

# ScholarWorks@GSU

## Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus Ecology on LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging

Item Type	Dissertation
Authors	Williams, Benjamin
Citation	Williams, Benjamin. "Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus Ecology on LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging." Georgia State University, 2026. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/21">https://doi.org/10.57709/21</a>
Download date	2026-03-13 18:22:14
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/15988">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/15988</a>

## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, *Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus Ecology on LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging*, by Benjamin M. Williams, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

David Johnson, PhD  
Committee Chair

---

Jennifer Esposito Norris, PhD  
Committee Member

---

Deron Boyles, PhD  
Committee Member

---

Matthew Robison, PhD  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Jennifer Esposito Norris, PhD  
Chairperson, Department of Educational  
Policy Studies

---

Paul Alberto, PhD  
Dean, College of Education &  
Human Development

## **AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

By presenting this dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the advanced degree from Georgia State University, I agree that the library of Georgia State University shall make it available for inspection and circulation in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I agree that permission to quote, to copy from, or to publish this dissertation may be granted by the professor whose direction it was written, by the College of Education & Human Development's Director of Graduate Studies, or by me. Such quoting, copying, or publishing must be solely for scholarly purposes and will not involve potential financial gain. It is understood that any copying from or publication of this dissertation which involves potential financial gain will not be allowed without my written permission.

---

Benajmin McKean Williams

## **NOTICE TO BORROWERS**

All dissertations deposited in the Georgia State University library must be used in accordance with the stipulations prescribed by the author in the preceding statement. The author of this dissertation is:

Benjamin Mckean Williams  
Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education & Human Development  
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Dr. Davis Johnson  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education & Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Benjamin McKean Williams

ADDRESS: 100 N. Santa Rosa  
San Antonio, TX  
78207

### EDUCATION:

PhD	2025	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
Masters Degree	2015	Miami University Educational Leadership
Bachelors Degree	2013	Georgia State University Sociology

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

January 2025- Present	Associate Dean of Students & Deputy Title IX Coordinator, Trinity University
November 2022- December 2024	Assistant Dean of Students, Miami University
January 2022- November 2022	Donor Experience Officer, Georgia State University
April 2019- December 2021	Director of Student Orientation & Family Engagement, Georgia State University
January 2017- April 2019	Associate Program Director of Student Center, Georgia Institute of Technology
June 2015- December 2016	Coordinator of Student Involvement, University of Colorado, Boulder

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Williams, B. (2025, March). *Searching from the Middle: Leveraging Best Practices to Make Your Move to the Senior-Level Roles*. NASPA Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Williams, B. (2025, March). *Managing the Middle: Continuing the Conversation on the Experience of Mid-Level Managers*. NASPA Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Roberts, D., & Williams, B. (2024, July). *Leveraging Professional Involvement: Opportunities and Challenges for Mid-Level Administrators*. *NASPA Publications*.

Williams, B. (2024, July). *Belonging & Community in Work*. IPDS New Professional Seminar, Bloomington, IN.

Williams, B. (2024, June). *Failing Forward: Lessons Learned from Managing in the Middle*. Mid-Level Administrator Conference, Indianapolis, IN.

Williams, B. (2024, March). *Lessons from Losing My Mom to Cancer: The Three Lessons I Learned from Navigating Grief, a Baby Hippo Named Fiona, and my Beloved Community*. NASPA Annual Conference, Seattle, WA.

Williams, B. (2024, March). *Managing the Middle*. NASPA Annual Conference, Seattle, WA.

Williams, B. (2024, March). *Failing Forward in Mid-Level Roles*. NASPA Annual Conference, Seattle, WA.

Williams, B. (2024, October). *Integrating Restorative Justice into Title IX and Conduct Work*. NASPA Region IV-East Conference, Cleveland, OH.

Johnson, A., Clement, K., Bohan, C., & Williams, B. (2022, May). *Leveraging funding and support to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion in graduate education*. *ACPA Developments*.

Williams, B. (2022, March). *Leveraging Graduate Student Funding to Foster Equity & Inclusion in Higher Education*. NASPA, Baltimore, MD.

Williams, B. (2022, February). *Kentucky Purpose First: Workshop on Student Onboarding*. Complete College America.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

- Williams, B. (2022, January). *Building Bridges through Communication*. Kappa Kappa Gamma Fraternal Leadership Series.
- Williams, B. (2022). What will this cost, and who's paying? In C. Petree (Ed.), *College Ready 2022: Expert Advice for Parents to Simplify the College Transition* (pp. 37–44). Wise Action.
- Daggers, L., Pontious, M., Sterritt, K., & Williams, B. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family engagement. *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*, 28(2).
- Williams, B. (2021, November). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Engagement*. NODA, Orlando, FL.
- Summerlot, J., & Williams, B. (2020, April). Managing risk in our work with student organizations. *Developments*.
- Williams, B. (2020, November). *Understanding and Exploring the Role of Student Governance*. Stevens Institute of Technology.
- Williams, B. (2020, November). *Leverage Technology to Improve Student Yield and Success Through Parent Engagement*. AHEPPP 2020, Virtual.
- Williams, B. (2020, November). *Leveraging Orientation Tech to Innovate Beyond Expectations*. ACPA & Advantage Design Group, Virtual.
- Chaplin, S., & Williams, B. (2018, June). From Zero to Sixty: Navigating Student Employee Hiring. *The Bulletin*.
- Fitzjarrald, A., & Williams, B. (2018, February). Leadership in NASPA's Second Century. *NASPA Knowledge Community Publication*, 67–69.
- Williams, B. (2018, May). *What Are You Doing For Me?: Young Alumni Engagement*. Georgia Alumni Professionals Workshop, Atlanta, GA.
- Williams, B. (2018, March). *Job Search 2.0*. Association of College Unions International, Anaheim, CA.
- Williams, B. (2018, February). *When the tough gets going, think Fiona*. National Association of Campus Activities Annual Convention, Boston, MA.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Williams, B. (2017, May). Insight into the New Professional. *The Bulletin*.

Williams, B. (2016, October). *Building a Campus Tradition: The CU's Got Talent Story*. Association of College Unions Region IV Conference, Boulder, CO.

Williams, B. (2016, July). Redefining Sustainability: The Intersection of Diversity, Inclusion, and Sustainability. *The Bulletin*.

Williams, B. (2016, March). *Been There, Done That: Lessons for the Job Search*. Association of College Unions International Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Williams, B. (2016, February). *From #Activism to @llyship: Supporting student ally development in the 21st century*. Colorado College Personnel Association, Denver, CO.

Williams, B. (2015, November). Climate Assessments: A Tool to Change Culture in the College Union. *The Bulletin*, 14–20.

Williams, B. (2015, October). *Work/Life Balance*. CPAC Careers in Student Affairs Conference, Colorado Springs, CO.

Williams, B. (2015, April). *Learning Partnerships in the Union*. Association of College Unions International Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX.

## PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2024-Present	ASCA: Association of Student Conduct Administrator
2019-2022	AHEPPP: Parent & Family Engagement
2013-Present	NASPA
2013-Present	ACPA: College Student Educators International
2012-Present	Omicron Delta Kappa Leadership Honor Society

Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus Ecology on  
LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging

by

**Benjamin M. Williams**

Under the Direction of Dr. David Johnson

**ABSTRACT**

LGBTQ+ collegians experience of campus can be shaped by affirmation, exclusion, and the interplay of various environments that make up higher education institutions. Campus ecology constitutes the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and constructed social, which provides a lens for examining these dynamics. Within this framework, belonging is not as a static outcome, but a process continually shaped by institutional context, peer interactions, and identity affirmation.

This study was guided by two research questions: 1) How does campus ecology influence LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging? And 2) How does institutional context influence LGBTQ+ students experience of space and the development of a sense of belonging?

Guided by these questions, the research employed qualitative methods, including a two-series interview process with 20 LGBTQ+ students across two campuses. Narrative and photo-elicitation strategies captured participants lived experiences, while data analysis illuminated how ecological contexts shape belonging.

Findings revealed that belonging was most deeply fostered in human aggregate environments through faculty, staff, and peer affirmations rather than through physical spaces alone. At Metropolitan Public University (MPU), students reported greater visibility of LGBTQ+ resources and a climate of affirmation that extended across multiple environments. At the Central State University (CSU), students encountered more frequent hostility and relied on smaller affinity-based connections or trusted individuals to sustain belonging. Across both institutions, affirming interactions, inclusive policies, and identity-validating spaces proved critical, particularly for transgender and nonbinary students. The implications of this study underscore the importance of institutional responsibility for supporting belonging. Practical implications include investing in programs and services faculty and staff as supports for LGBTQ+ students, and inclusive organizational practices. Policy implications highlight the need for equity-driven leadership and accountability measures to ensure campus environments support all students. Finally, the study contributes to scholarship on belonging by demonstrating the interdependence of ecological environments and interpersonal relationships in shaping LGBTQ+ student experiences. By centering LGBTQ+ voices, this research provides new insights into how higher education can better foster belonging through intentional attention to both ecology and human connection.

**INDEX WORDS:** LGBTQ+ college students, Campus ecology, Sense of belonging, Higher education, Queer and trans students, Student experiences, Inclusive campus climate

Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus Ecology on  
LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging

by

Benjamin M. Williams

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education & Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2025



## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the beautiful and dynamic LGBTQ+ individuals who have given of their blood, sweat, tears, and lives to foster spaces where trans and queer folks can thrive.

I dedicate this to the twenty students who gave of their time for this study and the thousands and thousands of others who are navigating education systems as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. You are beautiful, worthy, and perfect.

I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother. Marchia G. Williams was a light in this world, and I work each day to shine to keep her memory and impact alive.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have crossed this finish line without so many who offered love, guidance, a shoulder, a reality check, and a deep care for me.

I want to thank the twenty LGBTQ+ collegians who shared their stories, successes, pain, and brilliance with me. You are all the future and stand with you as you make your journey. In the words of Bayard Rustin, “we need in every community a group of angelic troublemakers.” You are part of that group. I see you. I believe you. I will work to make systems better for you and those who come behind.

I want to thank the faculty who have supported me in this journey. Dr. Johnson, I am deeply grateful for the belief you had in this idea and in me. I am better because of our work together and will always be grateful. Dr. Esposito, Dr. Boyles, and Dr. Robison, I appreciate your willingness to serve on my committee and for the ways you made this work better. I want to thank Dr. Bohan, Dr. Buras, Dr. Fourniller, Dr. Simonds, Dr. Lakes, and Dr. Holloman for helping me refine and reflect on the ideas that led to this study. I owe deep gratitude to Dr. Wright in Sociology for the mentorship and guidance he provided me as both a student and mentor. I am grateful for Dr. Oakley, who was the first faculty who said yes to this idea. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Ryan. You were my first instructor in undergrad; you were a great support to me as I developed my teaching philosophy and am so grateful for the ways that my journey has been shaped by what I learned from you.

I want to thank the leaders who have guided me in this journey and served as a consistent reminder of the need to do good work. Carly- you were my boss when this journey started, and you took a young professional struggling to find his way and helped me grow into who I am today- thank you. Heather- you took a shot with this young and excited professional who wanted to roll out the blue carpet at the place that shaped him. You championed, challenged, and supported me through so many things from the pandemic to staff changes, to building some incredible resources and experiences. Alison- you were there and supportive as I navigated a career in Advancement and missed my student affairs roots. I am so glad to call you a mentor, a supervisor, and friend! I also want to acknowledge those who had the Dean of Students title who helped me to grow and develop on my own path in the space. Kimberly- You showed me the power of fierce focus on students and a focus on upstream solutions. I learned a lot from you and am grateful for you bringing *The Alchemist* back to my life. BaShaun- you gave me space to shape engagement and to reflect on who and where I want to be. Jessica- you were my last boss

as a doctoral student. I am grateful for the space you gave, the investment you made, and how you have supported me continuing to grow as a leader.

I also want to thank the mentors and friends who have helped me get here. It feels so hard to type specific names, but you are a blessing. The late-night calls, the check-ins, the discussions, and the joy all helped me get here. In these final steps, there are a few people who have been especially supportive. Alex Wood, Mat Hall, Steve Large, Scott Walter, Jerome Conley, Destiny Hand, Sara Mata, Alex Cabal, and Nika Daryooni- you all have helped this last leg happen. I also want to thank three women who have been my fervent cheerleaders. Tara Singer- you fired me from a volunteer board multiple times but more importantly you are a light in my world. When I lost my mom, you were there, and you have been a support for me in so many ways. Tari Hunter- you have been a real one from day one. When my life collapsed around me you were the first caring arms I landed in. When I tried to figure out my life, you have been willing to talk. You started as a trusted adult and have become one of my most trusted advisors. Love you always! Finally, I want to thank Rebecca Stout. You were the first AVP/Dean of Students I met as a student at Georgia State. From ending up in your office after a protest on campus to serving on committees with you to having you as a friend and core person in my world, I am so grateful for all you have given me.

I am also made better by those who support me through volunteer work. I am grateful to those who I have volunteered with through NASPA, NASPA Foundation, ACPA, ACUI, HRC, Georgia State, Miami, Georgia Tech, Georgia Equality, and so many other groups. You all remind me each day that there is a rich power in giving our time, talents, and resources to the work happening.

Finally, I want to thank my mom. I am who I am because of her. I walk through this world with the loss of her as a motivator and reminder for the power of love. She cared, she showed up, and she taught me that our responsibility is to do work to serve those around us. I love you mom. #FuckCancer.

## Table of Contents

<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>LGBTQ+ Collegians on Campus: Historical Context</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Problem Statement</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Campus Experiences.....	14
Mental Health .....	15
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Research Significance</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Campus Ecology .....	18
Physical Environment.....	19
Human Aggregate Environment .....	20
Organizational Environment .....	21
Socially Constructed Environment.....	22
<b>Sense of Belonging</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Defining Sense of Belonging.....	25
Belonging as Basic Human Need .....	26
Belonging as A Fundamental Motive .....	27
Takes on Heightened Importance in Certain Contexts .....	27
Related to Matterng.....	28
It is Influenced by One’s Identities .....	28
Leads to Positive Outcomes and Success.....	28
Must Be Satisfied as Conditions Change .....	30
Critiques of Sense of Belonging.....	30
Belonging at the Margins.....	33
<b>The Relationship Between Campus Ecology and LGBTQ+ Students Belonging</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>37</b>

<b>Chapter 2.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>The Intersection of Ecology and Belonging for LGBTQ+ Collegians .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Belonging through Ecology.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Belonging in the Physical Environment .....	40
Belonging in the Human Aggregate Environment.....	46
Belonging in the Organizational Environment.....	50
Belonging in the Socially Constructed Environment .....	53
<b>Campus Ecology’s Intersection with LGBTQ+ Collegians Sense of Belonging.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Intersections of Campus Ecology & Sense of Belonging .....	60
<b>Filling in the Gaps.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Research Design .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Using Interviews and Visual methods to Investigate LGBTQ Collegians’ Belongings .....</b>	<b>64</b>
Critical Qualitative Inquiry .....	65
Case Study.....	68
Qualitative Interviews: Two Series Interview Approach .....	70
Integrating Visual Methods .....	72
Research Sites .....	74
Metropolitan Public University .....	77
Central State University .....	78
<b>Exploring Ecology’s Impact on Belonging in Two Contexts .....</b>	<b>78</b>
Positionality Statement .....	80
Participant Recruitment.....	81
Sexual Orientation .....	85
Gender Identity.....	86
Data Analysis .....	86
Limitations.....	90
<b>Chapter 4.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Views of Belonging &amp; Ecology from LGBTQ+ Collegians .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>The Environments of the Study .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Identity &amp; Belonging .....</b>	<b>94</b>
Participants Understanding and View of Belonging .....	94
MPU Responses.....	96
CSU Responses .....	98

<b>The Environments of Campus Ecology .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Belonging in the Physical Environment .....</b>	<b>102</b>
MPU.....	103
CSU .....	108
<b>Belonging in the Human Aggregate Environment.....</b>	<b>112</b>
MPU.....	115
CSU .....	117
<b>Belonging in the Organizational Environment .....</b>	<b>120</b>
MPU.....	124
CSU .....	126
<b>Belonging in the Socially Constructed Environment.....</b>	<b>132</b>
MPU.....	135
CSU .....	140
<b>The Intersections of the Environments.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Chapter 5.....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Lessons for the Profession.....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Key Findings .....</b>	<b>148</b>
Belonging Across Campus Environments .....	148
Physical.....	150
Human Aggregate .....	150
The Organizational Environment.....	152
Socially Constructed.....	153
Belonging in Individual and Institutional Ways .....	155
Small Moments: The Everyday Acts That Build or Undermine Belonging .....	155
Big Structures: How Policies and Institutional Cultures Shape Belonging at Scale .....	156
The Cumulative Impact: Layering Small and Big Belonging Experiences .....	157
Institutional Context Can Impact Belonging.....	158
MPU: An Affirming Institutional Context.....	158
CSU: A Hostile and Politicized Institutional Context.....	159
Institutional Context as Amplifier or Barrier .....	160
<b>Implications for Practice and Policy .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>Practical Implications for Universities .....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Policy Implications.....</b>	<b>163</b>

<b>Practical Considerations for LGBTQ+ Collegians .....</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>Contributions to Research .....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Directions for Future Research.....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Final Reflection.....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>APPENDIX A.....</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>APPENDIX B.....</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>APPENDIX C.....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>APPENDIX D.....</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>APPENDIX E .....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>APPENDIX F .....</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>APPENDIX G.....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>APPENDIX H.....</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>APPENDIX I.....</b>	<b>230</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Research Sites .....	P.77
Table 2: Participant Summary .....	P.84
Table 3: Distribution of Sexual Orientation.....	P.84
Table 4: Distribution of Gender Identity.....	P.85
Table 5: Distribution of Race.....	P.85
Table 6: Overall Reflections on Belonging.....	P.95
Table 7: Number of participants reporting belonging.....	P.101
Table 8: Perceptions of the Physical Environment.....	P.102
Table 9: Perceptions of the Human Aggregate Environment.....	P.113
Table 10: Perceptions of the Human Aggregate Environment.....	P.121
Table 11: Perceptions of the Socially Constructed Environment.....	P.133

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

- Figure 1. A photo of the Gender & Sexuality Center at MPU..... p.105
- Figure 2. A photo of the LGBTQ+ space at CSU..... p.109
- Figure 3. A sign from a campus street preacher..... p.139

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers.”*

Bayard Rustin

I remember clearly my first day walking on Georgia State University’s campus, my undergraduate alma mater, as a freshman in the fall of 2009. Having moved from a suburb where “fag” and “queer” had been carved into my car door, I was rejected by friends when I came out, and navigated being the only queer kid in school. I was ready for a new beginning. Living in midtown, going to school in the heart of Atlanta, and finding a place where I saw students who were also part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) community provided that. I found a place where I belonged in the Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity. In a room on the fourth floor of the Student Center on campus, I found an outdated room with conference chairs, but the interactions in the space created a home for me. Our Thursday night meetings had laughter, conversations on campus, and stories of navigating queerness in the South, followed by dinners, parties, and community provided an affirmation I had never received before: queer joy is real. When street preachers occupied a plaza, I was angry at the institution for letting them be there before I understood free speech. In student roles, such as the Student Government Association and being an Orientation Leader, I was welcomed as an out gay man. Still, a heteronormative climate and a lack of designated university resources to support LGBTQ+ students made me question if I mattered. All the experiences, good and bad, in the spaces and places that make up Georgia State’s campus helped me to find a place where I belonged.

In contrast, when I moved to Oxford Ohio for Graduate School at Miami University, belonging was a scarce resource. As a queer white graduate student with a partner who was a

person of color, the small college-town experience was different. My partner and I would walk uptown and get stared at in town. I was not in a welcome place anymore. On campus, it was obvious that as a queer person without the same socio-economic privilege, I didn't fully belong. At work, I didn't fully belong in a department that was built around students who lived on campus when my responsibilities were students commuting to campus. A new Student Center opened which had glass walls and no places for LGBTQ+ students to meet that wouldn't have outed them to campus. Decisions aimed at inclusion left the students most excluded without a space to call home. My lived experiences provide a view on how student experiences are shaped by campus ecology: the physical makeup of college campuses and the interactions that take place within them.

The central goal of this dissertation is to understand the ways campus ecology impacts belonging among LGBTQ+ collegians. In biosciences, ecology calls our attention to the relationship between living organisms and their physical environment (Dice, 1955). Drawing on the ecology metaphor, scholars of higher education have developed the notion of a campus ecology, a framework that looks at how students interact with one another within built environments (Evans, Forney et al., 2010). The social transactions, engagements, and design of physical spaces form the context in which academic and social integration in higher education takes place. The central premise of the campus ecology framework is that students can experience the same campus environment in vastly different ways.

This study focuses on the relationship between campus ecology and belonging among LGBTQ+ students for four reasons. First, universities are important sites of identity development for all students but often play an especially important role among LGBTQ+ students whose adolescent experiences were shaped by societal stigma related to sexual and gender diversity

(Stevens, et al., 2008). Second, unlike other marginalized groups, gender and sexual identities are not intrinsically visible. While one can imagine how the invisibility of a stigmatized identity may operate as an asset, it also may represent a constraint to the formation of social networks. Third, campus culture at many institutions is characterized by heteronormativity, a concept that focuses on systems and structures being centered on heterosexual relationships (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013). The hegemonic nature of heteronormativity on college campuses raises questions about how LGBTQ+ students find and create inclusive spaces, places, and interactions. Finally, reports of negative campus climate, hostile political climates, and experiences persist despite increased resources and supports (Beemyn, 2003; Human Rights Campaign, 2023).

### **LGBTQ+ Collegians on Campus: Historical Context**

While the substantive and symbolic presence of LGBTQ+ groups exists on most college campuses today, historically they lacked visibility. It is important to acknowledge that the terminology related to the LGBTQ+ community has evolved in various ways. The inclusion of a + after LGBTQ acknowledges other identities within the community ranging from asexual to pansexual, questioning, etc. LGBTQ+ showed up consistently in contemporary literature and is used throughout. In the methods section of Chapter 3 provides a sampling of the identities of participants within the LGBTQ+ umbrella. In general, academic research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students is limited prior to 1990 and even today there is limited historical analysis (Hevel, 2017; Beck, 2019). As Graves (2018) details, historical studies of women's colleges and Ivy League universities make clear that students engaged in non-heterosexual relationships did so privately and at great risk. Recent evidence, for example, demonstrates that a secret court of six administrators investigated and ultimately expelled eight Harvard students for homosexuality (Walsh, 2021). Historical analysis thus indicates that for all the 19<sup>th</sup> century and

much of the 20<sup>th</sup>, campus environments were coercively heteronormative. Consider Dilley's (2002) study of non-heterosexual college men from 1945 to 2000: "Whereas a closeted student understood his identity to be a secret, a homosexual believes his identity to be a private matter, and a gay collegian conceived of his identity in social terms, a queer man found the very notion of his identity to be public in nature and discourse" (Dilley, 2002, pp. 119-120). Dilley ties this identity typology to eras: homosexual (1940-1960); gay (1960s-present); and queer (1980s-present).

Changes in the broader social environment ultimately had implications for non-heterosexual identities, referents, and experiences on college campuses. While the GI Bill expanded access for men of different class backgrounds in higher education (Olson, 1973) it only raised the importance of staying closeted for gay military men. As one study participant explained his experience in the 1940s: "In the wartime Navy, anyone openly gay would have been given an honorable discharge and lost the support of his college education" (Garvey, Sanders, et al., 2017, p. 805). While scholars have attributed increased diversity on campus to the GI Bill, policy and culture nevertheless coercively required secrecy of sexual identity. Evidence of purging gay men on campus suggests such a climate was acute (Nash and Silverman, 2015).

The politics of the 1960s marked an important turning point away from this climate, even if the subsequent change was incremental and slow. D'Emilio (1992) asserts that the "achievement of the campus turmoil of the 1960s was the recognition that universities are not ivory towers where individuals engage in the disinterested, dispassionate, and detached pursuit of knowledge and truth. Rather, universities are intimately connected to the society of which they are a part" (p. 162). Student activism and engagement played an important role during this era, especially as it related to the politics of sexuality. In 1968, for example, two hundred students at

Bucks County Community College gathered in a courtyard to protest the president's decision to cancel a lecture by a gay rights organizer who was invited by students (Stein, 2022). Perhaps the most critical event for LGBTQ+ students occurred the next year, when the Stonewall Riots sparked new conversations and activism around LGBTQ+ equality across the nation and on campuses (Pitman, 2019; O'Riordan and Webb, 2021; DeVitis and Sasso, 2019). The increase in activism, protests, and visibility of LGBTQ+ collegians ultimately led to changes for students and administrators in higher education. The introduction of the G.I. Bill in 1944 and the federal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy represents one of many policies that integrated homophobia into society (Garvey, 2017). Activism through the Stonewall Riots, Ellen coming out on television, the death of Mathew Sheppard, and eventual legislation in 2009 providing hate crime prevention supported changing conversations on campuses (Gillespie, 2008; Renn, 2010; and Fine, 2012).

Student-led organization also began to emerge during this era. In 1967, students at Columbia university organized the Student Homophile League, the first officially recognized student group based on sexual identity, followed closely by similar groups at MIT, Stanford, Cornell, and other predominantly private elite institutions (Campus Pride, 2022). Court rulings represent another source of organizational change toward recognition of LGBTQ+ students. One of the first legal victories occurring in the early 1970s, when students at the University of Georgia won recognition on campus. The judge set the foundation for future wins by asserting that the university's ability to support students does not override their rights to free speech and expression on campus (Cain and Hevel, 2021). This ruling centered on LGBTQ+ collegians' rights and set an important precedent in the courts and the University System of Georgia, though it had impacts across the country.

By the late 1970s, early signs of progress for LGBTQ+ students were discernible on college campuses. Approximately 1,000 student groups were formally affiliated across the US (Campus Pride, 2022). Universities made efforts to hire or train counselors with an understanding of LGBTQ+ students' needs. LGBTQ+ affinity centers began to emerge, beginning with the University of Michigan in 1971 (Jourian, 2023). The first "out" student body president at Michigan represented an important sign of a cultural shift in the climate for LGBTQ+ students on some campuses, even as much progress remained (Campus Pride, 2022).

Indeed, these shifts marked the early stages of the institutionalization of support, services, and care dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ collegians. Perhaps the most promising sign of change is the expansion of LGBTQ+ affinity centers, which are now ubiquitous in most institutional contexts of higher education. Such centers are essential to "helping students cope with campus climates characterized by outright hostility and subtler, but no less harmful, microaggressions" (Magolda and Magolda, 2011, p.245).

Even as history provides evidence of progress, LGBTQ+ collegians continue to face barriers to their success in three distinct and interconnected areas. The first is the mental health challenges of LGBTQ+ collegians. The second are the ways that LGBTQ+ collegians are a community of students who face a variety of structural challenges. Finally, the practical challenges of coming out and navigating higher education. As this is written, over 500 bills have been introduced in over 27 states that intend to restrict access to gender-affirming care for LGBTQ+ youth, ban drag shows and eliminate mentions of LGBTQ+ individuals in everyday life (ACLU, 2023). It is well documented that LGBTQ+ collegians experience mental health issues that occur at higher rates, are more likely to attempt and complete suicide than their heterosexual or cisgender peers, and experience negative interactions on college campuses that

impact their ability to persist (Evans et al., 2017; Intrabartola, 2017; Kortegast, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017; Sadowski, 2017; Levenson, 2023). The negative experience of LGBTQ+ individuals and collegians underscore the importance of exploring LGBTQ+ experiences for institutions to support their success. Garvey (2017) points out that while LGBTQ+ collegians experience has been explored at different levels of analysis, few scholars have studied the impact of campus ecology on the experiences of belonging for LGBTQ students. This study will focus specifically on the intersection of physical space and experiences to explore the impact of campus ecology on LGBTQ+ collegians.

### **Problem Statement**

This study addresses the following research problem: How does campus ecology influence a sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ college students? The relationship between campus ecology on academic performance, mental health, coping strategies, and experience of suicidal ideation are interconnected in ways that can either positively or negatively shape the outcomes of LGBTQ+ collegians (Taylor et al., 2018; Kortegast, 2017; Coulter et al., 2016; Woodford et al., 2017; and Garvey et al., 2017). This study examined how experiences on campus may impact sense of belonging. Research on the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians is now abundant, but there continues to be a gap in the literature related to barriers to student persistence (Sanlo and Espinoza, 2012; Taylor 2015; Mancini 2011). The impact of interaction with both individuals and physical spaces can influence students' experience of sense of belonging. For this study, two key barriers to LGBTQ+ students exist that motivate this project: negative experiences on campus and mental health.

## **Campus Experiences**

Campus environments can shape students' ability to find community and persist (Astin 1982; Tinto 1993; Williams 1991; Ochoa 2013; Harper and Quaye, 2009; Laird, 1999). In the contemporary higher education landscape, neoliberal influences impact various parts of the campus experience. LGBTQ+ students are immersed in settings in which neoliberal ideologies resist supports for marginalized students. Hermanowicz (2024) provides a thoughtful and comprehensive discussion of what he calls the "therapeutic university," that "postures to do good, but its operations are...highly problematic (p.2). Neoliberal influences focus on choice and individuals while advocating for the elimination of dedicated supports for historically marginalized student populations. While a focus on belonging does speak to some elements of the therapeutic university that the author problematizes, it may also facilitate the resilience and broader positive impact on the community to foster growth and learning. Spring (2015) attributes this to an approach that centers "individualism, consumerism, competition, and minimal governmental interference" which promotes treating all equally with a disregard for how marginalized identities impact experience (pp. 233- 234). The tensions between the development of therapeutic universities and the attacks on programs focused on supporting historically marginalized and oppressed communities pose potential challenges to student belonging (Hermanowicz, 2024; Ottenritter, 2012). These impacts can also reduce the number of academic supports that many LGBTQ+ students need to succeed (Garvey, Taylor, et al., 2015). Furthermore, the campus experience of being othered inhibits connections to the institution and support systems (Lange and Moore, 2017). Othering is "a discursive process of separating We from Other as a means of constructing hierarchies of power" (Winslow and Winslow, 2014, p. 1).

Brodyn and Ghaziani (2018) interviewed heterosexuals living in traditional gayborhoods, a neighborhood with high LGBTQ+ populations, and found that several respondents shared problematic and challenging beliefs and expectations of their queer neighbors without consideration for the importance of those spaces. LGBTQ+ students are navigating campus spaces with peers who lack an understanding of the needs or experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. In this context, there are four common forms of discriminatory behaviors which are interpersonal macroaggressions, avoidance behavior, verbal threats, and physical threats. In addition to establishing these four terms as a reference point, additional studies explored the “subtle and blatant heterosexist discrimination on college campuses” (Hong et. al 2015 p.124). The prevalence of these discriminatory behaviors underscores the need to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians and their ability to integrate into a possibly hostile university context. LGBTQ+ communities’ experience on campus also impacts their mental health, which presumably has implications for student retention.

### **Mental Health**

Given the evidence of negative experiences on campus, it is unsurprising that researchers have documented that LGBTQ+ students experience significant mental health challenges. Woodford, et al. (2018) found that 14.1% (4.8% cisgender and 9.3% trans\*) of 775 LGBTQ students had attempted to commit suicide one or more times (p.426). A study done by the Tyler Clementi Center at Rutgers found that LGBTQ students are “three times more likely to report self-injury” and “seriously considered suicide at three times the rate” of their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Intrabartola, 2017). Such evidence suggests a crisis in higher education.

Space and place play a role in such patterns in two broad ways. As argued above, negative campus environments (e.g., harassment, stigma, hostility) may contribute to poor

mental health. Second, the mere absence of an inclusive environment could also encourage it (even without actively negative experiences). An important aspect of the experience of college students is isolation, which is prevalent within the LGBTQ student population. Evans, Nagoshi, et al. (2017) conducted interviews with 12 LGBTQ students on their views of campus climate and a key area of their findings found that students were experiencing isolation due to having to navigate spaces and avoid being “outed” on campus. Finally, it is worth underscoring that poor mental health undermines academic performance. Garvey et. al, (2018) found that negative experiences on campus climate among LGBTQ+ students resulted in lower levels of academic performance. The challenges and research discussed in this section help to inform the research questions that guided this study.

### **Research Questions**

The two research questions that guide this qualitative study are:

RQ1: How does campus ecology influence LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging?

RQ2: How does institutional context influence LGBTQ+ students experience of space and the development of a sense of belonging?

### **Research Significance**

As student populations diversify and the representation of LGBTQ+ collegians increases, institutions struggle with retaining and supporting marginalized students (Astin 1982; Tinto 1993; Abes et al, 2019; Harper and Quayle, 2009). Retention of such students takes on increased importance in light of a possible “enrollment cliff.” In response to the global recession from 2008 to 2011, the fertility rate dipped, leading some to predict an enrollment decline of 15% between 2025-2029 (Campion, 2020; Kline, 2019; Barshay, 2018; Grawe, 2017). When students

experience ongoing discrimination, harassment, and unwelcoming environments on campus, their ability to explore their identities is inhibited (Sanlo and Leck, 1998). Limited studies exist with a specific focus on the retention and progression challenges of LGBTQ+ collegians connected to campus ecology. Isolation, harassment, and negative campus climates all negatively impact LGBTQ+ collegians' progression (Sanlo, 2004; Mancini, 2011; Sanlo and Espinoza, 2012; Rankin et al., 2010; Tetreault et al., 2013). Existing work underscores the merit of a focus on campus ecology. Focusing on LGBTQ+ student experiences on campus, Trimble (2019) found that these students are at higher risk for attrition than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (p.88). The paucity of research in this area underscores the merit of studying the relationship between campus environment and belonging among LGBTQ+ students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

College and university campuses are places where students can grow, develop, and engage fully in learning (Clark, 1972; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Baker and Griffin, 2010; Cardone et al, 2013). This study explores the impact of environments of a college or university campus on LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging. It is important to acknowledge that the contemporary discussion is built on the foundational ideas of Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto's work, which has demonstrated a strong relationship between student involvement and achievement, persistence, and satisfaction with college (Astin, 1988, Tinto, 1993). Studies at community colleges have yielded similar findings (Friedlander and MacDougall, 1992). The study examined how the campus environment (campus ecology) impacts the connections students cultivate (sense of belonging) that help to support their success and persistence. The campus ecology framework informs this work, capturing both the physical spaces of campus and students' experiences on campus.

## **Campus Ecology**

Strange and Banning (2001) emphasize four environmental dimensions that will be discussed below: physical, human aggregate, organizational, and the socially constructed environments. The physical environment includes, for example, buildings, walls, and a variety of organizational decisions related to allocating and utilizing those physical spaces. Organizational concerns draw our attention to policies, such as the accessibility of gender-inclusive restrooms and the allocation of resources across campus. The human aggregate elements emphasize student subcultures, particularly the personalities, identities, and characteristics of the different groups on campus. Finally, the experiences, connections, and meaning of individuals on campus foster understanding of the socially constructed environment. The late-night study sessions in the library, the student organization meetings, and the experiences with faculty and students in classes shape the space students experience.

Campus ecology provides the framework to analyze and discuss the experience of students on a college campus. The word “campus” itself connotes a built environment. In postsecondary environments, this generally consists of physical structures dedicated to the work of higher education, such as libraries, classrooms, residence halls, and venues for recreation and leisure. Residential university settings convey academic campuses as bounded spaces demarcated from the outside world, while universities in metropolitan areas convey academic life as inseparable from urban life. Yet, a campus does not solely consist of physical buildings, hence the framework’s emphasis on “ecology.” Borrowing from the branch of bioscience that examines relations among organisms and their physical environment, campus ecology draws our attention to the relationship between the built environment of postsecondary organizations and student interaction and involvement (Kuh and Love, 2000). Physical space, in short, is much more important than simply the buildings, it is how students, faculty, and staff interact with them

to find their place. The dimensions of campus ecology allow for an analysis of how individuals on campus connect with others based on shared interests and values and make sense of their experiences (Strange and Banning, 2001). In the following sections, each frame will be discussed and viewed through the context of university environments. As with the foundation of a house or a university campus, the physical environment is the first element of campus ecology to be discussed.

### ***Physical Environment***

Banning and Strange (2001) refer to the physical environment as the built environment, buildings, and the functional and symbolic representation of values. The design of buildings influences their accessibility; the placement communicates value and the policies around usage influence the experience of these spaces. Physical spaces and the impact of their designs on user experience are central to how students engage within education systems (Ahmadi, 2022). The buildings contribute to the student experience of a campus. Morgan (2006) points out that “organizations are rarely established as ends in themselves. They are instruments created to achieve other ends” (p.15). This concept then requires consideration of the role of the physical buildings on a college campus. Let’s use a classroom as an example. The space is designed for the specific purpose of course instruction. In that classroom, norms around student-faculty interaction are taught, student organizations meet, and a variety of other formal and informal interactions between students and faculty exist. Sexist, racist, and homophobic microaggressions occur within those same spaces specifically designed to teach. If we look at a college union or student center, those spaces are designed to operate as a “living room” for the campus where students can learn “citizenship, social responsibility, and leadership” (Brown and Taylor, 2012,

p. 53). These physical spaces, whether intentionally or unintentionally, play a critical role in campus around the interactions in physical spaces.

How does the built environment shape student life? For one, some students do not live where they study at a commuter campus, requiring transportation, parking fees, and resources. In contrast, at a primarily residential college, students are a short walk from home to the library to the campus program is all that is required to engage fully in the campus. The ability to be in space, access resources provided and engage is impacted by the location and the demands of the various experiences. Students at community colleges navigate institutions with less physical space and generally reduced support infrastructure than their peers at four-year institutions (Stuart et al, 2014; Friedlander and MacDougall, 1992). The physical environment should be considered as part of the broader context of student experience.

### ***Human Aggregate Environment***

The human aggregate environment is the “collective characteristics” of a group, organization, or collection of individuals that “influence the degree to which people are attracted to, satisfied within, and retained by those environments” (Strange and Banning, 2001, p.35). The collective characteristics would then be how individuals define and perceive the environment. In the context of campus ecology, it is critical to understand that the human aggregate environment reflects the “influence of the dominant groups” (Strange and Banning, 2001, p.124). Individuals who fail to align with the human aggregate environment exist as outsiders on campus. In other words, the human aggregate environment looks at the culture and characteristics of a campus community. Cultures on campus are the various expectations, rules, and understandings of campus that students “learn and come to believe” (Charon, 2002, p.93). On a predominately

white campus, a student of color could feel isolated being in spaces where few individuals look like them.

Queer and Trans\* students may feel isolated among their heterosexual and cisgender peers. The dominant or collective characteristics, driven by the composition of students, faculty, and staff on campus, become defining elements of the environment that individuals adhere to or deviate from. The human aggregate environment helps to contextualize the composition of the campus and the potential impacts that it might have on students experience. For the sake of readability, in subsequent chapters I will often refer to the "human aggregate environment" as the "campus community", given the conceptual underpinnings of this dimension of campus ecology.

### ***Organizational Environment***

The organizational environment provides us with an understanding of how an organization's policies, structures, and allocated resources connect to the engagement of students and others (Banning and Strange, 2001). Morgan (2006) points out that "living systems exist in a wider environment on which they depend for the satisfaction of various needs" (p.33). A religiously affiliated institution may not encourage or welcome LGBTQ+ individuals' engagement, while in contrast, other institutions create policies that foster a welcoming campus environment through investment in programs, facilities, and staffing. These organizational elements are critical to contextualizing and exploring how LGBTQ+ collegians can cultivate a sense of belonging. "Organizational formalization" creates the implicit and explicit rules of student engagement and shapes stratification and power in a university (Strange, 2003, pp.303-304). That structure contributes to and forms a "complex ecosystem" as "organizations do not live-in isolation and are not self-sufficient" (Morgan, 2006, p.62). The intersection of

organizational, physical, and perceived structures helps to frame the discussion of how students experience campus ecology.

The organizational environment can be explored and understood through the governance structure, including how institutions are governed and how individuals are selected for various leadership roles. This can influence the different ways that policies and organizational decisions are made. Policy decisions around allocating resources to buildings, departments, and other aspects can then be subject to political influences like we see currently in states like Texas and Utah. The influence of governing bodies coupled with potential partisan selection of board members could influence institutional decisions. Perhaps most pertinent to our concerns here, the organizational environment encompasses any policies or formal decisions tied to LGBTQ+ students on campuses, such as pronoun usage, bathroom policies, and governance of student organizations. The organizational environment thus adds an additional layer of complexity to explore and understand student belonging. The final element of campus ecology to explore is the socially constructed environment on campus.

