Learning Beyond the Binary in the Bible Belt:
Supporting Transgender and Non-binary Students in Higher Education in the Heartland

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Abstract

Within the realm of education, among other public spaces, gender queer, transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identifying students struggle with their sense of self in spaces that deny their identities by design. Like most of the public realm, institutions of higher education were established and designed around a strict gender binary that leaves these spaces inaccessible for gender queer students and staff. Gender diverse students entering public education in the South-Central and South-Eastern region of the United States, often referred to as the Bible Belt, face even greater aspects of inaccessibility. This region is dominated by fundamentalist Christian thinking which often influences the ways in which legislation is passed within these states affecting all public spaces, including higher education. Despite legislative attempts to hinder and even eradicate gender diverse individuals from accessing public spaces like higher education, public institutions within this region continue to work to create accessible and supportive environments in which gender queer students can participate if not thrive on their campuses. This research explores the ways in which institutions of higher education in the Bible Belt support transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse individuals on their campuses in addition to how well, if at all, students within this community perceive their institution as an accessible and supportive environment for them. Through interviews with gender queer students and support staff specifically dedicated to creating accessible spaces for them on campus, this research seeks to discover current practices and their efficacy, as well as the expectations and needs of students while on campus. Although most institutions have a small support staff specifically dedicated to serving underrepresented students on campus, the desperately needed systemic, structural, and administrative changes require both the buy-in of higher administration and a lack of legislative interference. The student voices represented in this study provide a further understanding of the needs of gender diverse people on campus providing the opportunity to better serve this population on individual campuses.

Keywords: higher education, educational access, educational support, transgender, non-binary, gender queer, gender diverse, gender non-conforming

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Author's Declaration

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to all the amazing gender queer individuals in my life who truly demonstrate the beauty and joy of living authentically as yourself. For their patience as I learned and unlearned my own internalized biases and for lovingly teaching me how best to serve and support them as we journey through this world together.

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Introduction

Gender fluidity and diversity are a major point of interest in the field of education as the variety of gender definitions has grown significantly over the last twenty years, especially among young people going through their secondary and higher education experiences (Rankin and Beemyn, 2012). In a study performed by Rankin and Beemyn (2012), participants used over 100 different terms to describe their identity in reference to gender. In the social structure of the United States, which is organized around the binary of sex assigned at birth, individuals who identify outside that binary face the struggle of navigating gendered spaces while not conforming.

Within the realm of education, among other public spaces, gender queer, transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identifying students struggle with their sense of self in spaces that deny their identities by design (Bragg et al., 2018; Paechter et al, 2021). Restrooms on campus, school sanctioned athletics, health education and services, and countless other school policies alienate students who do not fall within the realm of the constructed male/female binary prevalent in larger society. This makes navigating spaces which should be welcoming and supportive of gender queer students' diverse identities difficult, to say the least. Educational atmospheres should be those in which students of all identities can learn and grow in both their academic and personal lives—building confidence in themselves, their capabilities, and their personal identities. Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasize that "growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing along and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem" (p. 173) are key factors in developing self-esteem in identity. Cultivating this kind of strong self-esteem within a traditional school setting, however, can prove difficult when the environment in which these students spend the majority of the day, directly opposes their personal identity.

The gender binary becomes more emphasized in highly traditional areas, such as the South-Central and South-Eastern region of the United States where Christian fundamentalism is widely practiced and is, oftentimes, a societal expectation. Because of its highly traditional and conservative population which dictates social, political, and educational norms across the region, this territory of the United States is often referred to as the Bible Belt. Highly conservative values in this region influence interactions as small as interpersonal encounters to large scale legislation across the state and local communities. Leaning on the support of the large population

of self-identified ‘born-again Christians’ in their constituency, lawmakers in this region frequently use their faith as reasoning behind the introduction of new laws that would restrict the rights and freedoms of those they have deemed hostile against their belief system, including anti-equity laws against gender queer individuals (Bull & Gallagher, 2001). Societal norms and legislation that only assume the presence of two genders significantly impact public spaces, including institutions of education, and, in some cases, exclude any concept of identity outside of this binary method of thinking. Rosky (2017) discusses how public schools are vital institutions within democracy and lay the foundations for citizenship. When those schools fail to acknowledge, or worse condemn, the humanity and validity of LGBTQ youth, it leads to bullying, isolation, and even violence within the walls of education.

Christian fundamentalism is marked by a narrow understanding and strict adherence to biblical tradition and rules. Reverence to, and expectations of traditional roles within society based on gender—a hierarchical structure in which women take a supportive role to their male counterparts with acceptable tasks and responsibilities designated between each group—are rampant and used to devise societal regulations. This leaves gender queer individuals without a clear, defined space within these societal constructs. Due to its strict, conservative ideals regarding sex and gender, individuals who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth or identify outside of the gender binary, oftentimes find daily life in this region difficult and, at times, dangerous in forms of verbal and even physical abuse from peers, parents, and school officials by not fitting in to the established hierarchy set by Christian traditional, familial, and social structures (Barton, 2010; Stone, 2018).

A public institution of higher education in the United States is designed to serve the population of that state, so the social and cultural influences of the area largely impact the ways in which the institution is structured, run, and the culture that is cultivated on the campus. In a state or region that is openly hostile to ideals and ways of life outside the close adherence to fundamental Christian beliefs, public institutions will often thusly reflect these values because many of their participants are locally derived and may already align with regional collective identity (CollegeSimply, 2022; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). This can make the higher education experience inaccessible to students with diverse gender identities. The way in which the institution is structured and the religious ideology of those with the most influence over it (the administration and the state government) may be actively working against creating

space that is welcoming and affirming to transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identities.

Research Questions

Institutions of higher education in general, however, often boast progressive, critically thinking and diverse and accepting campuses even within this highly conservative region—providing gender queer students a more inviting, supportive, and possibly even gender affirming environment to be themselves without (as much) scrutiny and prejudice. The guiding research questions for this study seek to establish whether and, if so, how institutions of higher education within this region are building an accessible experience for gender diverse students and how impactful those efforts are according to the student population in question. By approaching the research two-fold, as indicated below, I hoped to gain insight in both the efforts made by these institutions and their efficacy within a single study.

1. To what extent do public universities in the Bible Belt region of the United States create supportive and accessible spaces for transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary students on campus and how?
    a) What specific resources do universities provide to help support these students through their education?
2. How does the gender queer community of students on campus perceive the effectiveness of this support in their own education?
    a) To what extent is higher education considered an accepting/accessible space by students with gender non-conforming identities?
    b) What are key aspects, if any, of the higher education experience that make students believe their identities are affirmed and accepted in this environment?

Researcher Background

I centered this research within the Bible Belt because though I spent my secondary education outside of this region, my family all come from Texas and Oklahoma originally. It is where I attended primary school and where I returned to pursue higher education and have continued to live and work for the past ten years at three different universities in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Despite its ability to feel exclusionary, judgmental, and even hostile, I found peace, love, and kindness in the heartland of the United States, and it is where I choose to build my life. By conducting my research here rather than anywhere else or even in a larger, nation-wide study, I hope to have even a small impact on the ways in which this region responds to the diverse communities that already live and thrive—as best they can—where they also call home.

Though I am not a member of the gender queer community, as a bisexual woman I am part of the LGBTQ community at large, and I have always shared an empathetic connection with students who identify with all facets of the acronym. I strive to be an effective ally for them through their trials navigating public life. I have worked as a student services professional and academic advisor at three large, public universities in the Bible Belt and with various student populations—first-time full-time, non-traditional, first- and second-year students and those preparing for graduation, post-grad and graduate, online and on-campus, low-income, first-generation, etc. I work closely with many students within the LGBTQ community on campus, among others, and strive to make my office an accessible and supportive space for all students seeking my help throughout their degree progress. My job revolves around not only helping guide them through their educational experience regarding their coursework and keeping them on track for graduation, but also in being an advocate and support system for them through all the anxieties higher education can bring. I listen to their struggles navigating campus culture and their excitement at inciting change therein.

Throughout my education and my continued work within a public institution in the Bible Belt, I have been faced with and learned through my own privilege as a cis-gender white woman who passes as heterosexual in the public sphere. I had to consciously learn and observe the exclusivity rampant in public space designed around the gender binary to truly begin to comprehend the struggles of students who do not identify within a restrictive understanding of gender. And as I continued to listen, learn, and engage in the conversations I had with students and other members of campus it began to be clear to me that despite the proclamations from the

universities regarding diversity and inclusion and support for students, in the eyes of the students themselves these support systems were often lacking.

Alternatively, students are also quick to emphasize the comfort they receive on campus. This progressive space full of critical thinkers may be flawed and inaccessible at times but is oftentimes still a far more welcoming community than the highly traditional (religious fundamental) places from where they may have come. It would seem that higher education within the Bible Belt simultaneously empowers and restricts identities outside the gender binary by giving these students a space to learn and grow interpersonally while also adhering to a binary construction of certain amenities and social aspects of campus life. I wanted to explore that in a meaningful way—giving voice to both the students and the institutions themselves regarding the ways in which they create accessible and supportive space for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students on campus.

Explanation of Terminology

This study focuses on a specific population of students attending institutions in a distinctive region of the United States. Due to the highly particular nature of the sample, it is important to identify the terms that frequently appear and why they were chosen over a multitude of other linguistic options available when discussing the community involved in this research, the region in which it was performed, and the types of institutions that were chosen from which to recruit participants. These factors are important to the understanding of the results of this research.

I acknowledge that terminology and language vary across territories and communities. In particular, the terms used to define identity can be highly personal and nuanced. To remain consistent and clear throughout the study, the vocabulary that will be used is outlined below.

LGBTQ Terminology

Language, identifiers, and vocabulary surrounding the gender and sexually diverse community are dependent on factors like geographic location, education, and personal and community preferences. A prime example is LGBTQ versus LGBTQIA versus LGBTQ2S+ to name a few of the varied acronyms used to encompass the whole of the sexual and gender diverse community in general. This illustrates the multitude of terms that can be used to define the community in its entirety let alone the different subgroups and personal identities therein. For

this reason, it is important to outline the terms used and why in order to establish common language and its purpose within this study.

The focus of this study is to highlight those who identify within the gender diverse community, which is a broad category that fits a wide range of personal identities. Oftentimes, the definition of gender identity indicates something to the extent of "a person's internal sense of being a male or a female" (Soukup, 2017, p. 7). Though partially accurate, this ignores the fluid nature of the gender spectrum as many gender-diverse people find themselves outside of the male/female binary. Since this study specifically looks at any individual who identifies outside of the gender expectations of their sex assigned at birth, I will predominantly use the terms transgender, gender queer or diverse, gender non-conforming, and non-binary to describe these individuals as they are the terms that appeared most frequently throughout my research and are widely inclusive. These terms will allow for a broad range of participation because they encompass a more generalized community that can include other, more niche, and specific gender identities.

Transgender. Specifically, this study focusses on students who identify as a variable gender that does not necessarily align with their sex assigned at birth. These individuals oftentimes use the term transgender to identify themselves, though there are a multitude of other identifying terms within this larger category for those who want to more specifically define their gender identity (Soukup, 2017, p.6). This study will exclusively use this overarching term to define all individuals who identify with a gender identity outside their assigned sex at birth. As described by Nicolazzo (2017), the term transgender,

> "captures a wide array of identities, expressions, and embodiments that continue to grow and expand…Rather than being restrictive, the definition allows individuals to self-identify as trans* regardless of their desire to biomedically transition, to be recognized as another sex or gender (i.e. pass), or to be seen as existing within the false constructs of the gender binary" (p.21-24).

Non-binary. A person who identifies as gender non-binary views their gender outside of the male/female binary system established in western society (Soukup, 2017, p.13). These individuals may present as androgynous or a-gender—appearing gender-neutral, not presenting as either masculine or feminine—or they may be fluid on the gender spectrum—shifting their presentation from masculine to feminine to androgynous and any combination therein depending

on their feelings of presentation in the moment. They do not identify as either/exclusively male or female and frequently, but not necessarily singularly, use some form of gender-neutral pronouns like they/them, ze/zem, or other. The ways in which non-binary individuals express their gender varies with each person and may even change day to day (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

Gender Queer, Gender Diverse, and Gender Non-conforming. Gender queer/diverse/non-conforming are overarching terms that include transgender, non-binary, and any other identity that does not adhere to the strict notion of male and female as exclusive and singularly defining gender identities. Most frequently this term will be used on its own when discussing the population at large for this study as a blanket term that can be used to describe all participants. This does not indicate that the participants themselves identify specifically with the term gender queer or diverse or non-conforming but is merely the researcher's attempt to simplify language for the report itself.

Geographic Terminology

The region of the United States of America spanning from the western border of Texas to the east coast in the southern half of the country is often colloquially referred to as the Bible Belt. These states are largely populated by those with an ardent Christian fundamentalism who value the literal interpretation of the Christian Bible and its teachings and expect it to be a major part of their societal construct and identity (Heatwole, 1978; Thomas-Durrell, 2020; Webster et al., 2015). Though there is some conversation on which states should be included in this blanket term, ranging from around eleven to upwards of fourteen states, the most common inclusions are: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina (Heatwole, 1978; Webster et al., 2015).

