# An assessment of campus climate among sexual minority college students

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**ABSTRACT**

While several studies have clearly identified a link between sexual minority status and discrimination, harassment, and victimization on college campuses, less in known about sexual minority students and other indicators of campus climate. The goal of the current study was to examine the association between sexual minority status and students' perceptions of their connection to the university, trust in the university to keep them safe, and confidence in sexual assault reporting system at their university. Contrary to the predictions, there was no significant difference between LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ students in their connection to the university and trust in the university to keep students safe. However, LGBTQ students did report significantly lower confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university than non-LGBTQ students. The implications of the findings are discussed along with recommendations for creating an inclusive campus climate for sexual minority students.

Keywords: higher education; campus climate; sexual minorities

## INTRODUCTION

A cross-section of studies conducted in the United States (U.S.) have found that rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide are elevated among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (LGBTQ) individuals in comparison to their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts (King et al. 2008; Kosciw et al. 2012; Mereisha, O'Cleirighb, and Bradford 2014). Sexual minorities report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression than non-sexual minorities (Kosciw et al. 2012), and they are at an increased risk for substance abuse and suicide (Mereisha, O'Cleirighb, and Bradford 2014). In a meta-analysis of 25 studies, King et al. (2008) found that substance abuse was 1.5 times higher among lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (LGB), and LGB individuals were twice as likely as heterosexuals to attempt suicide.

Several studies have found an association between the increased rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide among sexual minorities and their disproportionate experiences with victimization and discrimination at school (Almeida et al. 2009; Martin-Storey and Crosnoe 2012; Russell et al. 2011). Since 1999, the U.S. organization Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has conducted the biennial National School Climate Survey in order to assess the incidence and prevalence of bullying and harassment directed at LGBTQ students and examining the impact of hostile school climates on LGBTQ youth. The 2013 survey had nearly 8,000 respondents ages 13 – 21 from all 50 U.S. states who attended a K-12 school during the previous year (Kosciw et al. 2012). Of the students who identified as LGBTQ in the 2013 survey, 64% reported hearing homophobic language frequently at school and half reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers and/or school staff. Seventy-five percent (75%) of LGBT students reported experiencing verbal harassment (e.g., slurs, threats), 36% reported physical harassment (e.g., pushed, shoved), and 16% reported being physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked).

While the National School Climate Survey focuses exclusively on high school students, other studies have examined campus climate from the perspective of sexual minority college students in the U.S. and consistently found they report significantly more discrimination, harassment, and victimization than their non-sexual minority peers (Rankin 2004; Rankin et al. 2010; Yost and Gilmore 2011). Rankin (2003) conducted a multi-institutional survey in the U.S. that included over 1,000 sexual minority college students. Nearly 30% of respondents reported experiencing harassment, 20% reported worrying about their physical safety, and as a result over one-third of the sample reported that they believed it was necessary to hide their sexual minority status on their campuses. In conjunction with the non-profit U.S. organization, Campus Pride, Rankin et al. (2010) conducted the most comprehensive study of LGBTQ college students to date. The national study surveyed over 3,000 sexual minority college students and found that they were twice as likely as their peers to be the target of derogatory comments and seven more times likely to report the harassment they received was based on their sexual minority status.

While several studies have clearly identified a link between sexual minority status and discrimination, harassment, and victimization on U.S. college campuses (Rankin 2003; Rankin et al. 2010; Yost and Gilmore 2011), less in known about sexual minority students and other indicators of campus climate. Title IX of the United States Educational Amendments of 1972 requires that all schools receiving federal funds prohibit discrimination based on sex, and its scope was subsequently expanded to include sexual orientation and gender identity. While not yet mandated, all universities receiving federal funds have been encouraged to conduct campus climate surveys in order to demonstrate they are meeting federal guidelines (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault 2014).

In its *First Report*, the U.S. White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual

Assault (2014) released a tool kit to guide universities in the development of campus climate surveys, which, in part, included measures designed to assess students' (a) connection to the university - how much do students feel valued, respected, and a sense of belonging at their university; (b) trust in the university to keep students safe - how much do students trust that their university is doing all it can to keep them safe and trust that if an incident were to occur that their university would handle it appropriately; and (c) confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university – how confident are students that if they reported a sexual assault that the report would be taken seriously and perpetrators would be held accountable.