### ***Socially Constructed Environment***

The socially constructed environment reflects campus climate, social experiences of students, and environmental press, a term used to describe the behaviors and behaviors the environment affirms (Banning and Strange, 2001; Strange, 2000). The student experience, in the context of the socially constructed environment, then is viewed through the ways students navigate space, experiences on campus, and opportunities to engage with others. This view of environments combines the various elements of the ecological model to understand and explore how the individual experiences and their social and cultural life intersect (Bronfenbrenner, 1991). The socially constructed environment exists within the context of other elements of

campus ecology and significantly influences how collegians cultivate a sense of belonging (Johnson, 2022).

The interactions that occur between students and their environment on campus influence colleagues' growth and development (Banning and Kaiser, 1974). The socially constructed environment is both the experience students have and a part of the growth and development of students understanding of social interactions (Banning and Strange, 2001). In this study, the four institutional environments of physical, organizational, human aggregate, and socially constructed (recap) provide a lens to explore a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians. In the next section, a discussion on belonging will provide the second element of the theoretical framework used in this study.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Strayhorn (2012) defines the phrase *sense of belonging* as the “social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community” (p. 4). In his work, Strayhorn discusses belonging as a “cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective and/or behavioral response” (Strayhorn, 2018, p.3). In simplest terms, belonging is an assessment individuals make about their connection to a community. For example, a student who walks into a room may experience relief of their anxiety or apprehension when they see a person or a group of people they know.

Scholars' discussion of what Strayhorn calls belonging is built from various concepts dating back to Maslow's (1954) work. Schlossberg's (1985) concept of marginality and mattering is also viewed as precursor to contemporary belonging discussions, which is discussed to help further contextualize the concept. Marginality and mattering impact how individuals

make meaning of everyday events. Marginality looks at the way individuals are invisible in their communities. The marginal nature of black and LGBTQ populations was examined in early literature (Ellison, 1972; Torton Beck, 1982). In contrast to marginality, mattering is an original cornerstone of belonging in which individuals value a connection to others (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). While they are not specifically discussed, the above literature and other scholars have been engaging with the concept for decades (Freeman et al, 2007; Soloranzo and Yosso, 2000; Hausmann, et al, 2007; Hurtado and Carter 1997).

Belonging is the connection members have to others in a group and a belief that the community's needs will be achieved (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The idea of community and connection then may influence individuals' decision to stay at a job or enrolled at an institution. A lack of belonging may also influence decisions to leave. The assumption that belonging, involvement, and connections on college campuses are associated with student success has been discussed by a variety of scholars who study higher education (Astin, 1991, Tinto 1993, Clark, 1972, Baxter Magolda, 1992, Hurtado, 1997). The existence or lack of belonging is then a lens to understand how an "individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community" changes their experience (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 200). Gaining insights into the way belonging can be impacted by the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians on campus can inform administrators work. The literature indicates increased belonging can result in students retention and persistence, which positively benefits the students and institutions. The individualistic nature of belonging creates a need to contextualize and define how literature discusses the concept. It also points out the importance of exploring how experiences on campus may impact on a student's sense of belonging. In the following sections, literature framing sense of belonging will be discussed.

## **Defining Sense of Belonging**

Scholars vary in how they have defined belonging, but the literature emphasizes that belonging is connection, inclusion, and community. Research also demonstrates that belonging is related to student well-being on campus in both academic and social contexts. Strayhorn's definition brings together multiple perspectives on belonging in an attempt to provide a definition that has become prevalent in higher education. The following studies all bring different elements of Strayhorn's framing of belonging together. The oldest study in reviewing the literature was Anant (1966), which explores the personal elements of belonging and how being valued then bolsters a feeling of integration in a system. Goodenow (1993a) speaks to how encouragement and support in academic and co-curricular settings contribute to feelings of connection. McMillan, Chavis (1996), and Osteman (2000) both discuss belonging in the context of connection to a group and the way that helps meet collective needs. Tovar and Simon (2010) look at how individual identities impact emotion and connection. Overall, scholars have been inconsistent in defining belonging. Developing a general understanding of the current discourse and selecting a definition that aligns with the research project is critical.

Additional researchers have contributed to support the foundational understanding of belonging as a factor that can impact students experience and retention on campus. Hausmann et al (2007) conducted a study to look at the differences between African American and white students' sense of belonging. Their study included 254 African American first-time freshmen and a random sample of 291 white students. The students received three surveys, and the study also included interventions for belonging ranging from communication from administrators to gifts. (p.655-657). Their study demonstrated that belonging positively impacted persistence,

which is supported by other literature as well (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Patrick et al., 2007; Yeager et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016; Walter & Cohen, 2011). Museus & Maramba (2011) conducted a single-institution sample of 143 Filipino American undergraduates related to study the pressure of severing cultural heritage. They found that pressures to integrate had indirect influence on their sense of belonging. Similar experiences of navigating identities and the impact on belonging can be found in the literature (Hagerty et al., 2002; Ostrove, 2003; Walton & Brady, 2017). The broad and comprehensive definition presented by Strayhorn brings various theories discussed in the literature together to create his definition. Strayhorn (2012, 2018) presents seven consistent core elements of belonging from the literature. The elements which will be discussed briefly are that belonging are: 1) a basic human need; 2) a fundamental motive sufficient to drive human behavior; 3) takes on heightened importance in certain contexts; 4) it is related to mattering; 5) it is influenced by one's identities; 6) leads to positive outcomes and success; and 7) must be satisfied as conditions change. The first core element is that belonging is a basic human need.

### ***Belonging as Basic Human Need***

Strayhorn (2012) asserts that the need for belonging is a “precondition for higher-order needs such as the desire for knowledge, understanding, and self-actualization. This idea is also represented in Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs that places “love and belongingness” in the middle of the hierarchy of needs. Succeeding on campus requires the satisfaction of basic needs which Baumeister and Leary (1995) articulate when they assert “if psychology has erred with regard to the need to belong...the error has not been to deny the existence of such a motive as much as to underappreciate it” (p. 522). While the experience of belonging is based in the individual, the consequence is no less real. In fact, in 2023 the Surgeon General released a report

entitled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” speaking to the very real negative outcomes of a lack of belonging (United States). This evokes belongings’ role as a fundamental motive.

### ***Belonging as A Fundamental Motive***

Basic needs motivate behavior. The want to belong is a motivating force where individuals will engage in subcultures, make poor choices, and even go against personal values to find connection (Clark 1992; Ferguson, 2000). Strayhorn (2018) provides a variety of examples from previous research related to how compelling the want for belonging is that individuals will even engage in disruptive behavior to find community. The drive to find connection influences behavior which Baumeister and Leary (1995) contextualize as belonging “stimulates goal-directed activity” to find it (p.500). Whether a student experiences a sense of belonging on campus or not, then they could drive their decision to stay or transfer to another institution. .

### ***Takes on Heightened Importance in Certain Contexts***

Belonging is observed and discussed in the context of connection to other individuals. The heightened importance is emphasized in transition stages as individuals make sense of who they are and where they belong (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b). Chickering & Reisser (1993) provides seven vectors as a foundation of contemporary student development theory that frames the transitional stages ranging from development competence to moving towards interdependence and establishing identity. The transition and definition stages of Chickering are moments when college students are working to define who they are. Strayhorn (2018) looks back to his research to see the way a student leader felt alienated within a math class where her “sense of belonging in college was eroded by the energy that fueled her anxiety, worry, and sense of alienation in the classroom” (p.35). The insight from Strayhorn’s research indicates that

belonging in space merits exploration and study as students navigate the way they matter on campus.

### ***Related to Mattering***

While a discussion of Schlossberg's (1985) concept of mattering was discussed earlier, a variety of research supports the value and importance of mattering (Clark, 1992; Ryan & Stiller, 1991; Pettigrew, 1998). Flett (2018) discusses the General Mattering Scale, which is a five-item measure to assess the concept that has been used since 1997. Additionally, there are five elements in literature that further conceptualize mattering. Being seen or garnering attention, feeling valued and cared for, feeling needed, feeling appreciated, and seeing others around them (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981). In his text, Strayhorn illustrates this point by sharing an interview he had with a Fortune 500 leader who withheld information from his team so that he mattered in his workplace. The literature and this example demonstrate that mattering and belonging are integral. The experience of those elements is also in context of identities.

### ***It is Influenced by One's Identities***

Strayhorn (2018) asserts that "social identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion converge and intersect in ways that simultaneously influence sense of belonging" (p.37). As an exemplar, a student who is a queer, black, transgender woman, and uses an assistive device to navigate campus and a white, able-bodied, and cisgender man may experience belonging differently based on their identities. Jones and McEwen (2000) describe these interconnections as a complexity that wasn't previously acknowledged.

### ***Leads to Positive Outcomes and Success***

While some have questioned whether universities should indeed be concerned about belonging (Hermanowicz, 2024), research clearly demonstrates that students persist when they

feel like they belong (Hausmann et al., 2007). Researchers have also established the role that institutions have in taking action to support persistence (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton, et al., 1997; Kuh, et al., 2006 Abes, et al., 2019). The discussions around student persistence emphasize the value of belonging in supporting students to be able to succeed in higher education. Casey et al. (2023) explored the connection in a quantitative study focused on two parallel organic chemistry classes. They recruited students to take two general chemistry classes where one had interventions to increase belonging like faculty mentoring and peer mentors compared to the other. Researchers found that students who took the enhanced class reported higher perceived belonging and decreased belonging uncertainty, resulting in higher persistence in the chemistry sequence. The review of data from the study found that there were differences for women related to belonging. Fostering space for women and students of color to see themselves as scientists is required to support student persistence from historically underrepresented backgrounds in STEM from the study. The research team used a six-item validated survey to explore belonging and had a 92.7% response rate (p.2865-2867).

Another study looked at the impact of integrating professional development skills to support marginalized student belonging and persistence. The study integrated opportunities to build skills in six areas and found that the investments increased persistence, and students reported feeling valued and cared for, which is a core element of belonging (Mackiewicz, et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2012). Pedler, et al. (2022) created a mixed-methods questionnaire distributed to students, which garnered 578 responses. The responses included all four years, gender, age, and whether they were a first-generation college student. The researchers found that those students who reported a higher sense of belonging were also more motivated to persist and engage with their coursework. The study also found first-generation students experienced less

overall sense of belonging than their peers who had parents who went to college or university. This study provides additional support to understanding the potential connection between belonging and academic performance. This also plays into the next core element of belonging around change.

### ***Must Be Satisfied as Conditions Change***

Sense of belonging may be achieved by a robust variety of social interactions or could be satisfied with a few meaningful connections (Strayhorn, 2012). It is also important to belong so that the need is still met even as changes occur. Alternatively, a single event or interaction that leads to rejection or isolation can erode a sense of belonging (Walton and Cohen, 2011). Goodenow (1993) emphasizes the concern that belonging is “malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative interactions” constantly (p.81).

The seven elements that Strayhorn provides help to understand the concept and create obstacles for student belonging. A feeling that can be fleeting and impacted by various forces requires administrators to consider the multitude of campus experiences and environments. The connection between campus ecology and belonging to this study contributes to deepening our understanding of supporting students. With the established context, it also turns focus onto how literature currently discusses sense of belonging on campus.

### **Critiques of Sense of Belonging**

The literature related to belonging as discussed in this chapter is varied. The concept itself is in the words of one researcher, “a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics” (Maher et al., 2013, p1026). The varied definitions open the concept to critique given its individual nature and various understandings. Belonging has become

a conversation in multiple higher education spaces, but the term only has meaning when the structures and supports exist (Lu, 2023). The discussion in Lu's article points to the prevalence of the word belonging and the more important structures and systems needed.

In their review of this literature, Dias-Broens, Meeuwisse and Severiens (2024) directly stated that "there is no consensus in the literature about how students' sense of belonging in [higher education] should be defined and measured" (p.5). This is a powerful statement drawn on their review of 150 studies between 2000 and 2021. This study selected Strayhorn's definition to have a central grounding piece, which provides a specific context and conceptualization of belonging. This study works to contribute to the discussion on belonging by grounded student impact through campus ecology. The critique of various definitions of belonging also refers to the efforts discussed to address students lack belonging.

One critique of belonging is the discussion of the use and discussion of interventions. Cheung & Fowler's (2023) review of two articles provided insight into how there are assumptions of intervention impact without designing the system to fully assess it. In one study, the intervention to enhance belonging was passively imposed through a Facebook group using a sample of 471 students comparing classes with and without a correlating Facebook group. In the other, the researchers studied use of a makerspace as an intervention, but the survey didn't assess frequency of use. Additionally, a group of researchers doing a review of the literature discussion on belonging found over 50 instruments had been used to measure belonging in 95 studies with the vast majority being unidimensional (Dias-Broens, Meeuwisse, and Severiens, 2024). Additionally, other studies implemented interventions, but they were developed within a predominantly white context (Middleton et al., 2021; Solanki et al., 2020). The variation of instruments and interventions contributes to the lack of central definition. Research and

measurements being developed in predominantly white contexts contradict the literature that speaks to the challenges marginalized students face with belonging on campus (Ribera et al., 2017). Critiquing the approaches to address a lack of sense of belonging is important due to the assumptions of impact on belonging exist. Additional concerns raised on instruments and interventions support the larger critique of a lack of a uniform approach to assessing belonging. This study works to not further contribute to the challenge by utilizing a comparative case study to explore the experience of students.

A final point to discuss is from Allen et al.'s (2022) narrative review across various databases and platforms centered on belonging. One implication the researchers discuss is the Need for belonging researchers to develop a more robust understanding of the existing literature. The theoretical, methodological, and conceptual gaps need to be bridged to make this literature much more widely accessible. Knowledge development in this area will lead to improved research measurement and practitioner tools, potentially based on multi-theoretical, empirically driven perspectives that will, in turn, make the bridging of future theory, research, practice, and lived application easier for all stakeholders (p.98).

The implications of this critique are important to this study for several reasons. First, the ability to understand and discuss current literature. The lack of a standard definition for belonging is important to acknowledge. Discussing the role of researchers in defining and conducting research on belonging is helpful to move the agenda forward. Finally, this concept must be continually clarified and refined. This study is designed to share the experiences of students related to belonging and campus ecology. The final product will help explore students'

experiences in a specific context and add to the discussions of belonging through their words and campus lives.

### **Belonging at the Margins**

While belonging is critical for all students, lack of belonging poses critical risks to marginalized and underrepresented students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Spencer & Aronson, 2002; Walter & Brady, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012; Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Duran, Foste, Garcia, & Snipes, 2022). Hausmann et al. (2009) provides an overview of literature that speaks to the ways that belonging is especially important to marginalized students. Students from stigmatized or minoritized communities are likely to experience challenges with their mental health because of discrimination that erodes their sense of belonging (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams 1999; Jones, Peddie et al., 2016; Levy, Heisselet al., 2016). One consideration is that while institutions invest in recruiting students from historically marginalized communities, those students need additional support to persist (Friedersford, 2015; Plaut et al., 2011). Murphy & Zirkel (2015) conducted a study where they found that the lack of connection to individuals within their majors contributed to a lower sense of belonging for students. Research also indicates that marginalized students are hyperaware of interactions to assess whether they belong. Murphy et al. (2007) explored how experiences raised concerns around social identity. In the study, the researchers observed 25 male and 22 female students at Stanford to assess their understanding of situational threat by having students watch a video with differing levels of gender representation and then respond to questions. They found that the videos with limited gender equity resulted in heightened vigilance from women, and the women anticipated a lower sense of belonging at the conference. In spaces where individuals don't belong, the physical items, the representation of groups, and the items can provide cues to whether individuals have a place within the community

(Murphy & Taylor, 2012). Freeman & Carlson (2023) provide an overview of a program built in a law school that addressed belonging for marginalized students by providing mentoring, faculty connections, and academic support that led to higher levels of student belonging and persistence.

For marginalized and oppressed students, the impact of experience on campus, interactions with faculty, and other experiences contribute to a feeling of belonging. The organizational structures, instruction, activities, and many of the most influential moments all occur within the physical spaces of campus, as discussed in campus ecology. Jones (2009) further acknowledges that the intersection of identity, developmental capacity, and engagement is crucial to students understanding who they are and their expectations. Researchers acknowledge that acceptance or lack thereof for marginalized students impacts the connections made in engagement, involvement, and persistence attributed to their marginalized identities (Milem and Berger, 1997). It is important to acknowledge that the impacts of experience can vary based on other intersecting marginalized identities students have.

The differences in the experience of a white gay cisgender man, black lesbian trans\* women, or disabled non-binary queer people are significant and may influence the need to find belonging on campus. When spirituality, institutional type, race, and geography are considered as well, then the unique intersection and experiences of a dynamic LGBTQ+ community can be understood and explored (Nicolazzo, 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Lenning, 2017; Duran and Perez, 2017; Means, 2017). The literature discusses the specific value of a sense of belonging for marginalized students, including LGBTQ+ students.

Marginalized and oppressed students' sense of belonging is crucial as a protective factor to keep them enrolled (Strayhorn, 2012). Students who possess multiple marginalized identities experience a more significant physiological burden that negatively impacts their academic and

co-curricular experience. The impacts can show up as negative health outcomes or higher levels of anxiety (Gonzales, et al., 2002; Walton & Cohen 2011). Belonging and positive health outcomes that can be fostered for these same populations “with smaller and more manageable environments within the larger campus, offer a conduit for socialization into the larger campus community, and provide a venue in which students can maintain and express a sense of racial/ethnic identity on campus” (Museus and Quaye, 2009, p. 72). Systems, subcultures, and the access to community on campus influences understanding the systems and operations of colleges and universities. This study will take the broader discussion around identity and experience on campus to focus on the intersection of campus ecology and belonging to understand ways to support the retention, progression, graduation, and support of LGBTQ+ collegians.

### **The Relationship Between Campus Ecology and LGBTQ+ Students Belonging**

Given the importance of academic and social integration to student retention, it is important to consider the role of campus ecology. Hausman et al. (2009) assert that “social and learning environments that include intentional and systematic practices that reduce threats to students’ sense of belonging” increase students’ persistence (p. 309). Campus ecology gives an understanding of the importance of the design of physical spaces and how higher education institutions must consider the spaces to foster the connections needed for student persistence (Haynes et al., 2009). There are “a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1989, 16). This study seeks to understand how campus ecology and the experiences on campus impact students ability to cultivate belonging on campus.

The relationship between campus ecology and belonging is especially important to consider among underrepresented groups such as LGBTQ+ collegians. The literature tells us that belonging cannot exist without spaces and places on campus that are welcoming, affirming, and which cultivate safety and security for students from marginalized communities (Strayhorn, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh, et al., 2008). Understanding that marginalized students have different experiences because of campus ecology is an important starting point for fostering inclusive spaces (Strange & Banning, 2015). This study focuses on the impact of campus ecology on sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ collegians. The campus's location, physical structures, and broader culture collectively shape student experiences. In the literature, this is discussed in various ways, as the combination of the facilities, experiences, and campus climate impacts students interest and ability to succeed (Secore, 2018). In this study, campus ecology encompasses the facilities for marginalized groups, the availability of gender-inclusive restrooms, the accessibility of campus, the policies that govern speech or expression, and the regulations of organizations. In addition to the policies and structures, campus ecology also comprises the interactions, climate, and culture of a campus that occur within the various spaces on campus. The exploration of experience of those who hold marginalized identities then navigate a dominant culture, campus climate, and find themselves engaging in resistance to the dominant culture that works against certain mainstream beliefs (Hebdidge, 2005; Hebdidge 1979). Campus ecology is the comprehensive experience of students through buildings, residence halls, campus climate, culture, and experiences which, as discussed, can impact students' sense of belonging. The examination of experience of campus ecology on sense of belonging then centers on how LGBTQ+ collegians navigating campus have their belonging impacted.

## Conclusion

LGBTQ+ collegians have experienced legal regulation, the inability to get married, and have seen significant numbers of hate crimes that encourages centering their diverse experience (Slaten et al., 2014). To create space for belonging among LGBTQ+ collegians, “campus climate is critical to students academic success and well-being” (Taylor et al., 2018, p.155). The idea of belonging is situated in relationships and experience, so it logically follows that the climate of a campus can impact the ability to thrive and belong. The role of universities and colleges in addressing these challenges is an area of discussion and disagreement. As discussed in the literature on belonging above, community is critical to students finding their place and connections on campus. Challenges and critiques to sense of belonging need to be acknowledged along with the various benefits outlined in the current literature.

By amplifying the voices and centering the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians, the study documented the evolution of the experience, support systems, and how the lived experiences of individuals impacted their sense of belonging. Researchers have explored this complex system of “connections and interlocking influences, people, and organizations that are changing the way educational policies are made” (Au and Ferrare, 2015 xviii). Understanding the influences impacting higher education and support of students is important given the impact of services and programs on belonging. For instance, the closing of offices and layoffs at UT Austin may have impacts on students’ sense of belonging on that campus (Alonso, 2024). This will be a key area for future reference and exemplifies how external influences can shape student experience. Acknowledging this complex system is important to consider what can be done to promote student success and address existing barriers. This study's exploration of belonging on campus for LGBTQ+ collegians will contribute to scholarly conversations and provide practical

implications for those who support student well-being. French (2007) asserts that “[i]f institutions can move beyond mere acceptance or tolerance of diverse perspectives and toward a model that encourages the incorporation of these perspectives, there is greater potential for changes to institutional cultures” (p. 111). The following chapter provides a discussion of the topic in literature and opportunities for this study to contribute to the discourse.

## Chapter 2

### The Intersection of Ecology and Belonging for LGBTQ+ Collegians

*“We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us”*

Winston Churchill

After 250 assessments of campus climate, it was found that a sense of belonging was the top reason for students considering leaving the institution, followed by a lack of resources (Weber, 2022). Those reasons emerge from campus ecology and merit review of the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians specifically. Scholars have engaged in conversations about LGBTQ+ collegians in various ways over the years. In 1979, Cass’s theory of sexual identity formation examined the stages LGBTQ+ collegians navigate when coming out and making sense of their identity. This theory established a foundation for continued studies of queer and transgender collegians in various context. Wall and Evans (1999) built on that work by synthesizing research from the late 1990s and calling for coordinated support of students moving forward. To this day, literature speaks to the challenges where LGBTQ+ collegians experience higher instances of suicidal ideation than their heterosexual peers (Intrabartola, 2017). Additionally, incidents of unwelcoming campus contexts and discourse on the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ identities are debated in the courts, media, and classrooms (Draughn, et al., 2002; Sanlo, 2004; Rankin 2006). Each of these concerns may impact the retention and success of LGBTQ+ collegians. Understanding these student experiences is critical as neoliberal influences work against support for LGBTQ+ collegians under the guise of removing "values, philosophy, and social interests" (Lipman, 2011, pp. 11-12). Legislative efforts to end diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, which have been attempted in 28 states (Ryan, 2024), underscore the need to understand the barriers encountered by LGBTQ+ students.

Chapter 1 discussed the definitions of campus ecology and sense of belonging at length. Additionally, Chapter 1 discussed the impact of a lack of belonging for students and needs of LGBTQ+ collegians. The goal of this chapter is to synthesize what we know about the relationship between campus ecology, sense of belonging, and LGBTQ+ students. In each section, I consider how scholars have studied each dimension of the campus ecology framework, relevant research on marginalized students in general, and where relevant, research that specifically addresses LGBTQ+ students. Overall, the synthesis demonstrates a paucity of research on the importance of place in higher education (Gusa, 2010). Moreover, we will see that while scholars have connected different dimensions of the campus ecology framework to the concerns of LGBTQ+ students, few studies of this population integrate each dimension of the framework in their analysis.

### **Belonging through Ecology**

Although scholarly consideration of campus ecology emerged prior to coinage of the notion of “sense of belonging,” the core ideas related to student involvement and integration on campus feature prominently in academic research. Because interest in LGBTQ+ students is a more recent phenomenon, at times, I review relevant work on other marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, to consider how existing research may inform our understanding of the research questions motivating this study. Each section explores the way that sense of belonging as a concept has been discussed in connection with each of the four environments of campus ecology.

### **Belonging in the Physical Environment**

The design of buildings and structural decisions “grow out directly from the inner nature of the people, and the animals, and plants, and matter which are in it” (Alexander, 1979, p.7). Strange & Banning (2001) define physical space as the structures, facilities, and landscape of an

environment. A student center, a recreation center, a residence hall, a green space, and a classroom are all designed to serve various functions on a college campus and compose the physical space. Focusing on college unions as an exemplar, there is a focus on the role these facilities play in contributing to belonging. A study of dissertations published found that 23 dissertations discussed college unions, with six studies looking at the physical structure (DeSawal & Yakaboski, 2013). Knell & Latta (2006) state that “the university campus is an evolving image, and the college union is one of its ever-changing reflections” (p, 29). Given the conceptual importance scholars assign to these physical facilities, the lack of empirical research on the role of design and physical structures represents an important gap this study seeks to contribute.

These facilities serve designated functions and serve a larger purpose as hubs for community, learning, and growth. Physical space is the foundation, literally and figuratively, of campus ecology. Librarians, campus planners, and university leadership have all invested in exploring the physical environments impact on operations (Jamieson, 2003; Temple, 2007; Massiss, 2010; Campos et al., 2021). The structures are more than just buildings. They facilitate and engage the campus in the daily functions of community. Researchers have also viewed the impact of architecture and design on the experience of well-being. An interdisciplinary review of research conducted by Joye (2007) found that design decisions in buildings directly impact student experience. An ethnographic study of 91 students’ experiences, for example, found that design of buildings, integration of natural light, furniture, and other physical components contributed to community, relaxation, and restorative spaces (Banning, Clemmons, McKelfresh, Gibbs, 2010). Physical spaces on campus facilitate student growth, support community development, and influence the ability of students to succeed at the collegiate level (Kuh et al.,

2008). Tinto and Goodsell-Love (1993) specifically discuss this when they determine that physical space contributes to students ability to grow, connect to supports, and develop community. The design and initial impressions of physical space on campus informs how students interact with their environment (Oblinger, 2006; Leijon, 2016). Physical spaces communicate values and commitments of institutions that facilitate social interaction (Schuetz, 2005). Magolda (2001) explored the ritual of a campus tour as another way to view the ways architecture and physical buildings are used to promote and sell the student experience.

These studies suggest that the physical environment is especially crucial to the experience of students from historically marginalized or oppressed groups. Most work of this nature discusses the intersection of space and race. Duran et al. (2022) point out the need for “critical theorization of space [in context of] the historical domination of, claims to, and control over physical spaces” (p. 613). Racist symbols on college campuses represent a contemporary example that illustrates the relationship between the physical environment and sense of belonging. Drawing on interviews with 23 black undergraduate students, Tichavakunda (2022) demonstrated how referents to slaveholders on college buildings shape the student experience. In particular, the study found that students reinscribed, reinterpreted, and resisted symbols of White Supremacy even as they were accustomed to confronting them elsewhere in society. Given these patterns, it is unsurprising that students are increasingly mobilizing against racist symbols on campus. As one example, the University of Louisville recently renamed its stadium in the wake of derogatory and racist language from a former donor for whom the facilities were previously named. Robison (2011) speaks to the role of “LGBT’ness” on campus as a positive factor on student experience. The visibility of LGBTQ+ centers and gender-inclusive restrooms fostered connection and community for participants connecting belonging and the physical environment.

Considering the larger discourse on physical space and its role in supporting student belonging, various studies discuss the broad connection between the built environment and sense of belonging. Braskamp et al. (2006) assert physical space and belonging connect as students look to “find places and groups where they feel that sense of connection” (p.150). Quantitative and qualitative studies have worked to understand how the design of classroom space, crowding on campus, and the way that existence of physical support spaces for marginalized students cultivate belonging for historically oppressed groups (Holton & Riley, 2016). Denton, Kortegast, & Miller (2018) discuss visual methods as a tool to use with participants to showcase their experience.

This study is designed to center the voice and experience of students, which uses visual methods to show the elements of campus ecology being discussed. Phelps-Ward et al. (2021) engaged photovoice, the use of photographs or videos captures by the participants, to document a research meeting and the role of visual methods for researchers and participants. The authors assert that the power of visuals, the role of power, and the ability to use visuals to support building community and relationships with participants. This study's use of visuals achieves similar aims by viewing the concepts through the eyes of the students who experience it. Alcantar et al. (2020) explored the placement and structures of Asian American and Pacific Islander serving community colleges. In their study, they observed campuses over a three-year period and conducted interviews with 20 institutional agents. They found that the designation of physical space fostered both a sense of belonging for students and increased engagement. For instance, the location of a LGBTQ center and the quality of space compared to others may communicate the way students perceive their value on campus. Additional studies found that students themselves articulated the connection between how the physical design of campus influences the activities that occur (Cooper & Fry, 2020; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021).

While scholars have begun to identify the relationship between space and belonging among racial minorities, research that examines how LGBTQ+ students experience the physical environment is relatively rare. Scholars certainly recognize the importance of space to LGBTQ+ students. Discussing the K-12 context, for example, Sadowski (2017) outlines those public institutions must move beyond safe spaces to design structures and policies to support students. Yet, Sadowski's (2017) essay neither explicitly attends nor offers empirical evidence on college campuses. One survey of 635 students in the UK who held diverse identities demonstrated high levels of connection between belonging and the physical spaces of campus (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021). Yet, the design of this study limits our ability to fully understand the role of place for LGBTQ+ students. For example, the main measure for which the study assessed space is based on a "yes" or "no" question on whether space "mattered." Studies of this nature underscore the relationship between space and belonging but say little about how or why space is important. Robison's (2011) dissertation studied the experiences on campus of bisexual and gay men related to safety. His study involved ten bisexual and gay men's experiences while being out on campus. He used two interviews and a focus group to collect data to share the experiences. His study found that experience with student groups on campus and residence life informed if the students felt safe. The existence and engagement with the LGBTQ student organization or a safe zone sticker on a door, represented welcome and affirming spaces.

Research on the issue of campus space, experience, and the persistence of students reflects an assumption that higher education institutions should support their students and provide paths for their students to be successful. Student Centers on college campuses provide an example of the ways physical space creates "central point[s] where institutions can promote inclusion and be a welcoming place for numerous student populations" (Banks, Hammond, and

Hernandez, p. 13). Designing places and activities that promote connection for oppressed students supports students finding co-curricular and academic integration. However, it is only when “a feeling of inclusion and sense of safety, engaging mechanisms for involvement, and the experience of the community’ are considered that this idea can be achieved (Strange and Banning, 2015, p. xii). Brown-Saracino (2018) points out that as LGBTQ individuals navigate space as it “create(s) the social environments that LGBTQ [residents] encounter on moving there, and how – in accordance with those features – they adjust their relation to local heterosexuals, to other LGBTQ individuals, and, ultimately, to their own sexual identity” (p. 221). It is an important and salient aspect of the dialogue around space and individual experience, as the author points out that ultimately the spaces, we navigate may impact how LGBTQ individuals understand and internalize their identities.

There is a limited discussion of the impact of the built environment on the experience of LGBTQ collegians’ sense of belonging. As this section has demonstrated, there is a nascent literature that explores the physical campus space and LGBTQ+ students’ experience therein (McSpadden, 2020; Jaekel, 2017; Hays, 2020). There is also a variety of literature discussing the role or need for LGBTQ+ resource centers. In *Contested Issues in Student Affairs*, Dr. Kristen Renn’s chapter discusses the role and existence of identity centers to serve LGBTQ+ collegians and provide physical space to feel valued. The study of belonging in the physical space can help administrators understand the impacts of decisions in the physical design and structure of campus. Additionally, administrators must also understand the impact of the spaces and structures on belonging (Banning, 2012). There continues to be a gap in exploring LGBTQ+ experiences across the broader campus, considering the intersecting elements of campus ecology, which will be discussed in the following sections.

This gap is consequential as it limits information available to campus planners, administrators, and stakeholders to inform design and construction decisions on campus. There is evidence as discussed in this section that the design of physical spaces, locations of space on campus, and naming of facilities can all impact whether students perceive that they belong. The study helps to fill the gap related to the role of physical space in the context of other elements of campus ecology.

### **Belonging in the Human Aggregate Environment**

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, the human aggregate environment, which we can also understand as "campus community", refers to the way that individuals understand and experience an environment based on the characteristics and composition of students and organizations. Given that this dimension of the campus ecology framework emphasizes the types of students, staff, and faculty that comprise a campus, it is worth emphasizing the centrality of institutional types and missions to the student experience, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds. Historically, most universities in the United States were originally designed for the benefit of privileged students (Warikoo, 2016). In other words, historically, on most campuses, the campus community a student would encounter is largely white and heteronormative.

In many respects, approaches to studying the human aggregate environment reflect these historical characteristics, even as campuses have (unevenly) diversified. One of the most prevalent approaches to studying this dimension of campus ecology consists of quantitative analysis of student participation in academic majors, student clubs and organizations, and subcultures. A classic study in this respect is work by Feldman et al (1999), who analyzed congruence between students and campus environments through an analysis of academic majors. To do so, they reviewed survey data from 2,309 survey responses from students across 360

institutions. They found that students who found congruence in their academic environment grew in knowledge, while those who didn't developed or decreased their skill level. These results demonstrate that integration within a campus's academic environment is intrinsically connected to student success. In a follow-up to their initial work, the researchers identify a need to better understand how environmental congruence influences academic performance (Feldman et al, 2001). Porter & Umbach (2006) used three years of survey data from the same survey as Feldman and found that sense of belonging within academic majors varies by gender and race. For instance, there was a 3.8% difference in the number of African American students enrolled in the sciences when they control for "background characteristic and personality" (p. 446). In contrast, white students were consistent in the models and actual enrollment. These findings imply that marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ+ students, may find it more challenging to develop a sense of belonging within their fields of study. Qualitative work further bolsters this conclusion. Drawing on interviews with 19 Latinx students enrolled in a Chicano studies class, Nuñez (2011) found that students felt isolated as they did not see themselves represented on campus even as their university tried to develop a more inclusive curriculum.

Of course, much of student life occurs outside of the classroom, where interactions with other students that shape belonging are more likely to happen. Drawing on a survey of 11,209 seniors at 50 institutions, Dugan (2013) identified a taxonomy of 21 types of co-curricular group experiences, such as academic careerists, social collegiates, and athletes, as part of a broader attempt to understand the integration of students in campus life. Yet, marginalized students in general and LGBTQ+ students are rarely foregrounded in such work. In Dugan's (2013) study, they are generally categorized as "Identity and Expression Leaders." While this study helps us broadly understand that participation in any affinity group is associated with broader integration

within a campus, they tell us little about how LGBTQ+ undergraduates navigate campus life or develop a sense of belonging.

A second broad research category on the human aggregate environment emphasizes campus culture. Charon (2002) defines culture as “that which we learn and come to believe.... [and] a set of ideas concerning what is real or true” (pp. 93-94). When considering examples of campus culture, this could include service learning, involvement in Greek life, whether a culture welcomes LGBTQ+ folks, etc. In addition to the dominant culture of campus, there are subcultures that exist as a form of resistance (Hebdidge, 1979). Examples of subcultures on college campuses include, for example, the marching band, LGBTQ+ organizations, intramural sports, and subcultures related to social class. Stuber (2011) conducted an ethnographic study of how social class shaped student interactions. For example, a student who had to work on a wealthy campus didn’t experience belonging the same way others did. The results of this work point to a need to design intervention programs that increase the circulation of social and cultural capital across campus (Stuber, 2011). The subcultures can be simply a space to find like-minded individuals or exist as a political act (Muggleton, 2000). The intersection between the culture of a campus and the subcultures that form in resistance to the normative culture helps to understand how students are impacted by culture (Hebdidge 1979). Subcultures in the form of student organizations may demonstrate students identifying a need of students to find community. As discussed in the literature above, identifying community can positively impact sense of belonging for students.

Westbrook (2009) points out that LGBTQ+ student organizations, an element of subculture, “[reduce] social isolation and feelings of stigmatization” (p.371). The author goes on to point out that these groups have leadership that is primarily white, gay, and middle-class men.

The existence and persistence of LGBTQ+ student organizations promote the support of LGBTQ+ collegians (Evans & Broido, 1999; Stevens, 2004). Additionally, Renn & Ozaki (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 18 college students involved in identity-based student organizations. They found through the interviews that the existence of these organizations helps with the development of identity and leadership in subgroups. Finally, Hurley (2016) used data from the 2012 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, which entailed a survey of 4,237 LGBTQ students and 124 Transgender students. A key takeaway was that white LGBTQ+ individuals have a disproportionate benefit of support networks, mentoring, and leadership development when compared to their LGBTQ+ student-of-color peers. This is a reminder of the need to consider the differences based on multiple intersecting marginalized identities within the human aggregate environment of a campus. Literature emphasizes the need to explore and understand the way that culture, perceptions, and discussions generally connect.

When examining the human aggregate environment, it is also important to consider the cultural context that students bring to their experience. For instance, Duran & Perez (2017) articulate the role of family for Latinx LGBTQ+ students and the impact on their experience navigating the human aggregate and broader campus environment. At a predominately white institution, students coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds must balance maintaining their cultural heritage and a human aggregate environment that doesn't account for their experience. The role of family and support as a component of the human aggregate environment allows us to consider how administrators influence the environment. Martin et al. (2018) used a narrative research design and interviewed eight student affairs administrators to address how family support and engagement influence student experience. They found that when administrators focused on creating inclusive community spaces, education, policy, and advocacy to support

LGBTQ+ students experience the human aggregate environment benefitted by being perceived as more welcoming of LGBTQ+ students.

Overall, scholars have devoted significant attention to developing taxonomies of student life outside of the classroom. Studies have also made inroads into understanding the role of participation in student organizations in developing a sense of belonging. Yet, the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students do not feature prominently in such studies. Additionally, the lack of attention to the four intersecting elements of campus ecology limits understanding of the comprehensive student experience.

### **Belonging in the Organizational Environment**

The organizational environment represents the policies, processes, and structures that define the campus environment. Higher education institutions are complex systems built within the context of rules, rituals, and culture, including the systemic biases and discrimination prevalent in the United States (Charon 2002; Bjork, 2002; Sarine, 2012). Unlike the physical environment of a campus, or the student groups and subcultures that shape campus life, the roles of organizational structures and policies are less readily apparent to students. As Trouillot (2015, p.158) reminds us, “[t]he ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge is the exposition of its roots.”

Perhaps because organizational power and policies are less readily apparent to students, or because of a broader intellectual division between scholars who study students and those who study postsecondary policy, there is relatively limited research in this area of the campus ecology framework. Instead, one often finds proscriptive or conceptual typologies developed by campus ecology scholars. Strange & Banning (2015), for example, provides a comprehensive discussion of various organizational structures and types that shape student life. They argue, for example,

that administrators should examine innovation, efficiency, quantity of production, and morale when developing integrative environments for students (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Nevertheless, some research points to the relationship between organizational structure, policies, and student well-being. Focusing on structure, for example, Kezar & Kinzie (2006) used a multi-site case study approach to explore how institutional mission and student engagement are related. Drawing on nationally representative data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), they found a positive association between institutional mission and the way engagement was focused where policies and practices aligned with the mission. When institutions build engagement into their missions and build programs and supports to demonstrate commitment, engagement increases. While institutional mission statements may explicitly shape practices related to student life, organizational practices may also have unintended bias towards students and people of color in instruction (Brooks, 2013). Institutional diversity work, or the attempt by organizations to enact a racially conscious external identity, represents a common example (Hamilton and Nielson, 2021). When organizational rhetoric espousing diversity departs from actual practices on campus, students from marginalized backgrounds may find campuses that fall short of their expectations, thereby challenging their ability to develop a sense of belonging (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023).

The most closely related body of work to the present study concerns specific campus policies relevant to the well-being of certain LGBTQ+ students. One historical analysis reviewed the change in policy allowing an LGBTQ+ organization to be founded at the University of Georgia, demonstrating how the organizational environment can be influenced by external forces like a court ruling (Cain & Hevel, 2021). The rulings referenced in this study created the legal foundation for spaces and student organizations for LGBTQ+ students to exist. These policies

are part of the organizational environment that then informs practice. In *Trans\* In College*, the researcher interviewed nine students about their experience in navigating campus life as Trans\* students (CITE). Assumptions about representation, bureaucratic structures that result in deadnaming students, and policies on documentation erode connection for these students. Policies around bathroom use, gender-inclusive housing, presence of staff, or space designated to LGBTQ+ students are various ways the organizational environment influences belonging for collegians, even though they may not have as much direct awareness or knowledge. Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith (2019) conducted a study of 507 trans and gender-nonconforming students that found that gender-inclusive restrooms, changing names, and nondiscrimination policies that include gender identity positively impact students experience. Several other research studies specifically discussed the importance of policies to provide for chosen name policies and pronouns in student record systems (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022; Linley & Kilgo, 2018). Day et al. (2022) used data from a 2016 survey of 523 students using multivariate ordinal regression to understand the connection between resources for transgender students and LGBTQ+ organizations and programs, which found students felt more connected and that they belonged when the organizational environment was inclusive of their needs. Research also looks at the experience in the organizational environment for LGBTQ+ students in Christian colleges (McRay & Ruff, 2021). A study of 11 minoritized LGBTQ+ faculty found that these faculty are “expected to exert additional labor in their research, teaching, and service, all while being insufficiently supported and valued by many in the academy” (Wright-Mair and Marine, p.688). This is important to the study as it also exemplifies the role of support from faculty and staff and the impact it can have on students. It is critical these supports from the organizational

environment are viewed in context of the other three elements to gain a deeper understanding of belonging.