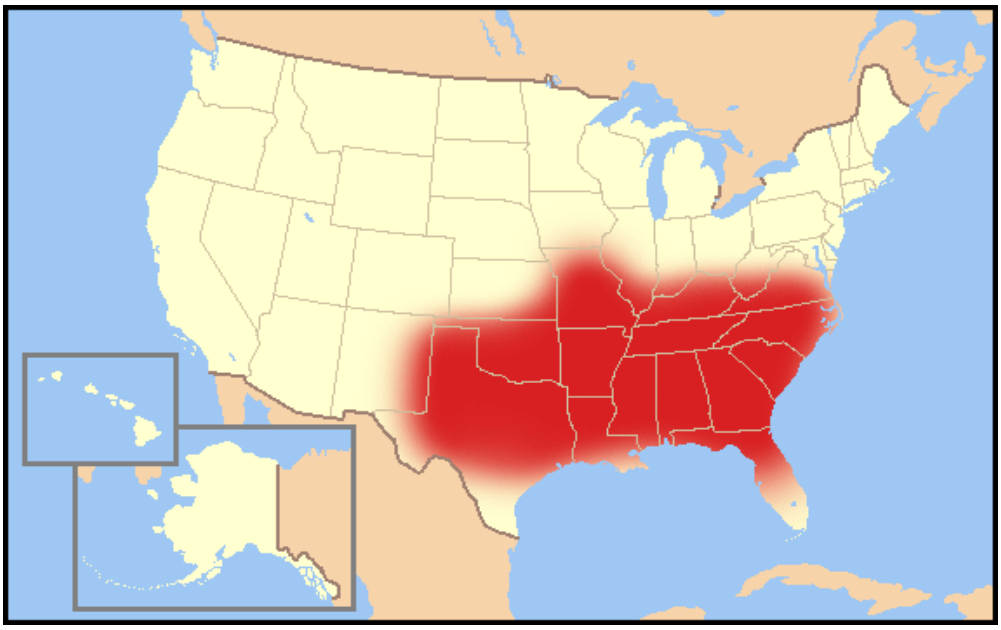

Fig. I.1. The Bible Belt of the United States. Map created by Wikipedia using data from Pew Research Center, 2022

The term Bible Belt will be used throughout this study to indicate this region of the United States, and all public institutions represented in this study fall within this distinct region of the country.

Educational Terminology

This study sought participants specifically from state funded, public institutions within the Bible Belt region of the United States. These state institutions operate on funding from the budget of the state government in addition to student tuition charges, donations from alumni and patrons, as well as other sources of income (athletics, events, etc.). The purpose of a state institution is to serve the population of that state specifically regarding education, so they are responsible for accepting a set number of student applicants from the secondary schools within the state which will meet a percentage requirement of their student body. This is typically between 60-75% depending on the state and their governing body (CollegeSimply, 2022).

Overview of Study

With the guidance of the research questions, this study sought to identify the ways in which gender non-conforming students are seeking accessible systems and support on their universities' campuses by addressing what is currently being practiced and where the gaps in that support lie. The student voices are key to the argument of efficacy on campus. Despite what administration and staff consider adequate support for this population, if the students themselves

do not see or feel the effects of that support, then these institutions cannot claim truly accessible campuses for this community.

Chapter 1 explores the ways in which public spaces, specifically public institutions of higher education, predominantly organize their systems and physical spaces around the gender binary. It also looks at best practices that institutions can follow to better help LGBTQ students—including the gender queer community—thrive in an environment not necessarily built for them.

Chapter 2 explains the methodology for conducing this research. The data was gathered through interviews with both staff and students from four different institutions of higher education across the Bible Belt to acquire a good understanding of both what kinds of support structures are already in place on these campuses and also how students within the gender queer community view the accessibility on their campuses for their specific needs. Using a qualitative approach allowed for the identification of common practices across campuses and for common stressors among the student population creating the opportunity for gaps to be identified.

Chapter 3 defines the meaning of creating accessible space and support structures for gender non-conforming students on campuses in this region beginning with having administrative buy-in for the need for progress regarding this community. Without administrative backing, the students' baseline needs for access and support like institutional visibility, allyship training for staff and students, and effective anti-discrimination policies cannot begin to be addressed.

The creation of safe and welcoming physical spaces is vital to a campus' ability to claim accessibility for diverse populations. Chapter 4 explores not only the impact of designated spaces like LGBTQ centers in institutions of higher education on the gender queer community but also the extent to which common and academic spaces around campus impact students' sense of support on campus. Although designated spaces for this community to feel safe and accepted are vital, being able to move freely around campus and have those spaces be equally accessible to them creates the sense that they are valued members of the campus community.

A university campus is a space where multiple cultures and communities are able to learn from one another through campus activities and events. Chapter 5 explores the programming on these campuses both specifically for gender diverse students and the campus at large to help foster community across various populations of students. Student groups and personal health

related programs help gender queer students engage with those on campus who identify similarly to them and help those who may be struggling with their identities in one aspect or another. Campus wide pride events expose the community at large to the joy and life of these individuals—creating a sense of community and understanding among varying student groups.

Though institutions are already working to serve and create accessible space for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students on campus, there is always progress to be made when it comes to student services. Chapter 6 investigates student expectations for progress and strategic plans that staff hope to implement to improve the day to day lives of this community in a higher education setting. However, it is also important to note the legislation actively working towards hindering public institutions from supporting gender queer individuals in a significant way through identity-denying laws which impact how these institutions use their funds to support this community.

The final discussion in Chapter 7 further examines exactly what accessibility and support mean for the gender queer population and what they expect that to look like for them. Like other students at a public institution, the gender diverse community expects a space that is welcoming and easily accessible for them to navigate without unnecessary roadblocks to their education that might make them feel as if their identity is a burden that must be accommodated.

Chapter 1

The Gender Binary and its Impact on Gender Non-Conforming Students in Higher Education

The South-Eastern and South-Central regions of the United States boast an extensive fundamentalist Christian population, leading to the moniker of the Bible Belt and a highly conservative political disposition (Thomas-Durrell, 2020; Woodberry & Sith, 1988). The conservative majority population living such a strict adherence to their faith makes certain ways of life and personal identity difficult to maneuver or find acceptance in their communities. Oklahoma, for example, is considered one of the "reddest"—most conservative—states in the United States because not a single county tallied a majority vote for a Democratic candidate in the 2008, 2012, 2016, nor 2020 elections (Ballotpedia.org, 2023). This indicates the state's firm adherence to traditional, conservative values, which are oftentimes resistant to identities outside the established social norms. In fact, Sally Kern, a former Oklahoma Representative in the state government, went so far as to equate homosexuality with terrorism, claiming its threat to the way of life and well-being of the state. Additionally, on May 7th, 2021, the governor of Oklahoma, Kevin Stitt, signed in to law an ordinance forbidding public institutions from requiring gender (as well as race and religious) diversity training for its students—hindering efforts of universities in the state to make their campuses more inviting and accessible spaces for their student population (Martinez-Keel, 2023).

Similarly, other states within the Bible Belt such as Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, and Louisiana have already passed, or are in the process of passing, legislature restricting identity recognition, medical care, and anti-discrimination practices for gender queer persons in their state. With politicians taking such an aggressive stance against members of the LGBTQ population and with "…corporate conservatives [having]… a wide influence on education, policy, and politics because of their financial support" (Mason, 2013, p. 169) in this region, these anti-LGBTQ sentiments can influence educational structure on a broad scale.

Despite political and social practices within the Bible Belt, however, public institutions of higher education pride themselves on progressive thinking and as initiators of change (Kezar, 2009). Colleges and universities across the United States, the conservative South and Midwest included, constantly work to adapt their non-discrimination policies, admissions requirements, and campus culture to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment for students

(Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Frietas, 2017). Many universities have specifically updated their non-discrimination policies over the past decade to include not only sexual orientation but gender identity in these official policies, advertising an accessible and inclusive space for both cisgender and gender queer students.

Though public institutions in higher education strive to be inclusive spaces for students and may not necessarily actively work against the transgender community, these campuses can oftentimes still be uninviting as their structure, policies, and procedures are designed around the strict gender binary established by western, societal norms. Students, faculty, and staff may be wholly unfamiliar with lifestyles that appear alternative to what they grew up knowing as "normal" which can lead to difficult and even hostile environments for transgender and non-binary students attempting to navigate the educational system. Institutional policy development may make campuses appear somewhat more accessible to students on paper. But these policies become much less effective to serve this population when they are not highly and prominently promoted within the physical institution, present on their website, or when they are not enforced by the institution's governing body (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017; Woodford *et al*., 2018; Lawrence & Mckendy, 2019).

A great deal of research has already been done regarding visibility, accessibility, and the experiences of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals in public spaces. In order to focus on that research, I center studies that were performed in higher education in the United States to better demonstrate how my work specifically within the Bible Belt at publicly funded institutions extends the conversation. Though the experiences of the gender diverse community across the western world are extremely similar, it was important to me to predominantly, though not exclusively, use literature on the experiences of students in the United States and especially those cases that work with student voices explicitly.

The Gender Binary in Higher Education

Like most public spaces, institutions of higher education are highly gendered. Some of the most common challenges that face gender non-conforming students include, but are not limited to, gendered housing policies, sports teams, social clubs, organizations, bathroom and locker room access, official university records and standardized forms, and severe lack of programming such as student organizations, activities, and community engagement with the university at large (Frietas 2017, Rankin and Beemyn 2012; Wernick et al., 2017; Zeeman et al.,

2017). Social access and physical access go hand in hand when discussing public spaces (Adair 2015). Students become cut off from the typical university experience when they are limited to an either/or choice when it comes to gender from as early on as their application form. This first discriminatory act affects what residence halls students can live in, what locker rooms they can use, and what types of organizations they can pursue membership in once arriving on campus (Rankin & Beemyn 2012). This initial act of discrimination almost completely excludes gender diverse students from participating in the 'typical collegiate experience.'

In a large-scale assessment of institutions of higher education in the United States, Beemyn (2005) found that despite the constantly growing number of gender non-conforming students at university, these students are often met with methods of record keeping that only acknowledge two sexes. Though these initial findings from Beemyn are almost twenty years old, their continued efforts among many other gender diversity researchers continue to find similar results in which despite their growing visibility, gender queer students continue to face highly gendered and inaccessible spaces in education (Adair, 2015; Beemyn, 2015; Beemyn, 2019; Freitas, 2017; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Kilgo, 2020; Knutson, et al., 2022; McGuire & Anderson, 2022; Neary, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2017; Praetcher et al, 2021; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Spade, 2011; Wentling, 2019; Wernick et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2018; Wright, 2021).

Intentional or not, the binary way in which institutions classify their students often signals to gender queer individuals that they are not necessarily welcome or free to feel included on campus from as early as registration before the student arrives. Once they reach campus, they must then face the reactions and potentially dangerous interactions with a large, unfamiliar student body. Despite the growing number of gender non-conforming students coming out on college campuses, students are often met with hostility—not only from other members of the student body, but from the faculty and staff as well (Beemyn 2005; Seelman, 2014). While transgender and other gender diverse students find barriers in their daily lives when attempting to navigate campus and their academic pursuits, their cisgender classmates enjoy the ease of navigating a system specifically built for them, giving them the false sense that these highly gendered spaces do not actually exist (Nicolazzo, 2017). By creating spaces that only align strictly to the gender binary, separating students into one of only two categories, and providing very few spaces where the concept of gender is extended or does not exist leads to misunderstanding of the gender diverse experience, exclusion from quintessential collegiate

experiences, and can sometimes lead to dangerous situations on campus for gender diverse students (Nicolazzo, 2017; Hill et al., 2021).

Best Practices for Institutions

A great deal of research has been conducted regarding best practices for institutions for serving and creating accessible spaces for the gender queer community to better thrive on college and university campuses, which includes everything from creating designated LGBTQ centers for community building to developing more inclusive admissions applications and housing opportunities for students (Hill, et al., 2021; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Linley et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017; Tillapaugh, 2015). By creating inclusive policies to disseminate across campuses, institutions can work to become inviting and safe spaces for transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse students to flourish in their educational pursuits rather than experience barriers to their education. Lawrence and Mckendry (2019) explain how,

> "…trans and non-binary people are at heightened risk of experiencing bullying and harassment. It is vital therefore that your policy includes specific information on what the institution regards as bullying and harassment, what protections and rights are in place for trans employees, and details of accountability and grievance processes" (p. 188).

By outlining the specific protocols in place for dealing with gender-based harassment, institutions can begin to develop more welcoming and safe spaces and a culture of inclusion and understanding for its genderqueer student body.

Lawrence and Mckendry (2019) go on to describe how, "[p]erhaps the single most important thing to help people settle into their new course is the provision of highly visible and welcoming opportunities to disclose and discuss their needs" (p. 81). In their study, nearly 50% of participants were not even cognizant of the existence of a gender diverse policy on their campuses or if there was any kind of additional support for those students within the gender non-conforming community. Almost a quarter of participants expressed how they felt completely unable to even discuss their identity with the institution at all (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019, p. 81). If students are not able to comfortably disclose and discuss their gender identity on campus, their overall experience throughout their education will be mired by constant masking while they engage on campus and with their instructors and peers (Seelman, 2014).

However, if institutions are able to consciously promote gender diversity by hosting campus events such as welcome week and other campus wide experiences, then cultural inclusion can be better achieved on a campus wide scale rather than just within highly specialized community spaces. This will, in turn, promote a greater sense of belonging and ultimately greater retention numbers on campus (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Seelman, 2017; Thomas et al., 2017). Seemingly small changes such as adding inclusive demographic information on admissions forms and consciously tracking the persistence and retention and graduation rates of LGBTQ students allows the community to feel seen and cared for on their campuses (Dewitt, 2012). Not only do the students within the community see these inclusive acts but so does the rest of the student community as they fill out their application forms and wander through welcome week activities or other campus events. Inclusive acts therefore normalize the presence of gender queer students on their campuses and promote a more universally inclusive climate (Dewitt, 2012; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

LGBTQ Centers

Cultural and community centers and spaces on college campuses create an immediate sense of belonging and community for students, especially those with minority and/or marginalized identities. These centers are typically professionally staffed with experts in the field who are oftentimes members of the community they serve (Dewitt, 2012). Multicultural, racial, and sexual orientation and gender inclusive spaces help provide students on predominantly white, cis-gender institutions of higher education with places where they are free to be their most authentic selves which they may not feel safe doing elsewhere on campus.

