your experiences with the [institutional center].

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Revisiting Campus Ecology
   a. Based on our first conversation, I put your responses into the graphic [show personalized model graphic]. How does this personalized graphic look to you? Is there anything you want to change, add, or remove?
   b. Looking at your circles, how, if at all, do you see systems of power and oppression factor into your life?
   c. Is there anything else you want me to know about you and your world?

2. How did you learn about the LGBTQ+ resource center?

3. Experiencing the center
   a. How do you feel going to the center itself? Events hosted by the center in other spaces?
   b. Who have you met when interacting with the center?
      i. Staff? Peers? Faculty? Community members?
   c. What is your favorite part of the center? Least favorite part?
   d. If you could change anything about the center, what would it be?

4. Connection
   a. Do you feel connected to the LGBTQ+ center?
      i. Have you ever felt not connected or disconnected from the center?
      ii. Please describe what that dis/connection feels like.
      iii. Has this changed over time? How?
   b. How has the center influenced your experience at [institution]?
      i. How might your experience at [institution] be different if you had/did not interact with the center?
   c. Would you recommend the center to others?
      i. To whom? For what?

5. Any additional questions
   a. Based on the participant's previous interviews, additional questions will be asked to synthesize previous interview and to promote reflection.

6. As we wrap up today, is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Mapping Data Sources to Areas of Inquiry

Table 2

Areas of Inquiry in Relation to Project Data Sources

Major area of inquiry		Data source
Student	Personal identities	Interview 1 – Q2
	Current ecosystem	Interview 1 – Q3 Interview 2 – Q1
	Experiences at the University	Interview 1 – Q3, Q4a.ii Interview 2 – Q2, Q4b
	Experiences with LGBTQ+ center	Interview 1 – Q1, Q3a.ii, Q4a Interview 2 – Q2, Q3, Q4
	Conceptions of LGBTQ+ center	Interview 1 – Q4b Interview 2 – Q2, Q3, Q4
LGBTQ+ center	Areas of work	Interview 1 – Q4 Interview 2 – Q3 Observations Documents
	Physical space	Interview 1 – Q4b.iii Interview 2 – Q3a
	Staff	Interview 1 – Q4 Interview 2 – Q3b Observations Documents
	Institutional context	Interview 1 – Q4a.ii Interview 2 – Q4b Observations Documents
	Perceptions of center's intended users, audiences	Interview 1 – Q4 Interview 2 – Q3b, Q4c

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