The literature discussing the organizational environment provides a variety of insights. This ranges from the role of inclusion in mission statements to fostering feelings of belonging to the policy decisions of institutions. The existence of LGBTQ+ affirming policies and faculty/staff who share identities all are positive impacts on the way students experience the organization. An existing gap is the discussion of how organizational environments interact with other elements of campus ecology to impact students experience. This study works to understand how the organizational environment impacts sense of belonging within the campus ecology context.

### **Belonging in the Socially Constructed Environment**

The socially constructed environment relates to how “an individual’s sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group” becomes defined (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 29). Kuh & White (1988) described this idea as an institutional ethos or “an underlying attitude that describes how faculty and students feel about themselves” (p.62). Extending the concept to campus ecology, Strange & Banning (2015) emphasize how the socially constructed environment is shaped by experiences, comments, interactions, and engagements. The socially constructed environment, in short, exists within the physical frames of the built environment, the characteristics of the human aggregate environment, and the policies and processes of the organizational environment.

Campus climate research is perhaps the most heavily studied dimension of campus ecology (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Hurtado, et al., 2008). In their review, Hurtado et al. (2008) identified 90 surveys that discuss different aspects of campus

climate conducted between 1985 and 2008. Many studies examine the relationship between racial climates and educational outcomes, although more recently, scholars have begun to explore the climate for LGBTQ+ students (Garvey et al., 2017). Garvey et al. (2017) surveyed 3,121 LGBTQ students over 70 graduation years to understand how geography, along with academic and co-curricular experiences, influence LGBTQ students experiences. The researchers found three key insights connected to this study. The first is the generational shift where individuals who graduated more recently have stronger perceptions of campus climate-indicated progress. The second is that experiences on campus have a significant impact on the perception of climate. When more negative interactions occur, the campus climate is viewed more negatively. Finally, there is a variation based on the region of the country. This is insightful for this comparative study with one institution in the Midwest and one in the south.

Two broad sets of findings emerge from campus climate surveys. One is a point developed in the first chapter of this work: individuals experience campuses very differently. Students of color, for example, are more likely to have observed or directly encountered racism than white students and thus view their campuses as more hostile (cf. Rankin and Reason, 2005). Second, scholars have demonstrated that such climates negatively contribute to student outcomes such as sense of belonging (cf. Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Garvey, et al. (2018) add to this discussion using the National LGBT Alumni Survey to explore the way that campus climate as an undergraduate impacts alumnx experiences. One of the strongest relationships in their analysis came from how the undergraduate experience impacted alumnx perceptions. These data indicate that fostering a positive campus climate benefits current students as well as alumnx, who are often called on for philanthropic support.

While campus climate surveys are useful for documenting differences across groups, they are less capable of assessing the actual meanings that students assign to their campuses and experiences. Alongside climate surveys, scholars have utilized qualitative research to better understand how students perceive their campus environments and the implications of these views for belonging. Much of the work in this area focuses on gender and race. Harris (2010), for example, conducted a grounded study of 68 undergraduate men to examine how they understand and enact masculinity. The study demonstrated that ongoing experience and engagement with interactions across “diverse backgrounds, identities, and experiences challenged prevailing assumptions about masculinities and motivated the participants to consider new meanings” (Harris, 2010, p.314). The new meanings resulted in students finding stronger connections within campus environments. Another study using purposeful sampling conducted focus groups with 46 women and found that the women experienced a “chilly campus climate that served to further perpetuate a culture of fear for their campus safety” (Turner & Torres, 2006, p.24). Comparing Harris (2010) and Turner & Torres, (2006), one observes how gender can be directly related to empowerment for men and fear for women. These studies again affirm the impact of experience on campus affecting sense of belonging. Whether it is investing in well-being or the presence of racist parties, the experience on campus informs and impacts student belonging. Stanton et al. (2016) completed a qualitative study with focus groups and interviews with 29 students focused on well-being. This study found that experiences of social connection and learning contribute to the overall perceptions of students. Garcia et al. (2011) used critical race theory to analyze 27 occurrences of racialized theme parties. In an analysis of the parties, they identified racist elements and microaggressions present that negatively contribute to campus culture. Another study used focus group data from a larger study to identify over 70 microaggressions

experienced by racial minorities in housing that negatively impacted their feeling of safety and belonging (Harwood et al., 2012). Individuals with disabilities were found to implore downplaying one's disability status when navigating campus life to avoid being othered (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2010). The experience and challenges with socially constructed environments are even greater when you consider the experience of international students (Yan and Berliner, 2013). The barriers to belonging represented in these studies emphasize the role of socially constructed environments. One of the tenets of sense of belonging is the way that the need for connection becomes crucially important, especially for marginalized communities, to find a community to support success (Strayhorn, 2019). Learning environments grounded in engagement with faculty and peers have been found to contribute to higher levels of academic engagement, pointing to the value of social interactions and belonging (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). These connections help students to persist and resist the challenges of the world around them. Duran (2019) explored the impact and definition of belonging for queer students as "having both marginalized identities validated, depending on individuals' interests, and existed in smaller networks." Finding a smaller community to connect with in the socially constructed environment is a consideration in exploring belonging.

The connection between race and the socially constructed environment has been studied much more than sexual identity. Evans et al. (2017) conducted interviews on campus climate and found that that discrimination and isolation were consistent experiences. Cadenas et al (2024) used national data with 501 immigrant students and found that when a campus was welcoming, they found higher positive mental health outcomes and a sense of belonging. When the campus was not welcoming, students experienced negative impacts on mental health and belonging. While some may question the need for universities to focus on such concerns, the findings

underscore the importance of cultivating a welcoming campus climate. A survey of 172 women of color found that belonging significantly predicted their academic performance (McQueen, Thelamour, and Daniels, 2023). Another study done by McDougal et al. (2024) using 21 focus groups of students, faculty, and staff found significant negative experiences on campus and called for increased efforts to recruit and support black students to foster a welcoming environment. Garvey et al. (2017) point out that the campus climate for LGBTQ+ students negatively impacts their ability to persist and complete their degree, which brings us to a discussion on the existence of LGBTQ+ students experiences specifically in the literature. A review of the literature related to LGBTQ+ students in the socially constructed environment helps to inform the gap this study addresses. Weise et al. (2023) explored nonreporting of bias incidents in the South using a survey of 143 participants from 39 institutions across the Southeast. They found that students were less likely to report as they did not feel the report would have an impact. A study conducted with 21 transgender and gender non-conforming students in response to a campus climate survey found that these students did not believe reports of sexual violence would be taken seriously because of the campus climate (Gartner, et al, 2023). These two studies point to a dangerous element of an unwelcoming campus climate, resulting in less reporting harming LGBTQ+ collegians.

It has been found that positive experiences in various spaces on campus had a direct impact on LGBTQ+ students (Duran et al., 2022). The positive and negative experience of students shapes their sense of belonging in spaces designed for connection and community. Research on the experience of LGBTQ+ students in residence halls demonstrates experiences of homophobia and transphobia (Kortegast, 2017). Additionally, Jonathon Pryor (2017) examined areas on campus that were sources of discomfort. His participants illuminated challenges

navigating Greek Life, campus recreation, and athletics. The discomfort in these spaces illuminates areas where the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race interact and creates additional pressure points for LGBTQ students. Additionally, while individual students may have felt discomfort, it also illustrates the broader cultures of campus space that are not inclusive of the needs of LGBTQ students. These studies all looked at individual elements and spaces on campus connected to LGBTQ+ belonging. In *Trans\* in College*, Z Nicolazzo shares the stories and experiences of Trans\* students navigating space and place on campus. The work examining Trans\* students illuminated the need to understand that community members' needs may differ based on their identities. It is important to explore the areas of discomfort and areas that are affirming across campus. Additionally, the intersection of identities must be understood and integrated into understanding challenges members of the LGBTQ community face in the context of other privileged or marginalized identities they hold. LGBTQ+ collegians' experiences are also discussed by various researchers on how students LGBTQ+ and racial identity impact their experiences (Duran et al., 2022; Jourian, T. J., 2017; Mayhew and Simonoff, 2015; Means, 2017). In constructing research questions, analyzing data, and discussing opportunities, it is important to acknowledge the impact of race on LGBTQ+ collegians' experience of campus ecology and sense of belonging. It is also important to acknowledge that considering the varied experiences of individuals accounts for the way that “racialized homophobia” shows up in how LGBTQ+ students of color experience racism within the community that impacts their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2014, p.588). To date, more research is needed to examine how LGBTQ+ students experience the socially constructed environment in multiple parts of campus.

Throughout this section, the intersection and connection of the four elements of campus ecology have been discussed. The variety of research on experience in specific subsets of

campus from recreation to residence halls is a helpful foundation and speaks to the need for this study. However, the gap persists in addressing the connection between the four environments of campus ecology and belonging in context of each other. This gap is consequential because in failing to address the broader experience across areas, addressing campus climate is even more challenging.

### **Campus Ecology's Intersection with LGBTQ+ Collegians Sense of Belonging**

This study sits at the intersection campus ecology, sense of belonging, and research on LGBTQ+ students and seeks to bring them together in a way that helps to inform practice and provide insights into students experiences. Duran et al. (2022) reviewed the scholarship related to LGBTQ+ individuals in higher education from 2009 to 2018. They found a variety of critical implications ranging from the lack of publications in top-tier journals, failure to include theoretical or epistemological traditions, and other limitations. As they conclude, “it is evident that researching LGBTQ+ people does not inherently mean having queer and trans politics, frameworks, or theoretical stances that center on LGBTQ+ people” (Duran et al., 2002, p.397). Additionally, Dias-Broenset et al. (2024) conducted a review of 150 studies published between 2000 to 2021 that found 52 different measures of belonging and a “misalignment between definitions and measures in quantitative studies” (p. 2). The exploration of belonging and campus ecology focused on LGBTQ+ students helps to address Strayhorn's ideas of belonging. It is well documented that the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians connected to their identity as a queer or trans person impacts their feeling of community and belonging across experiences in subsets of campus ecology (Falco & Sparrow, 2023; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Contos et al., 2023; Parker, 2021). The existing literature focuses on the details in the smaller spaces, whether that be residence halls, classrooms, or other spaces discussed in this section. This study

intentionally broadens the focus to compare experiences across two campuses in the four environmental dimensions discussed in the campus ecology framework.

### **Intersections of Campus Ecology & Sense of Belonging**

In looking at the intersection of campus ecology and belonging related to LGBTQ+ collegians, institutional homophobia, which dismisses the legitimacy of the experience of LGBTQ+ members of college and university communities, is a critical influence (Walter and Hayes, 1998). Exploring the experiences of LGBTQ collegians to inform practice is integral to student support. There is a well-documented research discussion on the value of engagement, involvement, and belonging for college students as a predictor for success and graduation (Austin, 1975; Astin, 1982; Astin, 1999; Abes, et al., 2019; Baxter Magolda, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Friedlander and MacDougall, 1992; Jones, 2009; Seidman, 2005). This study focuses intently on the intersection of campus ecology and sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians, which is underemphasized in existing research. Researchers have found that the development of a sense of belonging facilitates the connection to retention and progression, as belonging has a significant impact on a student's ability to be retained and graduate (Astin, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Williams, 1991; Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Kuh, et al., 2008). The limited conversation of LGBTQ+ collegians within a view of campus ecology affirms the importance of this study within the broader discussion in higher education.

Sense of belonging is also discussed in the context of students' experiences by the intersection of other identities. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework used to understand how the intersecting or overlapping oppressed identities impact the experiences of individuals rooted in Black Feminist Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). She defined intersectionality as “the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of

feminism and antiracism” (Crenshaw, 1991, 1265). In this study, understanding the variety of identities in addition to students LGBTQ+ identity interacts with other elements of their identity such as religion, race, ability status, or others. Means (2017) speaks to the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and religion, which for black gay and bisexual cisgender men requires navigating being queer, black, and spiritual. This is one example of the intersections that must be further flushed out and contextualized to truly capture the experiences of LGBTQ collegians with space and place.

In another context, there are perceptions that HBCUs are unwelcoming to LGBTQ students. Some historical challenges relate to the conservative and religious associations of HBCUs and traditional gender roles all impact LGBTQ students looking for spaces that are affirming of their queer identities (Lenning, 2017). Patton (2011) studied the experience of gay and bisexual men at HBCUs and found that “the campus environment influenced their meaning-making” and found a “firm sense of congruence with the campus despite instances where their sexual orientation was not validated or recognized” (p.95). This study, while in some ways appearing contradictory, supports the assertion that finding validation and community based on your identity is crucial to cultivating belonging. The men in this study found community as black men, but not gay men. These men also reported belonging as black men as more important than their sexuality. The “choice” students had to make to find a space to belong to the human aggregate environment influences the sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians. The implication of the interviews is that had they been out, they would not have felt like they belonged. That contradiction supports the strong influence of belonging where students chose to hide part of their identity so they could fit in. This critical insight helps again frame the

importance of considering how the intersecting identities of LGBTQ+ colleagues impact their ability to succeed. The research on HBCUs is limited but complicated.

Understanding the cultural context of institutions and the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians within those spaces is important to this study. The discussion of the four environments within campus ecology is designed to explore the impact of the campus ecology broadly on students. In a study conducted with Latino men exploring coming out to their family, the researchers found that family can simultaneously serve as a place for affirmation and “a source of insecurity” (Duran and Perez, 2017 p.1156). This is an important aspect of the conversation as whether someone comes out before or during college, the experience can impact significant parts of life and impact the importance of community. Collins (2005) illuminates that the media “stigmatizes straights” and “pathologizes the sexual practices of LGBT Black people” (p. 281). This social control creates and perpetuates false narratives. For students of color on campus, they are navigating buildings named after slave owners and campuses that, for decades, and in some cases centuries, were not accessible to people of color. Johnson et al. (2007) examined the way that sense of belonging for students was impacted based on their racial identity.

Belonging and campus ecology provides insights into the experience of students on college campuses. This study focuses on the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians and the intricacies of how they navigate the physical and social structures of campus. Through exploring student experiences, this study provides an avenue to understand how the broader campus ecology impacts students’ sense of belonging. Moving forward, this study will help contribute to the growing discussion focused on how the physical and social environments of a campus impact students at the margins.

## **Filling in the Gaps**

This study contributes to how we understand the way that various places, spaces, and interactions that occur in them impact LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging. Unlike most of the existing literature that takes a narrow focus on an element of campus ecology, a specific physical space on campus, or a subset of the LGBTQ+ community, this study looks at campus ecology's impact on a sense of belonging through the four environments discussed in chapters 1 and 2.

Fostering a campus environment that is inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ+ college students is critical. As discussed in Chapter 1, mental health, and a lack of a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students have a significant impact on their ability to thrive. Colleges and universities are responsible for supporting students full participation in the transformative experience that shapes their identities and futures. It is not simply creating safe spaces but creating space where growth, development, and success are not denied to a student population simply because they are a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Using campus ecology as a lens to explore belonging allows for a comprehensive view of the student experience across the various interconnected environments on campus. The broad approach will allow administrators, researchers, and other stakeholders to understand students need to be supported in succeeding on their campus.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### Using Interviews and Visual methods to Investigate LGBTQ Collegians' Belongings

“We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are.”

Marsha P. Johnson

Qualitative research “centers everyday human experiences and understandings of the world. It is rooted in meaning-making and shines in its ability to capture the richness and depth of the research context” (Ford and Goger, 2022, p. 1). This project centered on how campus environment influenced the sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ students. The qualitative basis of this work examined participant experiences to understand the relationship between campus ecology and belonging. The research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1: How does campus ecology influence LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging?

RQ2: In what ways does institutional context influence LGBTQ+ students experience of space and the development of a sense of belonging?

To address these questions, I conducted interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified (LGBTQ+) students at Metropolitan Public University (MPU) and Central State University (CSU). Qualitative inquiry facilitates the process of contextualizing experience and building relationships with participants (Mason, 2002; Schram, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2009). Freebody (2003) frames qualitative research in education as a core opportunity to assess and gain a deeper understanding of educational practices. Research also provides an opportunity to focus on liberation (Schlostak and Schlostak, 2007). In practice, this means listening to students' experiences and using those insights to consider what administrators

can do to support LGBTQ+ students. In the context of the present study, the qualitative research guide in the Appendix helped explore if, and how, campus ecology impacted sense of belonging among participants. The experiences of students on campus were explored through interviews and responses to several visual prompts. The use of interviews allows the researcher to “come to an understanding about how a person’s shared experiences have shaped their opinions and beliefs” (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p.88). When exploring if campus ecology impacts LGBTQ+ students’ sense of belonging, the critical qualitative element grounded the work in transforming the systems that may negatively impact LGBTQ+ students. The transformation comes from addressing barriers and reviewing areas that undermine students’ experiences, which could subsequently lead to changes in policy and practice. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to celebrate and amplify practices that are fostering belonging for these students.

### **Critical Qualitative Inquiry**

Most broadly, the research questions call for a qualitative methodology, especially given the emphasis on campus environment. Consider Rubin and Rubin’s (2005, p.2) description of qualitative research, in which they emphasize place: a researcher “gather[s] information by observing and by talking with and listening carefully to the people who are being researched... in their ordinary settings, where they live or work or play” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.2). The critical lens focuses on how “qualitative research can and should work for society and help to bring about beneficial social change” (p. 4). Critical qualitative research centers on the experience of marginalized individuals to free them from oppressive systems, discriminatory practices, and biases (Van Mannen, 1988). Utilizing a critical approach allows this research project to work in partnership with the participants to share their stories, explore connections to broader research, and acknowledge the power and privilege that impact their experiences to

foster change (Huckaby, 2019.) Utilizing critical qualitative research in the study of the experience of LGBTQ+ college students experiences on campus facilitates learning from the multiple experiences students have on campus, in the classroom, in organizations, and more. This study, like other critical analyses, “can and should work for society...to being about beneficial social change” (Cox et al., 2008, p.4). Esposito & Evans-Winter (2022) remind researchers that we have “moral and ethical obligations of qualitative research,” which “must be considered an important scientific and political tool for documenting a social group’s humanity including their struggle against all forms of oppression” (p. 189). Conducting research that deconstructs assumptions, advocates for student needs, and acknowledges how societal inequality influences student development and experience contributes to fostering more inclusive environments (Colley, 2014; Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020; Machen, 2020; Shaw et al., 2022). By centering the participants experience, amplifying their voices, and providing policy recommendations and considerations to deconstruct oppressive systems, the study can help critically and thoughtfully contribute to societal change.

Understanding belonging among LGBTQ+ collegians could provide administrators insight into reducing barriers to LGBTQ+ student success. By identifying and resolving obstacles to belonging, administrators can enhance the LGBTQ+ student experience on campus, positively impacting retention (Tinto, 1989). Exploring student perceptions of belonging is then contextual and grounded in their lived experiences. Studying the experiences of LGBTQ+ students requires acknowledging the various ways their identity may impact their experience. In addition, the intersections of oppressed identities provide potential additional considerations in supporting student success. The critical approach allows the research to inquire “against the grain”: to question the conceptual and theoretical bases of knowledge and method, to ask

questions that go beyond prevailing assumptions and understandings, and to acknowledge the role of power and social position” (Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research, 2020).

Acknowledging and deconstructing systems that negatively impact queer and transgender student belonging reduces barriers to their success. The critical approach combined with interviews and photo-elicitation to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians provides data on both the experience of campus environments and aesthetic properties that shape belonging.

Morales (1998) argues that a combination of methods facilitates a deep understanding of how the structural context in which individuals are embedded shapes the human condition. Student voice is an important part of decision-making for administrators and grounds this study. Broadly, methodology should be viewed as a philosophy, while methods are the tools used to achieve the product. The methodology for this study is the creation of a comparative case study at two sites. The methods will involve qualitative interviews and photo-elicitation. This methodological approach, involving both interviews and visual methods, is organized around the goal of fidelity:

Fidelity refers to the intimate understanding of a topic that can be developed by researchers through prolonged study, personal experiences with a phenomenon, and deliberately seeking out a faithful appreciation of a phenomenon in relation to the contexts and dynamics relevant to a research question (Levitt et. al., 2021, pp. 359-360).

Honoring the experiences of participants, the insights gained, and the trust cultivated between the researcher and the individuals help to explore the research questions and topic with depth and fervor. More specifically, the questions guiding this study call for a critical qualitative methodology to understand the phenomena and potential insights from the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians. These insights are then shared and leveraged by administrators and staff

who may identify and disrupt systems that inhibit LGBTQ+ student belonging if they are identified. The insights from this comparative case study provide insights and information on how policies, processes, and programs impact LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging. The focus on a critical approach center on the varied experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians on campus. The critical approach to this project will center on the realities of the experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians, dissect the influence of campus ecology, and works to provide insights to administrators to eliminate barriers to retaining and supporting LGBTQ+ collegians and other marginalized groups.

In constructing the framework for the study, acknowledging the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians was important. Utilizing a critical qualitative approach is “characterized by a view of subjectivity as embedded in society and as intrinsically influenced by cultural, contextual, and historical forces related to social power and oppression” to acknowledge, not ignore, the lived complexity of LGBTQ+ college students (Levitt et al, 2021, p. 358). It is then the responsibility of fidelity for the researcher to the experience and insights, not any preconceived ideas or assumptions. Case study was utilized to facilitate this study.

### **Case Study**

While this study employs a comparative case study design with two cases, this section focuses on the method and therefore uses the singular term “case study.” A case study allows researchers to explore the experience of participants in the pursuit of understanding, not to arrive at a universal truth (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are a form of empirical inquiry that looks at a specific phenomenon in its context (Yin, 2009). This study's exploration of LGBTQ+ student's experience on campus is well suited to being studied through a case study. Creswell (2014) shares a case study “explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more

individuals.... bound by time and activity” (p. 241). The study’s focus on campus ecology’s impact on sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians at two campuses provides the time and broad activities of the case. Additionally, this study looked to explore the impact of the four environments of campus ecology on the student’s sense of belonging. The questions and study are an exploratory case study, the purpose of which “is to study a phenomenon with the intention of ‘exploring’ or identifying fresh research questions which can be used in subsequent research” (Priya, 2021, p.96). The findings from this study tell the experience of two sets of students in two different contexts. Given that the experience and understanding of belonging is personal and varied, a case study allowed exploration of the how and why of those varied experiences of students (Hays and Singh, 2012). This study focused on understanding how experiences on campus impact feelings of connection. The cases then are informed by “the perceptions and values of the people who belong to the case” (Stake, 1997, p. 404). This study is grounded in the way that LGBTQ+ collegians experience their campus. Campus ecology is used as the lens for discussion.

Given the context of the study, Yin (2003) affirms the selection of case study as he points to the value of a case study when working to understand the how and why of a specific outcome. This study explored how campus ecology impacts the sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians. In reflecting on the students experiences, the impact of environment of campus ecology varied both by campus and by student. A deeper discussion of the participants experiences and the associated discussion can be found in Chapter 4. The cases created are unable to establish a universal truth but provide a lens and insight into experience that administrators and others can leverage to make changes. Yin (2003) also provides various

principles to consider when designing your study. A key part is the use of multiple sources of data, which this study will do. The methods for this study are interviews and photo-elicitation.

### **Qualitative Interviews: Two Series Interview Approach**

This project utilized a modified version of Seidman's (2006) "Three Series Interview" approach in which a researcher uses three separate interviews to deeply explore educational and social issues through the experiences of individuals. Seidman's approach focuses the first interview on the life of the participant, the second on the details of focus of participants' life related to the student and the third to be reflecting on meaning. I conducted two interviews where the first interview focused on the participants' process of defining their LGBTQ+ identity, their involvement and experiences on campus, and exploring the spaces and places students engage with routinely. The second interview was focused on the photo elicitation to discuss images participants will take in response to nine questions to represent elements of campus ecology (Seidman, 2006; Torre & Murphy, 2015). The combination of the two first steps for Seidman into one is driven by the focused nature of the discussions and project. The second interview then provided opportunities to continue to share the experiences through the visuals. All interviews were recorded and used to create transcripts that were then analyzed for themes and trends.

The primary goal of the first interview in this project was to explore the experiences and their relationship to their LGBTQ+ identity on campus (the protocols can be found in the appendix). This includes a conversation on how they navigate being LGBTQ+ on campus, providing a greater context for their experience at the institutions, as well as intersections between their identity and path to graduation. The initial prompts and questions helped to contextualize the individuals' experiences. Understanding their journey of acknowledging their LGBTQ+ identity, if they were out on campus, their family relationship, services they engaged

in, previous positive or negative experiences that impacted their approach on campus, and significance provides perspective to their experience. Exploring their early experiences as LGBTQ+ helped to understand their time on campus and support the researcher and participant in developing rapport. The remainder of the interview focused on their experiences on campus. The construction of questions around their memory of how their LGBTQ+ identity influenced their experiences on campus, where they found community and significant memories that stand out for them, helped to shape an initial understanding of their experiences. As participants shared their experiences, additional clarifying questions help explore the experiences they are sharing to provide a baseline understanding. The initial interview helped to focus on the second interview, which focuses on the specific experiences discussed in the first interview.

The second interview focused on the experiences' meaning and explicitly on belonging. Like the first interview, the transcript of the second interview was provided to check and validate the discussion. The focus will be on the exploration of belonging and how the campus environment has impacted the students experiences through the photo-elicitation prompts. When considering the questions in the interviews, it was important to consider participants' experiences, focus on what and how they said in response, and the importance of centering the focus of the inquiry (Garnaut and Gold, 2021; Leavy, 2011; Schrag, 2021). The underlying outcome of these considerations is a project that helped to understand and explore the core questions. Schrag (2021) reminds researchers that staying close to “what you are looking for in the sources” from your research questions will lead to powerful insights (p 62-64). Schrag’s reminder is not about going in with a preconceived notion but pursuing the answers through participants lived experiences. An additional element of this study to amplify the voices and experiences of participants will be using visual methods. While additional insights can be found,

the focus shifts to meaning making from the details documented and explored in previous conversations. In this project, meaning is designed to help understand the experiences on campus and how they impact students' connection and feeling of belonging.

### ***Integrating Visual Methods***

The use of visual methods in the second interview provided a direct window into students' experiences. The production of these visual images connects the identities of the photographer with the content being captured. For instance, the transgender woman's photo of a women's restroom explaining how the sign negatively impacted them adds rich detail and context. Social production requires consideration of the perspective of the creator of the image, the context of the photo, and the various social structures and systems surrounding the production of the image (Rose, 2001). The participants' direct involvement in capturing the images and explaining the impact on their sense of belonging. Additionally, the interpretation of visual images should be approached in a critical way. Rose (2001) articulates three considerations of a critical use of visuals, which are those images be viewed "seriously, thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects, [and] considers your own way of looking at images" (p.15-16). These three elements guide the interpretation of these images. A critical approach to visual methods also must consider the way that visuals represent a meaning of the world. An image of a student organization meeting, for example, would require a researcher to make sense of the purpose of the meeting, the location, and subtle insights to understand the bias of the person who captured the image. Finally, a critical approach requires acknowledgement and consideration of reflexivity as a researcher in reviewing images. Reflexivity is central to a critical approach, requiring researchers to acknowledge and name the biases, assumptions, and experiences that influence their perceptions. The image should not be

used to validate preconceived notions but instead provide a rich context to understanding the experience of participants (Rose, 2001). Using visuals as a secondary method provides an additional opportunity to view and understand “our personal identities, narrative, lifestyles, cultures, and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space, and truth” (Pink, 2001, p. 17). Pink’s idea of connecting multiple facets of life guides the use and application of visual methods in this study along with Rose’s (2001) perspective on critical approaches to visual research. In this study, students were provided with a list of 9 statements, and they were asked to take a photo to represent the statement. 17 of the 20 participants provided at least one response to the photo prompts. Only 3 participants responded with a photo for each prompt. The discussion of the prompts is included throughout Chapter 4. The prompts were:

1. Take a photo of a place on campus where you feel the most comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity.
2. Take a picture of a physical space on campus that you don’t feel like you belong.
3. Photograph a place on campus where you feel your LGBTQ+ identity is less understood or acknowledged.
4. Show me an image of a campus resource (e.g., center, office, support group) dedicated to LGBTQ+ students that represents joy or fun.
5. Show me a location on campus where you have experienced support from faculty or staff regarding LGBTQ+ issues.
6. Capture an image that represents a sense of community for LGBTQ+ students at your university.
7. Take a picture of a social event or gathering where LGBTQ+ representation is visible and celebrated.
8. Capture a moment during a campus event or activity where you felt included and valued as an LGBTQ+ individual.
9. Show me a representation of a space on campus where you feel pressure to conceal or modify aspects of your LGBTQ+ identity.

The photos and subsequent explanation during the second interview are additional data points (Stanczak, 2007, pp. 2-3). The visual data complementing the qualitative interviews helped to explore the topic as this representation has the added benefit of providing additional direct input from participants. Researchers bring assumptions into their studies, but the active

engagement of participants with visual strategies helps to understand the visual and address assumptions that might be made (Pink 2013). The direct insights and meaning given directly by participants reduces researcher bias. The analysis of the visuals coupled with the interview data will further deepen the analytic depth of the study. The goal is to understand the intricacies of experience as “qualitative researcher works between and within competing and overlapping perspectives” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 4). In considering the various perspectives presented in the project, it is also critical to acknowledge the role of the researcher in engaging with the visuals. Goldstein (2007) asserts researchers should “treat photographic images in the same way a scientist treats data...all data are assumed to have a variety of types of error (i.e., deviation from truth). The question then becomes not ‘do these data represent reality,’ but rather ‘are the deviations from reality I know to be present relevant to the question I’m asking’ (p. 64). This study does not view the perspective or images provided by the participants as misrepresentations of reality. Rather, this qualitative study engages with the visuals to understand participants’ truth and share those stories within the comparative case study.. By integrating the perspective, visuals, and meaning making across the various data, the project gained a deeper and stronger understanding of the issues being explored.

### **Research Sites**

The study centers on the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians, and there were various elements to consider when selecting sites to conduct the research. In selecting sites, the chief goal was to understand how campus ecology influences sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ students. One could learn much of this relationship in nearly any postsecondary setting, whether urban, rural, four-year, two-year, or doctoral intensive. Yet, we learn even more about the role of the environment through comparison of organizational context. Comparative studies are “aimed

at learning the dynamics of educational development, which enabled policymakers to improve the living conditions of citizens' (Milošević and Maksimović, 2020, p.156). In the context of this study, similarities and differences between the research sites provide insights which could guide administrators in developing policies and programs. Understanding and learning within educational contexts is important to understand how belonging among LGBTQ+ students varies across campus environments. For instance, the difference between a large urban research institution and a small private, religiously affiliated institution shapes the resources, reach, and demographics of an institution.

The two sites for this research project were Metropolitan Public University (MPU) and Central State University (CSU). MPU has enrollment of over 50,000 primarily commuting students.. MPU is in a major southern city. It is classified as an urban research institution and is a designated R1 institution. CSU has an enrollment of over 19,000 and is residential. It is a comprehensive research university designated as a land grant institution with a primarily residential student population. Both institutions have a designated LGBTQ Center at the time of this study with at least 1 full-time employee and have a variety of LGBTQ+ student organizations. A chart comparing the institutions is below, followed by a discussion of each institution.

**Table 1**

*Research Sites*

	MPU	CSU
Founding Year	1913	1809
Enrollment	36,513	19,107
Type	Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral degrees	Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral degrees
Retention	78%	89%
Net Price	\$17,589	\$23,301
Campus Setting	City: Large	Town: Fringe
Faculty to Student Ratio	25:1	15:1
Race & Ethnicity: White	18%	80%
Race & Ethnicity: Black	42%	3%
Race & Ethnicity: Asian	16%	3%
Race & Ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino	14%	5%
Race & Ethnicity: Two or More	5%	4%
Race & Ethnicity: Unknown	1%	1%
Race & Ethnicity: U.S. Nonresident	3%	5%
Dedicated LGBTQ+ Center Space	Housed within the Multicultural Center	Housing within the Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion
Full Time Employees	1 Coordinator	1 Associate Director and 1 Assistant Director

\*Data comes from the College Navigator tool developed by the National Center for Education Statistics

\*\*This comparison is specifically between the Atlanta campus of Georgia State University and the main Miami campus in Oxford. While both institutions have additional campuses, they are not being compared.

Table 1 depicts organizational differences at a glance. Overall, we see that MPU is a larger urban institution, while CSU is a public liberal arts institution in rural area. Both share rankings as top institutions for commitment to undergraduate teaching according to the US News & World Report rankings and broadly have a similar structure to support for LGBTQ+ students. While they share some similarities, they are drastically different institutions in location, student composition, and composition of campus and adjacent areas. The study explored the way that campus ecology impacts belonging for LGBTQ+ students. Comparing the insights provided by the participants at both institutions helped to explore the barriers and opportunities within two drastically different campus contexts to provide insight for various institutions. A discussion of each site follows to further establish the context of the research sites.

### **Metropolitan Public University**

Metropolitan Public University (MPU) is an urban research institution in a major U.S. city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The campus began to grow its physical footprint in the southeast in 1996 with the opening of their first residence hall on campus. When founded, the institution was segregated and is now one of the most diverse institutions in the country. The physical environment of the campus includes a combination of pre-existing buildings that were acquired, the construction of new facilities, and the building of a residence life program that accommodates 6,000 students living on campus. In addition to university-owned properties, several student-focused residential facilities are privately owned near campus. The campus includes a recreation center, various administrative buildings, classrooms, research spaces, and the other facilities you would expect on a comprehensive university campus.

Consideration of space dedicated to LGBTQ+ students is a recent occurrence on campus. The LGBTQ organization, a student organization, was able to rent a room on the fourth floor of

the Campus Center when it became available in 2010. The Multicultural Center opened on the second floor of the Campus Center East to host LGBTQ+ programs and expanded in the Fall of 2020 to include the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center.

### **Central State University**

Central State University (CSU) is a university located in a rural setting with a focus on liberal arts. CSU is in a small Midwest town and the campus has traditional brick architecture with buildings sharing style and a noticeable divide between the campus and the city. Distinct gates welcome you to campus as you drive into the town, and you can see a shift in architecture between the physical facilities and the local community. The red brick buildings host a variety of classrooms, administrative spaces, and student spaces. Roughly 8,000 students live on campus.

Space on campus dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ students has existed since 2009 as part of their Diversity Equity and Inclusion office, corresponding to when the first staff member was hired in 2009. CSU also has an LGBTQ+ student organization. In 2014, CSU opened the Student Center, which included enhanced space for LGBTQ+ students and their staff.

### **Exploring Ecology's Impact on Belonging in Two Contexts**

This study explored how campus ecology at two different institutions and contexts influences and impacts the sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians. Comparative studies allow for exploring strengths and causes of experience and identify the various complex realities of comparisons (Marx & Soares, 2016). The use of MPU and CSU, given their different characteristics, helps provide unique insight into barriers to LGBTQ+ students belonging. The comparison between two campus environments that are distinctly different from each other is intentional. Kosmützky, et al. (2020) point out that the use of comparisons allows us to explore the “contrasts and juxtapositions.... with a focus on their differences and not on their

similarities” in field sites (p.179). Similarities and differences between LGBTQ+ students’ sense of belonging in two different campus contexts could help professionals understand ecology and belongings impact on student experience. Similarities on two different institutional types could inform practice. Similar elements across two very different contexts could inform both core aspects of belonging and how campus ecology influences experience. The juxtaposition, comparison, and assumptions are grounded in the idea that campus ecology influences LGBTQ+ students’ ability to develop a sense of belonging. The comparative approach centers on LGBTQ+ identity and assessment of belonging that aligns with a comparative study.

Focusing on the completed study, the four environments of campus ecology guide exploring belonging and the experience of LGBTQ+ collegians. The physical environment, which includes the broader community the institutions are situated within, establishes the structures and the physical buildings of campus. The differences in the rural college town and urban city pose two stark contrasts to the environment of the campuses and the buildings. The accessibility of different physical spaces like gay bars, community centers, etc. could influence the experience of students as well. It is not unreasonable to infer that the human aggregate environment of a predominately white midsize liberal arts university and a diverse large urban research institution could appeal to different student populations. That variation may or may not influence how experiences impact belonging for LGBTQ+ students. The organizational environment of each institution also has influences based on the accessibility of gender inclusive restrooms, policies that influence student experience, and ultimately explore the impact of those decisions on students. The socially constructed environment provides the lens to explore the interactions and experiences that occur within the physical environment. A faculty members’ comment in the classroom, interactions in the Student Center, or the broader culture of campus

are all viewed in the socially constructed environment. These dimensions of campus ecology provide the lens for the project to explore campus ecology's influence on LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging. Given such differences in these two environments, it is reasonable to expect that LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging may vary at MPU and CSU.

### **Positionality Statement**

Critical qualitative work rejects the traditional idea that researchers should be objective. Instead of asserting objectivity, it is important to acknowledge how experience influences approach. As a queer administrator, researcher, and college graduate, my identity and experiences with campus ecology influence the construction of this work. I believe in the responsibility of administrators to deconstruct and understand structural and policy barriers to LGBTQ+ belonging to support the engagement, retention, and ultimate graduation of this population.

My experience as a queer person, student, and administrator provides me with a lens into multiple perspectives that are critical in this work. As an administrator with broad experience and responsibilities for campus climate, I have been engaged in various ways to support students retention, progression, and ultimate graduation. I both lived the experience as a student and now hold responsibility for shaping it as an administrator. The other piece is that as a doctoral student, my central focus has always been around space and queer students. The language has evolved and grown, but the core passion of understanding and addressing barriers to LGBTQ+ students belonging on campus is engrained within my work and motivates the exploration in this study of how, in two different contexts, LGBTQ+ collegian's experience impacts their ability to belong. It is a design decision at one of the institutions to place the office that serves marginalized students in the middle of the building with glass walls that laid the seed for this study. For administrators,

they were attempting to demonstrate the value of inclusion. For the students of color and the LGBTQ+ students, they found themselves living in a fishbowl with the rest of the student body staring in at them as they walked past.

Wickramasingha (2023) specifically discussed the role of positionality in comparative studies where she looked at her personal experience and the context, she was exploring in knowledge production. The crucial emphasis on positionality in comparison is acknowledging the difference and the way that experience impacts researchers. In considering my study, I must acknowledge the role I play in asking and constructing questions and engaging with participants. As part of the research process, engaging with colleagues and the committee to review and provide feedback will strengthen the final product. The selection of qualitative interviews as the approach is both informed and constructed to acknowledge the personal experience I bring and to center the voices of those living the experiences today.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Leavy (2011) emphasizes the use of various recruitment methods and that constraints may occur due to the focus on any interview on a topic related to sexuality and belonging. To recruit individuals for this study, the snowball method, outreach to specific departments, and outreach to professors who are teaching topic-related courses were used. In addition, outreach through each universities' student organizations for students identified as LGBTQ+ and general promotion went to all students through their student affairs promotion opportunities. A graphic (Appendix B) was created in the brand of each university, and 75 copies were distributed across campus in approved publication locations. Participants were all current students enrolled at the research sites who identify as lesbian, gay, queer, or bisexual. Individuals across gender

identities, races, religions, etc. will all be included. One participant from each institution ended up being a graduate student as well.

The sample size is 20 students where ten came from each institution. There was no consideration in recruitment related to participants' race, gender identity, ability status, religion, or other identities. There were nine undergraduate students and one graduate student at each research site. The various identities of participants helped to provide context to each of their experiences. However, the purpose of this study was to look broadly at campus ecology and sense of belonging related to the participants' LGBTQ+ identity. Additional future studies may be informed by findings based on various identities represented in the study.

To provide some insights into the participants of the study, I have prepared four charts that showcase the distribution of sexual orientation, gender identity, and race for participants along with an overall summary.