Students' ability to thrive on campus and their positive experience throughout their education is connected to the institutional climate, and students best thrive when they feel their identities are being affirmed by the campus, even if it is only within these centers (Hill *et al*., 2021). Hill et al (2021) explain how, "LGBTQ+ students consider and embrace multiple dimensions of their identities as they navigate college environments and reflect on these dimensions positively, even when facing challenging circumstances" (p. 274), because they were able to find community within the sometimes-hostile spaces of a university campus. These spaces allow students to engage in LGBTQ specific content and they provide dedicated support for these students which can empower their success on campus significantly (Pitcher *et al*., 2018).

In their book on the transgender experience in college, Nicolazzo (2017) explains how many transgender and other gender diverse students are so disciplined in the cultural reality of the gender binary and how that is expressed and strictly adhered to in public spaces that they frequently choose not to engage in discourse regarding gender and gender expression. They are more likely on these "compulsory heterogender[ist] campuses to comply with gender norms rather than resist and push back" (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 110). However, with the existence of LGBTQ centers on campus, transgender, non-binary, and students with other gender queer identities are more likely to find a space in which they can publicly express themselves. These centers are extremely influential in the lives of these students and their experiences on campus in a positive way (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; Rankin et al., 2010).

Though these spaces provide the opportunity for students to participate in activism and education work on campus and in the community at large, they are best utilized to create community for the LGBT student population, allowing them the opportunity to build friends and engage with other members of the queer community and allies on campus. These networks are not exclusively gender queer, as an LGBTQ center on campus will serve all population that fall within the acronym. Studies find that creating exclusively transgender or gender queer spaces are not necessary for this community to find a home at and thrive in higher education as long as they are able to build a kinship network within the campus and LGBTQ community at large there (Nicolazzo, 2017). Conversely, there are several reports of transgender and non-binary students on campus feeling excluded from these spaces that are supposed to be inherently welcoming to them (Goldberg, 2019, Kinney, 2005).

Due to LGBTQ centers being primarily focused on, and in many cases run by, the sexually diverse population—centering their programming on the LGB part of the acronym—transgender and other gender queer students on campus find themselves in yet another space that has not been designed for them. Especially in student run organizations, if there is not significant membership with gender diverse identities, the focus of planned events will naturally swing towards the sexually diverse experience rather than encompassing every letter in the acronym (Goldberg, 2019, Nicolazzo 2017).

Despite the shortcomings of some LGBTQ centers, they continue to be the most welcoming, accessible, and supportive spaces for transgender and non-binary students on their

respective campuses. Even if they do not cater specifically to this population as their main focus, they still provide what Hill et al. (2021) refer to as the 'queer bubble.'

The 'queer bubble' on campus serves to bring students within the community together in a space where they can collaborate socially, academically, and personally and create discourse outside of the heterogeneity of campus without fear of persecution and dangerous rejection from peers, staff, faculty, or leadership.

Educational Programming

Campus Community Education. Educational programming for not just students but faculty and staff as well is crucial to bolstering the campus climate and creating an understanding and, more importantly, supportive and accessible environment and ethos for transgender and other gender non-conforming students (Hill et al., 2021; Linley et al., 2016; Tillapaugh, 2015). By creating programming outside of the classroom, institutions can much more effectively educate large portions of the population and engage them in conversation with the LGBTQ community that is ever-present on their campuses (Dewitt, 2012).

By raising awareness of transgender and non-binary identities and dedicating an educational focus on diversity and inclusion, many of the issues surrounding these identities on campus could be somewhat alleviated. The more people become familiar with the concepts of gender diverse identities, personal pronouns—both binary and gender neutral—and the ways in which these communities enhance the campus experience, the more easily they can accept and embrace these identities in all their validity (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

Thriving as an LGBTQ Student on Campus

Like any other student on a college campus, gender queer students' ability to thrive in higher education is connected to their personal experiences on an individual level, the cultural climate of the institution, and the institution's ability to create accessible space for these students to learn and grow alongside their cisgender peers (Hill et al., 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017, Schreiner, 2010). Wentling (2019) explains that, "[t]rans students must navigate multiple campus spaces, carefully negotiate social interactions within each, and manage these relationships over the durations of their degree program(s)" (p. 130). Students thrive in an atmosphere that supports their goals as a learner and in their identity as a member of the collective campus community. And transgender, non-binary, and other gender queer students mostly have to create the spaces in which they are able to thrive on their own with only minimal help from the university at large.

Schreiner (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) describes a thriving student's experience as one in which the student is completely engaged on an intellectual (access to learning and personal academic determination), social (interpersonal relationships and connectedness, contribution to community, campus citizenship), and emotional (positive perspective) level throughout their collegiate experience. So even though certain factors such as overall campus climate and leadership support is completely out of the control of the gender diverse population, the ability to manage their own learning, identity, and community on campus can significantly impact their ability to thrive throughout their education (Hill et al., 2021; Knutson, 2022; Singh 2016; Singh & Jackson, 2012).

Building Community

One of the primary foundations of student success in higher education is the creation of community and the support one can draw from that community (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Hill et al., 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017; Schreiner, 2010; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Not all gender diverse students may face prejudice in their personal experience on campus, but most people will either know or have heard of a member of this demographic who have encountered hateful and even dangerous situations. Most students can also point to a time in which though they were not the object of bigoted speech, they overheard other students expressing transphobic views or using bigoted and exclusionary language in public spaces on campus (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019). For this reason, identifying spaces, community, networks of peers and professionals, and groups/organizations that not only respect but affirm a student's identity are paramount to the student experience (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Hill et al, 2021).

Community building happens both on campus and online and is most efficient when these resources are made easily discoverable and accessible. It is not enough for institutions to create spaces for positive interactions if students are not able to find them without having to ferret out their existence. A prominent online presence on institutional websites allows for students to quickly see there are welcoming and affirming spaces on their campus and points them directly to them with ease. In these easily accessible spaces transgender and non-binary students can "form kinships, access support and regroup following encounters with aggression" (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019, p. 39).

These spaces allow for students to feel comfortable bringing up the topic of gender, gender identity, and gender expression without fear of misunderstanding, confusion, or even

hostility. Many studies have explored how students navigate institutions by being deliberate and cautious regarding when, where, and to whom they choose to disclose their identity and only bringing up gender and identity in spaces that felt safe, supportive, and allowed them to practice resilience (Hill et al., 2021; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017). Nicolazzo (2017) found that, for transgender and gender queer students,

> "By not bringing up gender, they were able to save their energy for people and situations that helped them feel refreshed, rejuvenated, and able to cope with the cultural realities of gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism they experienced" (p. 110).

By building community with the LGBTQ population on campus, either virtually or through LGBTQ centers, the gender diverse population can express their identity and live authentically on campus without having to mask or diminish that identity like they do in other spaces. Many students interviewed by Hill et al. (2021) "expressed interpersonal thriving as involving relationships with other LGBTQ+ individuals and connections to LGBTQ+ communities," indicating that the ability to build community on campus is paramount to the ability to thrive throughout their education (p. 275-276).

Positive Framing of Experience

Due to its prevalence, most research on the transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming experience contextualizes it through a lens of oppression and the failings of the institutions to serve this population (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019). For this reason, Hill et al. (2021) approached their research through an "explicitly positive perspective" (p. 38) in order to embrace Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based research to provide the lighter, more uplifting side of the trans experience on college campuses outside of the marginalization and discrimination from peers and staff (Hill et al., 2021; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

One of the greatest influences on gender diverse students' positive experience in higher education is the ability to "embrace multiple dimensions of their identities as they navigate college environments and reflect on these dimensions positively, even when facing challenging circumstances" (Hill et al., 2021, p. 274). Through the discovery of spaces and communities in which they can practice their gender rather than mask it, students can experience the liberation that comes from being their authentic selves among their peers despite the chronic and systemic

trans* and gender diverse oppression so prevalent on campuses (Butler, 2006; Nicolazzo, 2017; Hill et al., 2021).

By seeking out specifically positive experiences from gender queer students on campus, Hill et al. (2021) found that thriving in higher education for this demographic relied heavily on one's ability to manage their identities to best protect themselves from potentially hostile spaces while also embracing their identity and participating in advocacy and Pride work. They found that, naturally, a positive campus climate is extremely helpful in creating a positive experience for these students. When students are able to connect to the LGBTQ community on campus through programming, LGBTQ centers, or student organizations, it provides them with a buffer from triggering encounters and spaces which allows them "to think highly of themselves as they navigate various environments" (Hill et al., 2021, p. 278).

Institutional Shortcomings

'Institutional resources' is used as an umbrella term to define the services, opportunities, and official messaging brought forth by the university/college/institution. For example, some institutions put forth specific policies and messaging that they are LGBTQ friendly prior to students ever physically being present on the campus (Hill et al, 2021; Vacarro & Newman, 2017, Woodford et al, 2018). When it comes to thriving on campus, Hill et al. (2021) found that,

> "…students indicated thriving in part thanks to institutional resources, those that were LGBTQ+ specific and those that were not, such as counseling centers. These resources contribute to students' senses of the campus climate; in their absence, campus climate likely hampers LGBTQ+ students' capacities to thrive. Institutional dimensions that advance LGBTQ+ student thriving affirmed LGBTQ+ students' multiple identities and facilitates connections to LGBTQ+ specific communities and curriculum" (p.278).

This indicates that though students are able to thrive by embracing their multiple identities, navigating spaces by managing those identities to best protect themselves, and by finding community within what might be a hostile environment, institutional support is still important and helps to foster a personal sense of belonging on campuses.

Several studies have found that, despite their efforts, educational institutions oftentimes fall short of the necessary support structures needed to welcome gender non-conforming students and provide them with the accessibility they need to easily maneuver campus like their cis-

gender classmates (Rankin & Beemyn 2012, Davis 1989, Robinson & Diaz 2006). Wentling (2019) explores how,

> "The climate for trans students in different campus spaces depends on the institutional actors within that space. Whereas some faculty and staff members are informed about and sensitive to the needs of trans students, many are not, which means that trans students are often misrecognized and discriminated against in campus departments, organizations, and policies" (p. 130).

Because of this inherent alienation from the general population, students with marginalized identities oftentimes create spaces for themselves within the university experience such as clubs and organizations, as previously discussed, which allow them to work in opposition to the institutional structures that might exclude them.

Student led organizations provide a much-needed space for students to feel included, seen and accepted as their true selves; they can, however, cause a heightened sense of isolation and even anxiety because they might feel like the *only* safe space for students on highly gendered campuses (Frietas 2017). Renold (2005) discussed how organizations such as these are a means of collective resistance and, though isolating, are crucial for gender non-conforming youth as it gives them a space to maintain non-hegemonic gender identities.

Thinking Through the Conservative South, Queer Theory, and the University Experience

The Bible Belt region of the United States is demarcated by religious homogeneity and its highly conservative disposition socially and politically adhering to strict patriarchal and heteronormative ideals (Woodberry & Sith, 1998; Thomas-Durrell, 2020). Ideals such as these approach the lifestyles and identities of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals as anomalies within society that may present a direct threat to the established, traditional way of constructing societal norms—a fight they have been waging within the political system since the early 1900s. In the 1920s, the conservative rebellion against secular liberalism began through strict opposition to any attempt to modernize Christianity and through the inversion of the narrative of oppression.

Pat Robertson, a highly visible evangelical who began the Christian Coalition and even ran for president for the religious right, effectively drew media attention and support for anti-LGBT legislation by portraying Christian evangelicals as victims of the groups he had a strong hand in marginalizing rather than as the oppressors (Bull & Gallagher, 2001). Extensive media

coverage involving Robertson and other prominent evangelical figures paired with campaign financing reforms gave the religious right the means and opportunity to influence the political sphere more directly to push Christian agendas including curriculum and conduct within public education (Bull & Gallagher, 2001; Rosky, 2017).

Anti-LGBTQ legislation like 'don't say gay' laws, which explicitly prohibit teachers from discussing queer communities at all in public classrooms, to be discussed more in depth in later chapters, are rampant in states with incumbent legislators who are directly funded by Christian organizations. These legislators stand on religiously based 'morality' to denounce even the acknowledgement of queer lifestyles. This excludes and isolates LGBTQ students, leading to hostility and risks the physical and mental well-being of queer students within public institutions (Rosky, 2017).

Alternatively, queer theory provides the understanding that gender queer individuals—more specifically those who are students in higher education—are not an inconsequential population morally corrupting the halls of education, but a common and valid community presence that should be supported through accessible practices in public spaces (Butler 1993; Watson 2005). The "most prominent queer theorists work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render identity singular, fixed, or normal," which allows for the reading of any text, space, or construct to be interpreted through a 'queer' lens rather than focusing on societal norms or *the way things should be* (Watson, 2005, p. 74).

The harsh, binary structures of this highly religious and conservative region seek to erase visibility of this community and the community itself through legislation that dehumanizes and illegitimizes queerness. Sedgwick (1993) explains that, "[s]eemingly this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants" (p. 3). By pretending that queer identities are somehow less valid and implementing laws that reflect that ideology creates a highly isolating experience for individuals who represent this population (Lorde, 1984; Sedgwick, 1993). This notion is reflected in the findings of this study where we listen to the voices of gender queer students on these campuses, their feelings of unwelcomeness, and how they must seek out those few spaces that are in fact safe for them to be themselves.

This research aligns its thinking with queer theory in its assertion that the gender diverse community have every right to access and acceptance in public spaces such as higher education

with an equitable experience to that of their peers despite the predominant socio-political climate which may otherwise attempt to deny their existence. Singh (2011) explains that in higher education,

> "…social justice considerations, especially inclusion strategies, have been incorporated into frameworks which strongly emphasize economic growth, human capital development and competitiveness imperatives, often over many other social goals relating to rights-based claims to fair access, public aspirations, etc." (p.491).