Given that LGBTQ students in the U.S. routinely report more discrimination, harassment, and victimization than their peers (Rankin 2003; Rankin et al. 2010; Yost and Gilmore 2011), it is important to understand how this disenfranchisement is associated with other indicators of campus climate. The goal of the current study was to examine the association between sexual minority status and students' perceptions of their connection to the university, trust in the university to keep them safe, and confidence in sexual assault reporting system at their university. Since research has consistently found that sexual minority students are more likely to feel disenfranchised than their non-sexual minority peers (Ottenritter 2012; Rankin 2005), it was hypothesized that LGBTQ students would report lower levels of connection, trust, and confidence in their university than non-LGBTQ students.

**Review of Literature**

Campus climate has been defined as "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (Rankin 2005, 17), and alternatively as the "metaphorical temperature gauge" through which we assess whether a college provides a welcoming learning environment (Cress 2008, 96). Over the past 50 years, extensive research in the U.S. has been devoted to understanding the impact of campus climate on student success both inside and outside the classroom (Brown et al. 2004). With the 'traditional' U.S. student of the past (i.e., white, male, recently out of high school, from an educated middle-class family, living on campus and attending full-time) giving way to students largely from nontraditional backgrounds on many campuses, there is an increased focus on institutions' provision of enriching environments in order to maximize success for all students (Rendon 1994).

Research indicates that students' perceptions of campus climate have been associated with a variety of student outcomes, including academic achievement, social adjustment, and retention (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Rankin et al. 2016; Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo 2006). Kimmel (2015, 2010) identifies *bullying*—specifically with regard to acts of sexual discrimination and aggression (both verbal and physical)—as a primary contributor to "hostile (campus) environments" which has been consistently associated with increased student distress. U.S. Title IX legislation requires that universities protect students from harassment and discrimination and demands that bullying no longer be viewed as a rite of passage. Designed to address behaviors that create a hostile learning environment, Title IX disciplinary action can be taken when it is deemed that incidents have the potential to limit a student's ability to be successful, academically or socially.

Contemporary research on the effects of campus climate on the adjustment of LGBTQ college students indicates that there is a public perception that campuses are paragons of acceptance and inclusion; however, many minority students still report experiencing hostile anti-LGBTQ attitudes (Brown et al. 2004; Yost and Gilmore 2011). While there is movement as a society away from *traditional* heterosexism in which sexual

minorities are viewed as perverse or immoral, there is a new wave of *contemporary* heterosexism in which a message is conveyed that *the gays* are demanding special privileges and disproportionate attention to their struggles (Brown et al. 2004). Whether blatant or subtle, the effects of both traditional and contemporary heterosexisms are similar in that they promote stigmatization and discriminatory behaviors that lead to an increased likelihood that LGBTQ students will experience psychological distress (Kosciw 2004).

Many sexual minority students and university employees (faculty *and* staff) report a perceived presence of homophobia on their campuses (Nagoshi et al. 2008). Hurtado et al. (1998) indicate that this type of hostility can be linked with negative academic outcomes for LGBTQ students as evidenced by poor grades, low test performance, and attrition. According to Kosciw (2004), this perception of a hostile campus climate toward sexual minorities often leads to missing of classes or entire days of instruction for fear of, or, in direct reaction to discriminatory treatment.

## METHODS

### Procedures

Data were collected from students attending a four-year public regional university located in a suburban area in the South East region of the United States. Prior to data collection, the university's Institutional Review Board approved all research protocols. The online survey was developed and administered through Qualtrics, which enabled all data to be collected anonymously. As an additional measure to maintain anonymity of respondents, the feature in Qualtrics that collects IP address information was disabled.

All students at the university were sent a link to the online survey through the university's email system. A link to the survey was also posted on the university's Homepage, and its Facebook and Twitter pages. Notifications were also posted at key locations on campus. All individuals who clicked on the survey link were provided with more information about the survey and their rights as a participant. In order to participate, individuals had to provide consent before entering the survey. At the end of the survey students were presented with the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of the following prizes: 1 $50 gift card to the university bookstore; 2 $25 gift cards to a coffee chain; and 5 $10 gift cards for university dining. Students were also given the opportunity to print a certificate of completion to present to instructors who were offering extra credit for participation in the survey.

### Participants

A total of 979 students completed the survey. With regards to gender, participants were asked "How do you identify?" and asked to select one of the following options: male; female; transwoman; transman; or other. If participants indicated "other" they were asked to please specify. As for sexual orientation, participants were asked "Which of the following sexual orientations do you most identify with?" and asked to select from one of the following options: heterosexual; homosexual; bisexual; questioning; or other. If participants indicated other they were asked to please specify.