**Table 2**

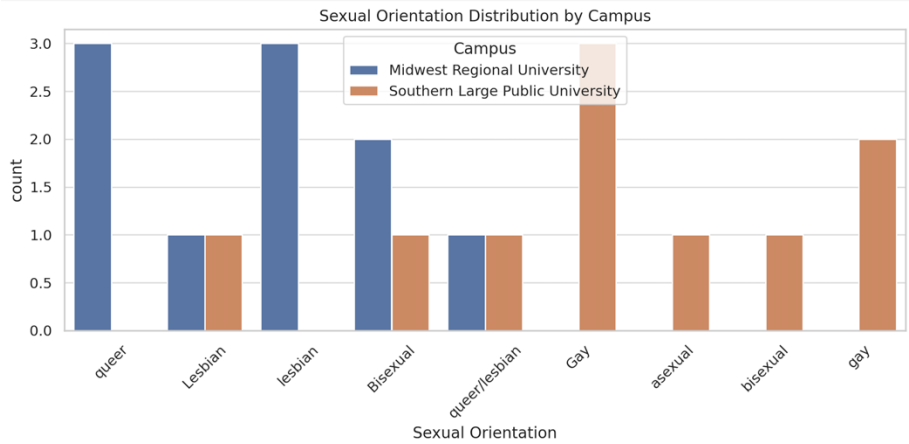
*Participants Summary*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Campus</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Race</b>
Talia	CSU	Cisgender Woman	Queer/Lesbian	White
C	CSU	Non-Binary	Queer	Black
JM	CSU	Non-Binary	Queer	Asian
Tyler	CSU	Transgender man	Bisexual	White
Hailey	CSU	Non-Binary	Queer	White

Taylor	CSU	Masculine	Lesbian	White
Alexis	CSU	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White
Bob	CSU	Trans-masculine	Lesbian	White
Sarah	CSU	Transgender woman	Lesbian	White
Blake	CSU	Transgender man	Bisexual	White
Edith	MPU	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White
Axel	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	White
Jeremy	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	Multi-racial
Alex	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	White
James	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	Asian American
Sana	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	Asian
Brian	MPU	Cisgender Man	Gay	Asian
Sasha	MPU	Transgender Woman	Bisexual	White
Jenny	MPU	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	Black
Elizabeth	MPU	Gender non-conforming	Asexual	White

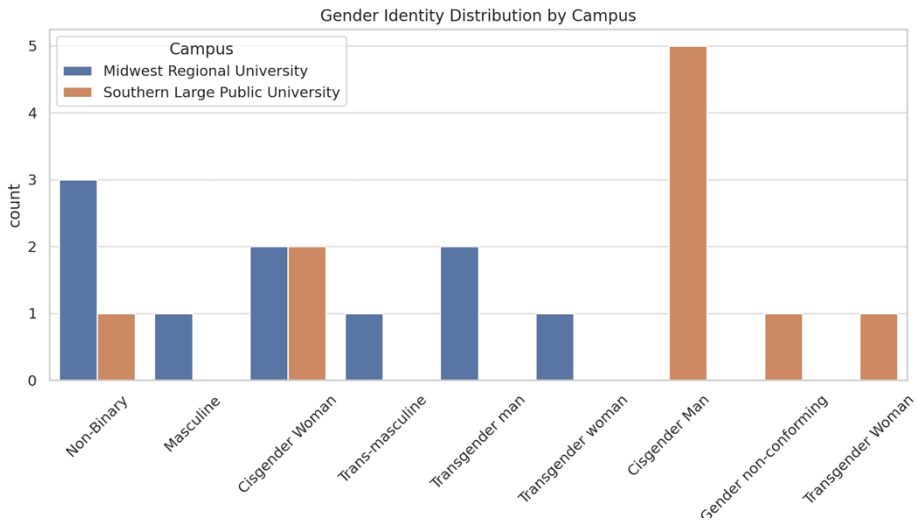
**Table 3**

*Distribution of Sexual Orientation at Research Sites*



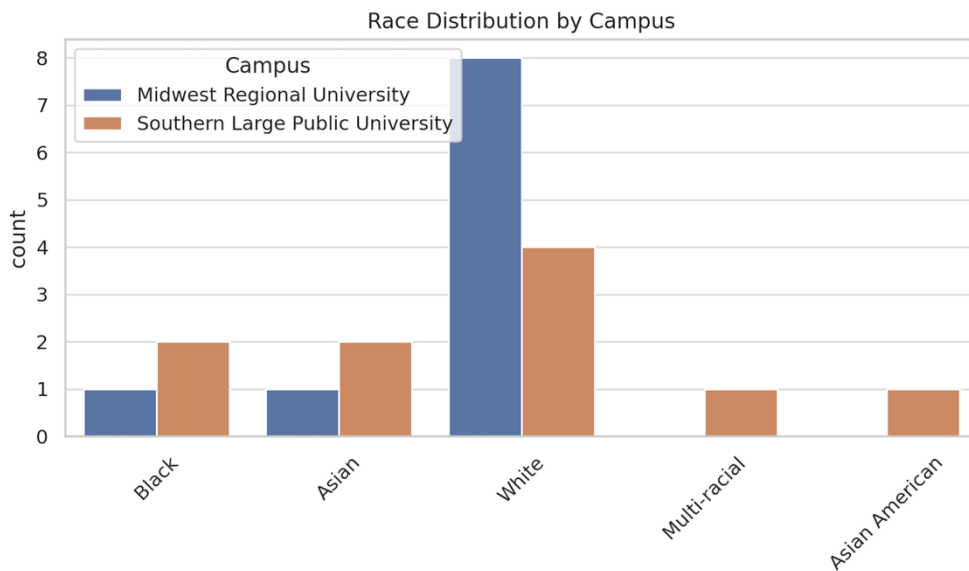
**Table 4:**

*Distribution of Gender Identity at Research Sites*



**Table 5**

*Distribution of Race at Research Sites*



The demographics and tables illustrate who participated in the study at each institution. However, the contributions and discussions with the students provide a variety of insights into the way that students make sense of their identity and what a sense of belonging means. The discussion of those insights in the following section is discussed looking at sexual orientation and gender identity.

### ***Sexual Orientation***

The participants discussed their sexuality in both their identity and their experiences. These sections focused on their identities. 90% of participants were “out” on campus and were public about their sexual orientation. Overall, the students who said they came out were generally accepted by their families, with two participants having had negative experiences at home. The group had roughly an equal split of those who had experienced a negative response while coming out from their peers on campus. That data shifts significantly, when looking at the two campuses separately. The students at Midwest Regional University (CSU) accounted for 90% of the negative experiences from peers, while only one participant at Southern Large Public University (MPU) reported a negative experience from peers.

## ***Gender Identity***

In the study, 45% of participants identified as cisgender, 10% identified as transgender and 45% identified on the non-binary or gender non-conforming spectrum. 90% of students were out on campus as it relates to their gender identity. The two students who were not out both identified as transgender. The experiences of students related to gender identity had a reported influence on feelings of belonging related to the organizational environment or challenges with physical spaces regarding access to bathrooms. The depth of experience or connections of campus ecology and belonging will be discussed in following sections related to the environments of campus ecology specifically.

## **Data Analysis**

As a product of this project, the data includes 922 pages of transcripts, and more than 50 images by the participants as part of the second interview. No analysis or review of the data was done until all data was collected. The only exception is that transcripts from the first interview were shared with participants prior to the second interview as a reminder and to check the trustworthiness of the transcript created via Zoom. Grbich (2013) states that analysis starts with becoming deeply familiar with your data and that researchers should “seek to let the data speak for itself, allowing [me] to identify informants’ statements about beliefs, attitudes, values, explicit ideas and ideologies as well as behavior patterns, actions and events” (p.261).

After my initial review of data, I used Bingham’s (2023) Five-Phase Process to analyze and interpret the data. I selected this method by conducting a comparative study with interviews and visual data the multi-step analysis of data is appropriate. The analysis “can provide an in-depth, highly contextualized understanding of a given policy, reform, or intervention, which helps researchers better explain associated practices and outcomes” (p. 12). Understanding the

sources of data, the research questions, and the variety of data being collected, the multi-step process provides an opportunity to explore the data and the insights. The phases in Bingham's method are (1) Phase 1: Organizing the Data, (2) Phase 2: Sorting the Data, (3) Understanding the Data, (4) Interpreting the Data, and finally (5) Explaining the Data. At each step of this process, memos are created. Memos in qualitative research provide a way to record decisions and processes in the study that occurs in a variety of forms to document both analysis, reflections, and potential answers to research questions (Strauss, 1987; Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022). The memos in this study took multiple forms ranging from recording my process, reflections on meaning, and idea maps exploring meaning on large sticky pads. Organizing and sorting data are the first phases and critically important.

Phase 1 involved creating codes and labels for the data that helped to further refine during analysis I completed phase 1 by spending a month familiarizing myself with the data. I listened to each interview once and then read the transcript twice. The transcripts of interview 1 and 2 for each participant were read together. During this process, I made written notes of items they discussed in a memo, specific areas of campus ecology environment they mentioned, or general themes related to sense of belonging as a reference for myself heading into more structured and formal analysis. Additionally, as I read through the first interview, I broke the interview out into the sections of the interview guide by the theoretical framework and underlined and made focused notes in each interview. This helped me to look at students' perceptions of sense of belonging overall and experiences within each of the four environments. Additionally given that I have visual and interview data, the organizational process helped account for the visual elements. These visuals prompted students to further reflect on the intersections of the theoretical framework with a specific focus on the four environments of

campus ecology. Following guidance from Saldaña (2021), I created a separate memo for the photographs where they were organized by the campus environment and labeled by the institution. The initial review of those photos looked at types of spaces submitted, any duplicates, and anything that stood out in connection to their first interview on belonging and experiences. Additionally, I then reviewed the photos in context of what the participant said about them in interview 2 to add depth and personal voice. In Appendix I includes images of some of my initial memos. The photos are not included in the appendix to protect the anonymity of participants. Limited images are included in Chapter 4.

Phase 2 built upon the work of the first to refine the initial coding into additional categories more directly connected to the research questions and the purpose of the study. In my second reading of the interviews, I broke the interviews into five initial broad categories to organize my data. The categories to initially organize the data were belonging & identity and the four environments of campus ecology physical environment, human aggregate environment, organizational environment, and socially constructed environment. These categories provide the structure for discussion of data in Chapter 4. In Addition, in this review I did start to note quotes or items that stood out as important, which is appropriate as part of a pre-coding process (Saldana, 2013). Two critical parts of this process are starting to filter out data that are unrelated to the theoretical framework and identifying intersections across institutions and experiences. The researcher who developed the approach recommends developing a codebook at this step to help demonstrate the trustworthiness of the data and process to begin analyzing the data in phase three. After reviewing my memos, considering my review of the interviews, and the photos, I developed initial codes.

In Phase 3, I applied the codes to the data. This process identified topics of focus like “institutional fit,” “passing,” and “belonging” across the campus ecology environments. One key element of this process is to develop a memo that serves as a running document of possible answers to the research questions based on the data. In this step, I used large sticky notes where as I went through the data again with the initial codes. Each sticky note was designated for one of the research questions. I then used color coded sticky notes representing each environment of campus ecology to explore the data and make meaning of the codes developed, what additional codes would be helpful, and what isn’t applicable. I also mapped ideas and concepts related to my second research question using this same process (which can be found in the appendix).

Phase 4 is where the focus turns to findings from the patterns in the data. At this stage, in Bingham’s model, the process looks to condense codes into a smaller number of concepts referred to as pattern coding (Miles et al., 2020). The themes that develop change into theme statements that can be used to provide the depth of the data to provide clear answers to the research questions. In this stage, my memo focuses on the decisions being made to simply and condense codes into the themes from the data, reference to other data to inform those decisions, and then the statement of themes and their connection to the research questions. These themes then go into Phase 5. The final step in the process is to build upon the theoretical framework and literature to the findings from the study. The intersection of belonging and campus ecology across the four environments comes into focus here and informs the discussions in Chapter 5. The approach to both conducting and subsequently analyzing the data outlined above is constructed to meet the threshold of trustworthiness, which can be viewed through the criteria defined by Guba & Lincoln (1985) as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The four terms are defined below using Guba & Lincoln’s work:

- Credibility- speaks to the ability to be confident in the process and the outcomes of the study.
- Transferability- demonstrating applications to other situations.
- Dependability- are the results consistent and would it be able to be repeated.
- Confirmability- extent to which the results are grounded in respondents experience not research motivation or focus.

The utilization of Bingham's (2023) model for analysis supports achieving the definition of trustworthiness. By integrating both the visual elements and interviews, the study provided various insights from student experience and key themes for consideration across the higher education sector. The use of memoing, the documentation of analysis, the stages of analysis, and the subsequent evaluation all support trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the study provides insights, it is also important to note the limitations.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the study should be considered and discussed. In constructing this study, it focused on LGBTQ+ students experiences on campus. The broad focus limits the ability to speak to any specific experience. The study included individuals who identified across the spectrum of identities, which then limits the applicability to any specific community. There are several challenges related to generalizability that should be acknowledged. First the inclusion of the entirety of the LGBTQ+ community limits any level of generalizability as with ten students at each campus a small snapshot of any one group is being included. There was even smaller representation and distinctly different identities across the two campuses. This further limits generalizability across the campuses. Additionally, the study looks at the experience of ten individuals at two campuses, which also provides limitations to the broader generalizability of

the study. The differences of the two institutions provide a stark contrast in campus environment, but a study could have compared equally different contexts. That could include a four-year and two-year institution, highly selective, public and private, etc. The comparison between these two sites is limited to the experiences of these two separate sets of students, limiting any generalization of insights gained. Additionally, perception is central to this study, as students' experiences guide the analysis. There is no objective arbiter assessing the trustworthiness or truth of the students' experiences. This study tells their stories, which may lead to critiques regarding their feeling about an institution or their perceived alignment between espoused or enacted values. A final limitation is that as discussed in literature, belonging is dynamic, fluid, and individual feeling. This snapshot will not show the dynamic changes that occur over a month, semester, or even academic year the way an ethnographic study would. It is worth noting that given that all students identified as able-bodied, their experience of navigating campus was likely informed by that privilege. That limitation encourages considerations for intersections of marginalized identities require researchers to consider that the ability status of students is likely influencing their experience of the physical environment.

## Chapter 4

### Views of Belonging & Ecology from LGBTQ+ Collegians

*“If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in.”*

Dr. Brené Brown

The analysis that follows in this chapter is based on the existing literature review of both belonging and campus ecology. These lenses provide an important way to understand, view, and reflect on both the current literature and the experiences of these participants. In Chapter 5, I will offer an interpretation, critiques, and recommendations regarding LGBTQ+ collegians as administrators and policymakers consider how to support students' belonging and success of students in higher education.

Twenty college students voiced their perspectives as part of this study. The research questions guiding the interviews asked if campus ecology influenced LGBTQ+ sense of belonging and if institutional context influences students' experience of space and finding belonging. In reviewing the 20 transcripts from first-round interviews and 15 additional transcripts for those who completed the second interview, the data supports the claim that campus ecology can positively and negatively influence sense of belonging. As we will see, the results suggest that some dimensions of the campus ecology framework may be less relevant to students' experiences than prior research presumes. While the human aggregate and socially constructed environments seem quite salient to students' sense of belonging, study participants rarely attributed much importance to the built environment. Moreover, the results also indicate that organizational context plays an important role in sense of belonging, especially as it relates to student identity and access to resources. While most study participants from MPU described a

strong sense of belonging on campus, study participants from CSU rarely described their experience on campus in such terms.

This chapter considers these patterns and their variations in detail. The chapter is organized as follows. The first section provides an overview of identity and belonging among study participants. The subsequent four sections describe students' interpretations of each dimension of the campus ecology framework, beginning with the physical environment, followed by organizational, human-aggregate, and socially constructed environments. In each section, tables describe and compare broad patterns in the data related to whether participants attribute a positive, negative, or neutral relationship between specific dimensions of the campus ecology framework and sense of belonging. After such overviews, each section provides detailed summaries of data subsections that compare the experiences and interpretations of students at CSU and MPU.

### **The Environments of the Study**

It is important to situate the research in the two sites it occurred. While a comprehensive discussion occurred in chapter 1, this summary helps to remind us of the unique settings the participants reflected on. MPU is a large urban public research institution in the city with a diverse student body both racially and economically that primarily commutes. The institution has a mix of design and looks to its buildings as it grew over years through acquisition of buildings and space downtown. The divide between the city and the campus could be described as blurry at best. In contrast, CSU is a mid-sized public research university in a stereotypical college town with over ninety-five percent of students residing within two miles of campus and a student body that is predominately white and affluent. This campus buildings all have a shared resemblance

with red brick, traditional architecture, and the divide between the town and campus is clearly marked.

The second research question is directly tied to the differences in these campus contexts. A review of participants' insights into the impact of campus ecology on their sense of belonging pointed to the student body, the campus design, the policies and process all contributing. The campus context, the physical elements, the political landscape are parts of the environment and important to consider in exploring the similarities, differences, and contradictions that arise in the following sections. To begin discussion of the findings, we discuss the participants' identities and their conception of belonging.

### **Identity & Belonging**

This section describes how students make sense of their identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, whether they possess a sense of belonging, and what it means to belong on campus. Their identities and views on belonging help to frame the discussion of how the various environments within campus ecology impacted students' perceptions of belonging.

#### **Participants Understanding and View of Belonging**

All participants articulated a moment in which they felt welcomed. Table 6 provides an overview of how participants reported experiencing belonging. The summary was created by aggregating and coding responses to questions in the Interview Guide. The prompt "belonging is

**Table 6**  
*Overall Reflections on Belonging*

	Belonging is important	I feel like I belong at my campus	I have found a place or space I belong on campus
CSU	10/10	1/10	9/10
MPU	10/10	9/10	10/10
Overall	20/20	10/10	19/20

important” and “I feel like I belong” were created using responses to the Belonging section of the guide. The prompt “I have found a place or space on campus I belong” was coded based on responses to the Physical Environment (1,2,3), Human Aggregate (1, 3,4), and Socially Constructed Environment (2,3,4) sections. A positive response indicates that the participant identified the environment as a positive contribution to their belonging. A negative response indicates a lack of belonging, connection, and pointed to perceptions or negative experiences.

Three main patterns are evident in Table 6. First, we see that all study participants indicated that belonging is important to their experience. Second, sense of belonging varies dramatically across the two study sites. And third, nearly all students indicated they found a place to belong on campus. While looking at the belonging in aggregate is helpful to understanding shared experiences, exploring patterns at each campus provides important context to subsequent considerations of campus ecology that will follow in this chapter. The snapshot presented in Table 6 is derived from participants’ descriptions of what it means to belong on campus, prior to interview questions about specific aspects of campus ecology. A final observation of note: even when students describe a weak or low sense of belonging in general, nearly all indicated a specific place on campus where they belong. The places varied from a staff member’s office, a team they are a part of, a student organization, or a center focused on supporting LGBTQ+ students. Details and variations of these broad patterns across each university are examined in more-depth in the next two subsections, beginning with MPU.

## *MPU Responses*

When analyzing the responses from participants at MPU, it became evident that students assign great importance to belonging on campus. One participant stated that “if I belong, I have found my people. I can exist, I can feel safe and honestly like in the darker moments I know I got my people.” Eighty percent of respondents spoke specifically about the diversity of races, religions, styles, cultures, and beliefs collectively describing a view of the MPU campus in which students felt accepted for who they are. Indeed, simply observing diverse identities in the physical spaces on the MPU campus on a day-to-day basis, whether in classrooms, student lounges, or other spaces, contributes to a student’s sense of belonging. Yet, interactions with others, especially those who formally represent the university, is equally (if not more) important. One student described interactions and engagements with staff and faculty as a key positive contributor when those relationships exist:

I am a [Resident Assistant], work in [Orientation], and I both feel accepted and celebrated. Like, I had to disclose that I am trans to those supervisors because of like policy and housing stuff and they didn’t treat me different, they saw me and yeah there’s this part of me that matters but changes nothing. I have been living my life fully as a woman since before I came to MPU and provide for myself so there’s always this fear. MPU has never made any of those fears a reality and then you just see the way everyone regardless of their identities can be accepted makes a place I am really glad to be.

The experiences with faculty and staff were a key point for MPU students. Although integrative experiences need not be tied specifically to students’ sexual or gender identities, participants often reported feeling welcomed on campus as part of the LGBTQ+ community. One student described the experience of being affirmed and welcomed on campus as follows:

I get to just be me on campus. I don't have to think about being a lesbian, being black, family drama, or all the other things that off campus I think about a lot. I can walk across the plaza and see people I know, I can go to the student center and hang out in CCI, and in all those spaces I get to just be me. When you ask about belonging, that's what I think about. I just get to be me and like all of me all the time, which I just don't get outside of campus.

The creation of a welcoming environment is important in part because MPU is not immune to discriminatory events. Two respondents, for example, brought up "isolated" incidents in which someone either yelled out a window said something in class that was homophobic or transphobic. One participant reported they did not feel like they belonged. However, they attributed that to their status as a commuter whose transportation challenges precluded engagement in campus organizations and activities. When asked if any experiences made him feel like he didn't belong because of his identity, he strongly affirmed the opposite. He spoke of posters and emails he saw promoting events for the LGBTQ+ community that made him feel that he belonged as a queer student, but he hadn't been able to cultivate community yet. Even so, he emphasized that he felt welcomed and affirmed in both his classes and the library. Thus, while he reported not belonging at MPU in a global sense, he nevertheless found a place where he belonged.

Even when students feel that they belong on campus in a general sense, there may be spaces where belonging is less acute. One student, for example, indicated that they felt that they didn't belong in the locker room at the Recreation Center. Sharing a photo during an interview, she explained, "I pass and so this photo represents a place where I am afraid that I will be exposed. I just avoid it all together or make sure I can have an escape plan." The student's

reflection speaks to the literature referenced in Chapter 2 that points to the contextual nature of belonging. This student feels they belong on campus, but in context of a locker room as a transgender woman they don't feel they belong in that space. When discussing the physical environment, belonging could be generally on campus or specifically in a certain place. Overall, MPU students reported belonging on campus as a whole and in specific places. The next discussion looks at the experience of students at CSU, which are significantly different.

### ***CSU Responses***

Like students at MPU, CSU students believe that belonging is important. And while most were able to identify a single space where they felt a sense of belonging, the interview data suggests that overall, CSU study participants lacked a strong global sense of belonging. One participant's response nicely reflects the sentiments held by their CSU peers:

“this place is for white, heterosexual, cisgender students. If you aren't that, you don't belong. I am not that in so many ways.” This perception finds its origins in many aspects of the CSU student experience, including the general heteronormative culture of the institution, the culture of specific organizational units such as the School of Business, walking about campus (where participants referenced experiencing homophobic or transphobic comments), or in off campus environments such as the town's bars and clubs. Collectively, these experiences led transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students to feel like they were outside of the campus norm. Such experiences are difficult to avoid, participants explain, because students tend to congregate in specific places on and off campus. Consider the way one CSU student described “Stoneroad”, a large bar in town:

So I am bi and have friends who aren't queer. They like going to Stoneroad and I go with them. Men try to touch me, which like is not ok and toxic as fuck. So that's the

environment. I went there with a girl I was dating once and we were dancing and these bros stared at us, tried to like engage, and it was disgusting. They didn't see us as people just there like everyone else. I also had a friend who I was with another night who is gay. He was there with his boyfriend and they got drinks spilt on them and when they danced together people tried to get in their face. That isn't just the culture at that bar, that's what its like being out and queer here both in the city and at CSU. It might not always be as blatant as someone yelling "faggot" at the bar, but its there all the time.

While this pattern of CSU heteronormativity figured prominently in the interview data, not all CSU participants described campus life in this manner. Tyler, a transgender bisexual student, noted that he is affirmed in his classes, can exist without fear for his safety while on campus, has a strong social support system, and is able to be out as a transgender man. As he explained:

I am in a major and there's like a lot of queer folks [in it]. I found clubs and just am able to be. I don't know. I know what my friends experience here. I lucked out in some ways, I guess. Most of my classes are in [Reckor] Hall, so I have a single stall restroom. My faculty are super-progressive and loud on campus around what's going on. I don't really go into any of the spaces I hear bad things about. CSU is hard, but I have been ok in that regard.

Additionally, each of the nine participants who said they didn't feel like they belonged, along with Tyler, identified at least one place or space where they *did* experience a sense of belonging. In fact, the nine participants at CSU who said they didn't belong identified at least two places or spaces they felt like they belonged. Seven of the participants specifically articulated three. To provide contrast, only two participants at MPU identified more than one place in response to the same question.

How can we reconcile these divergent patterns? The most likely explanation is that because students at MPU have an overall affirming environment there is less need to seek out multiple affirming spaces, whereas CSU students feel like they don't belong at the institution. Whether through interactions on campuses, stares from other students, or negative interactions with faculty or staff, the experiences negatively impacted students' sense of belonging. CSU students' reporting multiple individual spaces they belonged is a potential outcome of not belonging to the overall campus environment. "I don't belong at CSU but I belong in CSDI, I belong when I am with my friends, I belong in [Alex's] office, and those spaces matter a lot to me. So yeah, I belong somewhere but not here overall" said one student.

This idea of not belonging at the institution but finding a space materialized in interview 2: Every CSU participant at CSU submitted a photo related to both a space they feel they don't belong to and a space they feel misunderstood. When students feel like they don't belong and are experiencing spaces where they feel misunderstood or unwelcomed, the pursuit of spaces that are affirming and welcoming becomes a necessity. The relationships with affirming staff, the existence of a center to go to and be in community, and cultivation of community within organizations and activities, all become responses to a campus climate that is reported to be neither welcoming nor affirming. Campus ecology then becomes a lens to discuss those elements.

### **The Environments of Campus Ecology**

Having established an overview of how study participants describe their sense of belonging (and lack thereof), the discussion now turns to a consideration of the relationship between belonging and campus ecologies at CSU and MPU. The intersection of policy, space,

community, and social interactions help deepen our understanding of the students and the differences at each campus. To frame the discussion, Table 7 provides an overview of ecological dimensions that, in the view of study participants, positively contribute to belonging.

**Table 7**

<i>Number of participants reporting belonging, by campus ecology dimension</i>	<b>MPU</b>	<b>CSU</b>	<b>Total</b>
Physical	5	10	15
Human Aggregate	10	10	20
Organizational	2	8	10
Socially- Constructed	10	10	20

Table 7 provides an overview of each environment and the number of students that identified experiences with the environment that had a positive influence on their sense of belonging. Of the 20 participants, seven participants reported belonging in each campus environment, five reported belonging in three of the environments and four of respondents reported belonging in just two of the environments. Furthermore, three respondents only reported belonging in one environment and one participant reported no belonging in the environments. The table illuminates two key trends to consider. The first is that six participants at CSU experienced belonging in two or less environments compared to one participant at MPU. Additional analysis of belonging by gender identity indicates that most participants who reported belonging in three or more environments identified as cisgender and the those who reported

belonging in two or less environments were transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary. These patterns provide preliminary evidence that sense of belonging is related to dimensions of campus ecology. Moreover, the patterns suggest an uneven influence across the four contexts of campus ecology. Considering the impacts of the four environments influence on belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians, the following sections are designed to discuss each of the environments of campus ecology starting with physical environment.

### **Belonging in the Physical Environment**

The physical environment encompasses the buildings, structures, pathways, design choices, and embodies the values of the institution (Banning and Strange, 2001). Such spaces, we shall see, matter much less to students than the interactions within them. The two research sites provide drastically different illustrations of a campus environment. At MPU, the campus is a mix of acquired office buildings, constructed and renovated buildings, city streets intertwined with campus, and new efforts to create community space through a quad or mass renovations of campus. At CSU, the campus features stereotypical red brick college buildings, carefully manicured campus lawns, and buildings with marble floors and ornate designs, arranged around green spaces, recreation fields, and clearly defined entryways and exits. The stark contrasts in the environments provide context for the experiences of participants in the physical environment. In this section, I summarize student perceptions of the physical environment (student experiences within such spaces will be described in the section on socially constructed environments). An initial overview of student sentiments toward their campus environments is found in Table 8.

#### **Table 8**

*Belonging within the Physical Environment*

Physical Environment	Positive	Neutral	Negative
CSU	5	0	5
MPU	4	5	1
Overall	9	5	6

When looking at the overview Table 8 provides there are two items worth noting. First, fourteen participants reported that the physical environment had a neutral or positive contribution to their sense of belonging. However, when broken down by campus, we see that half of the students at CSU indicated a negative connection between the physical environment and their sense of belonging, while only one MPU student felt similarly. As we will see, the presence of gender-inclusive bathrooms and LGBTQ+ affinity spaces play a major role in how students experience the physical environment on their campuses. This was especially important for gender-diverse students. Interestingly, the presence of such campus structures matters even to study participants who do not use them. Indeed, most participants learned of these spaces during campus tours and interpreted their presence as an anticipatory sign of inclusiveness on campus. The second item is that six participants reported not belonging in the physical environment, with five of those students identifying as transgender and one identifying as non-binary. Many of the participants who reported not belonging are enrolled at CSU while one was enrolled at MPU. Reviewing overall responses provides some insights, but the difference across sites is valuable to understand the nuances.

**MPU**

The “quad”, a large outdoor community space central to the urban campus, figures prominently in students’ narratives about belonging at MPU. This space, which is a large open

community space at the core of the campus, emerged frequently in participants' responses to a prompt about a place where they feel comfortable expressing their LGBTQ+ identity. As one student explained, "I am gay, I like men, I like being a man, and sometimes I like to color my nails or wear a mesh shirt, and like I feel super comfortable on campus, on the quad. I even had these two women compliment my nails just sitting there one day." Participants' discussion of the physical environment was often tied to events occurring within them. An event on the quad, in the LGBTQ+ center, and others as an example. Generally, participants discussed experiences within the physical space, rather than the ways in which particular aesthetics of space may be related to belonging. A student stated:

The quad is like a center point. A place where you can just like walk and see a mix of athletes and the artsy kids and the Greeks, and like almost anyone. I will sometimes just sit there with some friends and see queer couples hanging out, or like the other day saw two cute gay boys holding hands going to the Student Center.

Students of all sorts of backgrounds hanging out together, walking by, and it feels like just a space for the whole community. It's not just that I feel comfortable there or like never worry about anything, I feel like if you asked a bunch of students they'd see it as a place that both like represents who [MPU] is and that you belong here because we all do.

Presenting one's authentic self in public and seeing others with similar identities are integral to belonging in college. While the MPU quad is perhaps the most public space salient to study participants, the LGBTQ+ center (located within a broader multicultural affairs office), whether they used it or not, also contributed to belonging. One participant stated, "I have never gone in, but like I just feel good knowing it's there. It's like [MPU] cares about me as a queer person enough to create a space." This sentiment was shared in some form by the other participants at

MPU who discussed the relationship between belonging and the physical environment in positive terms. Indeed, even students who saw no connection between the built environment and their own sense of belonging (n=4) recognized the value of spaces for community for others.

Describing the center, one student noted:

I am in the center like almost every day. I wasn't out at first so I started just going to hang out in the [multicultural center]. Then I would just study at the table in the GSC. It started to become like my landing on campus. I live in midtown so I commute and it is not just like a space I feel comfortable but like its community. I have made friends, I have found other queer folks who like gaming or similar movies as me. Maybe some of that would have happened with out it, but it has made a big impact in me as I come out and like really found my people there.

The importance of the center is somewhat surprising, given that it is simply a small room (which used to be two separate small meeting rooms). Axel, a cisgender queer man who works in the space, provided Image 1 below, depicting a minimally appointed space. Both Image 1 and Axel's comments underscore the fact that experiences within spaces are more important than the aesthetics of them. He articulated the value of the center as "a place where you can land with people who get you." Although students employed varied rhetoric, this notion of "landing" in a physical place where one feels comfortable emerged in all the MPU interviews, whether students were referring to the multicultural center, academic departments, a community space in the student center, their residence halls, or a faculty/staff member's office.

### **Image 1**

*A photo of the Gender & Sexuality Center at MPU*



While several students saw a direct relationship between space and belonging, five students perceived the physical environment as unrelated to their experience. These students found social interactions within spaces rather than from the spaces themselves as being impactful. One participant shared:

The space doesn't really matter to me. I don't think about chairs, or design, or any of that. Like the people make the space. I don't care about the ballroom but can tell you about the drag show or the brunch thing or the award celebration that happen there. So like space to me is a thing and I guess if we didn't have space for these things that would suck, but it's what happens there and the fun with friends at the plaza that make it special not that [mascot] statue.

Campus ecology, as a conceptual framework, consists of four interrelated environments. And in this student's account, one sees how the features of the physical environment can be related to the socially constructed environment in that it creates an opportunity for more meaningful peer interactions. This may be confusing or contradictory to readers. Students who

were reported as a positive impact specifically discussed the physical environment because of an active engagement with spaces whether that is the LGBTQ+ center or the library. The students who I categorized as “neutral” saw no value in the physical space or its existence, apart from creating a positive climate (i.e., the socially constructed environment) by bringing like-minded students together. In my analysis of the data, I attempted to be as clear and direct as possible with respect to how students discussed specific dimensions of campus ecology and their sense of belonging. For Axel, as a participant actively engaging with the LGBTQ+ resource center, the space itself has value and connection to his belonging. Other participants, by contrast, who know it exists but are indifferent about visiting, see no value in the physical space.

While most MPU students viewed the physical environment in either positive or neutral terms, one study participant regarded the relationship between belonging and the physical environment negatively. This student, a transgender woman, discussed how the bathrooms in the recreation center and the setup of the restrooms in residence halls had elevated her anxiety and created a consistent fear in outing her. The participant identifies as a transgender woman but “passes”. Within the transgender community, “passing” refers to an individual who would not be assumed to be transgender. Because she transitioned prior to arriving at MPU, only a few people are aware of her identity, and she actively avoids gendered spaces where she feels at risk. Nevertheless, she says that: “it is an everyday concern of mine that I will be outed.” Many of those fears connect to the physical environment and designs along with broader organizational policies. The fear and obstacles that this one student articulated at MPU are discussed at length by multiple CSU students.

## CSU

CSU study participants were evenly divided in their assessment of the implications of the physical environment for belonging. Among one subset, a sobering truth appeared in each interview: a perception that CSU's overall physical environment was not designed to welcome or support them. One student made a comment that was echoed by all study participants:

CSU feels like a stereotypical college, you know? Imagine great landscaping, brick buildings, nice buildings unless you're in the arts, and parties in the residence halls or students drinking up town at the college bar. The [business school], res halls, and the new health building are made to feel perfect and polished. Honestly it feels like the whole place was designed for those who fit the perfect idea of what a model [CSU] student is, which is not queer or trans. I have found places where I feel like I belong but they are like my safe escape from the rest of this place.

Five participants, by contrast, viewed the physical environment as positively contributing to their belonging. Although they did not regard the entirety of campus buildings and spaces as welcoming, they did identify one physical hub for LGBTQ+ students to build community that, in their view, contributed to a sense of belonging: the Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion. As one student explained:

CSDI saved me. My roommate made comments all the time that made me uncomfortable. They like told me I hadn't found the right man. In two of my classes there were all sorts of like homophobic and transphobic comments. I even was just eating in a dining hall and these like walking stereotypes called me a dyke, and I was just eating lunch. CSDI, the people there, and the queer part of the space is comfortable and safe. It has big rainbow

doors, LGBTQ+ flags hanging in the windows, no stairs, no hateful words, just a space to be, to exist, and to like just not have to feel so on edge like everywhere else on campus.

The LGBTQ+ center was the sole physical space referenced by CSU study participants when discussing environments that contribute to a sense of belonging. One participant pointed out that they didn't seriously consider CSU during their campus tour until they saw the Center. As a student from a small town in the Midwest, discovering the center was the first time they were able to envision fitting in at CSU. While this space is not unique compared to other offices at CSU, the presence of a space dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community tells its members they can belong on a campus they otherwise perceive as unwelcoming.

## **Image 2**

*A photo of the LGBTQ+ dedicated space at CSU*



The five students who viewed CSU's campus environment negatively included photos of the Center as a place where LGBTQ+ students could be affirmed, underscoring the idea that the mere existence of a safe space may attenuate (to some degree) the detrimental effects of an unwelcoming environment. One student said, "I can always sneak away to the center if I need a

break from CSU. It's part of [the broader campus], but it's different because I am always welcome there." In contrast to the view of the center, students at CSU identified the Business School as being unwelcoming for LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and other marginalized populations. One student described the business school as, "marble floors, gold accents, donor names on plaques everywhere, and a general disregard of anyone who isn't white, fit, and straight." Other students in the study disclosed actively concealing their identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community in classes or events in the building. These juxtapositions of welcoming (The Center) and hostile (The Business School) spaces on the same campus illuminate the contextual and varied impact of campus ecology. This pattern of contradiction emerges in the data itself in that CSU study participants are evenly divided in their perception of the physical environment. While all ten participants identified CSDI as a space for support and affirmation, only five described a sense of belonging as it relates to the built environment.

The interview data also demonstrate that the absence of specific spaces may undermine sense of belonging just as much as the presence of unwelcoming spaces. In particular, all of the students with negative perceptions of the built environment raised access to gender-inclusive restrooms as a problem. Discussing restrooms, one student stated:

Do you think about where you can pee? I do, like all the time. There are four bathrooms within 15 minutes from my classes that I felt comfortable before the bathroom ban. Now there is one and it's the farthest away. I feel like these laws just hurt people. Even before all of this, it was hard with classes back-to-back. Now, I can either go into a restroom and make us all uncomfortable or just try to manage through. I came here to get a degree but now its just like another way to remind me I don't belong here.

CSU is in a state that had, two months before interviews started, limited access to bathrooms based on sex assigned at birth by state law. Additionally, CSU has several old buildings that had not been renovated, resulting in limited access to gender-inclusive or single stall restrooms. Two other participants noted that to access a restroom, they had to walk ten to fifteen minutes from their classroom buildings to one located in the Student Center.

In addition to the absence of adequate bathrooms, CSU students also referenced legislative activity in the state that would close the CSDI in its current form. “It feels like [capital city] is trying to erase my existence,” said one participant. This concern was raised by all participants at CSU where deep concerns existed about the loss of CSDI. One student noted that “CSDI is how I made it this far at CSU. If it’s gone, like my safe space is gone. The elimination of physical space for marginalized groups communicates a lack of concern for these students. It also seems counter to the interests of CSU, given that it presumably could undermine retention of LGBTQ+ students. For students, the loss of a dedicated physical affinity space is not simply a reminder that public representatives disregard their needs, it also represents a physical cancellation of the one space on campus where most LGBTQ+ students feel at home presenting their true selves (To be sure, this policy shift sits at the intersection of both the physical and policy dimensions of the campus ecology framework.). After data collection, the bill passed and the CSDI was disbanded, and staff were moved to different roles.

In sum, the physical environment matters, but is not a core contributor to sense of belonging among study participants. The primary way in which the physical environment contributes to belonging among study participants is when dedicated affinity spaces signal to LGBTQ+ students that they matter. More broadly, the physical environment functions through its intersection with other dimensions of campus ecology. We have seen, for example, that the

built environment is a venue for organizational policy, at times to the detriment of LGBTQ+ students (e.g., the lack of bathrooms). Moreover, we have seen that it is difficult to disentangle from socially constructed environment, in that the built environment facilitates student engagement. Of course, the physical environment plays another implicit role, in that it creates various gathering points on campus, where students come to understand the makeup of the human aggregate environment which is the focus of the following section

In sum, the physical environment emerged as a secondary but still noteworthy factor in shaping students' sense of belonging. At MPU, students often associated spaces such as the quad and the LGBTQ+ center with feelings of comfort, community, and authenticity, even when the spaces themselves were modest or aesthetically unremarkable. At CSU, by contrast, students described the physical environment as reflecting dominant norms of whiteness, wealth, and heteronormativity, with only the Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion serving as a consistent site of affirmation. Across both campuses, affinity spaces, particularly those signaling LGBTQ+ inclusion, proved most significant, while bathrooms and other facilities highlighted how design choices could marginalize or exclude. Taken together, these findings illustrate that the physical environment influences belonging not through its appearance but through the communities it enables, creating a natural bridge to the human aggregate environment, where the composition of the student body and campus culture more directly shape inclusion and exclusion.