This indicates that despite social justice's presence as part of the policy making vocabulary within higher education, institutions are less concerned with service to the student body and creating equitable access to learning. Instead, they are primarily focused on the economic bottom line of the university (Singh, 2011). However, by approaching equity practices, looking specifically at the direct efforts of individual universities to develop and sustain inclusive practices and support services for students within the gender non-conforming community, I attempt to gain a better understanding of the impact of social justice endeavors as they directly relate to this community rather than the university bottom line.

Audre Lorde (1984) described how fighting against dehumanization is a constant battle which has no end, informing this study through the understanding that despite the progress that has been made, there is always more than can be done. It is important to keep in the forefront of social justice work that "…it is the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now." (Muñoz, 2009, p. 28), which is why this research looks both at present and active work being done on campuses as well as what the future may hold for creating equitably accessible space for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students.

Using queer theory as the lens for this research allows for the data to be interpreted from a place of inherent acceptance and assumption that gender queer students are common and valid throughout public spaces. They are a community as present as any other on a university campus and should be provided the same access to, and through, their education as every other student. Rather than approaching this research from the mindset of accommodation, queer theory provides the framework for discussing everyday accessibility and student support through the acknowledgement of the humanity and validity of gender diverse identities.

Extending the Literature

Though several researchers have approached the topic of transgender and gender queer students in higher education, most have taken the approach of discovering and confirming best practices from an institutional policy perspective (Adair, 2016; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2006; Beemyn, 2015; Beemyn, 2019; Frietas, 2017, Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019). This review of literature relied heavily on the few studies that have looked at the transgender, non-binary, and general gender queer experience from the student perspective (Beemyn, 2019; Bilodeau, 2005; Goldberg, 2019; Hill et al, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017; Wentling, 2019) and how this community views their ability to confidently and effectively move around and through their education. Both Nicolazzo (2017) and Bilodeau (2005) focused on a sample of students from a single university, one in an undisclosed region of the US and the other situated in the Midwest. Hill et al. (2021), conversely, recruited participants from an LGBTQ conference which attracted attendees from across the United States and so was able to expand their sample across states, regions, and types of institutions—public, private, large, small, etc.—providing them with a broader range of student experiences across the nation.

None of these studies have focused specifically on the Bible Belt within the United States and most focus on the gaps in accessibility based on just an overview of support services rather than including student input. Bilodeau (2005) created a good template for adaptation for this study because they focused on a single university in the mid-western United States, only slightly outside the region of focus for this research, interviewing two students from that university. By expanding on this format, I examine a larger region with common values and social expectations in order to discover comparable initiatives on the part of the institutions, or lack thereof, and experiences for the students.

Nicolazzo (2017) explains that "…the scant amount of scholarship on trans* college students in higher education and student affairs…centers on a deficiency discourse that situates trans* individuals as victims of violence, harm, harassment, ostracism, and/or performing worse than their cisgender peers across various measures and indicators" (p 20). Rather than attempting to only focus on the negative or positive aspects of the student experience like the studies referenced by Nicolazzo (2017) or the study performed by Hill et al (2021) respectively, this research centers the voice of the student in their experience as well as the perspective of the

student services professionals specifically chosen to serve this demographic within LGBTQ centers on campus.

Oftentimes, well-meaning resources, like the LGBT-Friendly Campus Pride Index for 'best practices' regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion for the LGBTQ population often completely overlook the systemic oppression gender queer people face in social structures which are reflected in the campus climate (Campus Pride, n.d.). Nicolazzo (2017) draws attention to the fact that "many of the measures of inclusion are policy based… [and that] such policies are symbolic and do little to improve the daily lived experiences of trans* collegians" (p. 141). Though they are well meaning, general policies within a student handbook do little to actually help students if they are not consistently and vehemently upheld by the faculty, staff, and leadership of the institution. If they are put into place merely to check off a box of non-discrimination, they are not effective in creating accessible and supportive environments for gender diverse students.

This overview will lend itself to creating a better understanding of the role public institutions of higher education play when attempting to provide a space for gender queer students, and students of all identities, to explore their identities freely and accessibly without (as much) scrutiny, judgment, or denial of self. And, like Bilodeau (2005), gathering student perceptions of how well they feel supported and protected by their institutions will be crucial to the overall findings of this study. These perceptions will centralize gender diverse student voices and experience to provide a better understanding of the day-to-day experiences they have on college campuses in this highly conservative, religious region of the United States.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This research was designed to elevate the voices of gender diverse students on campus at institutions of higher education, and every decision regarding the structure of this study was deliberately influenced by that focus. By operating under the assumption that transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students exist and are active participants in university life and the educational system, my research sought to explore the nuances of that experience on campus to find the common threads through open conversation. By approaching students from this specific community as the unique individuals they are, this study aimed to find the experiential similarities of the participants on their respective campuses to better identify common struggles and successes across this region in public education.

A qualitative approach allowed me to engage in casual conversation with all participants regarding their involvement on campus and find the connections in their experiences. This method enabled the participants themselves to identify the issues and topics regarding their own experiences they find most important. Since this research focuses on the ways in which institutions and students experience and perceive the accessibility of their campus and the support services it provides, documenting those feelings through interviews rather than surveys was more effective. Interviews allowed the participants to steer the conversation towards the aspects of their university experience they most wanted to talk about rather than being limited by the narrow focus of survey questions meant to quantify and measure data.

Ethics

The Ethical Review Process

The ethical review procedure for this study was two-fold, beginning with Lancaster University's review and approval as the researcher's primary institution, and then at each institution in which field work was to be conducted. After a standard approval from Lancaster University, the research proposal was presented to every university I was considering for participation. These institutions all had different rules for conducting research on their respective campuses which were dictated by their governing bodies in charge of maintaining ethical research practices on campus, the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each institution had various levels of review, ranging from little to no oversight from the institution to a review of the

approval sought through the researcher's primary institution, to an additional full review by the participating institution's review board.

These differing requirements for ethical approval dictated when research could begin on each campus. I started initiating contact with potential participants immediately after receiving ethics approval from each university, so this was done in stages as those approvals were received, rather than beginning the recruitment process all at once. This allowed me to begin interviewing participants from the two schools who did not need to do their own review while I waited for final approval from those institutions who needed to review my proposal more thoroughly.

Boundaries and Potential Harm

Though this study presented no threat of physical harm to any participants, due to the extremely personal nature of the topic there was some opportunity for potential mental or emotional harm. When approaching the topic of accessibility and support for a largely marginalized, and often demonized, community there was the potential for participants to reflect on hurtful or dangerous experiences they had on their respective campuses which could cause them mental and emotional strain.

In order to mitigate this potential harm as much as possible, it was stressed in all participant documentation and verbally throughout interviews that if the participant ever felt overwhelmed or needed to stop at any given point or even end the interview, they were well within their means to do so. This study was designed to discover ways in which gender queer students could further feel affirmed and supported on their campuses, and causing unneeded stress or trauma through the interview process would be contradictory to the purpose of this project.

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet which outlined the objective of the study and the ways in which their participation would benefit that purpose (participant information sheets can be found in the appendix). In addition, prior to each interview, it was explained verbally how this study was designed to find where the gaps in services and accessibility are for this specific population and how the lived experiences and expertise of the participants were crucial for meeting that end. This allowed each participant to fully understand the expectations of the interviewer in that she would be asking about personal

experiences and reflections on those experiences in regard to the ways in which their campus support, the gender diverse community.

Throughout the interview process, there were a couple of instances in which student participants began to pull back from certain questions, becoming visibly uncomfortable on the screen and unsure of how to proceed. During these moments, I reminded the participant that they were under no obligation to answer my question, and we could move on from any topic they may not want to speak on. This allowed the student the opportunity to say yes, they wanted to move on or no, they wanted to share their story by reasserting their autonomy in the interview.

Instrumentation

Creation, Testing, and Final Implementation of Interview Questions

I developed two separate sets of interview questions for this study, one for the staff who are appointed the task of serving diverse populations on campus, and another for the students themselves. When originally developed, both sets of interview questions were approximately fourteen questions long, ranging from broad, open-ended questions such as *how do you feel your institution is doing in supporting transgender and non-binary students on campus?,* to much more specific and guided questions like *Do you feel safe when using gendered spaces on campus and why?* I developed these questions as a starting point to establish a baseline for the pilot interviews with the assumption I could then alter, remove, and develop new questions before entering the research interview phase with a more honed and directive set of questions.

Leading Questions and the Search for "Correct Answers." Through a round of four pilot interviews, two with institutional staff and two with former students, I highlighted the short comings of my initial draft of interview questions. Some of the questions I found to be too leading, causing the participant to try to seek out the answer they thought I was most looking for. This was especially apparent with the student participants I spoke to. When the students were asked some of the more leading questions, I could see hesitation and serious contemplation on their faces. It was as if the student was attempting to answer a test question—searching for the correct answer. It was not the thoughtful pause of someone attempting to answer genuinely about their own personal experience, but a student searching for the answer their instructor was most looking for.

These questions predominantly revolved around specific issues or services that may or may not be present on campus. The reactions from my pilot interviews to these questions made

me recognize I had brought certain assumptions and biases to the development of the interview questions. I had been unknowingly setting the participants up to answer in a specific way that I assumed to be the reality of their situation on campus rather than allowing for more open-ended conversation. I had essentially created a question one would expect to show up on a quantitative survey to measure the likelihood of these services on campus rather than discussing the realities of the campus itself in real time.

By allowing the conversation to be driven by the student participant themselves instead of letting my assumptions guide the discussion, the conversation became much more productive. This approach gave the student leeway to discuss aspects of their experience they were most inclined and passionate about rather than making them assess a situation they may not have ever encountered or given much thought to.

Staff Participation, the Desire to Show off. It was apparent that university staff were more likely to engage and participate in a meaningful way because they were able to openly discuss and even boast on occasion about the ways in which their efforts and objectives are actively serving the gender queer population. While the students needed room to touch on the topics they most wanted to highlight through gently guided, open-ended questions, in the staff interviews I learned I needed to specify a little more or run the risk of the participant wandering into a stream of consciousness not particularly relevant to the research questions.

The students were a little more reserved, whereas staff members were almost a little too eager to express everything they were doing within their department—whether it was related to gender diversity or one of the other populations on campus. Since the staff members interviewed all head LGBTQ departments, their services include all gender and sexually diverse populations. As a result, many of their efforts were not relevant to the research despite their constant engagement and service to those students.

Revising the Interview Questions. The task became to develop these two sets of interview questions to get the most from each group of participants. The questions needed to give the institutional staff leeway to talk extensively on their programs and their university structural support systems while keeping them specifically discussing the gender queer population on campus. Additionally, the questions needed to provide students with a path to casual conversation which would make them feel more comfortable sharing their experience. After these pilot interviews concluded, I revised both sets of interview questions to create a more

conversational atmosphere for the interviews to better prompt genuine response and casual engagement from each participant—especially when talking with students.

Structure of Final Interview Questions. Both sets of interview questions were around eight base questions asked to each participant. I allowed room for each participant to expand upon their comments or concerns about their campus by way of predetermined supplemental questions and also those that arose within the interview itself. This allowed the conversations to flow naturally and along the speaking points most important to each participant without straying from the purpose of the interview itself. The interview questions can be found in the appendix, noting that supplementary questions did arise within each interview to prompt participants to expand on topics, instances, or examples they may have brought up.

Interview Schedule

The main research interviews took place over the course of a six-month period beginning in March of 2022 towards the end of the spring academic term. The goal was to complete all interviews within one academic year so that the experiences described were all from a similar timeline across participating universities. I planned my interview schedule around the availability of the staff participants as they were key in the recruitment of students. The process began with the staff interviews, which took three months total to complete. The first three staff interviews were conducted quickly, within the first month of the interview process; however, the fourth and last interview did not take place until late May when the summer break from classes had begun and they had more time to sit down and speak with me.

The student interviews began after the staff interviews and took approximately five months to complete in total with the final interview taking place in September 2022. This timeline was dictated by the time it took to recruit and schedule interview appointments with all participants who showed interest. The student interviews in particular were more difficult to arrange as the months of May to July are typically summer vacation for most institutions and students are more difficult to reach at that time. For this reason, the call for participants to students was sent out twice, once right after the staff interview at that institution and again once the fall semester had begun in August and the marketing material could reach more people.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of twelve total participants across four different universities in three states. Though the Bible Belt region of the United States spans

approximately eleven states total, due to the time restrictions on this project created by the completion timeline for the researcher's doctoral program, it was not feasible to represent every state for this study. Alternatively, the three states chosen combined encompass approximately a quarter of the geographic area that makes up the Bible Belt and serve a large population of students both within their respective states and the surrounding areas.

On average, in the United States, public institutions' student population will have well over 50% of students coming from high schools from within that state with some schools ranging as high as 85% of their student body being in-state residents (CollegeSimply[1], 2022). The remainder of the student population will have moved to the state from the surrounding areas with only a small fraction coming from a completely different region of the country or internationally (CollegeSimply, 2022). This indicates that the vast majority of the student population at any state institution within the Bible Belt will consist of students coming from their home state or states within the Bible Belt itself, creating campus culture, attitudes, and influence that align with the ideals and socio-political beliefs of the region. This means that the student populations of the chosen institutional participants for this study are made up predominantly of enrollees from those state and the states that most closely neighbor them. Consequently, the majority of the student body on each campus are residents of the Bible Belt region.

The specific institutions represented in this study were chosen because of their status as public institutions serving a large number of students within the South-Central and South-Eastern region. All four institutions have a student population of at least 26,000 with the largest recording approximately 51,000. Three of the four institutions boast prominent athletics departments, bringing a great deal of media coverage to the university and the goings on there. The fourth is considered a prominent commuter school, serving a large population of non-traditional students (adult learners, people returning to school after entering the workforce, anyone not a first-time full-time student or right out of high school), so their influence on students reaches beyond their campus community. It was important that the institutions chosen for this study had broad influence on the region, because the more social coverage of the

[1] CollegeSimply is a privately run database which compiles statistical data from The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics for colleges and universities across the United States and presents them in an easily accessible format for potential students/researchers to access information such as demographics, cost of attendance, courses of study, retention percentages, admissions requirements, etc.

institution, the more likely there will be legislative influence in accessibility for certain populations.