When asked to identify the gender that they most closely identified with, 73% of the sample identified as female and 26% identified as male. One percent of the sample ($N = 8$) identified as transgender or other. Five of those individuals identified as a transwoman, one identified as gender queer, one identified as intersex, and one chose not to specify. When asked to identify the sexual orientation that they most closely identified with 91.4% identified

as heterosexual. From the overall sample, 3.8% identified as homosexual (*N*=32), 3.4% identified as bisexual (*N*=29), 0.8% identified as questioning (*N*=7), and 0.6 indicated other (*N*=5). Of the participants who indicated other, two individuals identified as asexual, two identified as pansexual/omnisexual, and one indicated that 'love is love'

While the following demographic variables were not included in the analyses, they are presented to provide the reader with general information regarding the sample. The mean age of participants was 23.1 years old (*SD*=7.29). However, since there was such a wide range of ages reported (16 – 64 years old), the median age of participants (21 years old) may be a more accurate representation of the typical age of participants in our sample. The class standing of participants was as follows: 20.2% freshman, 17.4% sophomore, 26.4% junior, 29.0% senior, 6.6% graduate student, and 0.4% special student. On average, participants reported attending the university for 4.79 semesters (*SD*=3.69). In terms of race/ethnicity, 74% of participants identified as Caucasian, 17% identified as African-American, 6.5% identified as bi- or multiracial, 1.5% identified as American Indian, 0.8% identified as Asian, and 0.2% identified as Pacific Islander. In a separate question, 3.2% identified as Hispanic/Latino. This racial composition approximates well the racial makeup of the University.

**Measures**

In order to compare LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students on measures of campus climate, a new variable was created to reflect sexual minority status using the variables of gender and sexual orientation. Participants who identified as transgender, homosexual, bisexual, questioning, or other were coded as 1. All other participants were coded as 0. Within the current sample, 9.1% of participants identified as LGBTQ and 90.9% identified as non-LGBTQ.

In the current study, three indicators of campus climate were assessed: connection to the university, trust in the university to keep students safe, and confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university. The measures used to assess each indicator are detailed below. The full scale can be found in Appendix A.

**Connection to the university.** Connection to the university was measured using the School Connectedness Scale (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum 2002), which assesses participants' perceptions of belonging and value on their universities on a Likert scale of 1 – 4 (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). The scale contains 9 items, and sample items include: "I feel valued in the classroom/learning environment," "I feel like I am a part of this college/university," and "I feel close to people on this campus." The mean for the School Connectedness Scale was a 3.30 (*SD* = .51) and the alpha coefficient was .91.

**Trust in the university to keep students safe**. Trust in the university to keep students safe was measured using the Trust in the College Support System Scale (Sulkowski 2011), assesses participants' perceptions of their university's ability to keep students safe and respond effectively if an incident were to occur on a Likert scale from 1 – 4 (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). The scale contains 6 items, and sample items include: "My college does enough to protect the safety of students," and "College officials handle incidents in a fair and responsible manner." The mean for the Trust in the College Support System Scale was a 2.78 (*SD* = .47) and the alpha coefficient was .74.

**Confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university.** Confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university was measured using the U.S. Department of Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Survey, which assesses participants' perceptions of how their university would respond to a student reporting a sexual assault on a Likert scale of 1 – 4 (1 = not likely at all; 4 = very likely). The scale

contains 12 items, and sample items include: "The university would take the report seriously," and "The university would take corrective action against the offender." The mean for the Trust in the College Support System Scale was a 3.20 (SD=.50) and the alpha coefficient was .83.

## RESULTS

Prior to testing the hypotheses, bivariate correlations were conducted. There was a large, positive correlation between trust in the university and confidence in the sexual reporting system ($r$ = .562, $p$ <.001). There was a medium, positive correlation between connection to the university and trust in the university ($r$ = .489, $p$ <.001) and medium, positive correlation between connection to the university and confidence in the sexual reporting system at the university ($r$ = .388, $p$ <.001).

A MANOVA was conducted to determine if LGBTQ students differed from non-LGBTQ students on measures of campus climate. Although the groups were very unequal in size, MANOVA is robust against homoscedasticity assumption violations (Braver, MacKinnon and Page 2003). Preliminary tests for normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance-covariance were conducted. The Box's $M$ value was 13.04 with a $p$-value of <.05, which is significant based on the guideline developed by Huberty and Petoskey (2000) of $p$<.005. Therefore, Pillai's trace was reported, because it provides the most conservative $F$ statistic and is considered by many statisticians to be the most powerful and robust multivariate test (Carey 1998; Olson 1976).