### **Belonging in the Human Aggregate Environment**

The human aggregate environment draws our attention to the reality of campus life: the people who are on a campus define a big part of what that campus is like (Strange and Banning, 2001). In this respect, when discussing the human aggregate environment, we are concerned with

*who* is there. Imagine an admissions brochure or a campus tour as an example of an expression of the human aggregate environment. At MPU, the typical student is not easily defined by characteristics like race, gender, etc. Participants instead used words like “creative,” “driven,” or other descriptors based not on identity. At CSU, the typical student is described as “white,” “straight,” “stereotypically good looking,” and “wealthy.” Most of the descriptors at CSU are identity-based. The difference could be because MPU is majority minority institution or as we’ll explore with participants connected to the idea of “who” the campus is. This dimension of campus ecology focuses on the conglomerate of individuals and groups who comprise the members of campus (rather than interactions with them, which is tied to the socially constructed environment). For the sake of readability, this discussion will use the term “campus community” in place of “human aggregate environment.” If most of a campus community is made up of first-generation students, or if there is a disproportionate presence of affluent students, that shapes the environment simply because of who is present. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that the makeup of a campus community has implications for a given student’s sense of belonging. In this study, there are significant differences between the two institutions and their students’ observations of the campus community. A preliminary overview of students’ perceptions is found in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Perceptions of the human aggregate environment*

<b>Human Aggregate</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
CSU	0	0	10
MPU	9	0	1
Overall	9	0	11

Much like the physical environment, we see major differences in how CSU and MPU students perceive this aspect of campus ecology. CSU study participants universally regard campus community in negative terms, while MPU generally regard their individuals at their university in positive terms. These disparate patterns point to underlying differences in the experiences of students on these two campuses and demonstrate the importance of the social atmosphere for belonging.

To illuminate this point, consider two juxtaposed statements from students. We'll start with Talia at CSU who states:

I am white, I am cis, and I still don't belong here. I don't have their money, I don't want to be in a sorority, and I am queer. What that means here is that I don't hit the stereotypical model of a student. I know it, [other students] know it, and I honestly don't care... Well, I do care. It sucks. I feel like an outsider here every day, but not fitting in here is good with me. I found my people, but I don't belong here in the overall sense, you know?

Talia's experience of campus is grounded in her perception that she is unlike most students in her campus community. And in this respect, Talia is no different from other CSU study participants. Talia initially noted that she "didn't care", but paused and subsequently explained that she "doesn't fit in."

Talia's perception, and others like her at CSU, strongly contrasts with the narratives of students MPU. For example, when discussing the campus community at MPU, a student named Edith explained:

I don't think I could think of a person who would not like, fit here. We have every group you could think of, every race, every sexuality and gender and like, you see some weird shit here, but people can just be. The best thing though is that no one makes it a thing. If you had asked me if I fit in at high school, hell no. Here though everyone does. Like you know how on those ads and stuff people make it look diverse when you apply to school, this place is that. Walk outside right now and you'll see a mix of everyone just living and socializing and like pretty diverse groups of people too.

Edith's view of the environment at MPU as a composite of the various identities with no dominant group surfaced with other participants as well. Although often cast in slightly different ways, most students at MPU similarly depicted the view of campus community presented by Edith.

The specifics of participants' experiences at each campus will be discussed in their following section. However, the data provides a clear answer to the question of whether institutional context is related to students' experiences and sense of belonging. The narratives of students at suggest that campus community positively contributes to belonging among MPU students and negatively contributes to belonging among CSU students.

## **MPU**

Nine of the ten participants at MPU felt that the campus community positively contributes to their sense of belonging. A student's sense of belonging seems to benefit from being surrounded by a diverse student body. Indeed, MPU study participants commonly referenced the racial and geographic diversity of the campus community in positive ways. One student framed the campus as:

A place, but like a place for everyone. Gay, that's cool. Black, that's cool, Muslim, that's cool, and like you get my point. [MPU] talks about our diversity at all sorts of events but like it's legit and genuine. This guy in my class is a from like middle of nowhere... and he hunts and stuff. We don't do that in [my city]. This other girl in my Psych class is from England. We all just exist. One of my friends who I was asking about [MPU] when applying said wherever you come from and whoever you are, you'll like find a way here. I totally agree and that to me is the whole belonging thing.

Another participant described MPU as a "place where everyone fits." A third said, "I fit in, but I feel like it's because we all do." These sentiments were shared consistently among the students at MPU. Students' familiarity with the campus community depends in part on where they live, their majors, their social networks, and outside of class engagements in student life. In this respect, encountering other LGBTQ+ students and participation in affinity organizations plays an important role in how study participants assess diversity within their campus community. One student said:

I met LGBTQ+ orientation leaders, RAs, and others when I was a freshman. Now I am the queer leader people meet. It feels a little like both like a pressure of 'don't screw up' and just a cool affirmation that my experience and voice can matter here. I hope there are people who look at me and see themselves being here.

Seeing LGBTQ+ representation contributed to positive experiences for many students. The words "welcoming," "included," and "community" came up as positive reference points for seven of the ten students at MPU in response to questions about the human aggregate environment.

While nine participants suggested that the campus community contributed to their sense of belonging, Jeremy, a cisgender gay man of color, did not. He is a commuter student who primarily spends his time in the library. His ride to and from school limits his ability to engage outside of the classroom and, as a result, he struggles to find where he fits in. He stated:

I don't feel like I don't fit in, but I also don't have a place if that makes any sense. I don't live on campus like my friends who I am in classes with, I can't go to org meetings in the evenings because I can't get home or afford an uber. I also feel like [MPU] is a commuter campus, but like my version of commuting limits me. So like again I fit in, but I don't.

If campus community contributes to belonging simply through observing other students with shared identities or interests, it is not difficult to imagine why the experience of a commuter student departs from students who are more strongly integrated into social and academic environments on campus. His experience at MPU is unlikely a unique one and evokes the complexity and contextual nature of belonging. Approximately 6,000 of 36,000 MPU students live on campus. Jeremy's ability to commute depends on family, instead of public transportation like the other students at MPU who were reported as belonging in this environment, ultimately limiting his engagement opportunities. This challenge represents an area of future consideration for how to foster belonging for students who are limited in their ability to engage whether because of transportation, economic pressures, etc. The strong, positive impact at MPU is contrasted by a significantly negative experience by CSU students.

## **CSU**

Every participant at CSU negatively assessed the campus community at their institution. The consensus among the participants at CSU was that the typical CSU student was white,

cisgender, heterosexual and affluent. In fact, every participant used the term “bro” or “frat guy” to describe CSU men and “designer bag,” “pretty,” or “stereotype” to describe women. When pressed to place a percentage of how many students at CSU met these idealized descriptions, six of ten participants said 70 percent or more. The remaining four participants’ responses ranged from 55-65 percent. Whatever the range, participants feel that most of the CSU population is captured by this image of the “typical student.”

When asked if it is easy or difficult to fit in, nine of the ten participants described it as difficult. One of those students, JM who is queer, non-binary, and a person of color, stated:

This place ain’t built for me. It’s so white, so rich, and not willing or interested in changing. Leadership in my department ignores my pronouns and accepts students and their families treating me like the help. So it isn’t just difficult to fit in, I actually feel like this place doesn’t want me to fit in.

JM’s challenges in navigating CSU are not unique to them and highlight the relevance of intersectional identities to belonging and campus community. If we assume that CSU participants’ view of the “average student” is accurate, then it is not difficult to imagine a student who is both queer *and* a person of color as an outsider within the campus community. The participants in this study who have multiple marginalized or oppressed identities commonly referenced this, for example using rhetoric about being “not just queer.” One participant who is white, queer, and non-binary referenced the challenge of fitting in. Even in spaces where they feel safe generally, they must “choose” how they present as non-binary even when their queerness is accepted. Three of the participants referenced having to decide in class whether to correct pronouns due to “fear” or “concern[s]” about outing themselves. When pressed about that idea, one participant provided a powerful summary:

If I correct a professor in my lecture hall, I am outing myself to everyone in that space. I don't feel welcome or comfortable and have to choose. Me and my friends who are like visibly queer talk a lot about how every day we choose to hide or to constantly correct people. It's kind of fucked because I am too queer, too not normal, too whatever, but then like being the [CSU] stereotype is fine?

The stakes of integrating into the campus community are high, evidenced in part by palpable tension participants displayed in both interviews as they recounted their experiences. The fear and pain in such choices is understandable. In some circumstances, a student may elect to suppress their true self, but this does not come without costs. For example, a lesbian CSU study participant in a sorority explained:

My [sorority] sisters accept me, but we kind of just ignore the whole lesbian thing. I have never been told specifically to not bring a woman to one of our date nights, but like it is like so clear to me that I would not be supported....it hurts a little bit but like I get it. One of my friends is in a fraternity and he really feels like a different pressure to stay in the closet.

Overall, inability to fit the perceived "mold" at CSU undermines sense of belonging among the participants in this study. Participants found themselves as outsiders in context of the campus community. We saw that this is particularly the case among students with multiple marginalized identities at PWI like CSU, such as gender diverse LGBTQ+ individuals and those with racially minoritized identities. Campus community, otherwise referred to as the human aggregate environment, frames students' general understanding of who belongs, and who does not.

In summary, students' perceptions of the campus community (the human aggregate environment) varied sharply between MPU and CSU. At MPU, most participants described the community as genuinely diverse, inclusive, and affirming, where differences in race, sexuality, and background were normalized and celebrated, though commuter students faced unique challenges in connecting. By contrast, CSU students consistently depicted the community as dominated by affluent, white, cisgender, heterosexual norms, leaving LGBTQ+ and racially minoritized students feeling excluded, pressured to conceal aspects of their identity, or forced to navigate painful choices around disclosure. While both institutions illustrate the powerful influence of who comprises the campus community, MPU fostered belonging through visible diversity and representation, whereas CSU reinforced exclusion through a narrow student archetype. These dynamics underscore how the composition of a campus community interacts with institutional rules and practices, creating a natural transition to the organizational environment where policies and structures more formally shape belonging.

### **Belonging in the Organizational Environment**

The organizational environment is the compilation of internal and external policies and related allocation of resources that influence the student experience (Strange and Banning, 2001). CSU and MPU are both public institutions situated within conservative states. This section of the study is particularly influenced by the impact of policies and the influence of shifting state policies. At MPU and CSU students who were gender diverse experienced barriers or extra steps required due to a difference between gender identity and sex assigned at birth. However, CSU was experiencing major policy changes in the state restricting bathroom access and elimination of DEI offices that students at MPU were not contending with. A noteworthy pattern in the

interview data emerged from my discussions with students about the organizational environment: half of the study participants recognized that university policies could be detrimental to belonging, even if they did not see it as influencing their own experience. I did not anticipate students would distinguish between a direct impact on themselves and the way it impacts others. For instance, one student shared, “I was meeting up with a friend uptown for lunch and they ended up cancelling because they didn’t have enough time to get to a bathroom, they felt comfortable in, have lunch, and get to our marketing class. I have never planned my life around the bathroom.” This participants’ reflection as a cisgender woman demonstrates the way that organizational environment shapes student belonging, though unevenly, based on identity or circumstances. Table 10 provides an overview of study participants’ perceptions of the implications of the organizational environment for belonging.

**Table 10**

*Perceptions of the Organizational Environment*

<b>Organizational</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
CSU	1	2	7
MPU	0	8	2
Overall	1	10	9

Two patterns in Table 10 are noteworthy. The first is that CSU participants were much more likely to view the organizational environment at their institution negatively compared to participants at MPU. Negative perceptions at CSU are driven in part by the previously mentioned policy restrictions on bathrooms and legislation related to the elimination of CSDI.

As we will see, this is partly explained by the fact that no cisgender students reported negative perceptions of the organizational environment, and the vast majority were neutral. At both CSU and MPU, all neutral responses came from cisgender participants. It is also worth noting that that seven of these ten participants reported as neutral made explicit comments on how the organizational environment has impacted their friends who identify as transgender. Their sense of belonging was not impacted by it, but they were acutely aware of how policies, laws, and decisions of the university have an outsized impact on students who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary. One participant at MPU said,

I was in class and one of my best friends is trans but like you wouldn't think too much about it, you know? Like no one is going to come up to him on the street and question him. He [transitioned] in high school and like I just see him as a hot dude. We were in Econ our first semester and the professor used his dead name. I don't know how or like what was missing, but he dropped that class that day. So, like I am not impacted directly but I see it and how it hurts people I love.

Most of the students who saw no relationship between their sense of belonging and the organizational environment shared some version of this type of story. Even when students in this category were not directly familiar with such circumstances, they indicated that they were able to imagine how university policies could be detrimental to student well-being.

The second pattern from Table 10 is a total of nine participants in the study viewed the organizational environment as negatively impacting their sense of belonging at their respective campus. There appears to be an outsized impact of this environment on participants who identified as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-confirming. The primary concerns raised by these students were about fear of being found out or resistance they ran into based on their

identity. The narratives of two study participants illustrate how university policies and practices undermine belonging for these students. The first comes from Sasha, an undergraduate transgender bisexual woman at MPU who works in various student assistant roles that require her disclosure of the sex assigned at birth due to gendered housing processes:

I have to go through all these extra steps to make sure I don't get outed in the Residence Halls. I had to out myself to my boss in Orientation. I pass and there are so many places where I am just afraid of what will happen. Will this policy in residence life out me? I should be able to focus on my academics and the student leader roles I have, but these policies add some concern.

Sasha's experience of navigating the system as an engaged student demonstrates how systems and policies requiring the disclosure of identity can lead a student to question if they belong on campus. Several of her roles involve supporting and welcoming students to campus, which is made more complicated for her navigating various systems and structures implemented by the institution.

Bob, a student at CSU, shared a similar account of how policies at the university may negatively affect belonging on campus:

I was transitioning, and it was unsafe at home. I had a friend let me stay at his dorm with him but then I had to leave because of the policy around guests. There was emergency housing, but I had to pay for it and couldn't afford it so ended up sleeping in my car. We even shared my situation and still just had to leave. So then I slept in my car and got lots of parking tickets. I tried to explain I cannot pay this \$75 ticket, that I was homeless, and they said "we don't care your trans" pay your tickets. I wasn't trying to play the diversity card like I'm, saying I am literally sleeping in my car.

Bob's narrative demonstrates how campus policies regarding guests and costs for emergency housing failed to support his needs. While the policies are not targeted at the LGBTQ+ community, the case illustrates how care and support of students can be lost in the execution of policies. A more thorough discussion of the policies focused on LGBTQ+ students and their impacts occurs in the discussion of each campus starting with MPU.

## **MPU**

Eight of the ten MPU students viewed the organizational environment as unrelated to their sense of belonging on campus. These students are also cisgender, which may suggest that the influence of university policies and practices on belonging is dependent on identity and intersectionality. The other two students, one transgender, the other gender non-conforming, reported a negative impact. While all MPU students discussed policies related to financial aid and parking as relevant to their experiences, these would impact all students, not specifically LGBTQ+ students. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ students may find themselves in precarious positions that place them at increased risk when financial problems arise. For example, a student referenced a friend who got "kicked out [of their home] and struggled to get financial aid."

Even when a student didn't feel impacted by the organizational environment, they were aware of the feelings their peers and friends experienced. One of those students stated:

One of my friends goes to school in Florida and he was planning to live in their like queer housing community, but it got eliminated. He is trans and like I mean he's more jacked than me. No one would know but his school is making people know. It is not right for him to have to be outed. I couldn't imagine my school doing that. He's actually going to move home. I guess because some of the things don't really apply to me I don't feel like

it impacts me, but I don't think it's right. MPU isn't doing that, but I guess like if it did I would start to ask if I belong here if part of my community is not supported.

This student's comment helps to demonstrate how organizational policies shape a student's sense of belonging, even when policy impacts other individuals. Although there is no apparent threat to the student, observation of other universities may set a tone for whether university administrations in general are supportive of marginalized students. Students may conclude, erroneously or not, that actions of other universities may be indicative of all universities and grow skeptical of the motivations and concerns of higher education institutions in general.

Seven of the students whose narratives suggest that the organizational environment is irrelevant to their sense of belonging were certainly aware of university or state policies that were detrimental to some members of the LGBTQ+ community, such as limiting access to bathrooms, hormone blockers or hormone therapy for transgender students, and other forms of medical care focused on transgender individuals. Elizabeth, a gender non-confirming asexual individual, provided the following example when asked about university policies and practices:

I am a graduate student, and, in my department, I am very supported. Here I also feel like I am welcomed in most ways and places. But my dead name was showing on the roster when I started, I got sent to three different offices to update my name, and no one seemed to see it as a problem. I am giving my labor, my time, and just felt like processes should be smoother for me.

From Elizabeth's account, we get a glimpse into the challenges some LGBTQ+ students face as they individually navigate the policy environment. Basic but nevertheless core issues related to students' names and bathroom access---alongside the more universal challenge of navigating university bureaucracies materialize as obstacles to belonging. In addition to basic services,

programs and supports targeted at minoritized populations are also important. While MPU is not in a state that has sought to eliminate or close DEI spaces, many students nevertheless referenced concern about such efforts in interviews (perhaps due to the pervasiveness of the issue in the public). Brian imagined how such a change might impact him, sharing:

I grew up in [small southern town] and when I was on an admission tour, I saw the CCI [Cultures, Community, and Inclusion] office. The tour guide talked about their gender and sexuality space and that felt really good. If CCI was closed and like Lavendar graduation didn't happen, it would communicate that I am not welcomed or supported here the same way. I see my trans friends already experiencing those challenges, I see [people] talking about programs to support my community as being bad. I hope MPU never makes that choice.

Other students made similar points, referencing fear that program elimination may come to their state. While such concerns were merely hypothetical at MPU, such threats and consequences were quite real for students at CSU.

## CSU

Most (seven) of the CSU study participants regarded their university's policies and practices as detrimental to their sense of belonging. Two saw the relationship between policy and belonging as non-existent, while one student regarded the relationship positively. Similarly to MPU, most who reported negative experiences were not cisgender. Three issues seemed central to the narratives of most students at CSU: bathroom access, the existence of DEI programs, and communication practices of administrators.

Students were asked about decisions the university has made that negatively impact the LGBTQ+ community. Compliance with the state bathroom law figured prominently in students'

accounts of organizational decision-making at their university. All ten students at CSU acknowledged that bathroom access was a challenge. While it didn't directly impact everyone, all students regarded the policy as a threat to belonging. Three participants had no access to a gender-inclusive restroom within 10 minutes of their classes. The policy change would increase that distance by an additional 5–10-minute walk. One student who identified as a transgender man stated “it sucks because like, I hope this is ok, but like can't I just pee without getting a weird look” as he reflected on how others responded to him in the restroom. Another student who identifies as trans-masculine shared, “I don't want to make someone uncomfortable, but I am uncomfortable every time.” In response to the new law, Hailey, a non-binary queer person who occasionally presents as male, shared:

So like there is this thing where it feels like you are being watched all the time now. I don't pass as a man, but like when I am more male presenting I think women would be uncomfortable with me being in their restroom. I spend zero like literally no time thinking about people and their bathroom usage. It feels like mine is constantly being reviewed and feels like the university now monitors me.

For the transgender and non-binary students at CSU, the bathroom represents a place of isolation, fear, and of monitoring. The policy change, the updated signage, and general climate was a concern. One student even said, “there were these two guys standing outside the bathroom and felt like they were just watching me to see what door I went in. I told the [student center] staff but they just kind of ignored me.” Policies and structures limiting bathroom access fail to provide a space where these students felt they belonged. The impact of this change is compounded by the efforts to then eliminate other structural resources and support.

The Love Honor Pride (LHP) Living-Learning community and multicultural center were two other contexts of relevant policies. As interviews for this study took place, a law was moving through the state legislature that ultimately would eliminate these supports. A consensus existed that the bill would pass, but the exact details were still unclear. This context helps to situate the information shared by the participants due to the fear and concern around losing these critical supports. Public universities have little choice but to comply with state laws. Presumably, defiance of state policy would invite budgetary, legal, and reputational threats. Nevertheless, in the eyes of CSU study participants, following the new law would amount to, in the words of one student, “complicit compliance.” When asked to explain this term, the student responded:

Okay so you have a choice. Do you do the thing that causes harm willingly or do you resist? So complicit compliance is being a part of hateful and hurtful decisions. The bathroom stuff has been a terrible example of how CSU is complicit here. CSU cares about my tuition, cares about the campus looking pretty, and could give a fuck about me as a queer person.

Complicit compliance, and relevant sentiments shared by other participants, describes the perception that the university is complicit in harming the LGBTQ+ community by complying with these laws. CSU’s compliance with state laws had negative impacts on nine of the participants. The responses initially focused on bathrooms and then expanded into discussions related to LHP and the multicultural center. The students spoke as though it was already pre-determined that these programs would end. Indeed, the multicultural center was disbanded not long after data collection for this project was complete. It’s important to acknowledge that while the students are making assumptions and presumptions about what will happen, the fear itself had a direct impact on their sense of belonging based on their observation of university inaction.

While this study cannot speak directly to the impact of the closing, the data suggests that the (in)existence of the center matters. Cee talked about institutional betrayal:

My LLC [living learning community] isn't going away, but lots of my friends are worried about theirs. It's the gay one (LHP). So like I ever was told by the staff that we might not be able to do certain programs, but like my community will still be here. I am not like comfortable to be in [LHP], but for my friends who are it's like the only place they feel safe here. [CSU] betrayed us all in how they did this bathroom stuff, how they continue to do it. I had a friend reported for going in the bathroom and they're just like butch. So yeah [CSU] has done a lot of hurt. And if [anti DEI bill] becomes law, they'll do more. They don't care."

CSU students described their experience of recent changes using terms such as "thoughtless," "careless," and "heartless." Four students used the word "violence." When asked to say more about how university inaction amounts to violence, one student said, "they don't have to do this. They definitely don't have to do it this way" while another spoke about how the messages about changes spoke of "responsibility to follow the law with no real interest in caring for us." The tension around institution's ability to resist policy and law is visible in multiple spaces. Even as universities are bound by state law, and regardless of campus leaders' individual positions on the policies, such legislative changes undermine LGBTQ+ student belonging and their perceptions of campus administration.

Indeed, within the overall interview sample, only CSU students specifically referenced campus administrators. CSU also was directly amid a policy change that negatively impacted LGBTQ+ students. The ability for administrators to adhere to laws while considering

communication approaches, engagement with impacted communities, and other efforts is worth noting. In one interview a student acknowledged the challenge administrators faced. He said,

I get what I want isn't what they can do. But you can treat me with dignity and respect. You can come into our meeting and see the pain and hurt this is causing. The president showed up for Jewish students after October 7<sup>th</sup>. As a Jewish student, that mattered. He hasn't shown up once for us. I haven't seen him at any of our events. I haven't seen a message with his name on it that was showing support for me. If you can't send a message because people are watching or whatever, then why not ask someone in Student Life when queer clubs meet and show up? So like I am smart, I get politics and whatever. I also get care, but I haven't gotten care from the higher ups here.

The organizational environment entails concrete matters such as institutional policies, state and federal regulations, and the allocation of resources. It also includes how elements implemented, managed, and communicated. In situations when administrators can't resist regulatory change, they could show more understanding for impacted individuals and endeavor to find alternatives modes of support.

To be sure, at least one study participant regarded the organizational environment positively. Blake is a white transgender bisexual student who came out and transitioned while at CSU. Blake regarded gender inclusive housing (the LGBTQ+ living-learning community), the presence of the multicultural center, and a campus "closet" (where students can access gender affirming clothes) as important bases of his sense of belonging. Because he passes as a cisgender man, he doesn't worry about using the bathroom. Blake discussed the value and support he received earlier in his time at CSU:

I benefitted from LHP, I was supported by staff in CSDI, I found myself. The [gender-inclusive housing policy], access to gender affirming care, and the [Open Doors Clothes Closet] helped me be me. Scholarships, programs, attending a conference, and meeting other queer and trans students made me feel not alone. I am grateful for all of that. I have been in some pretty dark places here with my family not accepting me and like I don't know how people will make it without CSDI, LHP, and stuff like that.

Blake experienced all the benefits of the programs, policies, and services that positively contributed to his belonging. He reported not belonging at CSU, yet also was able to identify a space and individuals who provided support and a place to belong within the larger campus environment.

Students like Blake benefitted from bathroom access and the presence of the multicultural center. The subsequent restriction and elimination of bathroom access raises questions about the fate of students whose sense of belonging would have possibly benefitted from their presence. For most CSU study participants, the anticipated changes appear to erode their sense of belonging on campus, likely because the students are aware of their importance. Protective measures for LGBTQ+ students in the organizational environment are being destroyed, with consequences for student well-being in general and in particular, belonging on campus.

Just after completion of interviews at CSU, the institution had just implemented a new law that restricted bathroom use to sex assigned at birth and eliminated all gender inclusive restrooms. Additionally, the state where CSU is located passed a bill to eliminate all DEI efforts at state institutions. The prevalence of this discussion of the organizational environment may reflect the gender diversity of students at CSU in contrast to MPU.

In sum, students at both MPU and CSU described the organizational environment as shaping belonging in uneven ways, with identity often mediating how policies were experienced. At MPU, most cisgender students viewed policies as neutral, though they were aware of their peers' struggles, while transgender and non-binary students reported barriers tied to disclosure requirements, bureaucratic processes, and access to support. At CSU, most participants saw policies as directly harmful, citing restrictive bathroom laws, the dismantling of DEI programs, and administrative inaction as undermining their well-being. While a few students at both institutions could identify positive policies or resources that fostered belonging, the dominant narrative emphasized how organizational decisions and compliance with state laws disproportionately harmed LGBTQ+ students. These findings highlight the powerful role of policies and resource allocation in shaping belonging and lead directly into the socially constructed environment, where the lived interactions between students, faculty, and staff further mediate these institutional dynamics.

### **Belonging in the Socially Constructed Environment**

The socially constructed environment concerns the interactions and experiences that students have with other students, faculty, and staff on campus (Strange and Banning, 2001, Strange, 2000). At MPU and CSU students found community through the LGBTQ+ club, the LGBTQ+ center, and in other engagements across campus. At MPU, students found affirmations of their belonging in identifying spaces. In contrast, CSU students sought affirmations and places to belong. Throughout this chapter, data related to experiences connected to the physical, human aggregate, and organizational environments on LGBTQ+ students have been discussed. Each provided rich data, insights, and a picture of the way these various environments shape LGBTQ+

student sense of belonging. However, the socially constructed environment showed up in each other environment as students responded to prompts, reflecting how other layers of campus ecology can produce climates of inclusiveness or marginality. This environment also had an outsized positive impact on the reported sense of belonging for participants as demonstrated in Table 11.

**Table 11**

*Perceptions of the Socially Constructed Environment*

<b>University</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
CSU	9	0	1
MPU	9	0	1
Overall	18	0	2

Table 11 showcases that 18 participants described ways in which the socially constructed environment created a sense of belonging at their universities. Such perceptions were informed by experiences with organizations, faculty & staff, and their peers. Only two students, one at each institution, described a social climate that undermined sense of belonging.

However, there were some overall experiences across students to broadly discuss. There were three general categories of impact that participants described in interviews: connections with faculty and staff, connections with other students, and then idiosyncratic experiences. Each of these areas will be discussed in more details within each research site. Brian, a queer cisgender student explained his belonging in the socially constructed environment as:

I found people who accept and love me. The Alliance is family, my team members like know I am gay but just view me as Brian, and like I can't even name all the faculty and

staff who have helped me. I was in a class and a student used the word faggot and the professor stopped class, asked them what they said, and then went on to out themselves, talk about expectations, and then asked the student if he understood. It was badass and like felt real to who [MPU] says it is. It also like cemented for me this place being different. In high school, I had a teacher make a gay joke in front of me. Like I actually feel like I belong here.

Brian's story of both past trauma within education and the way he has found community across spaces is an experience shared by most other study participants. If a student feels that a campus isn't built with them in mind, does not see others like them on campus, and feels unprotected by university policies, they may nevertheless find connection and community through various interactions that make them feel a sense of belonging. Study participants referred to such connections through student organizations (15 of 20 study participants) and friend groups (17 of 20 study participants). All the participants referenced at least one faculty or staff member who had made them feel like they belong.

Students' positive experiences with people on campus also contributed to belonging. One student discussed how when they didn't feel like they belonged at CSU, they "found a home in the gaming club. They don't care about my identity; they care about me." Another student at MPU spoke to how the gym became a place where she "could exist fully as a queer person without [my identity] being the focus." Several students at each institution talked about the role of the LGBTQ+ student organization. Bob shared:

Spectrum is where I found some of my best friends. Spectrum was a place I could go and say nothing or cry or laugh or just exist with queer people. This place is not queer or trans friendly and so it was this little queer space that we could all just be us. CSDI is that

for me to. I love [Jason] and [Ryan], they have helped me so much and the former staff did too. I was talking to my roommate about this whole process and they called Spectrum an escape and I liked that too. I know when I leave here I won't have that so like I think about building and finding my people in whatever comes next.

In addition to discussion of queer community, students also spoke about the importance of spaces where they can exist where being queer doesn't matter. This was true for the majority of participants at MPU.

## **MPU**

Nine of the ten participants at MPU reported that the socially constructed environment positively impacted their sense of belonging. This categorization draws on data that affirmed MPU was affirming, welcoming, and created a campus climate that welcomed individuals of various backgrounds, identities, and beliefs. The discussion will follow the three areas identified in interviews: faculty/staff interactions, student interactions, and informal experiences. Each represents an area of the socially constructed environment where opportunities to positively contribute to sense of belonging exist. While not all ten students reported belonging in this environment, all provided an example where a faculty or staff member had supported them.

One participant talked about the instructor of their spin class who encouraged them, used their pronouns, and affirmed the value of all bodies in the space. Another looked at their employment supervisor responded to their pronoun disclosure with affirmation. Five students gave examples of faculty making them feel welcomed by addressing jokes made at the expense of LGBTQ+ communities in class. A sense of how these MPU faculty respond to LGBTQ+ students is found in the narrative of one study participant, who described their interaction with a professor in the Student Center:

One of my professors came up to me and asked if they could sit with me. I thought it was kind of weird but I was at a table with three empty seats. We talked a little about random stuff and then she asked me if I was okay. I guess she noticed me not talking as much in class. Like it's a lecture of I don't know maybe 75 or 100 students and she noticed me? I have been dealing with some financial stuff because of my family and so like I kind of just let it all out. She didn't have to notice me, she didn't have to ask, and she didn't have to like connect me to some person in financial aid who helped a lot. Like there's thousands of students here and so like it felt good.

The faculty member had no idea the student was dealing with feeling rejected by their own family at home. Where home felt unwelcoming for this student, such interactions contribute to a sense of belonging on campus, away from home. In fact, seven participants noted outside the classroom engagement and acknowledgement by faculty as positively contributing to their sense of belonging. This speaks to the value of being understood and valued for all elements of a student's identity, not just their sexual orientation or gender identity when engaging with faculty and staff. The positive climate at MPU is evidenced by the fact that, of the ten MPU study participants, six reported five or more positive interactions with faculty. When pressed to talk about the value of the experience of such affirmations, one student said that while "one time is a fluke, experiencing multiple people, in multiple like subjects feels more like it's like a legit thing." The feeling that one is a legitimate member of a community as one's authentic self is critical to student integration and belonging on campus.

The notion of "having community" figured prominently in the data from interviews with MPU study participants. The nine who described a positive campus climate used phrases like "my people," "community", "family" and " support system" when describing the interactions

with others. The data suggest that students assign value to having groups and interactions in which they can exist as their “whole self.” Even when such a feeling is unevenly experienced across campus, students seek groups and places in which they can be themselves with little concern. One participant found it in the gym, saying that there, “no one cares who I sleep with or who I date, I am just the rad chick on the cycle.” Others find it amongst friends. A student, for example, mentioned that they feel most welcomed when “my identities don’t matter. It’s not that I don’t know I am neurodivergent or queer, or whatever, I just don’t have to think about it when I am with my friends. They don’t care; they just care about me.” Another student described the experience of community as having a weight lifted off their shoulder:

I am like really actively exploring and understanding my identity as a gay man. That’s because I feel like I can here and with my people. Like I am comfortable and fully just gay, you know? The best part though about the community I have found here at [MPU] is that it doesn’t matter. Like but not in a they don’t care way. It’s in a we love you way. When I saw your flyer in [General Classroom Building], I thought of this scene in *Love, Simon* when the mom tells Simon that he can breathe now. Like for so long I was looking for a place and for people that I could just exist with. I found it. Like I can breathe now.

Nearly all MPU study participants described this experience of finding community where one can exist authentically. Indeed, in the case of the one student who described a negative climate at MPU, it was evident that he had yet to find such a network. He described connections with friends at home, a community outside of MPU, and noted that while he doesn’t feel unwelcome, he doesn’t feel connected:

Well my sister goes here and we're close, but like I just don't really have friends here. I didn't live in the dorms, I don't do the like programs stuff, and so I have some people I see in the library regularly but don't like know them outside of where they like to sit.

Other students in this study specifically spoke to the value and fulfillment they found on campus supporting their sense of belonging. His feelings of not belonging in this area were also attributed to him considering transferring somewhere closer to his house to try to get more connected.

One noteworthy theme in interviews with MPU students concerned seemingly idiosyncratic and fleeting, but nevertheless important, interactions that students described as important to feeling integrated into the campus environment. Examples of such important idiosyncratic experiences included observing campus protest (which eight students mentioned) and being acknowledged or complimented on articles of clothing (which four students mentioned). While an event such as a protest is not an enduring feature of campus life, the nature of the protest and its collective reception communicate something to students about campus climate. Describing a recent protest, one student explained:

There were these like racist, homophobic, just like bigoted people who showed up outside the greenspace with their signs about who all God hates. I saw the people I would expect in the Alliance, but like I also saw a football player telling them they were dumb and saw faculty and students who like I don't think I would have thought of as affirming me show up. In the first interview you asked me about fit and like I do still think everyone fits here and like this moment for me represented who we are.

Conflict has a way of clarifying shared values that may otherwise be less apparent. In this instance, a student who has experienced identity-based marginalization is able to see that peers

and faculty may in fact serve as allies. This contributes to sense of belonging by demonstrating a broader culture of acceptance than a marginalized student may have known. Indeed, when asked to submit events that demonstrate belonging, other students submitted pictures of the protest, as seen in Image 3.

### **Image 3**

*A sign from a campus street preacher*



At face value, it may seem odd to conclude that an image of a street preacher signifies belonging, especially when it includes an individual holding a sign that reads “Hell Awaits”. However, one sees in this image students’ responses to the protest, including an individual showing their backside to the protester in question. Study participants’ felt affirmed by these active rejections of anti LGBTQ+ ideology and also by observing other students whose clothing signaled affinity, such as a rainbow pin on their bag or colored nails

MPU participants' accounts of affirmations indicate that small experiences can help foster belonging among queer and trans students. When an environment is not supportive as described by students at CSU, the focus on support becomes critical and not just an affirmation of what a student already experiences. The narratives of students at CSU describe the power of interactions across faculty/staff, students, and the informal experiences to find belonging in a hostile climate.

## CSU

Nine of ten CSU study participants described experiences and connections that enhanced their sense of belonging in this environment, while one another described it in more negative terms. Unlike the participants at MPU, the overall view of CSU is that it is a hostile and unwelcoming space for LGBTQ+ collegians. While the number of students who reported belonging are the same at both sites, the students at CSU had sought out and identified people, places, and communities where they felt welcome in an overall campus climate they were othered in. Among students who describe the campus climate in favorable terms, it consists of connection, community, and respect in pockets of campus. For the student who had a negative view of the campus climate, the environment is characterized by marginalization, by stares on campus, and long walks to bathrooms. To depict these views, this section will follow a similar pattern of discussing interactions with faculty/staff, students and peers, and finally the idiosyncratic informal experiences.

In general, CSU students found connection in the socially constructed environment through interactions with affirming and supportive faculty/staff. One student, for example, spoke about how she found community through her major. Another student connected to others through the various LGBTQ+ organization that exist at each. Seven found community in the LGBTQ+

center. Some students even found connections to like-minded students off campus, at venues such as the uptown coffee shop. Olivia, a cisgender lesbian, described CSU as:

...a place where being queer, trans, or a member of the community places you as other.

Once I kind of realized that, I spent more time in like connecting with the people I vibed with. I joined some clubs, went to some CSDI programs, and connected to a couple of people who work at [CSU].

While Olivia and the other students in this student would not view the overall climate of their university as positive or welcoming, they nevertheless find social spaces within the community where they can integrate with like-minded others and be themselves. The need to do so is compounded by the geographic circumstances of CSU. Unlike MPU, which is in a larger city with an identifiable LGBTQ+ social scene, the more conservative and suburban setting of CSU means campus is the *only* public place where LGBTQ+ students can connect. In this respect, students there have little choice but to seek out interactions with liked-minded individuals and groups. Consider comments by Cee, a black queer non-binary student at CSU:

I can get haircare products delivered here, I can't get a community that celebrates me through Amazon. I look to CSU to provide that space because the city doesn't and that is part of what I was sold on. So like my Resident Director is super supportive and that is great. I just think about what happens as CSDI gets destroyed or CSU stops investing. Like this place isn't the most affirming so like if faculty/staff leave who are queer, if spaces are gone, there's a lot of loss and pain for people.

Cee's comment about being able to get items to meet her needs delivered but not a community that celebrates her is a powerful reflection and summary of the view of students in this study on

the role of CSU in meeting their needs. The assertion, echoed by many CSU participants, is that the culture is not affirming and often quite hostile.

In such a context, resident directors, faculty, staff in Student Life, and academic advisors take on great importance for students. One student shared that their faculty member “[created] one of the few [spaces] on campus that I could just be a total mess and it be ok.” Another student shared that the staff in the CSDI helped to “keep them” at CSU, highlighting the importance of student-faculty interactions to retention of students in marginalized communities. Indeed, all CSU study participants referenced such interactions with faculty and staff as integral to staying in college.

A similar pattern emerges in CSU study participants’ discussions of interactions with students and student groups. The community that came to be clearly important at CSU for these students were individuals who were “safe,” “affirming,” and “caring” for them as LGBTQ+ students. The idea of care was a universal need connected to the students. Bob spoke to this when talking about interactions and the way his community helped to make through them.

I was at work and these like bro dudes came in. They made me uncomfortable and were bigger than me. I remember thinking about the worst that could happen as a trans person. Nothing happened, but after work, I went to my friend’s dorm room and just cried. I hated every part of it and like there’s this weird thing where knowing I had people I could talk to who would just get it felt good.

Bob’s comment speaks to the value of community in environments that marginalize LGBTQ+ students. Similarly, another student discussed the way that their friends in the gaming club helped them to “escape” reminders of the campus and culture. A different student talked about a movie night they host each week where folks can just come and hang out and that they are all

able to just “exist.” In an unfriendly campus environment, a student’s social networks provide respite, well-being, and affirmation, all of which are important to belonging. One student spoke to their experience building community in CSDI or in Spectrum as lifesaving:

My friends are the only reason I stay here. I found some supportive professors, I have found some cool people, but like they save me. I was walking back from uptown and someone yelled Dyke at me. I have had guys in [a local bar] see me with my girlfriend and say I haven’t found the right dude. I know there are tons of spaces I am not safe in here and outside of [CSU], but like with them, I am safe.

Students at CSU emphasized the protective role of their friendships, the value of those relationships, and engagement with student organizations as protective. Whether discussing community, positive experiences, or the experiences that encouraged students to persist, relationships are present in each discussion.

The value of protective relationships requires consideration of what the lack of that support looks like. Students who lack the types of connections described above are at risk, both in terms of their well-being and their likelihood of persisting at the university. Consider the experience of Blake, who stated:

I was able to explore my identity as a trans man because of the support I found at CSDI. The old staff left and then we got [Michael] and [Richard] were here they were great too. I got a binder, I cut my hair, and then now am stuck in this place. I don’t want my friends in [business school] to know I am trans. I can’t go to CSDI because people might know. So I am stuck. It feels like I had a place I was safe before, now I just want to be accepted as a man and going back to CSDI means I could be outed. It’s lonely.

Blake's fear of being othered in the broader campus community ultimately left him feeling he had no "safe place to land." His experience highlights the at times circumstantial nature of belonging. A sense of belonging can be absent in most spaces but present in another. Students can experience marginalization among some peers but integration among others. It is a real challenge for administrators and requires a review of what the opportunities we see for most students are. An approach that centers broad needs and builds individual opportunities is helpful to both meet general needs and not exclude those at the margins.

Idiosyncratic experiences, which were prominent among MPU students, were also discussed by CSU students but came up less frequently. A number of students referenced instances such as discovering a fellow queer student in class. Others referenced receiving supportive comments or connecting with others as a result of wearing LGBTQ+ stickers and pins. In addition, at CSU there was also discussion about street preachers. Students reported that three to four would be set up outside the student center. Interview data suggest that student responses to street preachers at CSU were weaker, compared to the strong counter-protest at MPU. One student's response shows a different view on a protest from what the students at MPU had shared:

I hate when those preachers come to campus. I don't need another reminder I don't belong here. I see students walk by and just wonder like what it is like for it to just not matter. They can probably go through a whole week with ever feeling like they are an outsider. I am an outsider every day and those people just represent that.