Participants

Every university in this study is represented by both a staff member and at least one student participant for a total of four staff and seven student participants. This allowed for each university chosen to be equally represented by both staff and students for more comprehensive results within the study. To protect their identities, all participants were assigned a codename chosen either by them or assigned to them by me. All names used within this research are pseudonyms. Additionally, all personal and institutionally identifying information has been removed to ensure the anonymity of specific institutions and participants of the study. None of the redacted information shared during interviews affects the results of the study.

The members of staff who were chosen for this study work at each institutions' respective diversity, equity, and inclusion office. These offices are dedicated to creating equitable spaces, diverse experiences, and an inclusive atmosphere for all students on campus. They focus on racial, cultural, gender and sexuality, and disability (among other) equity and inclusion on campus to create a more accessible institution for the populations they now serve despite these institutions not being initially designed for such a diverse student body.

There were four staff interviews in total, one from each institution. All four staff members worked within an office specifically dedicated to serving and supporting LGBTQ students on campus rather than in the more all-encompassing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices established on each campus. Though they operate under the direction of the greater DEI influence, the purpose of these specific offices within DEI is to develop programming and design accessible spaces for students—as well as faculty and staff—who identify within the queer community. I sought these professionals out specifically as they are the experts on their campuses regarding how the university is, or is not, creating accessible and affirming spaces for gender queer students on their campus.

Codename	Pronouns	Role on campus
Angela	she/her	professor/director
Nick	he/him	program coordinator
Noah	he/him	resource coordinator
Ruth	she/her	staff at LGBTQ center

Fig. 2.1 Staff Participants

When proposed, this research sought to reach between six and ten student participants in total with the hopes of having at least one student representing each institution. Seven students total participated in the study with all institutions being represented by at least one. Student participants all self-identified as transgender or non-binary and were actively enrolled physically on their campuses. Students studying in a strictly online capacity were not included in this study. This ensured student participants had first-hand experience of campus culture, the structures in place, and the major places of improvement needed for supporting this community.

Codename	Pronouns	# Years at Institution	Involvement on Campus
Cam	they/them	2 years	student employee
Ezra	he/him	3 years	president of engineering club, on executive board of other student group, work on campus
Andi	he/him	first year	gaming student groups, DEI student group
Glen	they/them	first year	LGBTQ center study and hang out space, trying to get more involved
Hal	they/them	1 year	club leadership and member
Linus	he/him	2 years	book club, literary magazine, volunteer for LGBTQ center, DnD club
Max	she/they	2 years	marching band, clubs

Fig. 2.2. Student Participants

Procedure

Staff Participant Recruitment

To begin the process of contacting participants for the study, I had to research each prospective university to find the office most closely related to the transgender and non-binary community on their respective campuses. Since all the institutions involved in this study are public universities, contact information for faculty and staff are public record, making it relatively simple to find the email addresses of at least one person within these offices to begin the search for the right staff member to interview.

Though all campuses I reached out to have a designated LGBTQ office especially designed to serve this community, it was somewhat difficult to find the websites and contact information for those offices specifically. Each university made accessing their general diversity and inclusion offices straightforward, but the offices therein serving specific student populations were much harder to navigate to. This could just be an oversight on the part of the institution but could also be deliberate either to shield the office from too great of outside scrutiny or an attempt

to conceal it all together. For several of the staff interviews, I had to first go through a general contact email for the diversity and inclusion center who then would forward me on to the leader of the LGBTQ center. On more than one campus it was necessary to contact the office both by email and phone in order to gain access to the contact I was most interested in speaking to, which was telling in itself of how accessible these spaces are for students and others searching for these types of resources.

I requested an interview with the person in leadership on each campus directly once I was able to gain access to their contact information, all of whom were more than willing to engage in the conversation about their programs, partnerships, and practices on campus. These interviews lasted approximately an hour for each staff member and took place over three months to reach and schedule with all four institutions.

Inviting Student Participants

In order to recruit student participants, I enlisted the help of the leadership I had spoken to in my staff interviews. All were willing to distribute the marketing material (fig. 2.3 and 2.4) I

Fig. 2.3. (above) Student Recruitment Flyer
Fig. 2.4. (right) Student Recruitment Text

Research participation opportunity. Volunteers needed for research study on accessibility and support for transgender and non-binary students on college campuses. Qualifying participants will be actively enrolled on campus and identify within the transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming community and are willing to share their experience on campus (participants will be kept anonymous). If you are interested in sharing your story please submit your contact information via https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9VRKJ9F or contact Megan Whobrey, m.whobrey@lancaster.ac.uk."
Image description: Pink, yellow, and blue background with a blue flower shape in the center. The words "participants needed for a research study about support for transgender and non-binary students on campus' are printed over and within the flower. Across the bottom is written "contact Megan Whobrey, m.whobrey@lancaster.ac.uk."

created for seeking student participants by either posting it on their offices' social media pages and/or within any group communication platforms they use to best reach their engaged population such as GroupMe or Discord—applications for large group messaging. This call for

participants was sent out by the institutional office leaders at two separate points during the school year—once directly after the staff member was interviewed and again a couple of weeks into the fall semester—in an attempt to reach as many students as possible to increase the probability of positive response which would result in a significant number of interviews.

Potential student participants were directed to an online survey where they would confirm they were both part of the transgender and/or non-binary community as well as active students on campus and willing to participate. They then provided contact information at which to best reach them to schedule the interview. Within twenty-four hours of the student responding to the survey I contacted them with a message thanking them for their response and willingness to participate and asking for days and times within the next week they might be able to meet. This email also included the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form for them to read through, sign, and return to me before our interview.

Interviews

All interviews were scheduled through email communication and performed via recorded video chat on Zoom. Recordings included both audio and video and were saved in password protected files on a USB drive only accessible by the researcher. These interviews were then transcribed verbatim by me and saved under the participants' codenames to be used during the analysis phase and quoted throughout this thesis.

Both staff and student interviews consisted of approximately seven to ten questions split between two sections: general information about the interviewee and their experience at the institution. No identifying personal information was documented, but to establish their place in the institution and how their experience related to the research questions, it was important to gather certain information from them like their responsibilities as members of the staff or how long they had been attending the institution for the students.

All interviews lasted an average forty minutes with some interviews lasting only twenty minutes and others going over an hour depending on the willingness of the participant to share their experience and how much they had to say regarding the questions asked. Several participants, staff and students included, were enthusiastic about telling their stories regarding their experiences on campus and were willing to talk more in depth regarding their institution's adeptness at creating accessible and supportive spaces for this community of students. However, a few students were more reserved and harder to engage in a more comprehensive conversation

and merely answered the questions succinctly and moved on to the next without expanding too much on their experience which is discussed in the following section. These shorter interviews, however, still provided valuable insight into campus culture despite their brevity.

Staff. The conversations with staff all went smoothly and easily. As predicted, these leaders were all more than happy to explain everything their respective centers had to offer in terms of serving the gender queer community on their campus. They were also candid and open about the shortcomings of creating an accessible and supportive experience at their institution, expounding on the ways in which the university and state cultural and political systems oftentimes stand in the way of their mission and the best ways to serve their population of students. These interviews explored how their office specifically served this population of students, how the institution creates an accessible environment for gender queer students, who their primary partners on campus are, and next steps for developing an even more inclusive atmosphere and campus culture.

A couple of the staff members were a little reluctant to answer some of the questions posed, and it was mostly due to them not having what they would consider a satisfying answer to that line of inquiry. They seemed hesitant to admit that there are major deficiencies in their ability and willingness to serve the gender diverse population on campus. Though they were excited and engaged in talking about their LGBTQ center as a whole organization and how they are serving the queer community at large on their campus, when directed to speak directly to support for transgender and non-binary students on their campus they had less to expand upon and almost seemed to avoid certain topics. They were always eager to discuss why some of the more obvious accessible practices were not in place even if they could not explain any new programs or goals they might have for this specific population on their campus for future engagement and support.

Students. Though a couple of students were excited and enthusiastic participants from the very beginning of our conversations, most of the student participants were rather tentative at the beginning of the interviews to engage too much. I could tell they were somewhat nervous about having to share their personal experiences on their respective campuses. I tried my best to put those students at ease by explaining fully the purpose of my research and how I hope it can be used in the future to make public higher education in the Bible Belt more supportive and accessible for a diverse student population. I also deliberately stated how not only would they

personally be kept anonymous but also the institutions I was working with and the states in which they reside were all to be kept anonymous, so the odds of any of their statements being traced back to them were slim to none.

I allowed students (and staff) to pick their own codename if they so chose, though only a handful of students did this. Most cited, lightheartedly, that they had already renamed themselves once and were not particularly interested in doing so again, and to those participants I assured them I would choose a gender-neutral codename for them. With a full understanding of the purpose of the study and how their identity and institutional affiliation would be kept strictly confidential, the reluctant students became visibly more relaxed and willing to engage in the conversation about their personal experiences on their campus. One student even reached out several weeks after their interview to report a new incident they were hoping might be included in this study to further illustrate the struggles of gender queer individuals on their campus.

Accessibility and Support for Gender Diverse Students at University

To begin answering the question of how transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse students on campus at public institutions of higher education in the Bible Belt are provided with access and support in their respective campus communities, it is first important to understand what that kind of access entails. One of my first questions during my interviews was always, a) What is your role in creating an accessible and supportive space for students on campus? for the staff members I spoke with and b) Do you feel your institution is an affirming or accessible and supportive space for transgender and non-binary students on campus and why? when speaking with students. These questions were broad and designed to allow the participant to analyze the ways in which their campus, or their office, served the target population to find the common threads among them.

The codes I derived for analyzing the data arose from recurring topics during the interview process. As I was transcribing each interview, I listened for points of emphasis from each participant and where they overlapped. I documented these emphases throughout the transcription process, and, ultimately, decided on sixteen codes—outlined below—with which to organize both staff and student interviews. After establishing the codes, I read through all transcriptions and pulled out each instance the topic arose in every interview and organized them in order to visualize how many times each topic occurred and in what contexts. In doing so, I was able to isolate the primary ways in which both staff and students define what accessibility

and support mean on campus, where they differ in these definitions, and what aspects of access and support both groups are most focused on.

Coding			
Administration	Name Change	Allyship	Roadblocks
Systems	Campus Culture	Student Groups	Title IX
Training	Restrooms	Health Programs	Housing
Physical Spaces	Creating Space	Goals	Events

Fig. 2.5. Coding

Staff mostly focused our conversations on the specifics of their offices, what types of programming and spaces were available to students on campus, major policy, and the ways in which administration affects accessibility and support. Students, alternatively, almost exclusively steered the conversation in the direction of campus culture, the ways in which they interact with their peers, instructors, and other staff, and how they are socially one-on-one and group settings while on campus. Even though the primary focus of these two groups varied quite a bit, the aspects of campus they discussed were similar but from a different lens. Students discussed the restrictive nature of the physical space of campus and how it is affected by the social culture around the institution. Staff, variably, discussed it from the standpoint of policy and administrative influence.

Whether approaching this from a policy and administrative perspective or interpersonal contact, I identified three major themes that arose across all the interviews and organized the sixteen codes within these three main themes to structure my findings. I used these themes to organize the findings: general campus access (policy creation, campus culture, etc.), access to physical space (safe spaces on campus, gender inclusive spaces, social spaces), and campus programming. The table below shows which code falls under each theme. Moving through the themes in this way in the subsequent chapters allows for progression through campus access and support from a broad to narrow view in both the active ways in which the institution views its ability to serve this population and student feedback on how well they consider their experience affirmed in this environment.

General Campus Access	**Access to Physical Space**	**Campus Programming**
Administration	Creating Space	Student Groups
Systems	Physical Spaces	Health Programs
Title IX	Restrooms	Events
Name Change	Campus Culture	
Allyship	Housing	
Training		

Fig. 2.6. Distribution of Coding into Themes

Chapter 3

What it Means to Create Access and Support

Creating an accessible campus for transgender, non-binary, and other gender nonconforming students is a multi-faceted endeavor that affects multiple aspects of educational life. First and foremost, it means acknowledging and affirming all identities on campus which comes directly from the top down; administrative backing is key to creating accessible spaces for any population. This type of support comes by means of campus policy that allows for students to use their chosen name in person-to-person interactions and in their official student documentation within the institutional systems. Educating staff and students about diverse identities, creating encompassing anti-discrimination regulations on campus to protect students who are out and engaging in campus life like every other student, and developing effective means of enforcing these regulations are also important examples of administrative backing. Without institution wide systems in place, it is difficult to claim that any campus is accessible for a gender diverse population because the systems themselves adversely affect the way they are able to navigate higher education (Knustson et al, 2022; Singh, 2016; Singh and Jackson, 2012).

The most prominent means of indicating institutional support for LGBTQ persons on the campuses in this study is the presence of specific offices designed to buoy and advocate for this community. These offices house a dedicated staff—typically a staff of one or two full-time employees and a handful of graduate students—and centers work specifically on students in the LGBTQ community and, therefore, the gender queer community on campus through their collaboration with administration to highlight the needs of this student population. Noah (he/him), the primary staff member and resource coordinator for one of these centers said that his position:

> "…is really making sure that there is someone everyday thinking about how we are serving these students. The university has really homed in on five underserved student communities in particular and making sure that they know that there is work being done and eventually, the hope is to grow these student communities and student cultural identity centers and one of which would be LGBTQIA+."