The results indicated that LGBTQ status was a significant predictor of campus climate [Pillai's trace = .019, $F$ (3, 776) = 5.03, $p$<.01]. The univariate effects indicated that there was no difference between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students on the School Connectedness Scale or Trust in the College Support System Scale. However, on the Department of Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Survey, LGBTQ students ($M$=3.00; $SD$=.59) reported significantly lower scores than non-LGBTQ students ($M$=3.22; $SD$=.48), indicating that sexual minority students had significantly lower confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university than non-sexual minority students. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d$ = .41) but statistically significant, $F$ (1, 3.67) = 14.67, $p$<001.

## DISCUSSION

While it is well-documented that sexual minority college students in the U.S. are significantly more likely than non-sexual minorities students to experience discrimination, harassment, and victimization on college campuses (Rankin 2003; Rankin et al. 2010; Yost and Gilmore 2011), less is known about sexual minority students and other indicators of campus climate. The goal of the current study was to examine the association between sexual minority status and students' perceptions of their connection to the university, trust in the university to keep them safe, and confidence in sexual assault reporting system at their university. It was hypothesized that LGBTQ students would report lower levels of connection, trust, and confidence in their university than non-LGBTQ students.

Contrary to the predictions, there was no significant difference between LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ students in their connection to the university and trust in the university to keep students safe. One possible explanation for this finding is that the university where data were collected has an active registered student organization on campus called the Student Alliance for Equality (SAFE; formerly the university's Gay-Straight Alliance, or, GSA), which promotes connectedness and the establishment of positive relationships with and among those students who identify as a sexual or gender minority *or* as

a straight ally. Fabiano et al. (2003, 106) define a social justice ally as a person who identifies as a member of a majority population and who "works to end oppression… through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population." Previous research has found that students who attend schools with ally programs such as GSAs are less likely to report feeling unsafe in their environment and are significantly more likely to know how to find and seek help from a supportive faculty or staff member than their counterparts attending schools without the presence of a GSA (Walls, Kane, and Wisneski 2010). Therefore, one potential explanation of the findings is that having an active GSA-style organization on campus positively impacted LGBTQ students' perceptions of their connection to the university and trust in the campus to keep students safe.

Another potential explanation is that LGBTQ students who felt less of a connection to the university and less trust in the campus chose not to complete the survey. Watanabe, Olson, and Falci (2016) indicate that individuals who feel disenfranchised are less likely to participate in campus climate surveys. The authors conducted an analysis of data collected from social media websites to determine the level of survey response from disenfranchised community members. Findings substantiated long-suspected claims that those with fewer social ties are less likely to participate in the research. Another notable complication in the collection of accurate data is a reluctance to truthfully disclose sexual identity even when anonymity is ensured especially among those who fit into multiple minority categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.) (Kim and Fredriksen-Goldsen 2013). The lack of disclosure of sexual and/or gender identity paired with a reluctance on the part of marginalized group members to participate in climate surveys is problematic to the generalizability of findings.

It is possible that current and future studies will be less-riddled with concerns about generalizability than past research. Macapagal et al. (2016, 8-9) discovered that the majority (75.5%) of adolescent participants reported feeling comfortable answering survey questions about their sexuality and/or gender identity as long as the information was *not* being shared with parents. McInroy (2016) asserts that *online methods* for gathering data from marginalized populations are increasing survey participation and will continue to do so going forward, hopefully lending to more accurate representations of the LGBTQ community.

Consistent with predictions, LGBTQ students reported significantly lower confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at the university compared to non-LGBTQ students. Research indicates that sexual minority college students report significantly more discrimination, harassment, and victimization than their non-sexual minority peers (Rankin 2004; Rankin et al. 2010; Yost and Gilmore 2011), which may result in lower confidence in the sexual assault reporting system at their universities. LGBTQ individuals are significantly more reluctant than their non-sexual minority peers to report their victimization to authorities (Jackson et al. 2016) though they are known to experience sexual assault at similar or higher rates than non-sexual minority students (Johnson, Matthews, and Napper 2014). Sexual assault victims have consistently identified *fear of not being believed* as one of the primary barriers to reporting victimization (Sable et al. 2006). LGBTQ individuals may be even less likely to be believed than heterosexual, cisgender victims as a result of homophobia and/or a lack of training on how to appropriately respond to violence against sexual and gender minorities (Lev and Lev 1999).

**Limitations**

In regards to limitations, it is important to note that the sample used in the current study was a convenience sample and does not necessarily represent the viewpoints of all LGBTQ students present on the university's campus. The perspectives of individuals who have chosen to leave the institution, those who are uncomfortable disclosing (even in a

confidential manner) their sexuality and/or gender identity, and those who have chosen not to participate in the gathering of data are not represented. Furthermore, data were collected at one point in time and does not represent longitudinal findings which could provide a more representative picture of the LGBTQ population at this university with the shifting attitudes and increasing supports that accompany policy changes and new programming.

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