The contrasts in student responses at MPU and CSU paint a different picture of two different climates for belonging. The counter-protest at MPU, in which students rejected the preacher's anti-LGBTQ+ values, affirmed a sense of belonging for study participants. At CSU, the lack of

response contributed to sense of marginalization and a lack of concern. One CSU student sarcastically referred to the preachers as an embodiment of a university catchphrase, “Cared For & Welcome” used by the university to illicit positive feelings. The student shared that marginalized groups sometimes use that phrase to point out the way their experience of the idyllic environment was “different.” Bringing together the experiences is an important way to conclude this chapter.

In conclusion, while students at both MPU and CSU relied on relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and organizations to build belonging, the broader campus climates shaped those experiences differently. At MPU, belonging was reinforced by a generally affirming and welcoming culture, whereas at CSU it was found in smaller, protective pockets within an overall hostile environment. In both cases, students’ sense of belonging was rooted less in institutional structures and more in the affirming interactions that created spaces of acceptance. These findings point to the critical role of campus climate in shaping belonging and preview Chapter 5, which explores the broader implications of this study for policy, practice, and future research.

### **The Intersections of the Environments**

In the preceding sections, the intersection of environments within campus ecology and their impact on sense of belonging was discussed by each environment. That is an artificial separation that is helpful for discussion. Separating elements of environment when they intersect and compound on each other helps us to consider various mechanisms and actions to influence change or provide support. In fact, the rich data in the socially constructed environment section came from mostly responses to other questions. When discussing the physical or human

aggregate environment, students struggled to separate the individual concepts or environments from the integrated experience they had. As an example, a trans student who is involved in clubs, lives on campus, and can't find a bathroom within a ten-minute walk from their classes is existing in all the environments in one moment.

There are also crucial questions raised that this study addresses but doesn't answer. For instance, how do we make sense of the different reasons that a relationship with a faculty/staff member foster belonging? At MPU, the relationships affirmed beliefs about culture while at CSU the relationships were viewed as a critical lifeline to persistence. The distinction in reasoning helps to understand how different campus types can leverage human capital to support students when policies and laws restrict services. At a campus like CSU, does the number of supportive faculty/staff provide a barrier to ensure belonging can occur in an environment students report as hostile? Can an institution like MPU reallocate resources into different supports for students if the overall culture affirms LGBTRQ+ collegians? These are all important question to reconcile and explore in future research. However, the focus of this study provided data to guide a discussion on two cases to explore how campus ecology and institutional context influences belong for LGBTQ+ collegians. As we look at the data, it is then critical to discuss the themes and discuss how these findings can be used by administrators and leaders to support LGBTQ+ collegians.

## Chapter 5

### Lessons for the Profession

*“All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.”*

Harvey Milk

This study was organized around two core questions: How does campus ecology influence LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging? And how does institutional context influence LGBTQ+ students' experience of space and the development of a sense of belonging? To summarize the findings, it is first important to recall the larger context in which they unfold. Universities are important sites of development for all students. Yet LGBTQ+ students continue to encounter negative climates and experiences (Garvey, et al., 2017; Garvey, et al., 2018), and the absence of belonging remains a leading factor in student departure (Weber, 2022). Prior research has explored LGBTQ+ students, belonging, and campus ecology, but typically in isolation, for example, studies of physical environments (Harrington 2014; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021) or surveys of campus climate (Rankin, 2003; Gusa, 2010, Peter, 2021; McDougal et al., 2024). Few designs have comprehensively analyzed the relationship between all dimensions of campus ecology and belonging among LGBTQ+ students. This study addressed that gap through a comparative case study of belonging among 20 LGBTQ+ students at two universities, focusing in-depth on each dimension of campus ecology and the relationship between them. The result is a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how belonging is constructed and sustained than single-site and survey-based studies can offer.

In this chapter, I summarize the study findings in relation to the research questions, provide recommendations to relevant stakeholders, identify contributions to the existing

literature, and consider future research opportunities. The chapter is organized in five sections. First, I provide a summary of the ways in which the results inform the research questions. Second, I consider the implications of the study results for practice and policy. In particular, I discuss strategies that university leaders, policymakers, and students may consider to promote belonging. Third, I discuss how the results contribute to existing research. In section four, I suggest future directions for research on campus ecology and belonging. In the final section, I conclude the dissertation with a personal reflection on belonging among LGBTQ+ students.

### **Key Findings**

In this section I summarize the core patterns that inform the research questions that motivate this study. In particular, I consider three core themes: the influence of each campus environment on belonging, the interrelationships between environments, and the role of institutional context. The first two themes concern the overall relationship between campus ecology and belonging (research question one). The third theme addresses the role of institutional context (research question two).

#### **Belonging Across Campus Environments**

The participants in this study shared stories of beautiful interactions, support, and some heartbreaking rejections within the campus ecology of their universities. The findings demonstrate the various ways that campus ecology influences LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging. The environments are viewed individually for analysis, but the reality is that students do not experience them in isolation. The richest data around the socially constructed environment came from responses to questions about the physical and human aggregate environment. These systems function as overlapping, intersecting, and impactful influences on how students connect,

engage, and navigate their campuses. The students also shared their perceptions that when belonging is experienced, they feel safe, valued, and able to authentically exist as a full person. The physical environment communicated institutional values through the existence of LGBTQ+ centers and inclusive restrooms. The human aggregate environment showcases the identity of campus and the student body as a representation of culture and norms. The organizational environment has a direct impact on whether students feel welcomed navigating resources, policies, and compliance with laws. The socially constructed environment captures the way that students find places of affirmation, rejection, and people either affirm or diminish LGBTQ+ students.

The accounts of students at MPU and CSU reveal both shared and distinctive experiences on campus. MPU students recounted alignment across environments and generally positive contributions to belonging as a result of the diverse student body, campus culture, policies, investment in support programs, and the support of faculty, staff, and peers. At CSU, certain features of the institution negatively affected belonging across both the human aggregate and organizational environments, leading students to rely on specific spaces and subgroups for a sense of belonging within a broader climate that often left them feeling unwelcome, unsafe, or unseen. These findings demonstrate that elements of campus ecology are fluid, both in individual experiences and within the political context of a given moment. A student can feel a sense of belonging in a club or organization; however, they can still experience exclusion within other campus environments. This suggests that institutions should pursue intersectional and systemic efforts that support students across multiple environments and within the campus community. The following discussion examines the ways each environment impacted LGBTQ+ collegians’

sense of belonging. In aggregate, the results also highlight the ways that these interactions can reinforce, counteract, or compound on each other.

### ***Physical***

For participants in this study, the physical environment had the lowest relevance to belonging. Nevertheless, there are three key ways the physical environment impacted belonging. First, the physical environment functioned as the facilitator of the three other environments. Interactions in the Student Center, classrooms, or a faculty office centered engagement, rather than the physical space or its design. Second, the objective elements (a LGBTQ+ center or gender-inclusive restroom) and the symbolic elements (the way physical spaces take on meaning like a business school that is viewed as unwelcoming) of the physical environment have meaning. Participants at MPU highlighted visible diversity in physical spaces like classrooms and buildings to the quad and Gender & Sexuality Center as physical representations of inclusion. Third, the physical environment can undermine belonging. The CSU participants, for example, described the Business School as a physical space where queer and trans students felt especially unwelcome, and the lack of accessible inclusive restrooms signaled to students their basic needs weren't a priority in the physical space. Overall, the results indicate that although the physical environment may not drive belonging, it plays a role where affirmations or exclusion can be experienced as a secondary layer of support.

### ***Human Aggregate***

The human aggregate environment, which I have referred to as “campus community”, represents the demographics, attitudes, and collective characteristics of members of the campus. There are three ways that the human aggregate environment influences sense of belonging among study participants. First, an outwardly diverse community, such as the one described by

MPU participants, fosters belonging. Visible representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in roles, such as orientation leaders and resident assistants, encourages belonging by signaling to students that it is safe to authentically present their whole selves. Second, when rigid social norms exist, as described at CSU, belonging is undermined. The perception of an exclusionary and hostile environment grounded in heteronormative culture resulted in feelings of otherness and hypervisibility. The homogenous nature of the dominant culture translated into microaggressions, misgendering, and silencing LGBTQ+ students' identities. Finally, careful consideration of institutional signals is critical, as they can either reinforce or disrupt students' perceptions of the campus community and their place within it. At MPU, admission brochures highlight a diverse student body in alignment with what students see on campus. At CSU, the brochures highlighting diversity contrast with the presentation of a welcoming experience based on the participants discussions within the human aggregate environment.

To discuss the tension between espoused and enacted values, it is important to acknowledge the perceived disconnect between participants' feelings and what others might assert as what is occurring. Neither the institutions nor their representatives had an opportunity to respond to these critiques. This study centers on the lived experiences and truths for the participants. It is important to acknowledge that students with different or even the same identities may perceive the human aggregate environment or campus culture differently. However, this does not diminish the importance of the perspectives shared. While the feelings and experiences of these participants are unique to them, a persistent pattern emerges across the LGBTQ+ community at CSU, reflecting a shared level of challenge. When faced with data that creates opposing or disparate narratives, the experiences of individuals can serve as a lens for understanding experience in the context of other data. This disconnect reinforces that the

reported impact of an environment is a reminder that elements of campuses can signal to students the espoused and enacted values of a campus.

### ***The Organizational Environment***

The organizational environment, the policies, decisions, resource allocations, and institutional structures of a university, directly impacts LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging. One overarching finding is that the impact of the organizational environment on belonging depends in part on identity. Most MPU participants saw the organizational environment as irrelevant to campus life, but transgender and gender-nonconforming students identified specific challenges related to updating names, gendered spaces (i.e., residence halls and restrooms), and the need to disclose their transgender status to participate in programs. Second, the organizational environment is one of the key dimensions of campus ecology that undermines belonging. This was evident at CSU where institutional compliance with state policy, poor communication and processes with impacted students, and elimination of supports created a deep sense of betrayal for students. The discussion of "complicit compliance" came from a perception of participants that the institution was making organizational decisions to comply with state laws and failed to identify or advocate for support of LGBTQ+ collegians.

Finally, actions within the organizational environment can either affirm concern or signal a lack of care for LGBTQ+ collegians. Name changes, housing, healthcare, restroom access, and DEI funding are not neutral administrative or policy decisions; they serve as communications from the organizational environment to students who are impacted by them. When organizational structures affirm LGBTQ+ students' identities, they become sources of support and belonging. When they choose or are forced to dismantle supports, that has a negative impact on the LGBTQ+ students. Even when institutions are forced to comply, the care and

intentionality of those changes are critical. As the data from CSU suggests, the loss of organizational protections can contribute to significant consequences for LGBTQ+ collegians navigating campus environments.

### ***Socially Constructed***

The socially constructed environment reflects the lived experiences and engagement on campus in community. This includes the daily interactions, relationships, culture in organizations, interactions in the classroom, with staff, faculty, and administrators as elements that influence sense of belonging. This environment had the most outsized contribution to belonging which provided two insights and one key finding.

First, the results demonstrate that affirming relationships strengthen belonging for students at MPU. Faculty modeled inclusion in academic spaces. Relationships with peers also played a profound role in shaping belonging at MPU, evident in language like “family,” “my people,” and “community” that students used to describe the friendships and chosen families on campus. The deep power in these interactions came from being able to exist authentically as a person and be accepted. Normalization of LGBTQ+ identities allowed students to develop a deep sense of belonging through their experience of care and affirmation. Even informal moments such as a protest that countered anti-LGBTQ+ demonstrators left LGBTQ+ students feeling affirmed by the community’s rejection of those harmful ideas. This experience reinforced the message that LGBTQ+ students were not isolated in their advocacy, but rather supported by a broader community committed to inclusion.

A second insight, evident in the narratives of CSU participants, is that supportive relationships provide essential buffers against the unwelcoming environment reported by participants. At CSU, belonging in the socially constructed environment occurred within the

context of a broader hostile campus culture. In fact, this environment had an outsized influence and role as faculty, staff, and community created spaces where students could reliably turn for support in navigating an otherwise exclusionary culture. The care and support of faculty and staff were often described as lifesaving, particularly with staff in the LGBTQ+ center, advising, and residence life. These relations became buffers to the broader rejection of the community, these students reported. Relationships with other students who were affirming were equally protective and became communities wherein they could exist fully and feel affirmed.

A final and important consideration is that the absence of affirmative experiences underscores how fragile and context-dependent a sense of belonging can be. Take, for example, the street preachers who appeared on both campuses. At MPU, their presence sparked a moment of communal solidarity. In contrast, CSU students described similar incidents as deeply isolating which reinforces their outsider status within the campus and the broader political climate of the state. These tensions at CSU further illustrate that belonging is especially vulnerable in environments that are less welcoming and affirming. In such contexts, affirming relationships become vital to belonging.

At both campuses, the socially constructed environment reveals that LGBTQ+ students' sense of belong is shaped by multiple factors. Faculty, staff, and students can either affirm or reject students' identities through everyday interactions. When the physical, human aggregate or organizational environments fail to foster inclusion, relationships and community structures become essential sources of support critical to sustaining LGBTQ+ students' academic success and overall well-being. This doesn't negate the focus on belonging. On the contrary, it highlights the urgency of finding community and connection especially in spaces where we feel unwelcome.

## **Belonging in Individual and Institutional Ways**

The preceding discussion of campus environments begins to answer research question 1 by illustrating the ways dimensions of campus ecology affirm or undermine students' sense of belonging. Belonging is not experienced only through these broad ecological categories. Instead, belonging is built and threatened through both the cumulative impact of institutional structures and the accumulation of everyday interactions. In this way, campus ecology influences belonging at multiple scales: the big, systemic messages communicated through policies, spaces, and cultures, and the small, relational acts that affirm or reject students in their daily lives. The following section explores this layered reality, demonstrating how LGBTQ+ collegians experience belonging in both big and small ways across their campuses. The participants' experience in this study suggests that belonging is not a singular, all-or-nothing state. Rather, it is an accumulation of both individual interactions (small moments) and (big structures) with each influencing students' educational experiences, identity development, mental health, and persistence in college. The various influences of environments show up and impact students. Belonging, whether experience in small, individual ways or through broader institutional structures, should be understood as part of a shared conversation. While each form of belonging can exist independently of the other, the absence of belonging in both spaces significantly heightens threats to persistence (Tinto 2017; Halberstam, 2011; Seidman 2012). This discussion helps to further address how campus ecology deepens are understanding of sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians.

### ***Small Moments: The Everyday Acts That Build or Undermine Belonging***

For many participants, belonging was fostered through what might seem like minor or fleeting affirmations: a faculty member using correct pronouns; a compliment on a LGBTQ+

pin; a residence hall staff member creating space for a difficult conversation. These everyday acts may seem insignificant, but for LGBTQ+ collegians, these moments accumulate to create a sense of belonging.

At MPU, these interactions occurred in a broader culture of inclusion, allowing students to experience belonging not as something they had to seek out, but as a part of their experience. At CSU, where the broader campus climate was less affirming, these small moments were not small in their impact. Faculty, staff, and peers who created spaces of care and a reprieve from a larger institutional culture that was indifferent, hostile, or both. A small gesture like a faculty member checking in with a student after class became profoundly meaningful. For some participants, these affirming relationships were not only affirming but essential. While small moments can be powerful, the data also underscores that belonging is deeply shaped by broader institutional structures.

### ***Big Structures: How Policies and Institutional Cultures Shape Belonging at Scale***

Organizational policies, campus demographics, state legislation, and institutional responses to political actions create the scaffolding which LGBTQ+ students navigate every day on campus. MPU's alignment of inclusive policies, a visibly diverse student body, and supportive faculty & staff fostered an ecosystem where LGBTQ+ students experience broad affirmations of belong. The experience was not restricted to isolated relationships but was embedded into the institution's fabric. Students could enter classrooms, residence halls, student centers, and leadership roles knowing that their identities were not only permitted but embraced. That did not mean participants were without negative experiences, but it did demonstrate the power of resilience in belonging when the system and structure support it.

The experience of CSU students demonstrates the threat that an absence of systemic supports poses to belonging. State laws restricting restroom access, dismantling DEI efforts, and enforcing gendered policies actively signaled to LGBTQ+ students that their identities were unwelcome. Participants repeatedly described a sense of *institutional betrayal*, where compliance with discriminatory laws eroded trust in institutional leadership. The policy changes at CSU had immediate and deeply personal consequences. In this context, the absence of systems to support belonging like a dedicated resource center was not simply about comfort or preference, but about the loss of a support for the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ collegians. The way policies are designed, enacted, and communicated influences whether students feel they belong within the university, and this sense of belonging is a critical factor in student well-being and persistence.

### ***The Cumulative Impact: Layering Small and Big Belonging Experiences***

In multiple areas of this dissertation, I have separated out dimensions of campus ecology to then ultimately view them in a unified frame. This is an important step towards understanding the individual influences and the overall impact. For instance, existing literature and personal experience led me to anticipate that the physical environment is strongly related to sense of belonging. This study challenges that idea and emphasizes LGBTQ+ collegians' needs in other environments. The study emphasized that spaces on campus, the people who are there and how they respond, institutional policies, and climate all can contribute to belonging.

The findings illustrate that LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging is shaped at the intersection of individual experience and institutional action across the four environments. In this study, MPU offers a view that alignment across multiple environments can foster resilient, affirming environments for LGBTQ+ students. In contrast, CSU demonstrates the fragility of

belonging when students must rely almost entirely on individual relationships to counteract systemic exclusion. While the power of connections in the socially constructed environment support students, they do not protect against threats to belonging when exclusionary institutional policies and hostile campus climates exist.

### **Institutional Context Can Impact Belonging**

Whereas research question one concerned the overarching relationship between campus ecology and belonging among LGBTQ+ students, research question two considers the role of institutional context. One of the clearest themes emerging from this study is that institutional context impacted LGBTQ+ students' experiences of belonging. Even when students share similar identities, the culture, policies, political landscape, and demographic makeup of their specific institution create vastly different environments that uniquely influence the nature of belonging. The contrasting experiences at MPU and CSU illustrate how institutional context serves as both a backdrop and an active agent in LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging.

### **MPU: An Affirming Institutional Context**

The institutional context of MPU functioned as an active force in cultivating belonging. The diversity of the student population across race, gender, sexuality, and cultural expression was not simply performative; it was perceived by students as authentic and deeply embedded into campus life. Students consistently described MPU as a place where “everyone fits”, not because identity markers are irrelevant, but because difference is normalized and a part of everyday campus interactions. LGBTQ+ students saw themselves represented in leadership roles, campus programming, and in other students from their first moments on campus. This institutional context, where visible diversity was aligned with inclusive policies and practices, allowed students to experience belonging as both personal and systemic. Even students who had

not directly engaged with the LGBTQ+ center or specific support services reported feeling affirmed simply by knowing these spaces existed. The organizational context at MPU where policies, programs, and leadership visibly supported LGBTQ+ students contributed to belonging through reinforcement of the message that their presence was valued. However, even in this supportive context, nuances of marginalization still emerged, particularly for students navigating intersections of identity (e.g., commuter status, economic limitations, or gender identity). These instances highlight that while institutional context can foster strong systemic belonging, individual experiences still require attention to the layered complexities of identity and access.

### **CSU: A Hostile and Politicized Institutional Context**

At CSU, institutional context operated as a persistent force that undermined belonging for LGBTQ+ students. While students found affirmation in certain spaces, they described the institution's dominant culture as deeply exclusionary, shaped by whiteness, affluence, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity. The broader state-level political environment compounded these dynamics, as recent legislation mandated the dismantling of DEI efforts, restricted restroom access, and forced the closure of the campus LGBTQ+ center. Participants repeatedly voiced frustration that university leadership chose compliance over resistance, communicating that LGBTQ+ students' safety and dignity were not priorities. The policies were not abstract; they were felt intimately in the daily life of students whether it was students navigating limited restroom access, fears of outing themselves in classes, or lost safe spaces that had previously anchored their sense of belonging. While affirming communities served as lifelines, they were insufficient to overcome the broader institutional culture. While the effects of recently enacted laws on affirming spaces are not yet known, this study suggests they may have a negative impact on students' belonging.

## **Institutional Context as Amplifier or Barrier**

When viewed together, these contrasting cases suggest that institutional context functions as both an amplifier and a buffer for LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging. At MPU, institutional context amplified belonging by embedding inclusion into both policy and culture, allowing everyday interactions to feel affirming without constant vigilance. At CSU, the absence of systemic belonging forced students to rely on individual relationships as buffers against an unsupportive institutional context. Even with strong individual connections, the persistent background of exclusionary culture and policy created a climate where belonging was tenuous and circumstantial. This study suggests that belonging is shaped by both the direct experience of students and the broader context of the campus. The alignment, or lack thereof, of values, policies, experiences, and cultural norms contributed to different lived experiences for the participants. While institutions are not able to simply change culture or relocate their campus, belonging requires intentional, sustained alignment across campus. This included leadership commitments to advocacy, campus design, classroom culture, and opportunities for engagement. Without this integrated support, belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians depend on fragile and changing elements.

## **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings from this study underscore the profound and multifaceted ways that campus ecology can impact LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging. While individual relationships, supportive spaces, and affirming faculty can serve as powerful sources of resilience and support, these cannot compensate fully for negative experiences in the physical, human aggregate or organizational environment. The contrast between MPU and CSU demonstrates that belonging is

not accidental, it is fostered and strengthened through an alignment of institutional culture, policies, leadership actions, and campus climate. As institutions of higher education increasingly face political, legal, and cultural challenges related to inclusion, the experience of LGBTQ+ students' needs is the focus. Belonging is not simply a matter of comfort; for many LGBTQ+ collegians, it is a determinant of academic persistence, mental health, and overall well-being (Evans et al., 2017; Intrabartola, 2017; Kortegast, 2017; Sadowski, 2017; Levenson, 2023). Systemic supports or the lack thereof can either nurture a sense of community or intensify the effects of marginalization. Supporting LGBTQ+ collegians and all students across every environment of campus ecology matters. Fostering a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ students is not only a matter of individual well-being but a powerful lever for student success, retention, and persistence (Sanlo, 2004; Abes et al., 2019; Harper & Quaye, 2009). The recommendations that follow are offered for three distinct but interconnected audiences, which are college and university administrators, policymakers and legislators, and LGBTQ+ collegians. Each set of recommendations draws directly from the voices of students in this study, honoring their lived experiences and providing actionable strategies to strengthen belonging and support for LGBTQ+ collegians.

### **Practical Implications for Universities**

The first recommendation is to prioritize visible recognition of identity as possible. Ideally, that means maintaining LGBTQ+ centers, gender-inclusive restrooms, and programs that are targeted at supporting LGBTQ+ students. Where laws restrict such efforts, institutions can still demonstrate care through compliant measures. Many institutions have, for instance, changed Lavender Graduations to Lavender Celebrations or emphasized on flyers that a program targeted

to provide support LGBTQ+ students are open to all. The results of this study suggest that any efforts to maintain these programs would pay dividends in both student support and retention.

The second recommendation is to prioritize understanding and the creation of socially constructed and human aggregate environments grounded in care, support, and connection. Students shared moments of a staff member checking in or a professor rebuffing hateful comments, which had a direct and positive impact on their sense of belonging. Universities can support students from marginalized backgrounds while complying with state and federal laws. Tangible actions include incorporating skill-building for fostering student relationships into new staff and faculty orientation and conducting routine assessments of campus climate across all areas. Creating practices that are viewpoint-neutral, and which provide additional support can comply with both policies while centering care for those at the margins. Additionally, this benefits all students regardless of their identity. Investing in training to cultivate student care, enable difficult dialogues, and build cultural competency is essential. The third recommendation focuses on communications related to institutional policy. At a campus like CSU, where restrictions on bathroom usage or eliminations of support offices occur, how messages are shared can further negatively impact students' sense of belonging. The students reflected on feelings of betrayal and a lack of engagement from senior leadership. Leaders should engage in direct communication with marginalized students and attend events hosted by student organizations supporting these communities just as they would for any student population, and consider strategies to minimize harm whenever possible. Two examples in this area would be ensuring that the institutional leadership is present at events like Lavender Graduation or National Coming Out Day.

Finally, administrators must reckon with the impact of the human aggregate environment. Indeed, they are ideally positioned to do so. The culture of our campuses matters, and this study points to the significant differences that can arise for LGBTQ+ students depending on the university they attend. At MPU, students feel engaged and connected. At CSU, they feel isolated and othered. These contrasting narratives of the human aggregate environment suggest that understanding, reviewing, and assessing what types of students a campus admits is important to belonging. It also does not need to occur to the detriment of any majority population. Thoughtfully reflecting on whose experiences on campus fall 'outside the norms' is critical for fostering not just isolated pockets of affirming spaces, but a campus ecology that is genuinely welcoming, affirming, and caring for all students, including LGBTQ+ students. If LGBTQ+ students are crying out for help, leaders have an ethical and moral obligation to assist and support them. In my own case, I show up for all students, some who believe that I am deserving of less rights as a queer person. Our institutions have a responsibility to serve all students so that the conservative, the queer, the black, the neurodivergent, and any other marginalized student are supported.

### **Policy Implications**

Policymakers and legislators have always been critical partners in campus life. The power they hold over the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ students is palpable in this moment in our history. Their ability to shape organizations and even program offerings is undeniable. A recent example occurred two years ago when the state of Utah banned gender-affirming care. A two-year study of the impacts found that gender-affirming care provided positive mental health and social outcomes for transgender youth (Anderson, 2025). The findings

were in contrast to claims that gender-affirming care was harming youth when they enacted the ban. Consideration of equity, support, and safety should occur to provide support for LGBTQ+ students who live and work in our states. In addition to financial and retention considerations, the findings of this study demonstrate that restrictive policies directly harm student mental health, erode trust in institutions, compromise safety, and undermine students' dignity. These consequences are deeply personal and systemic, extending far beyond questions of persistence. Policymakers should weigh not only fiscal impacts but also the ethical and social costs of policies that marginalize LGBTQ+ collegians.

The first recommendation is to preserve and protect campus services dedicated to LGBTQ+ students. There are financial benefits to retaining these students, which is critical given the current discourse on limiting state and federal support for higher education. Resource centers, gender-inclusive housing, and other programs are critical elements of the student success infrastructure. Taking action to restrict or eliminate these supports negatively impact belonging, persistence, and mental health of LGBTQ+ students. This study affirmed the role of these supports and critical support they provide in spaces that are hostile or unwelcoming.

Second, restrictions on gender-inclusive restrooms is an area that should be addressed through policy. The results reveal how transgender and non-binary students often face harassment, surveillance, and fear for their safety to use a restroom. Prioritizing safety and autonomy are key. Considering the support of increased gender-inclusive or single stall restrooms in policy would have a positive impact and mitigate any unsubstantiated concerns individuals have.

The final recommendation is to consider and understand the implications of eliminating programs centered on equity and inclusion for student persistence and enrollment. The students

at CSU and MPU both articulated the deep value that spaces and programs have for them. The erasure of these spaces and programs removes support and safety nets for students, which is especially consequential at campuses that are less affirming. These actions sending a direct message to LGBTQ+ students that their identities are not valued or supported. As an alternative, creating regulations around the inclusion of all students in programs is an alternative to eliminating these critical supports. Additionally, I would encourage policymakers to engage with those impacted by these decisions to better understand the impact. A colleague at CSU has shared that six queer students have decided not to enroll due to these changes. That is a financial loss of over \$816,000<sup>i</sup>. Investing in marginalized students fosters an inclusive environment that benefits every student and strengthens the institution as a whole. The focus should be on evidence-based research, the success of all students, and policies should support higher education as a transformative and inclusive space to meet the needs of all populations.

### **Practical Considerations for LGBTQ+ Collegians**

The participants in this study gave their time, experiences, and pain to help inform how colleges and universities can support them. The insights from them provide recommendations and considerations for other LGBTQ+ college students. The experience of navigating college as an LGBTQ+ student is both enriching and challenging. The ability of LGBTQ+ students to cultivate belonging in even unwelcoming environments is worth celebrating. Although institutions, policies, and environments shape student life in many ways, LGBTQ+ students often rely on strategies that build community, affirm their identities, and foster belonging.

The first recommendation is LGBTQ+ students should strive to find community. This may be in the form of the LGBTQ+ center, student organizations, a learning community, or an

organization that has nothing to do with your identity but affirms who you are as a whole person. Students in this student found LGBTQ+ resource centers, student organizations, and identity-based living communities often serve as safe and supportive spaces. In addition, many students found affirmation in areas of campus that had nothing to do with their identity, both through other organizations or activities and community spaces around campus.

The second recommendation is to identify faculty, staff, and administrators who support and affirm LGBTQ+ collegians. This can be through advisors of student organizations, faculty in classes, and administrators. Additionally, staff in residence halls, student unions, and more will be there. Everyone will not be affirming, but as evidenced by these participants, students can find people who will show up for them. Students can also reach out to faculty, advisors, or staff who show support through “safe zone” stickers on their door who make affirming comments.

The third recommendation is to support students in building capacity and resilience to navigate challenges. Cultivating self-care, investing in their mental and physical health, and creating healthy habits are critical. The journey can be challenging, but having a strong approach to care goes a long way. Maybe that’s a class at the recreation center, engaging with peer support groups or individual counseling, or something more creative. LGBTQ+ students need people and need to care for themselves.

Finally, administrators should acknowledge and affirm for students that they are worthy, matter, their identity is valid, and no one can take that from them. The political and climate of this moment is challenging for queer and trans\* folks but validating students’ identity and encouraging them to support their community and to also take a step back to care for themselves. There are folks across this world whose journeys are different but have walked along the road

they are now. Whether it's on campus or in the community or 1,000 miles away, a LGBTQ+ community is out there ready to welcome them.

### **Contributions to Research**

This study offers several important contributions to the literature on LGBTQ+ collegians, campus ecology, and sense of belonging. First, while prior research has established the importance of belonging for student success and persistence, this study uniquely situates LGBTQ+ students' experiences within the comprehensive framework of campus ecology, providing a view into how belonging is constructed and negotiated across varying campus environments. This contribution is important to understanding how to construct systems to support LGBTQ+ students. Denton (2020) asserts that “universities cannot retain students not framed as being in them” (p.550). This study provides evidence that students' belief about their place and value is connected to how they are welcomed within the environment.

Second, this research extends the theoretical framing of belonging by highlighting its fluid, contingent, and localized nature. While much of the existing literature conceptualizes belonging as a general sense of mattering within the institution (Strayhorn, 2018), this study demonstrates that for LGBTQ+ students, belonging often exists within smaller, highly specific sub-environments. Students at CSU often reported lacking a global sense of belonging to the institution but described intense belonging within individual offices, centers, or affinity spaces. In contrast, students at MPU described a more pervasive sense of belonging that extended across the entire campus environment. This localized and situated sense of belonging underscores the importance of micro-climates and specific affirming spaces, extending prior work by recognizing that belonging is not universally experienced even within the same campus.

Third, this study contributes to the understanding of campus ecology by applying Strange and Banning's (2001) four environments at two research sites. The data provides rich insights into how these environments individually and collectively shape LGBTQ+ students' experiences.

Specifically:

- The physical environment plays a dual role: as both a site of interaction and a symbolic representation of institutional values. The presence of LGBTQ+ centers, gender-inclusive restrooms, and visible affirming spaces not only provided practical resources but also signaled institutional commitment to inclusion.
- The human aggregate environment, encompassing the demographics and prevailing campus culture, emerged as particularly influential. MPU's diverse and inclusive student body fostered a sense of collective belonging, while CSU's more homogeneous and heteronormative culture contributed to feelings of isolation among LGBTQ+ students.
- The organizational environment highlighted how institutional policies directly impact students' navigation of belonging. For example, state-level legislation at CSU that led to defunding LGBTQ+ centers had significant negative repercussions on students' sense of safety and inclusion.
- The socially constructed environment demonstrated how everyday interactions, both affirming and marginalizing, deeply influence students' lived experiences of belonging.

The study thus expands the ecological framework by illustrating the interdependence of these environments. Changes in one domain, such as organizational policy, reverberating across physical space, social interaction, and perceptions of climate. This multi-layered analysis strengthens the relevance of campus ecology as a useful model for understanding LGBTQ+ students' campus experiences, particularly in politically contested environments.

Third, the study advances understanding of intersectionality within LGBTQ+ student experiences. While much of the existing research has grouped LGBTQ+ students together, this disaggregation of experience contributes to the growing body of scholarship emphasizing the importance of identity-conscious, nuanced inquiry into queer and trans\* student lives (e.g., Nicolazzo, 2017; Jourian, 2023). Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming students described qualitatively distinct challenges and strategies for negotiating belonging compared to their cisgender peers. Transgender and nonbinary students encounter distinct challenges such as restricted bathroom access, limited availability of gender-affirming care, and institutional policies that constrain their participation in campus life that do not affect cisgender queer students to the same extent.

Fourth, the study contributes to ongoing critiques in the literature regarding the understanding and measurement of belonging. Existing scholarship frequently emphasizes the importance of belonging but lacks consensus on its precise definition or operationalization (Allen et al., 2022; Dias-Broens et al., 2024). By grounding belonging in the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ collegians and connecting it to ecological environments, this research responds directly to calls for more robust, multi-dimensional, and empirically grounded examinations of belonging that account for social identity, institutional context, and power dynamics.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The results of this study point to three specific avenues for future research: individual, institutional, and systemic. For this discussion, the individual dimension focuses on direct impacts to individuals' sense of belonging, the institutional dimension focuses on areas to

explore impacts of institutional decisions, and the system dimension focuses on the factors in the broader landscape like state and federal law.

At the individual level, future studies can apply this framework and research guide to explore the impact of campus environments on sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ collegians, other historically marginalized groups using race, ability status, gender, etc., and even the general student population. Additionally, focused studies on the impacts on subsets of the LGBTQ+ community would be insightful. For instance, in this study the experiences of cisgender and transgender/non-binary/gender non-conforming students in the organizational environment were starkly different. Additionally, future studies should explore deeper the intersection of identities. The participants in this study spoke to how different elements of their identity impacted their LGBTQ+ identity. This study intentionally did not look at a specific subgroup, but the protocol and structure could be utilized to explore various intersecting identities within the LGBTQ+ community. In practice, this could focus on research questions interrogating the intersection of race and gender identity/sexual orientation or any other minoritized or marginalized population. Finally, longitudinal studies focused on LGBTQ+ student sense of belonging, which follow individual students over time, could provide useful insights, both for outcomes such as retention. Such studies should consider how belonging changes over time, what factors sustain belonging and consider any key points of focused support for students from orientation to graduation.

At the institutional level, future studies comparing and contrasting institutions that are more alike and studies that look at multiple institutions within a category could provide additional insights. The present study employed a comparative case study focusing on institutions that are dissimilar. Another fruitful approach would entail comparing belonging at institutions that resemble one another. For example, MPU is a large urban public research

institution where the majority of students commute. Comparing MPU to other urban commuter campuses may provide insights on the unique needs and opportunities to cultivate belonging at a commuter campus. Finally, students described institutional betrayal at CSU and viewed leadership as complicit in enforcing these policies. Comparing how leaders navigate similar challenges across institutions in the same state could yield invaluable insights into student support during difficult moments. Focused attention on crisis communication, legal compliance, and ethical leadership would highlight differences in actions and perceptions. Such insights could also guide more effective approaches in the future.

Finally, a focused look at the way that federal and state policies impact the climate and experiences of LGBTQ+ students remains an important avenue for future research. The CSU students believe that as laws and policies continue to evolve, exploration of the impact is both timely and critical. Additionally, comparative studies across states with different political climates and legislative frameworks related to support for marginalized students could provide a broader understanding of the impact of policy on belonging. Additionally, this study emphasized the role of faculty and staff allies as a protective factor for LGBTQ+ student belonging and persistence as state and federal policies shift to limit resources on campus. Exploring this would provide critical insights to help manage compliance with new policies and laws while centering student care.

### **Final Reflection**

The twenty participants in this study shared their experiences to help explore this topic. It is critical that we continue to center and consider the needs of LGBTQ+ collegians. In fact, I would argue, it is more important than ever. States are implementing laws that limit access to

gender-affirming care, eliminating offices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. The federal government has ended the 988 LGBTQ+ suicide hotline. Such cuts do not represent the entirety of harmful actions taken toward this community. There are real-world impacts to decisions made in boardrooms, state houses, and in Washington D.C. To support that point, consider statistics from The Trevor Project's 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People are included below (Nath, et al., 2024):

- 39% of LGBTQ+ youth considered attempting suicide, which included 44% of trans and nonbinary youth.
  - LGBTQ+ youth of color reported higher rates than their white peers.
- 49% of LGBTQ+ youth from 13-17 experienced bullying.
  - These students reported higher rates of attempting suicide than those who weren't bullied.
- 50% of LGBTQ+ youth who wanted mental health care were unable to access it.
- 90% of LGBTQ+ youth said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics.
- 12% of LGBTQ+ youth attempted suicide in the past year.

In 2024, before attacks on the LGBTQ+ radically increased, more than 1 in 10 LGBTQ+ youth attempted suicide. The Human Rights Campaign, for which I proudly serve as a member of the Board of Governors, has declared a state of emergency for LGBTQ+ individuals in America. The consequences of anti-LGBTQ+ policies will be harmful. Restricting gender affirming care harms transgender youth. Eliminating centers focused on supporting those most marginalized people leave people without a safe place to land on some campuses. I came to this

project with genuine curiosity about what I would learn. I am walking away with deep reverence for the students who shared their stories and a sadness for the state of our current affairs. I think we should talk about the way that we have fostered an us versus them mentality. I think we should see the negative impacts of our current political climate and demand better. I think we should show up and show care for others.

I started this work with a quote from Bayard Rustin. He was a trailblazer and continued to fight even when he had to take a backseat to live his truth as a black queer man. In Atlanta, on MLK Jr. Day, there is a “Rustin/Lorde” breakfast that celebrates and centers the labor, love, and impact of black LGBTQ+ organizers and activists. It feels appropriate to end the words of Audre Lorde who points out, “My silence had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.” I am a white queer able-bodied man who earns in the top 25% percentile in our nation. If you are reading this, I am also the recipient of a doctoral degree from Georgia State University, which has transformed student success and transformed my life. I have privileges that shape my world and how I navigate it. I also have a responsibility to my beloved LGBTQ+ community. This work is part of making good on my commitment and will be part of the continual fight for a world and nation where queer folks don’t fear for their rights, where trans\* folks, especially trans black women, are not murdered for living their truth, and where the LGBTQ+ youth suicide rate is not more than double of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

## References

- Abes, E. S., Jones, S. R., and D-L Stewart. (2019). *Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks*: Vol. First edition. Stylus Publishing.
- Ahmadi, Y.S.A., Nezhad. R.R., and Rostami, H.R.G. (2022). Investigating the Role of Physical and Digital Environment on Creating Active School with Respect to the Mediating Role of Social Environment. *Pamuk kale Journal of Sport Sciences*, 13(2), 83–100.
- Alcantar, C. M., Kim, V., Hafoka, 'Inoke, & Teranishi, R. T. (2022). Space and place at Asian American and Pacific Islander–serving community colleges: The geography of campus student support for Asian American and Pacific Islander students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(2), 178–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000281>
- Alexander, C. (1979). *The timeless way of building*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian journal of psychology*, 73(1), 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
- Alonso, J. (2024a, April). *UT Austin, closes former DEI division, lays off employees*. Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/04/04/ut-austin-closes-former-dei-division-lays-employees>

- Anderson, E. (2025, May 22). *Utah lawmakers' own study found gender-affirming care benefits trans youth. will they lift the treatment ban?* The Salt Lake Tribune.  
<https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2025/05/22/utah-lawmakers-own-study-found/>
- Astin, A. W. (1968). *The college environment*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Astin, A. W. (1973). The impact of dormitory living on students. *Educational Record*, 54, 204-210.
- Astin, A. W. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1977). *Four critical years*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1982). *Minorities in American higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 518-29.
- Baird, L. (1990). The undergraduate experience: Commonalities and differences among colleges. *Research in Higher Education*, 31(3), 271–278.
- Baker, V. L., and Griffin, K. a. (2010). Beyond mentoring and advising: Toward understanding the role of faculty “developers” in student success. *About Campus*, 14(6), 2–8.  
doi:10.1002/abc.20002
- Banning, J., Clemons, S., Mckelfresh, D., & Gibbs, R. (2010). Special places for students: Third place and restorative place. *College Student Journal*, 44 (4), 906- 912.