The creation of this type of center and position on campus signals that the institution is, at the very least, interested in creating an accessible environment for this population of students through dedicated spaces for them to live authentically.

By setting aside space for the development and support of the LGBTQ student population, the administrations on these campuses are indicating that this community is one that is welcome and that the campus is, at least in part, working towards creating an accessible environment for them to thrive in their education. A positive, affirming, and accessible student experience is determined by the individual, everyday experiences of the student themself, and the created institutional environment (Hill et al., 2021). An administration's ability to foster this kind of environment is essential to the collective facets of campus being an accessible space.

Ruth (she/her), lead staff at the LGBTQ center on her campus, specifically indicated that, besides offering the crucial need for safe spaces to live and learn, one of their functions in the center is to "advocate for huge campus wide policy changes," that would benefit and support gender queer students on campus. This indicates that these centers understand that their responsibility is not only to provide accessible space, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but also to use their position to encourage greater and greater access for students across campus on a broad scale.

Administrative Backing for Progress Across Campus and Various Departments

What the Administration is Already Doing

Administrative support not only means the institution at large putting forth the face of an inclusive and supportive campus but also providing the means for its various offices and departments to make that a living reality on a day-to-day basis. The primary means of furthering that support by the administration is through the time, space, and funds allotted for these offices to accomplish what they need to serve their dedicated population of students (Hughto et al., 2015; Knutson et al, 2022). Angela (she/her, professor/director) described how when she first started the LGBTQ center at her university, it was almost a dangerous feeling, being so visible on campus, rather than an empowering one, but thanks to the support of the administration and the campus at large that feeling has changed significantly over the past several years they have been operating. Where before both the office and individuals who visited the center experienced several incidents, five years into their presence on campus they are integrated into the community and do not have to worry about what may endanger them for just existing.

Institutions often lack meaningful support and inclusive practices—which causes students to face discrimination and microaggressions while on campus (Hill et al., 2020; Kilgo, 2020; Rankin et al., 2010; Wright, 2021). But even through a modicum of administrative backing, for

example, the creation of LGBTQ centers, students can begin to feel more affirmed and supported on campus. Support from the administration is what allows for these centers and the continued work towards equity and access for the gender queer population on campus to continue. In order for the centers to be able to serve their students, it is important for administrations to not only allow them to exist on campus but to back them financially through access to institutional funds. Nick explained how institutional support from student affairs and the other larger more overarching offices allows for the "signaling that we are a safe space for LGBTQ students"—even when the narratives coming out of the state legislatures are largely anti-trans (he/him, program coordinator).

Similarly, Angela (professor/director) described a town hall that was held prior to the creation of her institution's LGTBQ center where tensions were high, and she feared their center would not even get off the ground. Nevertheless, through her and students' insistence of its necessity, the administration ultimately decided to put money into these resources despite some of the vocal backlash. This ultimate backing of a dedicated inclusive space for students to live authentically and demonstrate their identity while also participating on campus provides the much-needed affirmation, even on a small scale, to allow transgender and other gender queer individuals to feel as if they are welcome rather than an anomaly to be worked around (Knutson et al, 2022; Moreland & Willcox, 2005).

Though there was little discussion on what the major administrative offices at large—such as the provost and presidents' offices—do to show their support for these centers and the students that they serve, their involvement is evident through the existence of these spaces. Without funding from the university, the centers that cater to the transgender and non-binary community on campus along with the rest of the LGBTQ population would not be able to provide any kind of space or services to these students. And without affirming space and supportive staff, gender queer students would find themselves in a space designed and operated without their lived experiences in mind, and, therefore, inherently othering to their existence on campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2015, Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Angela reflected that:

> "I owe a lot to the administration that helped start all this, and then the administration that continues to try to support us even in financial times that are not great. You know, I feel like I'm jinxing myself by saying this, but we have not had our budget cut…we've actually seen improvements because…we're taking

> on so many programs when other programs fail or, you know, someone leaves, and they don't fill that position. Where do those programs go? To us. And so, I feel like there's a respect for that" (she/her, professor/director).

Not only is her administration keeping their budget consistent, and even slowly increasing it over the years, but the fact that the administration entrusts even a portion of the annual institutional budget to serve this population of students means the center's work on campus is recognized and encouraged to continue.

Even during times of financial cutbacks, these centers were kept open and running by the administration when they could have easily been a cut byline. By continuing to provide financial support for the offices dedicated to serving gender diverse students, administrations allow for the active participation of this community on campus where they oftentimes go unrecognized (Hill et al., 2021).

Effectiveness of Administrative Support

Although administrative backing and affirmation of these programs on campus is evident in the existence of LGBTQ centers and their continued financial support, that in itself is not enough to make gender queer students on campus feel completely seen, respected, and supported. Many student participants, while acknowledging the attempt by the universities at large to at least appear as if they are accessible spaces for their community, also described almost unanimous discontent with the way in which the administration approaches the topic of gender diversity and accessibility on campuses.

Linus (he/him), a second-year student at his institution, referred to the administrative attempts at support and access as "taking the most politically correct angle" rather than a genuine approach to finding and implementing best practices. Cam (they/them), a fourth-year and openly non-binary student who wears a COVID mask with their pronouns largely written across it whenever they are on campus, also explained how despite the (very minimal) marketing on campus about accessibility, diversity, and inclusion that the administration makes sure to display, they believe it is "because they have to" due to federal regulations rather than from a place of actual empathy for diverse individuals on campus. They told a story about how they are constantly misgendered by their boss who has made only marginal effort to attempt to respect their identity. They also shared when they had to speak with the dean of students within their college they were dead named and misgendered despite correcting her several times within their

conversation and email communication. Even in spaces where they would expect to find an advocate, Cam found inaccessibility and disrespect.

In fact, most of the student participants responded along the same lines—explaining how though their institutions tout diverse and inclusive space for all students on campus when it comes to the transgender population, they have not so far found that to be true in their daily interactions. A consistent comment across student participants was that inclusivity policies feel mostly like empty words and that it is "really difficult for things to be effective like, university wide," as Glen (they/them), a third-year student on their campus attested to. So though despite the monetary backing of the administration for diversity programs, the efforts are not far reaching enough for transgender and other gender queer individuals to really feel as if their institutions as whole are willing to acknowledge their humanity and create a universal space where they have equitable opportunity to exist and thrive in their educational environment.

The one exception to this almost unanimous discontent was from Andi (he/him), a first-year student finishing his second term, who said,

> "I feel like they're actually, genuinely trying to help out with people feeling safe and feeling comfortable. And I also know that from what I've seen, I've met several um, transgender students and stuff already, and even though like, it hasn't even been like, at an actual meeting or anything, it's been like just out in the open and it's also a campus I feel like-- it's just very accepting of LGBT in general."

Andi expressed feeling a sense of belonging and that their presence on campus is perfectly normal, rather than something to be accommodated. In his experience the atmosphere on campus and the support he feels from the administration affirm his identity and his inherent right to be a student on his campus in a way that none of the other student participants were able to agree with.

Perhaps Andi's institution is far more equipped to create equitable space for gender queer students than the other student participants' institutions. Or perhaps Andi, having only been on his campus for such a short time, comparatively, has been lucky enough not to have experienced the discriminatory practices faced by others. His experience on campus so far has been one Glen, another first-year student, could only hope for when they said,

> "it'd be nice if [my identity] was not something that was like ignored or like swept under the rug or anything, like that but something that's just like normal and part of the university; that we have like, queer people here."

What all the student participants expressed was a desire to feel seen as a normal part of the campus culture rather than some sort of anomaly that has to be accounted for. Belonging and liberation in one's identity is fueled by the accessibility, support, and affirmation of those around them including in spaces of education, and it is important to identify how administrations can help students who feel left out become more included in their campus life (Knutson et al., 2022; Singh 2016; Singh and Jackson 2012).

Accessible Systems and Support Through Institutional Visibility

Collaboration Across Student Facing Offices on Campus

As important as it is to have the LGBTQ centers financially supported so they can continue to serve students, they, unfortunately, do not have any authority to create policy or enact major institutional change on their campuses. So, in order to serve their students in this way, these centers intentionally pursue creating contacts and building relationships with other student facing offices on campus that do have the ability to enact change in the daily lives of students. All four staff participants specifically mentioned working closely with admissions, housing, and IT in their efforts to create access for transgender and non-binary students on their campuses, because these offices have control over where those students live, how their name and personal information is displayed in institutional records, and how students can update that information. There was no consensus, however, on if these efforts were particularly effective.

Nick (he/him, program coordinator) especially spoke about their office of admissions and how his center has been working with that office to make the entire process more accessible for everyone in general. Specifically for transgender and non-binary potential students, however, the admissions process is difficult, as they are the ones typically unable to easily fill out the needed forms accurately because their identities are not represented anywhere on them. As a result, a collaboration between the LGBTQ center and admissions offices is paramount. Students like Cam expressed how when they applied to their university "there was not an option that I remember to indicate that I was you know, not….it was just male female and that was it like there was not another option" (they/them, second-year student). So, by working with campus admissions, Nick and other LGBTQ centers can work to create more accessible records and

processes for admission to the institution—demonstrating to gender diverse individuals that their identity will be respected on these campuses.

Angela (she/her, professor/director) described that her campus collaboration is what led to the creation of their LGBTQ center initially. She was working as a lecturer on campus before the center even existed, so once she was able to get the center established, the collaborative relationships she built around campus allowed her to create more and more access for students on campus. Similarly, in my discussion with Ruth, she described this cross-campus collaboration as a "multi-pronged" effect in which their outreach to other offices on campus to influence changes in accessibility helps educate those working within these services on the needs and gaps in support for gender queer students. Ideally, this then influences them to look at things differently and want to be better in how they serve these students without the specific influence of the center. For example, she shared how they,

> "…work with departments on policy and on making sure that their dress codes are inclusive and like looking at their forms and making sure they don't just have sex when they mean gender and really unpacking why they even need to know some of those things" (Ruth, she/her, LGBTQ center staff).

By providing this kind of collaboration in which they work with the departments to examine existing systems, how they are exclusionary, and the ways they are easily adjusted to create a more accessible environment, the centers leave room for the departments to continue this work on their own equipped with the tools to do so. This makes the work they do farther reaching. As a staff of only two people in their LGBTQ center, there is no way they could be solely responsible for making the campus at large a supportive and accessible space for transgender and gender non-conforming students without the help of other student services offices.

These collaborative relationships allow for the LGBTQ centers to bring visibility for gender diverse students in that they provide the opportunity for them to participate on campus as their authentic selves which validates them and their experiences (Knutson et al., 2022; Paetcher et al., 2021). By working with admissions, IT, and other student facing offices, the systems that could present a roadblock for the student can be navigated by dedicated staff to create a more accessible experience through things like name changes, accessible pronouns in institutional documentation, etc. so that the student does not have to disclose in every encounter. As discussed

by Moreland and Willox (2005), queer theory is about actions, ways of living, and shared lifestyles, so the only way to truly create accessible and supportive educational spaces for transgender and non-binary students is to give them an environment in which they can easily share in the experience without the added difficulty of their identity not being recognized in campus spaces.

Name Changes and Campus Documentation

One of the simplest ways to demonstrate support for the gender diverse population on campus is giving individuals the ability to easily update their name and gender markers in official university systems. This allows for everyone who interacts with that student in an official capacity—faculty or staff—to have access to that information without having to ask them. Oftentimes in classrooms, instructors ask students within the first-class period if they go by anything other than their officially posted legal name on the course roster, which serves both transgender and non-binary students who have chosen their own name after coming out as well as cisgender students who maybe prefer to go by a nickname or their middle name, etc. However, by creating a space for students to declare their preferred name in official campus records, students do not have to disclose that information in front of the entire class or in the middle of the registrar's office. Andi spoke on this saying, "instead of like having to like tell every single professor and every single person it's kind of just like, I wish it was easier to just be like "this is my name these are my pronouns, please just, respect it" (he/him, first-year student). Disclosure is a highly personal experience, so by allowing students to enroll under their preferred name, it enables them to interact with campus as themselves without the conflicting decision to either out or deadname themselves in every office they walk into (Garvey et al., 2019).

Several of the staff and student participants brought this topic up and the institutions used in this study were split basically in half on how accessible name changes were on their respective campuses. Ruth described how at her institution it was extremely easy to change a student's preferred name in the system but only as of the previous year. Where before students, no matter their gender identity, had to go through the LGBTQ center to have their preferred name updated in the system, students can now request that change on their own through an online form. Nick, who also runs the LGBTQ center at his institution, said similarly that his institution made changing a student's preferred name in the system extremely easy for students to do and that change can extend to their "email, changing all of their platform(s), on their institutional

[learning] platform, [and] changing on their student card" (he/him, program coordinator). In this way, students are able to update their preferred name across almost every system on campus so they, hopefully, will never have to out themselves while standing at the counter trying to pay their tuition charges. Conversely, Angela indicated that they "are still lagging on the chosen name and pronoun policy" on their campus (she/her, professor/director). She described how the university had been working on it for years and promised to have it done "by the fall," though she is skeptical of that because it has been a topic of discussion for several years with little to no progress being made.

Several student participants were completely unaware of the university policy on name changes, unsure if they were able to change their names easily or not. Many times, during our conversations about the accessible systems in place on their campus, students like Max made exclamations about how certain systems for name changes or documentation were not already in place but would immediately follow that statement saying, "I could be wrong about that" (she/they, second-year student). Even in places where systems are established for name changes, they are not highly accessible to students as those processes are not advertised or made easily available to students.

Cam (they/them, second-year student) specifically said they were never able to find out how to change their pronouns in the official university system and assumed it was not possible until they were looking at another student's profile—something they do within the realm of their on-campus job—and that student's gender-neutral pronouns were listed on their page. This indicates that it is in fact possible, but how to do it is not widely publicized. Cam even went as far as to say, "I wouldn't even know where to start asking for help and honestly at [my university] I wouldn't even feel comfortable asking for help because I've seen no, I've seen literally no incentive or anything" (they/them, second-year student). Cam especially considers their institution completely ineffectual when it comes to creating accessible space in any aspect for gender queer individuals.