- Banning, J. H. (2012). The campus ecologist. Retrieved from <http://www.campusecologist.com>
- Barshay, J. (2018). College students are predicted to fall by more than 15% after the year 2025. The Hechinger reports. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://hechingerreport.org/college-students-predicted-to-fall-by-more-than-15-after-the-year-2025/>.
- Barnard-Brak, L., Lechtenberger, D., & Lan, W.Y. (2010). Accommodation strategies of college students with disabilities. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(2), 411-429.
- Barr, J. (2005). Disseminating Qualitative Research in Educational Settings: A Critical Introduction. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 37(1), 83–85.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students intellectual development* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2000). Interpersonal maturity: Integrating agency and communion. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41, 141–156.
- Beemyn, B. (2003). The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12(2), 205–223.
- Bingham, A. J. (2023). From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620>
- Bingham, A. J., & Witkowsky, P. (2022). Deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. In C. Vanover, P. Mihas, & J. Saldaña (Eds), *Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: After the interview*. Sage Publications.

Bloomfield, W. (2022). *A brief early history of LGBTQ studies in the United States*.

A Brief Early History of LGBTQ Studies in the United States. [https://www.campuspride.org/a-brief-early-history-of-lgbtq-studies-in-the-united-states/#: ~:text=Sparked%20by%20the%20 homophile%20movement, Stanford%2C%20 Cornell%2C%20and%20 others.](https://www.campuspride.org/a-brief-early-history-of-lgbtq-studies-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=Sparked%20by%20the%20homophile%20movement,Stanford%2C%20Cornell%2C%20and%20others.)

Boutte, V.M., Pincer, S.M., Pratt, M.W., Adams, G., BirnieLefcovitch, S., Polivy, J. and Winter, A.M.G. (2007). The importance of friends: friendship and adjustment among 1st-year university students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(6), 665-689.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407306344>

Braskamp, L.A., Trautvetter, L.C., & Ward, K. (2006). *Putting students first: How colleges develop students purposefully*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

BrckaLorenz, A., Duran, A., Fassett, K., and Palmer, D. (2021). The within-group differences in LGBTQ+ college students belongingness, institutional commitment, and outness. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(1), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000135>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1999). Environments in developmental perspective: Theoretical and operational models. In S. L. Friedman and T. D. Wachs (Eds.), *Measuring environment across the lifespan: Emerging methods and concepts*: 3–28.

Brooks, J. (2013). *Confronting Racism in Higher Education: Problems and Possibilities for Fighting Ignorance, Bigotry and Isolation*. Information Age Publishing.

- Brown, P., and Taylor, J. (2012) Sustainability in the union. *New Directions for Student Services* (137), 53-65
- Brown-Saracino, Japonica. 2018. *How Places Make Us: Novel LBQ Identities in Four Small Cities*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Burke, E. K., & Park, T. J. (2022). In search of self, belonging, and a degree: The lived experience of historically marginalized racial college commuter students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 50(3), 128–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12250>
- Cabrera, N. L., Watson, J. S., and Franklin, J. D. (2016). Racial arrested development: A critical whiteness analysis of the campus ecology. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(2), 119-134.
- Cadenas, G. A., Nienhusser, K., Sosa, R., & Moreno, O. (2024). Immigrant students mental health and intent to persist in college: The role of undocufriendly campus climate. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 30(1), 54–60.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000564>
- Cain, T. R., & Hevel, M. S. (2021). “Gay People Pay Activity Fees Too”: The Committee on Gay Education’s Pioneering Legal Victories at the University of Georgia. *Review of Higher Education*, 45(1), 61–91.
- Cairns, K. (2010). The methodological dilemma: creative, critical and collaborative approaches to qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, 23(6), 755–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2010.508475>

Campion, L.L. Leading Through the Enrollment Cliff of 2026 (Part I). *TechTrends* **64**, 542–544 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-020-00492-6>

Campos, P., Luceño, L., & Aguirre, C. (2021). Physical Spaces in Higher Education as Scenarios of Learning Innovation: Compositional and Formative Synergies among Architecture, Music, and Fashion. *European journal of investigation in health, psychology and education*, *11*(4), 1166–1180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe11040086>

Cass, V. (1979). *Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model*. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *4*, 219-235.

Casey, J. R., Supriya, K., Shaked, S., Caram, J. R., Russell, A., & Courey, A. J. (2023). Participation in a High-Structure General Chemistry Course Increases Student Sense of Belonging and Persistence to Organic Chemistry. *Journal of Chemical Education*, *100*(8), 2860–2872. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.2c01253>

Cardone, T., Turton, E. S., Olson, G., Baxter Magolda, M. (2013). Learning partnerships in practice: Orientation, leadership, and residence life. *About Campus*, *18*, 2-9

Cann, C., & DeMeulenaere, E. (2020). *The activist academic: Engaged scholarship for resistance, hope and social change*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research. (2020). Core curriculum. <https://ccqhr.utoronto.ca/education/about-courseseries/core-curriculum/>.

Cheung, O. L., & Fowler, S. (2023). A Critique of the Commonly Used Approach to Study the Effectiveness of Technological Interventions for Raising Students' sense of belonging.

*Journal of Teaching and Learning With Technology*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.14434/jotl.v12i1.36212>

Colley, H. (2014). What (a) to do about ‘impact’: A bourdieusian critique. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(4), 660–681. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3112>

Clark, B. R. (1972). The organizational saga in higher education. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(2), 178-184.

Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999). Racism as a stressor for African Americans: A biopsychosocial model. *American Psychologist*, 54(10), 805–816.

Contos, L., Heller, S., Hughes, B. E., & MGWatson, S. (2023). How Academic Support Affects Sense of Belonging among LGBTQ+ Students. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 34(2), 36–42.

Cooper, L. & Fry, K. F. (2020). The Relationship between Classroom Environment and Student Course Attrition and Perceptions of Engagement. *Journal of Learning Spaces*, 9(2), 93-102.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Crotty, M. (2003). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

- D'Emilio, J. (1992). *Making trouble: Essays on gay history, politics, and the university*. New York: Routledge.
- Day, J. K., Goldberg, A. E., Toomey, R. B., & Beemyn, G. (2022). Associations between trans-inclusive resources and feelings of inclusion in campus LGBTQ+ groups: Differences for trans students of color. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000616>
- Denton, J. M. (2020). Queering College Student Retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(4), 544-566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119895515> (Original work published 2020)
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Sage Publications Ltd.
- DeSawal, D. M., & Yakaboski, T. (2013). *The role of the college union in student learning*. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 50(4), 446–459.
- DeVitis, J. L., and Pietro A. Sasso. (2019). *Student Activism in the Academy: Its Struggles and Promise*. Myers Education Press.
- Dias-Broens, A.S., Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, S.E., The Definition and Measurement of Sense of Belonging in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review with a Special Focus on Students Ethnicity and Generation Status in Higher Education, *Educational Research Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100622>.

Dice, L. R. (1955). What is Ecology? *The Scientific Monthly*, 80(6), 346–351.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/21546>

Draughn, T., Elkins, B., and Roy, R. (2002). Allies in the struggle: Eradicating homophobia and heterosexism on campus. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(3/4), 9-20.

Duran, A. (2019a). A photovoice phenomenological study exploring campus belonging for queer students of color. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56, 153–167.  
10.1080/19496591.2018.1490308

Duran, A., Jackson, R., & Lange, A. C. (2022). The theoretical engagements of scholarship on LGBTQ+ people in higher education: A look at research published between 2009 and 2018. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(3), 380–391.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000284>

Duran, A., Dahl, L. S., Prieto, K., Hooten, Z., and Mayhew, M. J. (2022). Exposing the intersections in LGBTQ+ student of color belongingness: Disrupting hegemonic narratives sustained in college impact work. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(2), 153–166. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000222>

Duran, A., Foste, Z., Garcia, C. E., and Snipes, J. T. (2022). How Campus Space Becomes White Place: Advancing a Spatial Analysis of Whiteness in Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 63(6), 611-625.

Duran, A., and Pérez II., D. 2017. Queering La Familia: A Phenomenological Study Reconceptualizing Familial Capital for Queer Latino Men. *Journal of College Student Development* 58(8):1149–65.

- Edwards, J. D., Torres, H. L., & Frey, R. F. (2023). The Effect of Social Belonging on Persistence to General Chemistry 2. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 100(11), 4190–4199. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.2c01048>
- Esposito, J., Evans-Winters, V. (2022). *Introduction to intersectional qualitative research Illinois State University*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Evans, N. J., & Broido, E. M. (1999). Coming out in college residence halls: Negotiation, meaning making, challenges, supports. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(6), 658–668.
- Evans N., Forney D., Guido F., Patton L., and Renn, K. (2010). *Student development in college: theory, research and practice* (2nd ed.), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Evans, R., Nagoshi, C., Wheeler, J., and Henderson, J. (2017). Voices from the stories untold: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer college students experience with campus climate. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Services*, 29(4), 426-444, doi:10.1080/10538720.2018.1378144
- Falco, J., & Sparrow, M. (2023). LGBTQ Community College Students Decreased Sense of Belonging. *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, 23(1).
- Feldman, K. A., Smart, J. C., & Ethington, C. A. (1999). Major Field and Person-Environment Fit: Using Holland's Theory to Study Change and Stability of College Students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 70(6), 642–669. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649169>

- Feldman, K. A., Ethington, C. A., & Smart, J. C. (2001). A Further Investigation of Major Field and Person-Environment Fit: Sociological versus Psychological Interpretations of Holland's Theory. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(6), 670–698. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2672899>
- Ford, T. N., and Goger, A. (2022). *The value of qualitative data for advancing equity in policy*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/value-of-qualitative-data-for-advancing-equity-in-policy/>
- Flett, G. L. (2018). *The psychology of mattering: Understanding the human need to be significant*. Elsevier Academic Press.
- Freebody, P. (2003). *Qualitative research in education. [electronic resource] : interaction and practice*. SAGE.
- Friedlander, J., and MacDougall, P. (1992). Achieving student success through student involvement. *Community College Review*, 20(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009155219202000104>
- Friedersdorf. (2015, November 24). Brown university's \$100 million inclusivity plan. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/brown-universitys-100-million-plan-to-be-more-inclusive/416886/>
- Freeman, A., & Carlson, C. (2023). Belonging Matters: One School's Strategy for Fostering Community and Confidence Among Students from Historically Excluded Groups. *Northwestern Journal of Law & Social Policy*, 19(1), 76–99.

- Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of Belonging in College Freshmen at the Classroom and Campus Levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 203–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20157456>
- Gao, F., and H. C. Y. Liu. 2021. “Guests in Someone Else’s House? Sense of Belonging among Ethnic Minority Students in a Hong Kong University.” *British Educational Research Journal* 47 (4): 1004–1020. doi:10.1002/berj.3704.
- Garcia, C. (2020). Belonging in a predominately white institution: The role of membership in Latina/o sororities and fraternities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 13(2), 181-193.
- Garcia, G. A., Johnston, M. P., Garibay, J. C., Herrera, F. A., Giraldo, L. G. (2011). When parties become racialized: Deconstructing racially themed parties. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(1), 5-21. doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.6194
- Gartner, R. E., Ballard, A. J., Smith, E. K., Risser, L. R., Chugani, C. D., & Miller, E. (2023). 'There’s no safety in these systems’: Centering trans and gender diverse students campus climate experiences to prevent sexual violence. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000512>
- Garvey, J. C., Taylor, J. L., and Rankin, S. (2015). An examination of campus climate for LGBTQ community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6), 527– 541.
- Garvey, J. C., Rankin, S., Beemyn, G., & Windmeyer, S. (2017). Improving the Campus Climate for LGBTQ Students Using the Campus Pride Index. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2017(159), 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20227>

- Garvey, J. C., Sanders, L. A., and Flint, M. A. (2017). Generational perceptions of campus climate among LGBTQ undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(6), 795–817. 10.1353/csd.2017.0065
- Garvey, J. C., Squire, D. D., Statler, B., and Rankin, S. (2018). The impact of campus climate on queer-spectrum student academic success. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(2), 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1429978>
- Garvey, J.C., Flint, M.A., & Sanders, L.A. (2018). Perceptions of Campus Climate among LGBTQ Alumnx. *Philanthropy & Education* 2(1), 97-124. [https://doi.org/10.2979/p\\_hileduc.2.1.05](https://doi.org/10.2979/p_hileduc.2.1.05).
- Garvey, J. C., Chang, S. H., Nicolazzo, Z., & Jackson, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Trans\* policies & experiences in housing & residence life*. Taylor & Francis.
- Gayle E Pitman. (2019). *The Stonewall Riots: Coming Out in the Streets*. Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Georgeac, O. A. M., & Rattan, A. (2023). The business case for diversity backfires: Detrimental effects of organizations' instrumental diversity rhetoric for underrepresented group members' sense of belonging. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 124(1), 69–108. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000394.supp> (Supplemental)
- Goldberg, Abbie E., Genny Beemyn, and JuliAnna Z. Smith. "What is needed, what is valued: Trans students perspectives on trans-inclusive policies and practices in higher education." *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 29.1 (2019): 27-67.

- Graves, K. (2018). The history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer issues in higher education. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (vol. 33, pp. 127–173). Springer.
- Grawe, N. D. (2017). *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Green, A. and Troup, K., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (2016), Manchester University Press.
- Guba, E. & Lincoln, Y. (1981). Effective evaluation: improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responsive and naturalistic approaches. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gusa, D. L. (2010). White institutional presence: The impact of whiteness on campus climate. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(4), 464–490. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.p5j483825u110002>
- Harper, S. R. (2008). *Creating Inclusive Campus Environments: For Cultural-Learning and Student Engagement*. Washington, D.C. NASPA.
- Harper, S. R., and Quaye, S. J. (2009). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Harris, F., III. (2010). College men's meanings of masculinities and contextual influences: Toward a conceptual model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(3), 297-318. doi: 10.1353/csd.0.0132.

- Harwood, S. A., Browne Huntt, M., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(3), 159-173. doi: 10.1037/a0028956.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guilford Press.
- Hermanowicz, J. C. (2024). The Therapeutic University. *Minerva*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-024-09539-x>
- Hill, M. L. (Host). (2013, September 12). Remixing the trans and hip hop conversation. Huff Post Live. Video retrieved from <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/what-djmister-cees-scandal-means-for-hip-hop/5230e99778c90a121000039d>.
- Halperin D. M. (2012). *How to be gay*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Harrington, Kim D., "Community on Campus: The Role of Physical Space." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2014. [https://scholarworks.MPU.edu/epse\\_diss/92](https://scholarworks.MPU.edu/epse_diss/92)
- Harwood, S. A., Browne Huntt, M., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(3), 159-173. doi: 10.1037/a0028956.
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Ye, F., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2009). Sense of Belonging and Persistence in White and African American First-Year Students. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(7), 649–669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8>

- Haynes, T. L., Perry, R. P., Stupnisky, R. H., & Daniels, L. M. (2009). A review of attributional retraining treatments: Fostering engagement and persistence in vulnerable college students. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 24, pp. 227–272). Amsterdam: Springer.
- Hays, A. (2020). A Question of Space: Surveying Student Usage of LGBTQ Resources in the LGBTQ Student Center Library and the Campus Library. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 26(1), 110–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2018.1564336>
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.
- Hebdige, D. (2005). Subculture: The meaning of style. In K. Gelder (Ed.), *The Subculture Reader* (pp.121-131). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Harris, F., III. (2010). College men's meanings of masculinities and contextual influences: Toward a conceptual model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(3), 297-318. doi: 10.1353/csd.0.0132.
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of Belonging as a Predictor of Intentions to Persist Among African American and White First-Year College Students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 803–839. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704530>
- Hays, D. G. & Singh, A.A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and education settings*. The Guilford Press.
- Hill, M. L. (Host). (2013, September 12). Remixing the trans and hip hop conversation. Huff Post Live. Video retrieved from <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/what-djmister-cees-scandal-means-for-hip-hop/5230e99778c90a121000039d>.

- Holton, M. & Riley, M. (2013). Student geographies: exploring the diverse geographies of students and higher education. *Geography Compass*, 7(1), 61-74.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12013>
- Huckaby, M. F. (2019). *Making Research Public in Troubled Times : Pedagogy, Activism, and Critical Obligations*. Myers Education Press.
- Hurley, P. T. (2016). *I am because we are : exploring the relationships between mentorship, involvement in LGBTQ student organizations, resiliency, and leadership efficacy of queer students of color*.
- Hurtado, S., Griffin, K. A., Arellano, L., & Cuellar, M. (2008). Assessing the value of climate assessments: Progress and future directions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(4), 204.
- Hughes, Bryce, 2018. *Coming out in STEM: Factors affecting retention of sexual minority STEM students*. *Adv.*4, (2018). DOI:10.1126/sciadv. aao6373
- Intrabartola, L. (2017). *LGBTQ+ mental health disparities among college students*. *Journal of Student Wellness*, 2(1), 15–28.
- Ivory, B. T. (2005). LGBT students in community college: Characteristics, challenges, and recommendations. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: Research, Policy, and Personal Perspectives*. *New Directions for Student Services*, 111, 61– 69.
- Jamieson, P. (2003). Designing more effective on-campus teaching and learning spaces. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 8(1–2), 119–133.

Johnson, D. R., Solder, M., Leonard, J. B., Alvarez, P., Nikolas, K. K., Rowan-Kenyon, H., and Longer beam, S. D. (2007). Examining sense of belonging among first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*, 525–542. 10.1353/csd.2007.0054

Johnson, R. M. (2022). A socio-ecological perspective on sense of belonging among racially/ethnically minoritized college students: Implications for equity-minded practice and policy. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2022*(197), 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20427>

Jones, K. P., Peddie, C. I., Gilrane, V. L., King, E. B., & Gray, A. L. (2016). Not so subtle: A meta-analytic investigation of the correlates of subtle and overt discrimination. *Journal of Management, 42*(6), 1588–1613.

Jones, S. R., and McEwen, M. K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*, 405–414.

Jones, S. R. (2009). Constructing identities at the intersections: An autoethnographic exploration of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development, pp. 50*, 287–304.

Joye, Y. (2007). Architectural lessons from environmental psychology: the case for biophilic architecture. *Review of General Psychology, 11*(4), 305-328, doi:10.1037/1089-2680.11.4.305.

- Jourian, T. J. (2017). “Fun and carefree like my polka dot bowtie”: Disidentifications of trans\*masculine students of color. In J. Johnson and G. Javier (Eds.), *Queer people of color in higher education* (pp. 123–143). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Jourian, T. J. (2023, May 31). *Exploring the history of LGBTQ+ centers on campus: Best Colleges*. Exploring the History of LGBTQ+ Centers on Campus.  
<https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/history-lgbtq-student-center/>
- Joye, Y. (2007). Architectural education and the ecological approach: Reconnecting architecture and psychology. *Review of General Psychology*, 11(4), 305–328.
- Kezar, A., & Kinzie, J. (2006). Examining the Ways Institutions Create Student Engagement: The Role of Mission. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(2), 149–172.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0018>
- Kline, M. (2019, August 1). *The looming higher ed enrollment cliff*. CUPA. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from <https://www.cupahr.org/issue/feature/higher-ed-enrollment-cliff/>
- Knell, P., & Latta, S. (2006). *College union dynamic: Flexible solutions for successful facilities*. Bloomington, IN: Association of College Unions International.
- Knell, R., & Latta, M. (2006). *The evolving role of the college union*. In D. C. Guthrie (Ed.), *Campus design and the student experience* (pp. 29–40). National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Komives, S. R., Woodard, D., and Strange, C. C. (2003). *Dynamics of Campus Environments*. In *Student services: A handbook for the profession*. essay, Jossey-Bass.

- Kosmützky, A., Nokkala, T., & Diogo, S. (2020). Between context and comparability: Exploring new solutions for a familiar methodological challenge in qualitative comparative research. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74(2), 176–192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12255>
- Kortegast, C. A. (2017). “But it is not the space that I would need”: Narrative of LGBTQ students experiences in campus housing. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 43(2), 58–71.
- Kuh, G., Cruce, T., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J. and Gonyea, R. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540–563.
- Kuh, G. D., and Love, P. G. (2000). A cultural perspective on student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 196 –212). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press
- Kuh, G. D., & Whitt, E. J. (1988). The invisible tapestry: Culture in American colleges and universities. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Series, No. 1. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education
- Lange, A. C., Duran, A., and Jackson, R. (2022). How whiteness wars in LGBTQ centers. In Z. Foster and T. Tavis (Eds.), *Critical whiteness praxis in higher education and student affairs: Considerations for the pursuit of racial justice on campus* (pp. 155–171). Stylus.
- Leavy, P. (2011). *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.

Levy, D. J., Heissel, J. A., Richeson, J. A., & Adam, E. K. (2016). Psychological and biological responses to race-based social stress as pathways to disparities in educational outcomes. *American Psychologist*, *71*(6), 455–473.

Leijon, M. (2016). Space as designs for and in learning: Investigating the interplay between space, interaction and learning sequences in higher education. *Visual Communication*, *15*(1), 93-124

Lenning, E. (2017). Unapologetically Queer in Unapologetically Black Spaces: Creating an Inclusive HBCU Campus. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, pp. 39, 283–293. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/90007885>

Levenson, J. S., Craig, S. L., and Austin, A. (2023). Trauma-informed and affirmative mental health practices with LGBTQ+ clients. *Psychological Services*, *20*(Suppl 1), pp. 134–144. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000540>

Levitt, H. M., Morrill, Z., Collins, K. M., and Rizzo, J. L. (2021). The methodological integrity of critical qualitative research: Principles to support design and research review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *68*(3), 357–370. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000523>

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Linley, J. L., & Kilgo, C. A. (2018). Expanding agency: Centering gender identity in college and university student records systems. *Journal of College Student Development*, *59*(3), 359-365.

- Loveland, B., and Doran, M. T. (2016). Out of the Closet and Into the Archives: A Partnership Model for Community-Based Collection and Preservation of LGBTQ History. *Pennsylvania History*, 83(3), 418–424. <https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.83.3.0418>
- Lu, A. (2023, February 13). *Everyone is talking about 'belonging,' but what does it really mean?* Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/everyone-is-talking-about-belonging>
- Magolda, P. M. (2001). What our Rituals Tell us about Community on Campus: A Look at the Campus Tour. *About Campus*, 5(6), 2-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108648220100500602>
- Magolda, P. and Magolda. M. B. (2011). *Contested Issues in Student Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*. Vol. 1st ed. Routledge.
- Mackiewicz, M. R., Hosbein, K. N., Mason, D., & Ajjarapu, R. (2022). Integrating Scientific Growth and Professional Development Skills in Research Environments to Aid in the Persistence of Marginalized Students. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 100(1), 199–208. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.2c00633>
- Mahar, A. L., Cobigo, V., & Stuart, H. (2013). Conceptualizing belonging. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 35(12), 1026-1032
- Mancini, O. (2011). Attrition risk and resilience among sexual minority college students. *Columbia Social Work Review*, 2, 9– 22.
- Massis, B. (2010). *Managing the physical learning environment: Enhancing the student experience*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 124, 69–75.

- Martin, G., Broadhurst, C., Hoff shire, M., and Takewell, W. (2018). ‘Students at the Margins: Student Affairs Administrators Creating Inclusive Campuses for LGBTQ Students in the South.’ *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 55(1):1–13.
- Marx, A., & Soares, J. (2016). Applying New Methodological Tools in Human Rights Research. The Case of Qualitative Comparative Analysis. *International Journal of Human Rights*, 20(3), 365–385.
- McEntarfer, H. K., & Iovannone, J. (2022). Faculty perceptions of chosen name policies and non-binary pronouns. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(5), 632-647.
- McClellan, M. L. (2023). LGBTQ college students lived experiences and perceptions of support on a conservative campus. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 35(1), 113–134.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2022.2124213>
- McDougal, S., Collier, T., Lewis, L., & Thomas, J. M. (2024). Black Campus Climate: Towards a Liberatory and Equitable Black Campus Experience. *Journal of Black Studies*, 55(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347231207061>
- McQueen, C., Thelamour, B., & Daniel, D. K. (2023). The Relationship between Campus Climate Perceptions, Anxiety, and Academic Competence for College Women. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 41(1), 138–152.
- Middleton, R., Fernandez, R., Cutler, N., Jans, C., Antoniou, C., Trostian, B., & Riley, K. (2021). Students perceptions of belonging in the School of Nursing at a regional

- university in Australia. *Nurse Education Today*, 99, 10481. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2021.104817>=Miles, M. B., Huberman, M. A., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Sage Publications.
- Mulrooney, H. M., & Kelly, A. F. (2021). Belonging, the Physical Space of the University Campus and How It Is Perceived by Students: A Quantitative Analysis among a Diverse Student Group. *Journal of Learning Spaces*, 10(2), 1–13.
- Munoz, J. (2023, January 31). *U of L renames football stadium years after dropping Papa John's*. WKU Public Radio | The Public Radio Service of Western Kentucky University. <https://www.wkyufm.org/2023-01-31/u-of-l-renames-football-stadium-years-after-dropping-papa-johns>
- Murdock-Perriera, L. A., Boucher, K. L., Carter, E., & Murphy, M. (2019). Places of Belonging: Person- and Place-Focused Interventions to Support Belonging in College. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 34).
- Mayhew, M. J., and Simonoff, J. S. (2015). Nonwhite, no more: Effect coding as an alternative to dummy coding with implications for researchers in higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56, 170–175. 10.1353/csd.2015.0019
- McCoy, S. D. (2018). Where is my place? Queer and transgender students of color experiences in cultural centers at a predominantly white university (Publication no. 10817628) [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Wisconsin-Madison]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing

- McSpadden, E. L. (2020). Creating LGBTQI+ programming in urban higher education: Considering the creation process of a campus resource room. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 32(3), 310–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2020.1752873>
- Means, Darris R. 2017. “Quaring’ Spirituality: The Spiritual Counterstories and Spaces of Black Gay and Bisexual Male College Students.” *Journal of College Student Development* 58(2):229–4
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey Bass.
- Milem, J. F., and Berger, J. B. (1997). A modified model of college student persistence: Exploring the relationship between Astin's theory of involvement and Tinto's theory of student departure. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(4), 387.
- Milošević, D., and Maksimović, J. (2020). Methodology of Comparative Research in Education: Role and Significance. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education (IJCRSEE)*, 8(3), 155–162. <https://doi.org/10.23947/2334-8496-2020-8-3-155-162>
- Monique, M. (2014). *Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press.
- Mulrooney, H. M., & Kelly, A. F. (2021). Belonging, the Physical Space of the University Campus and How It Is Perceived by Students: A Quantitative Analysis among a Diverse Student Group. *Journal of Learning Spaces*, 10(2), 1–13.

- Museum, S. D., and Quaye, S. J. (2009). Toward an intercultural perspective of racial and ethnic minority college student persistence. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33, 67–94.
- Murphy, M. C., & Zirkel, S. (2015). Race and belonging in school: How anticipated and experienced belonging affect choice, persistence, and performance. *Teachers College Record*, 117(12), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811511701204>
- Nash, M. A., & Silverman, J. A. (2015). “An indelible mark”: Gay purges in higher education in the 1940s. *History of Education Quarterly*, 55(4), 441-459.
- Nicolazzo, Z. (2017). *Trans\* in college: Transgender students strategies for navigating campus life and the institutional politics of inclusion*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Núñez, A.-M. (2011). Counterspaces and Connections in College Transitions: First-Generation Latino Students Perspectives on Chicano Studies. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(6), 639–655. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0077>
- Oblinger, D. G. (2006). *Learning spaces*. Boulder, CO: Educause.
- Olson, K. W. (1973). The G. I. Bill and Higher Education: Success and Surprise. *American Quarterly*, 25(5), 596–610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711698>
- O’Riordan, K., and Webb, S. (2021). What’s in a name: The politics of queer on campus. *Sexualities*, 24(8), 1061–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720947306>
- O’Shea, S. 2021. ““Kids from Here Don’t Go to Uni””: Considering First in Family Students’ Belonging and Entitlement within the Field of Higher Education in Australia.” *European Journal of Education* 56 (1): 65–77.

- Ottenritter, N. (2012). Crafting a caring and inclusive environment for LGBTQ community college students, faculty, and staff. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(7), 531– 538.
- Parker, E. T., III. (2021). Campus Climate Perceptions and Sense of Belonging for LGBTQ Students: A Canadian Case Study. *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(2), 248–253. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0019>
- Patton, L. D. (2011). Perspectives on Identity, Disclosure, and the Campus Environment Among African American Gay and Bisexual Men at One Historically Black College. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(1), 77–100. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0001>
- Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2022). A Sense of Belonging at University: Student Retention, Motivation and Enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>
- Penner, K., D. de Moissac, R. Rocque, F. Giasson, K. Prada, and P. Brochu. 2021. “Sense of Belonging and Social Climate in an Official Language Minority Post-Secondary Setting.” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 51 (4): 26–39.  
doi:10.47678/cjhe.v51i4.189087.
- Perceptions of Campus Climate among LGBTQ Alumnx. (2018). *Philanthropy & Education*, 2(1), 97–124. <https://doi.org/10.2979/phileduc.2.1.05>
- Phelps-Ward, R., Latz, A. O., Turner Kelly, B., & Kortegast, C. (2021). Re-examining and reimagining power in participatory visual methodologies: a collaborative

- autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 36(10), 2138–2155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1982049>
- Pink, S. (2001). *Doing visual ethnography: Images, media, and representation in research*. SAGE Publications.
- Priya, A. (2021). Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application. *Sociological Bulletin*, 70(1), 94-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970318>
- Rankin, S. R. (2003). *Campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people: A national perspective*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.
- Rankin, S. (2006). *LGBTQA students on campus: A national climate study*. American Association of University Professors.
- Renn, K., and Bilodeau, B.L. (2005). Leadership identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student leaders. *NASPA Journal*, 42(3), 342-367.
- Renn, K., and Ozaki, C. (2010). *Psychosocial and leadership identities among leaders of identity-based campus organizations*. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 3(1), 14–26. doi:10.1037/a0018564
- Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies : an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* /. Sage,.
- Ribera, A. K., Miller, A. L., & Dumford, A. D. (2017). Sense of peer belonging and institutional acceptance in the first year: The role of high-impact practices. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(4), 545–563. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0042>

Robison, Matthew K., "Through the Eyes of Gay and Male Bisexual College Students: A Critical Visual Qualitative Study of their Experiences." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012 .doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/2352880>

Ryan, M. (Ed.). (2024, June 28). *DEI Legislation Tracker*. chronicle.com.  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>

Sadowski, M. (2017). More than a Safe Space: How Schools Can Enable LGBTQ Students to Thrive. *American Education* 40(4), 4-9

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Sanlo, R. (2004). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students: Risk, resiliency, and retention. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6(1), 97-110.

Sanlo, R., and Espinoza, L. (2012). Risk and retention: Are LGBTQ students staying in your community college? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(7), 475–481.

Sanlo, R. L., and Leck, G. M. (1998). An oasis: The LGBT student group on a commuter campus. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators* (pp. 373– 381). Westport, Englewood Press.

Schlossberg, N.K. "Marginality and Mattering: Key Issues in Building Community. " *New Directions for Student Services*. " 1989: 1-7.

- Schostak, J. F., & Schostak, J. (2008). *Radical research : designing, developing and writing research to make a difference*. Routledge.
- Schrag, Z. (2021). *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*. Princeton University Press.
- Schuetz, P. (2005). UCLA Community College Review: Campus Environment: A Missing Link in Studies of Community College Attrition. *Community College Review*, 32(4), 60–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/009155210503200405>
- Secore, S. (2018). The Impact of Campus Environments on College Choice and Persistence. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 6(1), 17–34.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research, 3rd ed.* NY: Teachers College Press.
- Seidman A. (2012). Introduction. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (2nd ed., pp. 1–6). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Shaw, J., Gagnon, M., Carson, A., Gastaldo, D., Gladstone, B., Webster, F., & Eakin, J. (2022). Advancing the Impact of Critical Qualitative Research on Policy, Practice, and Science. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1–11.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221076929>
- So Tardi, V. A., Surtees, N., Vincent, K., and Johnston, H. (2022). Belonging and adjustment for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students during the social transition to university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(6), 755–765. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000305>
- Solanki, S., Fitzpatrick, D., Jones, M. R., & Lee, H. (2020). Social-psychological interventions in college: A meta-analysis of effects on academic outcomes and heterogeneity by study

- context and treated population. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 1–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100359>
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experience of African American College Students, *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2696265>
- Stake, R. “Case Study Methods in Educational Research: Seeking Sweet Water,” in *Complementary Methods for Research in Education*, 2nd ed., Richard M. Jaeger, ed. (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1997), 404.
- Stanczak, G. C. (Ed.). (2007). *Visual research methods: Image, society, and representation*. SAGE Publications.
- Stanton A., Sandflies, D., Dhaliwal, R., & Black, T. (2016). Understanding students experiences of well-being in learning environments. *Higher Education Studies*, 6(3), 90-99. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v6n3p90>
- Stevens, Jr., R. A. (2004). Understanding gay identity development within the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 185–206.
- Strange, C., and Banning, J. (2001). *Educating by Design: Creating Campus Learning Environments that Work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Strange, Charles Carney, and James H. Banning. *Designing for Learning: Creating Campus Environments for Student Success*. Jossey-Bass a Wiley Brand, 2015.
- Strauss, Anselm (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press.

- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2014). Beyond the model minority myth: Interrogating the lived experiences of Korean American gay men in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55, 586–594. 10.1353/csd.2014.0059
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stuart, G. R., Rios-Aguilar, C., & Deil-Amen, R. (2014). “How Much Economic Value Does My Credential Have?”: Reformulating Tinto’s Model to Study Students Persistence in Community Colleges. *Community College Review*, 42(4), 327-341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552114532519>
- Stein, M. (2022, November 16). *Out on campus: A collaborative project on Pennsylvania LGBTQ+ history*. Perspectives on History. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/december-2022/emout-on-campus/em-a-collaborative-project-on-Pennsylvania-LGBTIQQ-history>
- Tichavakunda, A. A. (2022). University memorials and symbols of white supremacy: Black students counternarratives. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 93(5), 677-701.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropouts from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent literature. *A Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.

- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438-455.
- Tinto, V. (1993). Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. and Goodsell-Love, A. (1993). Building community. *Liberal Education*, 79(4),16-21.
- Tinto V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, 19, 254–269.
- Temple, P. (2007). Learning spaces for the 21st century: A review of the literature. *Higher Education Policy*, 20(2), 107–117.
- Torre, D. & Murphy, J. (2015) A different lens: Changing perspectives using Photo Elicitation Interviews. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 23(111),  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v23.2051>
- Tovar, E., & Simon, M. A. (2010). Factorial structure and invariance analysis of the sense of belonging scales. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 43(3), 199–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0748175610384811>
- Trimble, D. V. (2019). The Right to Be Counted: Student Retention and the Washington State LGBTQ Student Success Initiative. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2019(188), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20380>
- Trouillot, M-R (2015) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 2nd ed. (2015), Beacon Press, ISBN 978-080708053

- Turner, B. K., & Torres, A. (2006). Campus safety: Experiences and perceptions of women students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(1), 20-36. doi: 10.1353/csd.2006.0007.
- Ulmer, J. B. (2017). Critical Qualitative Inquiry Is/as Love. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(7), 543–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417718298>
- United States. Public Health Service. Office of the Surgeon General. (2014). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General.
- Wall, V., & Evans, N. J. (1999). *Developing competent LGBTQ allies in higher education*. In R. Sanlo (Ed.), *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators* (pp. 67–92). Greenwood Press.
- Wall, V and Evans, N.J.. 2000. *Toward Acceptance; Sexual Orientation Issues on Campus*. Lanham, MD: American College Personnel Association.
- Walsh, C. (2021, June 8). *100 years later, scholars revisit the Secret Court at Harvard*. Harvard Gazette. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/100-years-later-scholars-revisit-t-the-secret-court-Harvard/>
- Walters, A. S., and Hayes, D. M. (1998). Homophobia within schools: Challenging the culturally sanctioned dismissal of gay students and colleagues. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 35(2), 1-23.

- Washington, J., and Wall, V. (2006). African American gay men: Another challenge for the academy. In M. Cuyler and Associates (Eds.), *African American Men in College* (pp. 174-188). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weber, S. R. (2022, September 22). *How campus climate and Student Services Interactions Connect (opinion)*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/view/s/2022/09/20/how-campus-climate-and-student-services-interactions-connect-opinion>
- Weick, K.E. (1976). Educational organizations In Brown, C.M. (Ed.), *Organization & Governance in Higher Education* (pp. 36-49). Boston, MA: Pearson
- Weise, J., Courtney, S., & Strunk, K. (2023). “I didn’t think I’d be supported”: LGBTQ+ students nonreporting of bias incidents at southeastern colleges and universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 16(5), 607–618. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000274>
- Westbrook, L. (2009). Where the women aren’t: Gender differences in the use of LGBT resources on college campuses. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 6(4), 369–394. doi:10.1080/19361650903295769
- Winslow, L. A. & Winslow, K. S. (2014). Ezra's holy seed: Marriage and othering in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 37(3), 44 - 62.
- Wickramasingha, S. (2023). Constructing (I’m)Perfect Geographical Knowledge: Negotiating Positionality in Comparative Field Sites. *Professional Geographer*, 75(5), 776–786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2022.2158887>

- Woodford, M. R., Kulick, A., Garvey, J. C., Sinco, B. R., & Hong, J. S. (2018). LGBTQ policies and resources on campus and the experiences and psychological well-being of sexual minority college students: Advancing research on structural inclusion. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(4), 445–456. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000289>
- Worsley, J. D., P. Harrison, and R. Corcoran. 2021. “Bridging the Gap: Exploring the Unique Transition from Home, School or College into University.” *Frontiers in Public Health* 9: 211. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285.
- Anna Visvizi, A., Lytras, M. & Sarirete, A. (2019). *Management and Administration of Higher Education Institutions in Times of Change*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: design and methods / Robert K. Yin*. Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2013). Chinese international students personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(1), 62-84.
- Zhao, C. & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de>



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### **Email to Staff to Recruit Participants**

Hi all,

I've been approved by IRB and [CSU] has accepted Georgia State's approval so I can begin my dissertation research. [CSU] is one of my research sites and am looking for 10 LGBTQ+ students to participate in my study from [CSU] I'd love your assistance in sharing the flyer, forwarding to students, and sharing with any groups you may know to let students know about the opportunity.

The students would do two interviews with the first being about their identity and general experience at Miami with the second being questions related to 8 prompts around campus ecology and belonging. They'll receive \$50 in compensation for their time.

I appreciate your support!

Best,

Ben

## APPENDIX B

### Recruitment Flyers distributed at each research site

**Queering Campus**  
A Research Study on Campus Ecology & LGBTQ+ Sense of Belonging

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!**

The purpose of this study is to explore how LGBTQ+ students experience on campus in the physical and social environment impacts their sense of belonging.

**Compensation:** \$50 Amazon Gift Card upon completion of the two interviews. **Email for more information!**

**REQUIREMENTS**

- ✓ Identify as LGBTQ+
- ✓ Be enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student.
- ✓ Be willing to participate in 2 60-minute Zoom interviews
- ✓ Take photos in response to 8 questions in between interviews

**Researcher: Benjamin Williams**  
Email: [bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu](mailto:bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu)

**Queering Campus**  
A Research Study on Campus Ecology & LGBTQ+ Sense of Belonging

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!**

The purpose of this study is to explore how LGBTQ+ students experience on campus in the physical and social environment impacts their sense of belonging.

**Compensation:** \$50 Amazon Gift Card upon completion of the two interviews. **Email for more information!**

**REQUIREMENTS**

- ✓ Identify as LGBTQ+
- ✓ Be enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student.
- ✓ Be willing to participate in 2 60-minute Zoom interviews
- ✓ Take photos in response to 8 questions in between interviews

**Researcher: Benjamin Williams**  
Email: [bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu](mailto:bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu)

## APPENDIX C

### Email to Students Who Reached Out

(Name),

So good to hear from you! Thank you so much for your interest. I'd love to have you participate!

The goal is to explore students' experience at the intersection of Campus Ecology (physical space and experiences within them on campus) and Belonging. The process will be two interviews with a request to take 9 photos in between. It should take approximately 2 and a half hours total and you'll receive \$50 in compensation.

I'm including my consent document below as it outlines different elements for you to review as well. Informed Consent: [https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0JImHTTdya6UELk](https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0JImHTTdya6UELk)

What do your evenings look like later this week or next? We could also set a time this weekend if that is better for the first interview.