Max, on the other hand, found changing their name and pronouns within the campus system very easy, but, unfortunately, also completely ineffective. She observed that she feels like "maybe the housing office doesn't really communicate with the financial office which doesn't communicate to the academics people," sharing a story about their friend, a transman, moving into his dorm (Max, she/they, second-year student). The university had all of Max's friend's

correct information regarding his identity which he changed after enrolling, but far before moving into his on-campus housing. When he got there, neither his legal name nor his new school ID picture had been updated in the housing system, which caused an issue when he tried to move in with his male roommate because housing thought he had been put in the wrong room.

Access and support for all students across an institution means putting effective systems in place to avoid these types of issues. Though the mere ability to update a student's name and pronouns in the university system is a great way to indicate the campus is friendly and accessible to gender queer students, if that information is not efficiently disseminated into *all* of the institution's separate systems those students face unnecessary and disruptive obstacles to their education (Garvey et al., 2019; Hughto et al., 2015; Knutson et al., 2022).

Using Gender Diverse Pronouns on Campus

Even those participants who did speak specifically to the ability to change one's name or pronouns within the system itself spoke to the ability to use their pronouns on campus in a way that felt accessible, and, for the most part, safe. Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) described how he has, "never once in my personal interactions has anybody ever pushed back," when he was discussing his own pronouns. Noah did not discuss institutional name changes or gender markers specifically, but he did bring up the use of video conferencing over the course of the pandemic and how he advocated for all profiles created through the institutional account to allow for someone to use their preferred name and require the addition of pronouns in their official name plate that appears under their video. It is a small step in creating accessible space for diverse pronouns, but it is a step in the right direction.

Cam, the fourth-year student who had few positive things to say about gender affirming practices on their campus, did refer to all of the different places they were able to display their chosen name and pronouns within the various technology used on campus from their email signature to their Zoom profile. And though they were critical of the way in which official campus documentation was so difficult to update, their ability to easily express their identity in these aspects made it possible for them to not have to explicitly state their pronouns every single time they interacted with someone via these systems on campus.

Especially for new and incoming students, when their first interaction with someone at the university might be an advisor over video chat, if they see that person with their pronouns front and center it is an indicator that the conversation about pronouns is not taboo at this

institution. It allows them to at least feel somewhat more welcome in this atmosphere than if they had not been there. A transgender, non-binary, or other gender non-conforming person seeing the use of displayed pronouns in institutional spaces signals to them that this is a place they are also able to share their pronouns without fear (Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Though larger scale administrative support like easy access to name changes and being able to update one's gender marker in official university records would naturally create an even more accessible space for students, institutions without these resources are still attempting to create a more supportive environment for gender diverse students on their campus in other ways. The general consensus among most staff and student participants was that they were grateful for the support that the administration already shows even if there is still progress to be made.

Allyship Trainings for Campus Community to Build Understanding and Affirmation

One thing that all four institutions shared was the presence of ally training, in some form, for both staff and students on their respective campuses. These trainings are designed as an introduction to the LGBTQ community and how to best support them in their daily experiences on campus. Beyond the basic introductory training program, most of the institutions also had continuing education trainings for people who wanted to further their education on allyship and how they can be an effective ally to the community.

These trainings are designed to provide humanizing information to those who participate who may not have encountered, at least as far as they are aware, anyone within the LGBTQ community and specifically the genderqueer community. Much of the ignorance and hate speech surrounding this population is due to a lack of understanding and the othering of this community to the point that some people see them as less than human. So, this training brings in to focus how members of the gender diverse community are valid members of society at large just trying to live out their lives day-to-day without the added hindrance of inaccessible resources and spaces (Hill *et al.*, 2021; Linley *et al.*, 2016; Tillapaugh, 2015).

Student Advocacy for an Educated Campus Community

Almost every student I spoke to focused primarily on the ways in which the campus community made them feel included or excluded when it came to accessibility and support. Many of them talked about how they think it is mostly due to the fact that, in this region especially, people are ignorant to the existence and humanity of gender queer individuals. Andi mentioned how easy it is to simply tell his instructors, staff that he regularly interacts with, and

classmates "'here's my name and pronouns' but it's also like most people just don't even understand it in the slightest or how any of that works" (he/him, first-year student). Several other students spoke on the general ignorance of the campus community about what being gender diversity really is. This translates to the palpable animosity they feel on campus due to the wide-ranging lack of understanding of their identities, and how providing people with effective education on their identity rather than just asking people to memorize pronouns would be extremely helpful (Dewitt, 2012; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

Andi (he/him), a transman in his first year at his institution living in university housing, discussed that although his roommate is another transman, they do live on a floor with several cis-gender men and "a lot of them…just didn't know about anything about like how any of this works." He specifically talked about how he thinks his floor mates would greatly benefit from some sort of class or training session to introduce that a little better to the concept of trans-identity and help them understand more why he and his roommate are on their floor instead of approaching it with uncertainty and, in a couple of instances, hostility.

This call for training and courses regarding diversity, and specifically gender identity, from basically every student participant came from a place of their experience being misgendered or witnessing someone being misgendered. To demonstrate, Glen (they/them, first-year student) watched the teaching assistant in their class, who is also non-binary, be misgendered by the instructor—the teaching assistant's direct report and supervisor—throughout the semester without any kind of repercussion or understanding that he was doing anything wrong. The student participants of this study all believed this type of deliberate misgendering and misunderstanding of a person's humanity through gender identity could be helped through exposure and greater education on diverse gender identities. They believe that this would significantly help the campus culture and community for them and their gender queer peers.

Training Programs in Place on Campuses

Every campus involved in this study provides, in some way, training for staff, faculty, and students through their respective LGBTQ center. All four staff participants discussed the various kinds of training they are constantly performing on their campus from very basic allyship training to extensive, highly specific training programs about the gender queer population. Angela and her staff developed a program they call "Trans 101," which they developed as a supplemental training course to their basic, two-part allyship training which is available to both

staff and student populations in hopes of spreading greater awareness, understanding, and support for the gender queer community on her campus.

However, the effectiveness of these training programs on campus can be argued. Within this region of the United States many states have laws—to be discussed later—preventing diversity training (specifically training referencing racial or gender diversity) from being mandatory in public institutions (Martinez-Keel, 2023). So even though extensive training for all members of the campus community exists on all these campuses, there is no way to expose everyone to them because the institutions cannot mandate the training to anyone—staff or student. In order to circumvent this restriction, the LGBTQ offices that are responsible for creating and performing these trainings offer professional development programs in collaboration with their respective HR departments so anyone who wants to take any ally training is easily able to sign up through the HR system. But in addition to these formal trainings through human resources, they also all have systems in place where people can request training for individual departments or staffs, student groups or classrooms, or even around the community the institution resides in.

Ruth (she/her, LGBTQ center staff) talked about how they do put on the regular professional development trainings that anyone can sign up for but mostly, "we go where we are invited…and we are periodically doing over 100 trainings a year" across departments, student spaces, and in the community surrounding the university at large. But, as important as these training sessions are and how much the student and staff participants of this study know that education is the best way to create a more supportive and accessible space, there is no way to reach everyone in the university systems with these trainings. In most instances, the training is purely optional, which means those who need it most are more likely than not to opt in to spend their time doing it.

Protecting Students through Anti-discrimination Policy

One glaring gap in administrative backing for the gender diverse population on these campuses is the lack of enforcement of the existing non-discrimination policies. Anyone looking is likely to find some sort of non-discrimination policy at any public institution in the United States, which specifically states that the university does not discriminate against anyone, student or staff, due to a sizable list of personal attributes including race, religion, sexuality, and gender.

Even though these mandated policies are in place on every campus, the enforcement of them leaves something to be desired—especially when it comes to the transgender community.

All campus issues that have to do with sex and gender typically go through the Title IX office. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the United States "prohibits sex (including pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity) discrimination in any education program" at a publicly funded institution (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Through the creation of Title IX policy, public institutions now have a dedicated office specifically monitoring gender equity issues on campus—from evaluating how female specific spaces on campus compare to male specific ones (like in the case of athletics) to being a safe haven for students to report sexual and gender related harassment or even assault on campus which can then be reported to the police.

Unfortunately, according to the student participants of this study, these offices can be less than effective when serving the LGBTQ populations on campus. Several students brought up how the Title IX office is relatively adept at responding to and advocating for cis-gender, straight women on campus who are assaulted by men, or at least they take the allegations seriously, but very rarely do they spend much time or effort on cases involving people who identify as queer. Ezra shared a story about a friend of his during their first year who was assaulted on campus. Though she reported it to the Title IX office, the case was dropped because the man who assaulted her claimed she was just calling it assault because she wanted to "preserve her status as a lesbian" (Ezra, he/him, third-year student). He then went on to say that "[t]here aren't really a lot of places to like report anything that happened to you on campus and if you did report it anyways nothing would really come of it."

Because the Title IX office is really the only space to report any kind of sexual or gender related harassment on campus, but they are notorious for not being overly helpful, the transgender and non-binary community at these institutions are reluctant to seek any help at all. Linus (he/him, second-year student) shared a story from his time in campus housing where "there was some guy down the AMAB[2] side [of the building] and he figured out that I was transgender and he started sending me videos, very insulting videos about transgender people. I didn't report it though 'cause it's not like the institution's gonna do anything." These stories

[2] assigned male at birth

demonstrate how even though these institutions and their administration put policies in place to protect the gender diverse population on campus, they often leave something to be desired when it comes to enforcing them. As a result, it seems that most of the demonstrated support for gender queer individuals on campus is just lip service.

The general consensus regarding overarching accessibility and support from the institutions themselves across the student participants of this study was that their institution claimed to support their gender non-conforming population through symbolic displays of support—many of which are mandatory through national legislation. The presence of anti-discrimination policies and the Title IX office are required by the federal government through the department of education; however, their mere presence on campus does not necessarily make the institution an accessible space for these students if the policies are not actively and effectively acted upon. Though ally training is invaluable, if those trainings must be opted into, the individuals on campus who need them most will likely choose not to participate at all—leading students to believe that they simply have to accept the misgendering and microaggressions they are likely to face on a daily basis or change where and how they attend higher education.

Even though administrations within these institutions claim to be working towards accessibility and equity for gender queer students on their campuses, the students themselves feel as if they are coming up rather short in those respects. The acknowledgement that efforts have been made, at least in name, is key and allows the universities themselves to claim gender inclusive campuses. But for those students living their daily lives in these spaces, they feel as if the efforts that have been made are bare minimum in order to meet mandated regulations.

Accessibility also refers to physical space and how students are able to move around and feel safe in shared spaces on campus in a concrete sense. How institutions build and advertise these physically affirming spaces is extremely important in creating an accessible campus for gender queer students (Nicolazzo, 2017). This need to establish supportive and accessible spaces across an entire campus will be explored more thoroughly in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

"We offer a safe space for students…": Access to Physical Space on Campus

Many students acknowledged that their administrations are making attempts at access and support for gender queer students but were also frustrated with the systems in place to protect and enforce those official policies, shrinking their access to campus life because they do not feel heard when they report incidents. This means that transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students have to actively seek out public places on campus where they are less likely to endure confrontation so they can experience higher education somewhat similarly to their peers, but they also need access to the campus at large in order to be fully successful in their education.

A major aspect of accessibility on campus is students' ability to find the spaces in which they feel safe and affirmed to engage in campus life. Accessibility means students should have access to basic amenities like restrooms and equitable/safe housing and also have the freedom to move around campus with their peers without fear of harassment or even dangerous interactions (Nicolazzo, 2017; Hill et all., 2021). The administrative support discussed in the previous chapter influences so many aspects of student experiences on campus. Administrative access, like campus wide anti-discrimination and name change policies, and the extent to which these administrative support systems are enforced on campus, affects the physical spaces students interact with on a daily basis. Ruth, the full-time staff member in her LGBTQ center, put this need into focus when she said, "I think it's important to like remind myself cis-gender students have access to these resources and trans students don't need to have barriers." Creating equitable space means providing gender queer students with the same opportunities as all other students on campus without making their experience harder through hostile or inaccessible public and social spaces.

The Impact of Multi-Cultural and LGBTQ Centers

When providing support and accessibility services to students on campus, the standard attempt by institutions is to establish a central office supporting students of marginalized identities. These offices typically hold names such as the Diversity and Inclusion Office, Multi-Cultural Center, Gender Equity Office, or any combination or likeness therein. They are designed to serve various communities within the university based on race, gender, sexuality,

nationality, etc., and usually have off-shoots focusing on specific communities under the larger umbrella office.

The four staff members that participated in this study all oversaw either the diversity offices as a whole or specifically operated the sub office designed to provide support and resources for the LGBTQ community (Dewitt, 2012). This structure looked different at every participating institution but functioned essentially the same. Noah, the resource coordinator in a multi-cultural center at a major state university, described his role as "creating, supporting, [and] corralling programs that are meant to support and uplift students' community" on his campus. His perspective on these types of centers and their function on campus was shared throughout all staff participant interviews—their purpose being creating space and accessibility to all marginalized communities on university campuses but specifically the gender queer populations. He said,

> "College should be bumper bowling. We create all of the structures in place so that safety, of everybody involved, is first and foremost. But we put up those safety structures that we can get into rigorous debate. We have to be uncomfortable to learn. And professors are just as guilty as students of conflating safety with comfort" (Noah, he/him, resource coordinator).

Noah's perspective describes these centers, these inarguably safe spaces for transgender and non-binary students, as spaces in which students are able to relax and enjoy their time in academia away from some of the contentious points and restricted access they may face while engaging with the rest of the campus culture. This provides them with the community they need to thrive even when faced with challenges elsewhere (Hill et al., 2021).