Best,

Ben

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent Text from Qualtrics

Georgia State University Informed Consent

Title: Navigating Space, Place, and Belonging: An Exploration of the Impact of Campus

Ecology on LGBTQ+ Collegians' Sense of Belonging Principal Investigator: Dr. David Johnson

Student Principal Investigator: Benjamin Williams

**Introduction and Key Information** We invite you to take part in a research study. You will decide if you would like to take part in the study. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how LGBTQ+ students sense of belong is impacted by the physical structures and social experiences on campus. Your role in the study will last approximately 2.5 hours over roughly a six-week period. We will ask you to do the following: Participate in two recorded interviews and take photos in response to eight questions between the two interviews. You will not have any more risks than you would have in a typical day. This study is not designed to benefit you. We hope to gain a deeper understanding of students experience, which can help inform practices, policies, and administrators' decisions. If you do not wish to take part in this study, you can decline participation at any time.

**Purpose** The purpose of the study is to explore student experience to inform future practices and policies related to support of LGBTQ+ college students. We invite you to take part in this research study because you are a member of the community who is currently enrolled at one of our research sites. We will invite a total of twenty people to be in this study. **Procedures** If you decide to take part in this study, you will participate in two roughly 60 minute interviews that

will be recorded via Zoom. Between the two interviews, you will be asked to respond to several statements by taking a photo that represents the prompt for you. Your participation will occur over roughly six weeks.

**Future Research** We will not use or share your data for future research studies. **Risks** You will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. We do not expect injury from being in this study. If you have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible.

Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to pay for any injury.

**Benefits** This study is not designed to benefit you personally. You may benefit from any policy changes that occur based on the outcomes of the study. We hope to gain information about the experience of students in the campus ecology that will help create more welcoming and affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ collegians on campus.

**Alternatives** The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

**Compensation** You will receive a \$50 gift card for time and/or travel spent in this study. You will receive one \$25 gift card at the completion of each interview for a total of \$50.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal** You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you can drop out at any time. You can skip questions. If you do not take part or if you leave the study early, you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to.

**Confidentiality** We will keep your records private to the extent required by law. The following people and groups will have access to the information you provide: • The Student PI, Benjamin Williams. Dr. David Johnson may also have access to the data, if needed. We will use a

pseudonym, a name you select to connect to study records. We will store the information you provide in a secured Dropbox file with additional password protection on the folder. The Zoom recording will be deleted once it is used to validate the transcript of the interview. The transcript will be deleted once the study is complete and the dissertation has been approved. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use information that may identify you.

Contact Information You can contact Benjamin Williams at [bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu](mailto:bwilliams74@student.gsu.edu) or 678-727- 6403 or David Johnson at [djohnson357@gsu.edu](mailto:djohnson357@gsu.edu) or 404-413-8263. • If you have questions about the study or your part in it • If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or [irb@gsu.edu](mailto:irb@gsu.edu).

Consent We will give you a copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep. If you are willing to be in this research study, please sign below. \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Participant Date IRB NUMBER: H25329 IRB APPROVAL

DATE: 12/17/2024 4 Version Date: December 10, 2024

\_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent Date

## APPENDIX E

### Email to Students About Second Interview

Hi (Name)

I look forward to our second conversation and wanted to share the form so you can upload your photos. Below you will find the list of prompts and have also included them in the study. Once you complete, please let me know and we will set up your final interview.

Form:[https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6iq1QaJnPUWeCqy](https://gsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6iq1QaJnPUWeCqy)

#### **Prompts**

1. Take a photo of a place on campus where you feel the most comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity.
2. Take a picture of a physical space on campus that you don't feel like you belong.
3. Photograph a place on campus where you feel your LGBTQ+ identity is less understood or acknowledged.
4. Show me an image of a campus resource (e.g., center, office, support group) dedicated to LGBTQ+ students that represents joy or fun.
5. Show me a location on campus where you have experienced support from faculty or staff regarding LGBTQ+ issues.

6 .Capture an image that represents a sense of community for LGBTQ+ students at your university.

7. Take a picture of a social event or gathering where LGBTQ+ representation is visible and celebrated.

8 .Capture a moment during a campus event or activity where you felt included and valued as an LGBTQ+ individual.

9 .Show me a representation of a space on campus where you feel pressure to conceal or modify aspects of your LGBTQ+ identity.

Best,

Ben

## APPENDIX F

### Interview Protocol

*This study is focused on the impact of campus ecology on LGBTQ+ collegians' sense of belonging. The questions for the first interview are going to focus on your experience on campus, how you came to understand your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and how you define belonging. These questions are focused on your personal experience and perspective on your experiences. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential. With your consent to begin, I will record the interview. Interviews are normally recorded to keep track of information accurately. Subsequently, the digital file will be destroyed. Your identity and that of your institution will be carefully concealed in any published work. Your participation in this study is important. However, should you at any time wish to stop, you may do so without consequence, and at any time you should feel free to ask me questions concerning the interview or the study. Are you ready to begin?*

#### **A. Introduction**

1. Why don't you start by telling me a little about yourself:

a. Probe: your major, your year in school, and two words that you would use to describe yourself as a student?

2. I'm also interested in why you decided to attend this university. What was it about this school that led you to apply and ultimately enroll here?

#### **B. Identity Development**

*As you know, I'm interested in the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in college. I'd like to start by learning about how you identify.*

1. Can you share about your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ experience and your coming out process, if you've come out?
  - a. Probe: How has your family and community responded to you?
2. Can you share what your experience as an LGBTQ+ student at your campus has been?
  - a. Probe: What experiences have shaped that opinion?
  - b. Probe: Can you describe a time you felt you were being treated or interacted with differently on campus because of your LGBTQ+ identity? whether it was a positive or negative interaction? If so, what was it and how did it impact you.
  - c. Probe: Tell me a story about what it's like to be an LGBTQ+ student on campus?  
Or, if a highschooler asked you what it was like to be an LGBTQ+ student at this university, what would you say and why?
3. If you've come out on campus, what did that experience look like? If you have not come out, why factors have stopped you from doing so?
  - a. If so, what has that experience been like?
  - b. If not, why not?
4. Have you encountered any challenges or discrimination on your campus as an LGBTQ+ person?
5. In what ways, if any, has your LGBTQ+ identity influence others ways you identify yourself, such as your race or gender?
  - a. Are there other elements of your identities that you feel connect with your LGBTQ+ identity that I didn't ask about?

## **B. Belonging**

*And now I want to ask some questions about your experience at this university. We can imagine different terms to describe the extent to which you feel connected and welcomed here. I'm going to use the term "belonging."*

1. Can you tell me about a time that you felt welcomed on campus? And if so, how would you describe what it means to belong here?
  - a. Probe: Does your feeling of what belonging depend on where you are at on campus? How so?
  - b. Probe: Does belonging on campus matter to you? Why or why not?
2. Have you experienced any challenges in finding a sense of community or belonging on campus? If so, how?
3. Can you share about the first time you felt you belonged somewhere, as a/n [insert LGBTQ+ identity]?
  - a. Probe: What was it about this experience that made you feel like you belonged?
4. How would you compare what it means to feel a sense of belonging on this campus relative to other places you spend time?

## **C. Campus Ecology- Physical Environment**

1. If you were to describe the physical aspects of this campus to a friend—such as the buildings, the landscape, whatever aesthetic features stands out most to you---how would you describe this campus? That might be positive, negative, or both.
2. Can you tell me about a specific places (building, student center, residence hall, etc.) that have made you feel connected or welcomed on campus? If yes, how so?

- a. Probe: Where do you spend most of your time on campus when you are not in your dorm, apartment, or class? And, why?
3. Are there specific places that have made you feel not welcome or connected? If yes, how so?
  - a. Probe: Are there any places on campus that you actively avoid?

#### **D. Campus Ecology- Human Aggregate Environment**

*We've been discussing different spaces on campus. I now want to ask a couple of questions about students here.*

1. Would you say there is such a thing as a “typical” student here? If so, how would you describe them?
2. Many campuses have diverse student groups, with some student groups being dominant or central on campus, and others less prevalent or visible. How would you describe this campus?
  - a. Probe: Is there are a hierarchy here in terms of who “fits in” and who doesn't? What does that look like?
3. How easy or difficult has it been for you to “fit in” here?
4. How would you characterize the place of LGBTQ+ students on this campus based on your experience?
5. Are there specific LGBTQ+ organizations or programs that you participate in?
  - a. Probe-If didn't engage: Can you tell me about what motivated you not to engage with the services or organizations on campus,

- b. Probe: What has finding or cultivating LGBTQ+ community looked like for you on campus? Off-campus?
6. Are there any other student organizations or clubs that you participate in? Can you tell me about those?

### **E. Campus Ecology- Organizational Environment**

*I also have a few questions related to the individuals who represent this university: staff, faculty, and administrators.*

1. Thinking about experiences you've had with faculty, staff, and administrators, can you describe any interactions you've had that contributed to your sense of belonging here?
2. Can you describe any interactions you've had with faculty, staff, and administrators that made you question whether you really belong here?
3. Thinking about senior administrators at this university (President, Vice Presidents, Deans, etc), would you say that the administrators and campus leaders are supportive of the LGBTQ+ community? Why or why not?
4. Can you describe any decisions or actions that universities representatives have made to make this campus feel like an inclusive environment for the LGBTQ+ community?
5. Can you describe any decisions or actions that the university has made that have been problematic for members of the LGBTQ+ community?

### **F. Campus Ecology- Socially Constructed Environment**

We are nearing the end. In this last section, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your view of the overall climate at this university.

1. In what ways are you satisfied are you with your overall *academic* experience at this university?
2. In what ways are you satisfied are you with your overall *social* experience at this university?
3. To what extent do you feel valued as an individual here?
4. How about safety. How would you characterize your sense of physical and psychological safety here?
  - a. Probe: What would make you feel safer? OR What would make you feel less safe?
  - b. Probe: Have you ever felt like you had to conceal your sexual identity or gender identity on campus to avoid feeling unsafe or unwelcome? Why or why not?
5. Overall, do you feel that your campus has an affirming and welcoming campus climate for LGBTQ+ students? Why or why not?
6. Last question. If the president of this university asked you to name one thing the university could do to create a more welcoming campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, what would you recommend?

*That brings us to the end of the first interview. I want to thank you so much for participating. Are there any last questions or pieces you'd like to share?*

*What will happen from here is we are about to talk about what the photo project happens. You will take a photo for each of the items on the list of ten statements. That will be what our second conversation is focused on. We'll go through each of the statements now and I can answer any*

*questions you have. I'll also provide you a form that you can use to upload the photos. If you have any questions between now and our next conversation, please reach out.*

## APPENDIX G

### Photo Elicitation & Guided Reflection

#### Student Communication

You will take ten photographs and upload the files to a Qualtrics form. These photos will guide our conversation during our second interview. If you can't think of a photo to take for a prompt, you can just skip that prompt. During our second interview, we will discuss what you submitted and what you felt you weren't able to capture.

10. Take a photo of a place on campus where you feel the most comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity.
11. Take a picture of a physical space on campus that you don't feel like you belong.
12. Photograph a place on campus where you feel your LGBTQ+ identity is less understood or acknowledged.
13. Show me an image of a campus resource (e.g., center, office, support group) dedicated to LGBTQ+ students that represents joy or fun.
14. Show me a location on campus where you have experienced support from faculty or staff regarding LGBTQ+ issues.
15. Capture an image that represents a sense of community for LGBTQ+ students at your university.
16. Take a picture of a social event or gathering where LGBTQ+ representation is visible and celebrated.
17. Capture a moment during a campus event or activity where you felt included and valued as an LGBTQ+ individual.
18. Show me a representation of a space on campus where you feel pressure to conceal or modify aspects of your LGBTQ+ identity.

I wanted to thank you for taking the time to capture these images. During our time together today, I will show your image and the prompt on a slide and ask you a few questions. At the end, I have 5 final questions as you reflect on our first and second conversation. Are you ready to start?

## APPENDIX H

### Visual Interview Discussion Guide

#### Physical Environment

Take a photo of a place on campus where you feel the most comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity.

1. Can you tell me about this place and why you feel comfortable expressing your identity there?
  1. Probe: What specific aspects of this place make you feel comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity?
2. Can you share a specific moment or interaction in this place that reinforced your sense of comfort?
3. Are there any people associated with this place who contribute to your sense of comfort and why?

Take a picture of a physical space on campus that you don't feel like you belong.

1. What elements of this space make you feel like you don't belong?
2. Can you describe a particular experience that made you feel unwelcome in this space?
3. What changes would make this space more inclusive and welcoming?

Photograph a place on campus where you feel your LGBTQ+ identity is less understood or acknowledged.

1. Why do you feel your LGBTQ+ identity is less understood or acknowledged in this place?
2. Can you describe a specific incident that made you feel misunderstood or unacknowledged here?
3. How does this lack of understanding or acknowledgment affect your behavior or feelings in this space?
4. What steps could be taken to increase understanding and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ identities in this place?

#### Human Aggregate Environment

Show me an image of a campus resource (e.g., center, office, support group) dedicated to LGBTQ+ students that represents joy or fun.

1. What services or support does this resource offer to LGBTQ+ students?

2. Has this resource been helpful to you personally?
3. How accessible is this resource to all LGBTQ+ students?
4. What improvements or additions could enhance the effectiveness of this resource?

Show me a location on campus where you have experienced support from faculty or staff regarding LGBTQ+ issues.

1. Tell me about the support you received and who provided it?
2. How did this support impact your experience as an LGBTQ+ student?
3. Are there specific programs or initiatives associated with this location that are particularly supportive?

Take an image that represents a sense of community for LGBTQ+ students at your university.

1. What is it about this image that signifies community for you?
2. Can you share a story or experience that highlights the sense of community represented by this image?
3. How does being part of this community impact your sense of belonging on campus?

### **Socially Constructed Environment**

Take a picture of a social event or gathering where LGBTQ+ representation is celebrated.

1. What aspects of this event make LGBTQ+ representation visible and celebrated?
2. How does attending this event make you feel about your LGBTQ+ identity?
3. Can you share a memorable moment from this event that highlights LGBTQ+ visibility and celebration?
4. What impact do events like this have on the LGBTQ+ community on campus?

Capture a moment during a campus event or activity where you felt included and valued as an LGBTQ+ individual.

1. What made you feel included and valued during this moment?
2. Who was involved in making this experience positive for you?
3. How does this moment stand out compared to other experiences on campus?
4. What emotions did you feel during this moment, and why?
5. How can more campus events or activities be designed to foster similar feelings of inclusion and value?

Show me a representation of a space on campus where you feel pressure to conceal or modify aspects of your LGBTQ+ identity.

1. Can you share about this space and why you feel pressured to conceal aspects of your identity?
  1. Probe: What specific pressures do you feel in this space, and why?
2. How do you cope with or respond to these pressures?

3. Can you share a particular experience where you felt compelled to conceal or modify your identity in this space?
4. How does this pressure impact your sense of belonging on campus?
5. What changes could reduce the pressure you feel in this space and create a more accepting environment?

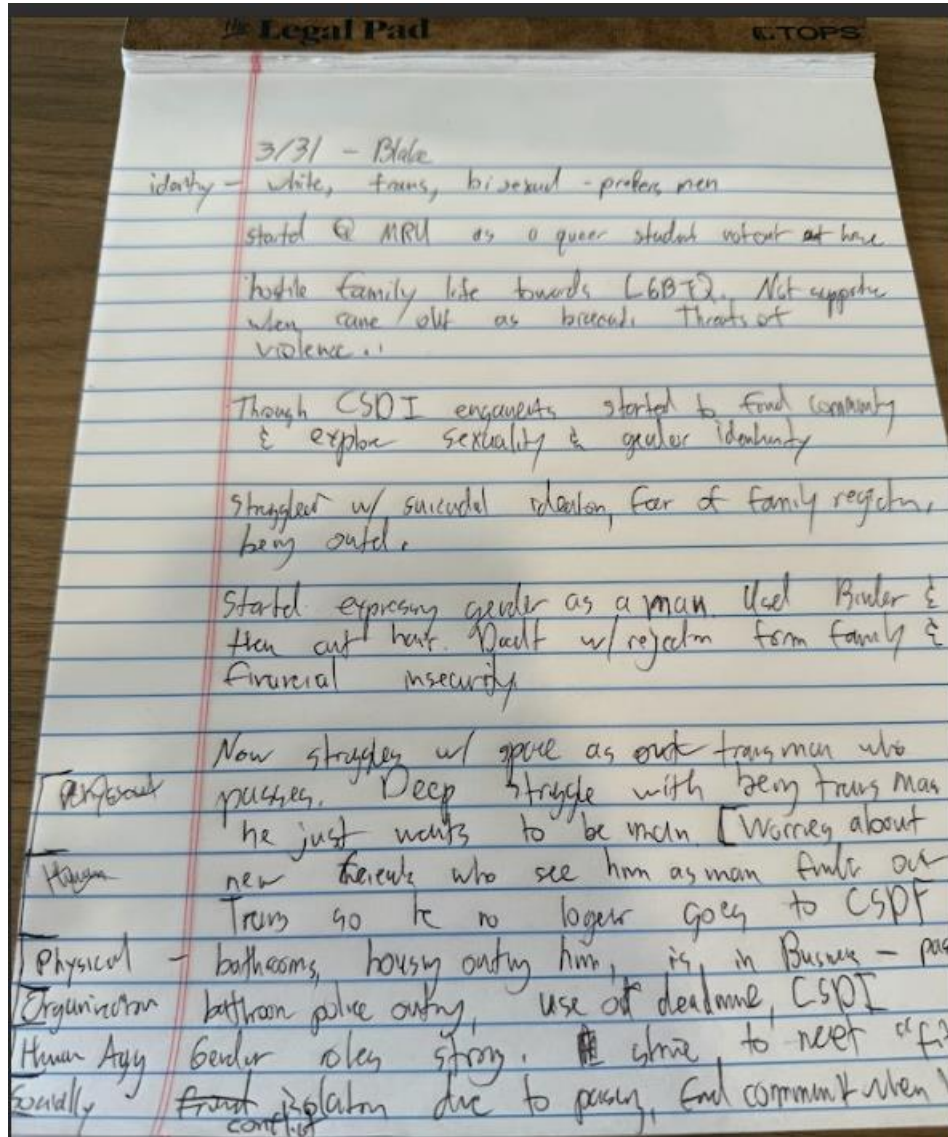
**Final Questions**

1. Are there any other elements of your campus experience that I didn't ask about that you'd like to share?
2. If you had one message to administrators or policy makers on how to support LGBTQ+ students belong on campus, what would it be?

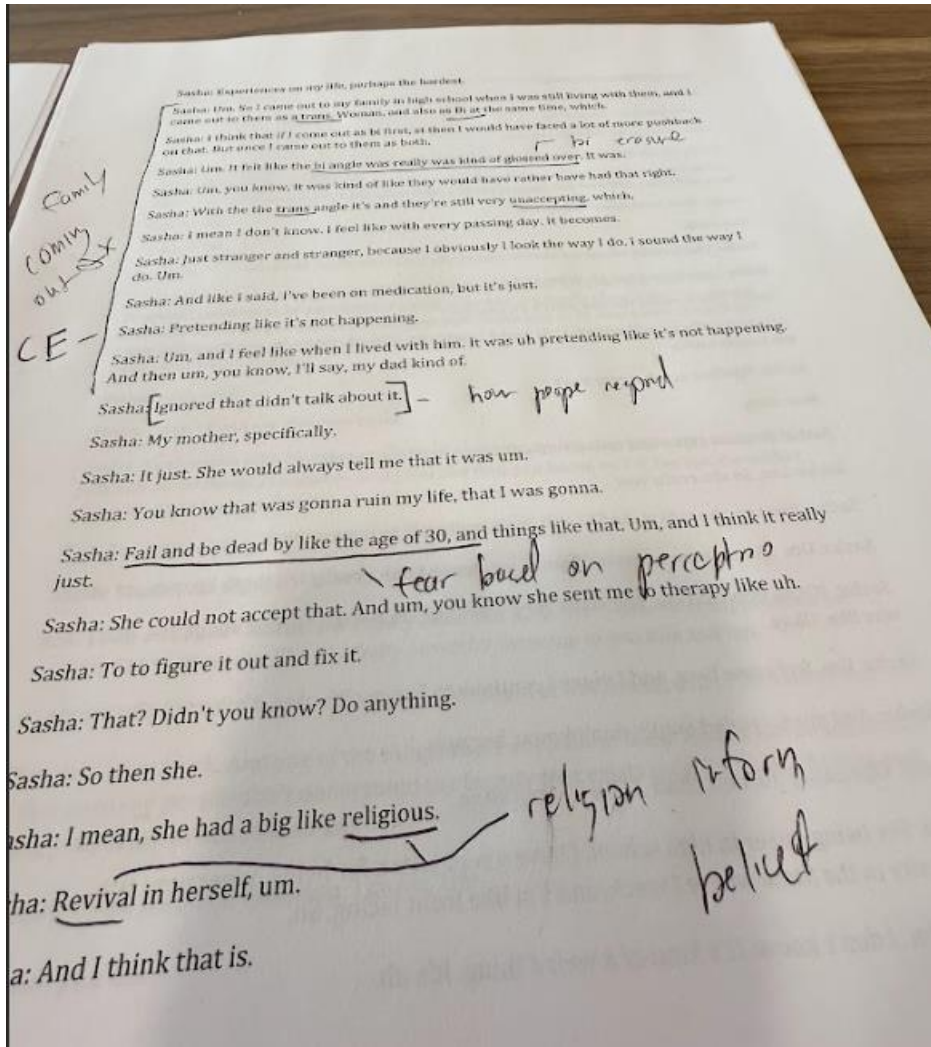
# APPENDIX I

## Coding & Memoing Process

### Phase 1- Memo example

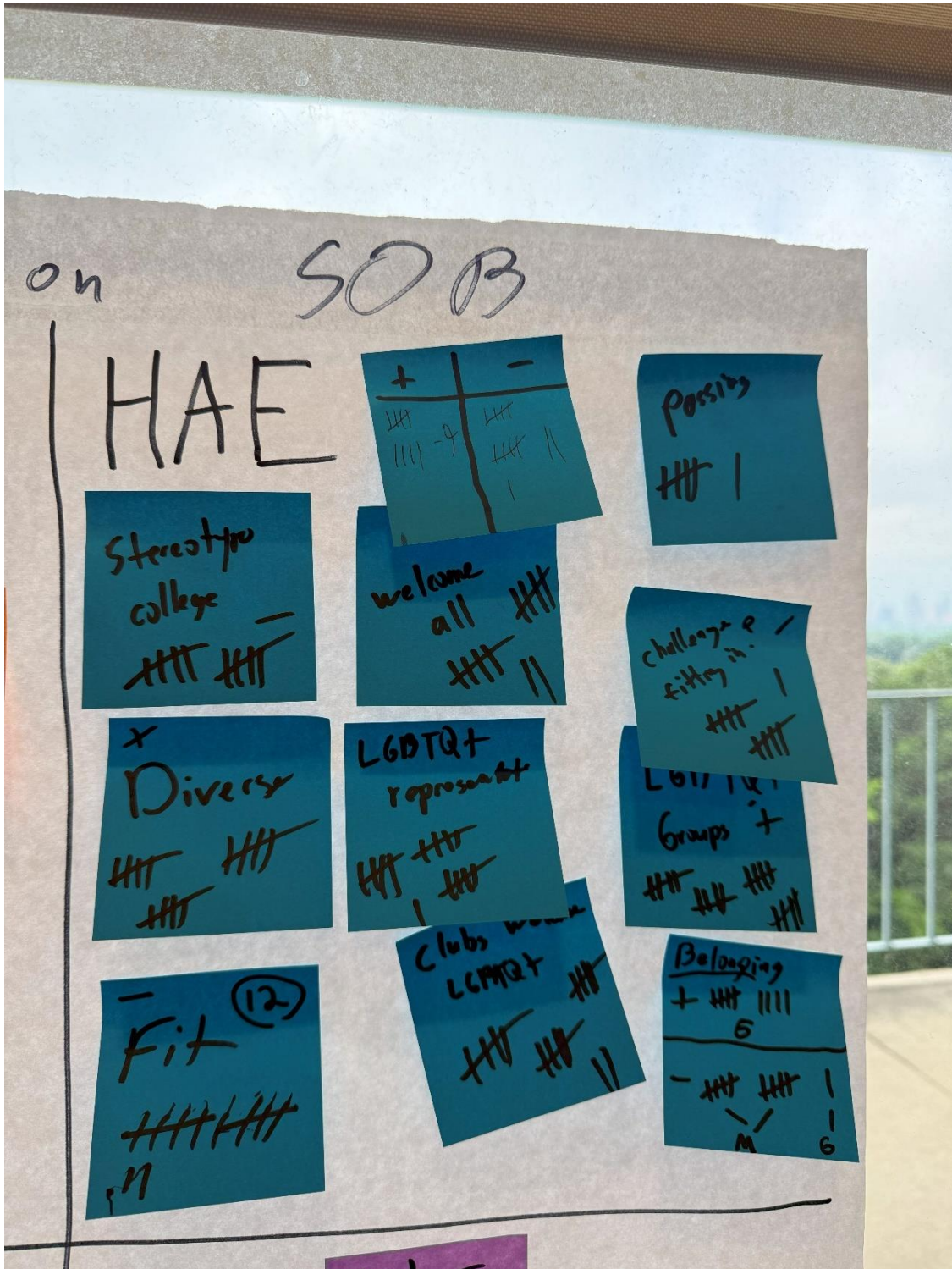


Phase 2 – Coding, mapping, and environment review example.

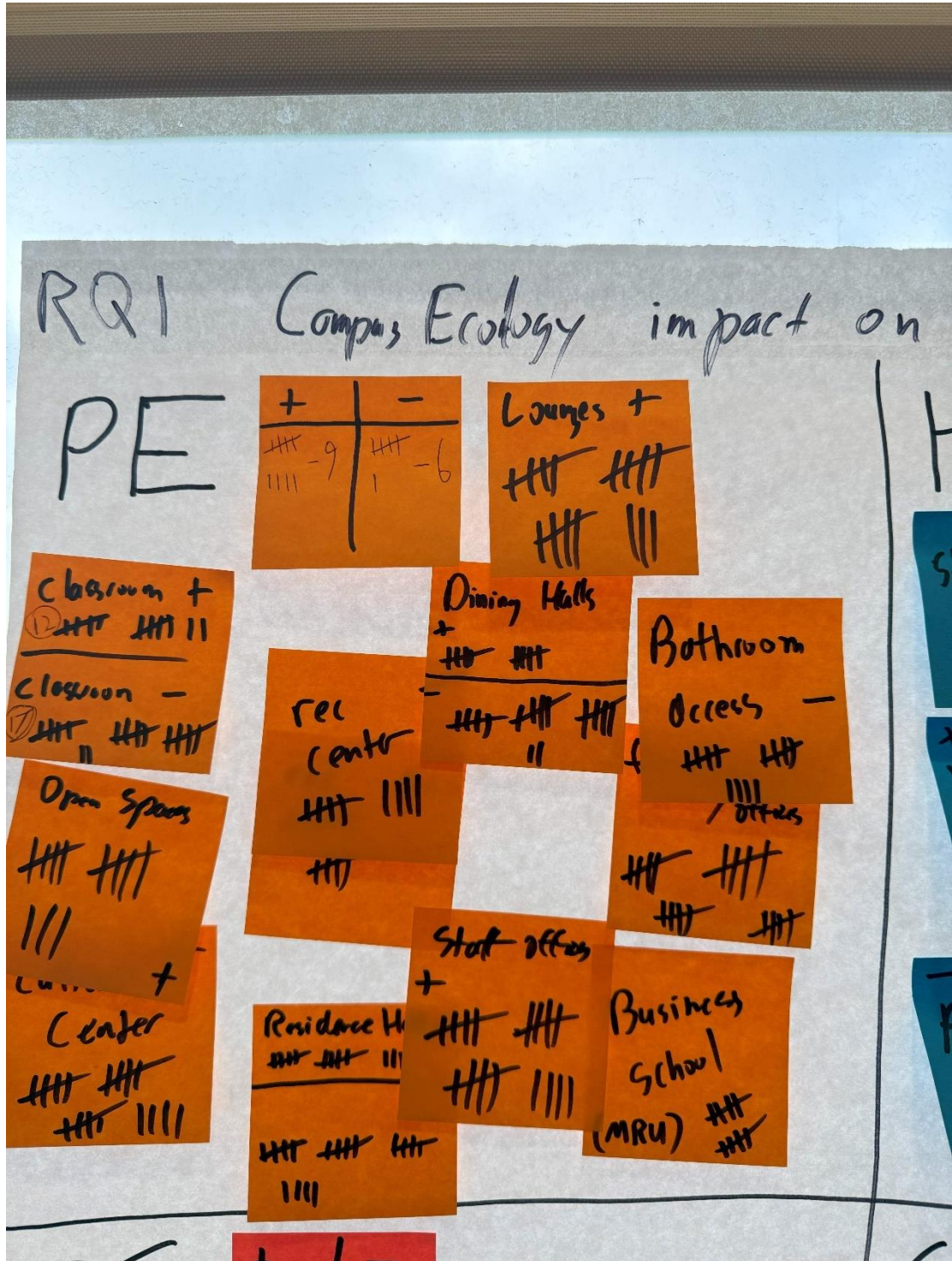


Phase 3 – RQ1 concept mapping Four Environments)

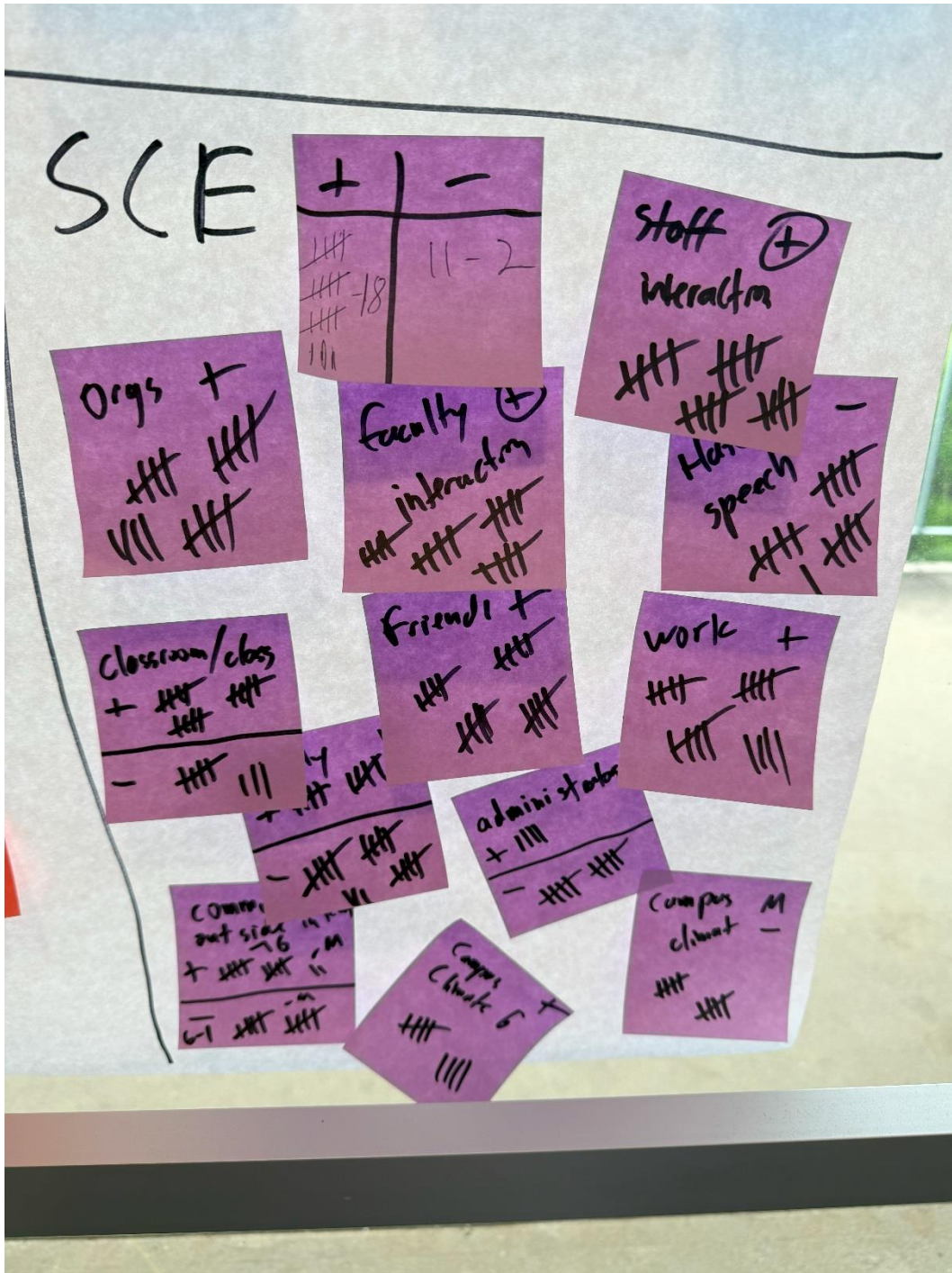




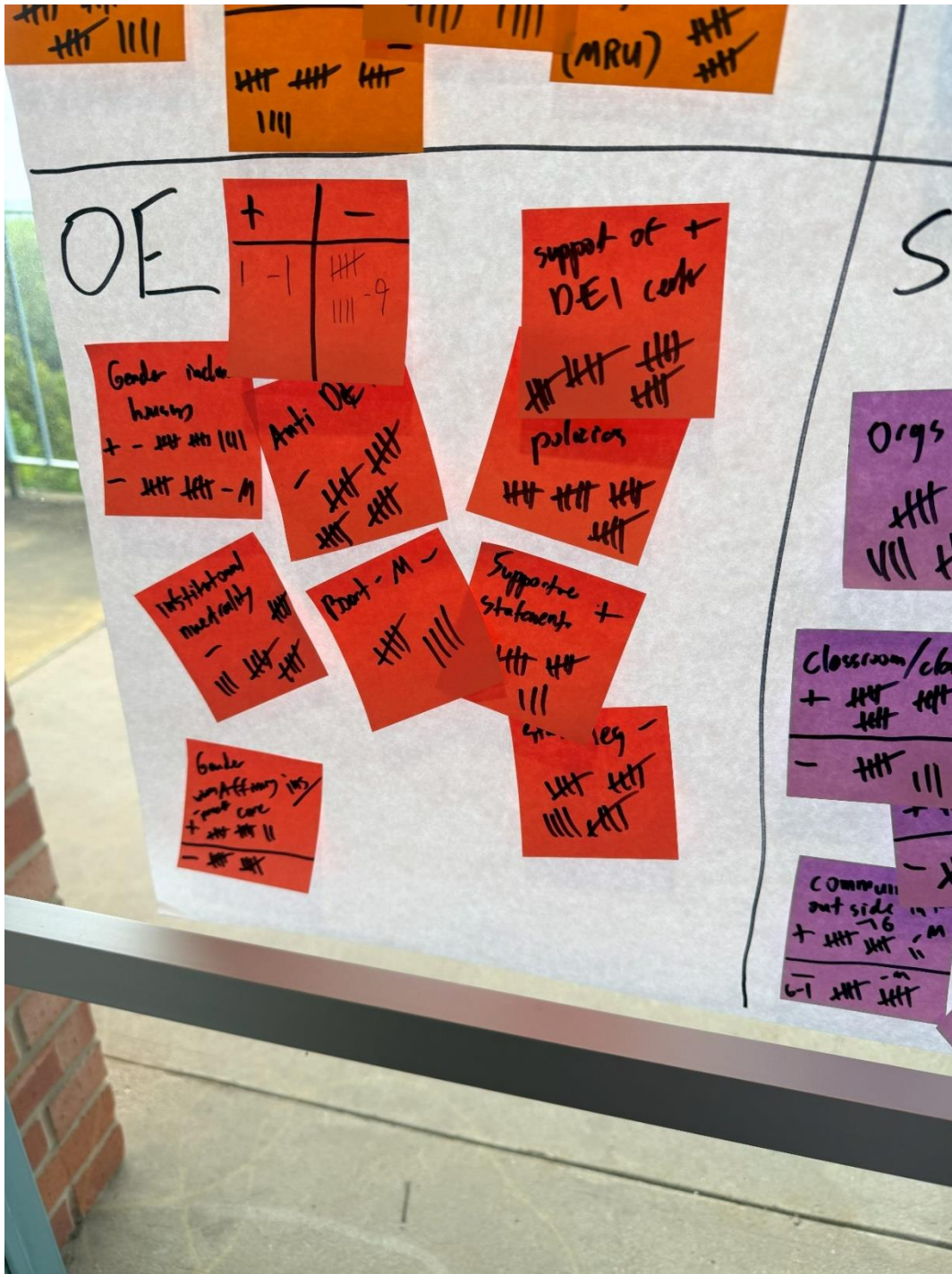
Phase 3 – RQ1 concept mapping (Physical Environment)



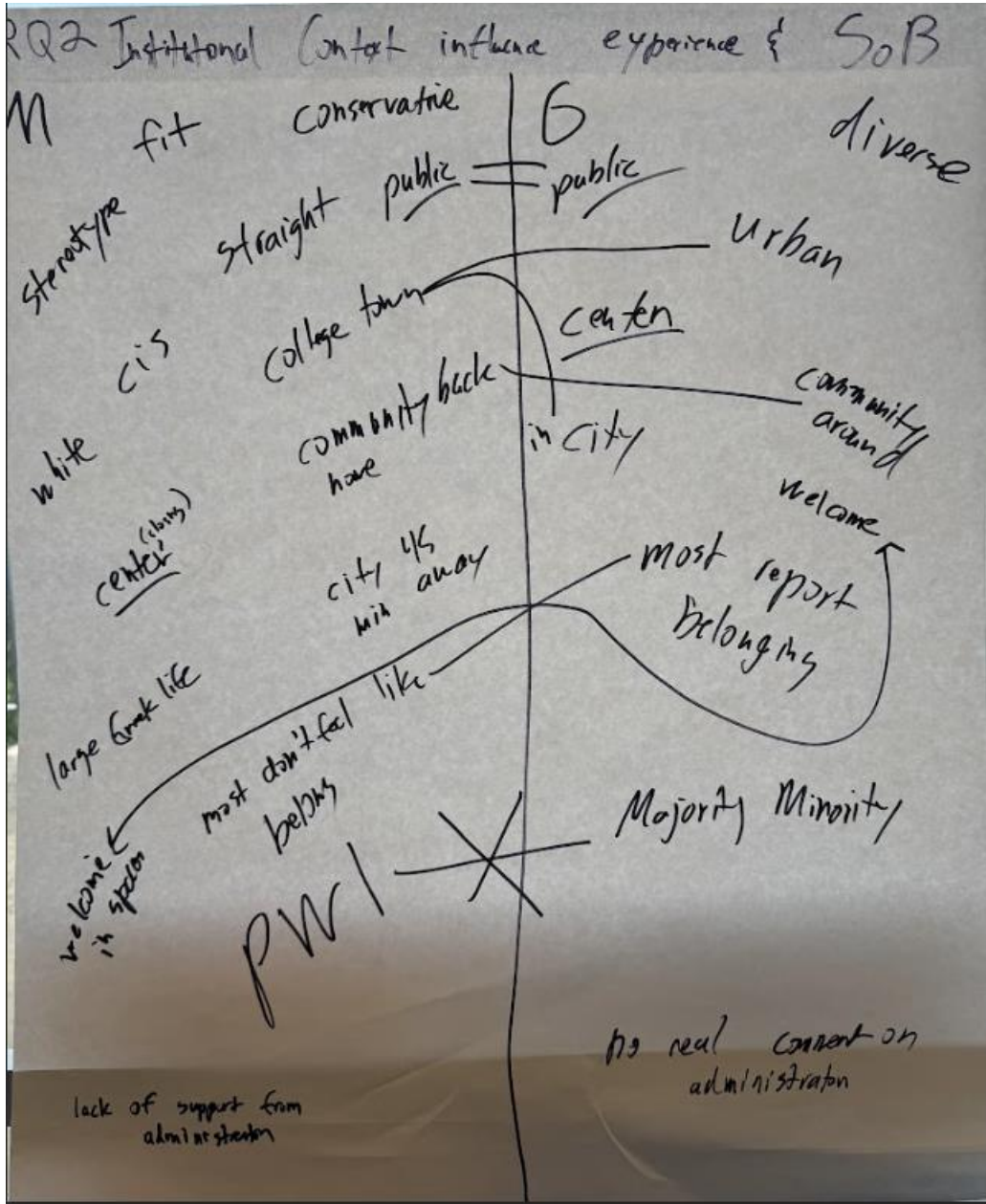
Phase 3 – RQ1 concept mapping (Socially Constructed Environment)



Phase 3 – RQ1 concept mapping (Organizational Environment)



Phase 3 - RQ2 concept mapping



---