Angela (she/her), who is both faculty and the director of a standalone LGBTQ center at her institution, very plainly stated their purpose as a center was to "offer a safe space for students" within the campus community which includes the physical space itself and the extensive resources it provides which will be discussed later in the chapter. Spaces like these are crucial for gender queer students because they provide a "nice and supportive and really helpful" place to go throughout the day, in between classes, work, or other on campus experiences according to student participant Glen—who praised their campus LGBTQ center for all the ways in which it attempts to provide space for people to live authentically on campus without fear of retaliation (they/them, first-year student).

Physical Space, Casual Living Room Atmosphere

One of the greatest assets of these centers is the physical space itself. Though all four staff participants wish for a larger space to provide room for even more students at any given time, they were all grateful to their institutions for the ability to take up physical space on campus rather than just operate out of a single staffer's office. Nick (he/him, program coordinator) described their space as a queer lounge, stating that "it's basically our living room—for some of our student[s] to just kind of hang out, like in between classes" and have a space to relax, spend time with other queer students on campus and feel comfortable and secure while spending their day on the campus. Noah (he/him, program coordinator) and Angela (she/her, professor/director) both described how they feel genuinely supported in their efforts by the institutions' administration for the ability to take up this space. The ability to provide a casual setting for the LGBTQ student population to congregate and feel seen without judgment or condemnation and, more importantly seen with earnest understanding and caring in a space dedicated specifically to their needs is vital to creating a sense of community (Woodford, 2018).

Students, likewise, spoke about how comforting the existence of the LGTBQ center on their campus was. Even when they do not have the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time there, the knowledge that at any point they could share space with others within their community made navigating campus for them a little more relaxed. Linus talked about how easy his center was to find when he got to campus, considering he did not know it existed before getting there. These centers are typically very centrally located at their institutions, most of them occupying space within the student union where all facets of campus life converge to socialize, study, and spend time throughout the day. By being where all the students are already, students within this community, who may have no knowledge of its presence on campus, can easily find these spaces while exploring the student-centered facility—making it a key aspect of access. Resources that are readily available and easy to find allow students to happen upon them or search them out without issue which provides a greater sense of access and acceptance on campus that may otherwise be lacking (Knutson, 2022).

Max (she/they, second-year student) talked about the office on their campus as one where queer students can access a myriad of resources from a great, affirming space that was open to anyone who wanted to spend time there, not just those who identify within the LGBTQ community. Max also mentioned the various kinds of lending libraries accessible to all the

students who utilize the center. By providing this kind of casually affirming space for students to spend time, these centers create a supportive environment within the institutional system where transgender and gender non-conforming students can feel safe to live authentically, even just temporarily, providing much needed access to a place to rest (Hill et al., 2021; Knutson, 2022).

The Power of Lending Libraries

A major aspect of these affirming physical spaces is literature specifically chosen for them. Though all students have access to campus wide library resources, what three of the four staff participants brought up in our conversations was the existence of a lending library in their physical spaces dedicated to LGTBQ research, fiction, and other literature. This library is incredibly important during the current climate in the United States, and specifically the conservative south, because many states within this region have proposed and passed legislation censoring books with any mention of lifestyle outside of the heteronormative (Perfas, 2023). So, books are actively being pulled off the shelves of public libraries—those within institutions of education and public libraries—that depict or discuss any aspect of the LGBTQ community. Even while book banning takes place within their campus libraries, transgender students are able to access texts closely related to their experience within these centers which, because the collections in the centers are privately curated, do not (currently) have to follow these same legislative rules.

Ruth (she/her, LGBTW center staff) described their lending library as available to faculty, staff, students, and the local community at large surrounding the university where she staffs the LGBTQ center. Their library is both physical and digital to provide even greater access to those in search of resources. They not only have a physical library within the LGBTQ center itself but collect digital resources from local, national, and international sources highlighting the community and serving the community as a whole, so they are easily accessible to all who go looking for them. Second year student, Linus, helps run the lending library at his LGBTQ center and discussed how though their library is not overly extensive, it is a space students use predominantly for studying like they would the campus library. Linus (he/him, second-year student) said, “I think it’s like two shelves max,” in reference to the center’s queer library, but it is quiet and comfortable, and patrons are surrounded by material that affirms and supports their identity which makes it a great space to spend some dedicated time.

By providing resources and allowing students to take ownership of those resources through students like Linus who are charged with upkeep and requests from students for specific texts, students can take agency over how the space feels intentionally for them and their specific needs with each passing cohort through the university. Nick described how many of his students had requested a specific fiction series for the library, to the point that they jokingly referred to the center as homophobic for its oversight of the iconic homosexual romance/coming-of-age *Heartstopper* novels. He proudly said, "I know that it might seem small, but our student(s) really appreciate [the library] being there," and they are able to find community within that space and the lounge because of it (Nick, he/him, program coordinator).

By creating a casual environment for students to relax and spend time the LGBTQ centers are providing the much-needed room for social engagement that allows students to feel comfortable on campus instead of only engaged in academic activities. And in letting students take ownership of these spaces through the upkeep of the libraries not only makes the institution more accessible but makes students feel connected and safe in those spaces (Neary, 2018; Zeeman et al., 2017).

Limited Space on Campus and the Growing Need of Community

The limiting factor regarding a physical space is its boundaries. As more students find these safe, relaxed atmospheres in which to spend their time, they become more and more crowded—and by the nature of that phenomenon, less and less relaxed. Because this population, the LGBTQ community as a whole, not just the gender queer population, is perceived to be so small on these campuses by the administration, physical space is often limited. Ruth, Nick, Noah, and Angela all voiced the desire, and referred to it as a need, for a larger space on campus to provide a space expansive enough for the community they serve. Though hard numbers are not kept by the offices included in this study, most approximated that their space had a few hundred unique visits by students every week, with many students utilizing the space and resources of the center multiple times a week.

The popularity of these centers continues to grow as word of mouth around campus introduces more and more students to these spaces. Institutions may have originally planned a center to serve a couple hundred students, but now serve and support thousands of students. The campuses involved in this study all have a student enrollment of at least 26,000 with some as high as 50,000. Each diversity center estimates they have around 4- or 5,000 students utilizing

their space and services throughout the year, so providing adequate physical space for those students can be difficult in a cultural climate that stigmatizes and demonizes these students' existence (Thomas-Durrell, 2020). But as Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) explained,

> "the other part of it is also thinking about how we adapt our space because we are here in the center…making sure that we are constantly thinking about how we provide safe space here and what does that mean…My biggest thing about thinking about safe space is we grow it and it's like a chia pet. It requires constant care because it can shrivel."

Creating enough and the right kind of physical space is crucial for providing an accessible and supportive environment for diverse populations on campus including the transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer community pursuing their education (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

Ezra, an upper-level student at his university, illustrated the center's need for greater space on campus through the ways in which they are treated at larger university events. He described how during major university resource and activity fairs, the LGBTQ center and other LGBTQ related resources are never provided with prime table space, they "kinda [get] pushed to like the very back of the buildings, so it's like out of sight out of mind." In this way he reflects on these LGBTQ offices' presence similarly to the staff participants. The centers are vital and are doing great work, but sometimes they are difficult to find. The centers themselves may be in the student union at large, but they can be difficult to locate within the typically multi-level and expansive buildings if students do not know what they are looking for.

Though these spaces are specifically designed to serve the queer community on campus and have intentionally laid out the physical space so all LGBTQ students can feel welcome, creating an accessible and supportive environment on campus is about more than just their allotted square footage in which to house a specific "type" of person. Creating a queer friendly campus also requires campus wide accessible spaces as (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Kilgo, 2020; Knutson, 2022; Nicolazzo, 2017; Pritcher et al, 2018). Students cannot spend their entire time within the walls of the LGBTQ center. Eventually, they must go to other spaces on campus for class, work, and student groups and activities, and for the institution to be considered truly accessible, these spaces must be as well.

Accessing Common Campus Spaces as a Gender Queer Student

The Hot Question: Restroom Access Across Campus

Throughout the conversations with staff and students, the topic of where a student (or member of faculty or staff) can relieve themselves throughout their hectic day on campus came up quickly and without prompting—indicating that this is an important topic for both those wanting to access these types of spaces and those who may have the power to create them on campus. Due to the highly conservative and binary nature of public spaces in general and the overwhelming influence of the regional culture on campuses within the Bible Belt, the topic of gender-neutral bathrooms is tetchy (Adair, 2015; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Despite this, public universities are still working towards at least attempting to provide easy access to restrooms for gender queer persons on their campuses by providing some gender-neutral restroom options. The emphasis on *some*, however, is distinctly important. These campuses span over acres of land with dozens of buildings across them, and none of the four campuses involved in this study could say that all, or even a large number of buildings on their campus housed accessible restrooms for students and staff.

Finding and Accessing Restrooms. Many of the student participants expressed frustration when it came to finding accessible restrooms on their campus, either because of how few of them there are or because they are all grouped together in a few buildings that are near each other—leaving the rest of the campus inaccessible to them. Cam specifically spoke about how they know of only one, maybe two, gender neutral restrooms on their campus, one of which is in the diversity center. “That’s why it exists,” Cam explained (they/them, second-year student). The diversity center and the space it takes up is the only place “they actually feel comfortable even using the restroom” while on campus. That is a major issue for them as Cam spends eight or nine hours on campus every day because of class and their on-campus job.

Glen and Max could also only think of one or two gender inclusive restrooms on their respective campuses, citing that the ones they know about are single stall restrooms housed within the student union typically near the LGBTQ center. Linus talked about how there were so few accessible restrooms on his campus and how, “The problem with the gender-neutral bathrooms is that they are very few and far between,” meaning there likely will not be one close by when a student needs it (he/him, second-year student).

With so few gender-inclusive restrooms on campus, it is impossible for non-binary and transgender students who do not feel comfortable or are afraid of the backlash they might face for using a binary restroom, to comfortably relieve themselves. Typically, if they are wanting to use an accessible restroom, they must walk ten to fifteen minutes across campus to then potentially wait in line for the one single stall accessible restroom they have access to. When discussing support and access on campus, the focus is providing an environment free from unnecessary hindrances to a student's education. Students should not have to take extensive trips to and from the student center just to use the restroom instead of using that time to study, socialize, or work at their on-campus job. This barrier significantly impacts how productive and connected to the university they can become (Knutson et al, 2022).

How LGBTQ Centers are Responding to this Need. To help students navigate to safe restroom spaces on campus, a couple of the LGTBQ centers represented in this study either have created or are in the process of gathering the necessary data to draw a map of accessible restrooms on their campus. These efforts are primarily student-led and are supported by the staff in the centers to create an official document and distribute it to students at large. Even where gender free restrooms exist, "there is a massive ignorance on this campus of where" they are, quotes Noah (he/him, resource coordinator). So, it is difficult to claim accessible spaces for transgender and non-binary students when the accessible space is not well documented, and that information is not easily accessible. When assessing how these institutions support their students, it is not enough to merely count the accessible spaces that are there but to also analyze how effective they are at actually serving that population.

Ruth discussed the university gym in her interview, explaining how the main gym which is accessed by thousands of students, staff, and community members everyday does have gender inclusive restrooms by offering single stall options for those purposes, but does not have any kind of gender inclusive locker room or shower room for transgender and other gender queer students to feel safe in. The university can, however, still claim that it has created accessible space for gender diverse students by having a gender inclusive shower at the small recreational sports facility. This alternative facility is on the other side of campus, however, at least a twenty-minute walk from the main, most prominently used and accessible gym for students. This illustrates the disparity between the administrative claims of accessibility discussed in the

previous chapter versus the ways in which those resources are actually usable for students on campus.

Identifying these issues is paramount to the efficacy of the LGBTQ centers in advocating for more inclusive and accessible spaces for students. By only providing accessible showers at the smaller gym all the way across campus from the prominent student spaces, Ruth's campus has effectively excluded gender queer students from using a major resource on campus except under very specific circumstances in which they do not need to be able to shower after their work-out. One of Ruth's goals going forward is to find a way to collaborate with the recreation department on campus to remedy this issue so that this population of students has more access to popular campus spaces without the hindrance of limited accessibility.

Gender Inclusive On-Campus Housing and How to Find It

Access to accessible, gender affirming housing at public institutions has the same pitfalls in this region as the issue of gender-neutral bathrooms. On all four campuses I investigated, options exist for students who have been assigned to a room, hall, or building that does not align with their gender identity; however, the options are not widely publicized or known. In some instances, they are even advertised in a completely different context, making it difficult for gender queer students to know what options are available to them. The options for these students, though predominantly available, are limited. Housing on college campuses is highly gendered. Certain institutions are working on creating greater diversity in the way housing is made up by allowing for co-ed halls and buildings even if they have not yet expanded to co-ed rooms. In the case of students who identity outside of their sex assigned at birth, which is how housing assignments are ultimately decided, these students often end up in a single occupancy room which gives them the privacy needed to feel safe within their living space but can rob them of the quintessential university experience of dorm living (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017).

Linus, a second-year student who lived on campus during his freshman year, talked about how confusing the housing situation is on his campus because there are actually a large number of options when it comes to housing arrangements, but, somehow, they are all still extremely binary in nature. He discussed how the various dorm buildings have different living options. There are halls with men on one side and women on the other, co-ed halls where there could be a room with male occupants right next to a room with female occupants, and also entire buildings

that are women only. This type of system gives the impression that the housing options are inclusive to incoming students, and that they are not forced to choose a men or women only housing option. However, when it comes to room assignments, everyone is still separated by the established gender binary, meaning even though co-ed floors and buildings exist, transgender and non-binary students may end up in a living situation that makes them or their roommate uncomfortable.

For students willing to have the conversation about their gender identity before they come to campus, entering an accessible living situation could be a little bit easier. For example, Andi, who is currently living on campus during his first year and identifies as a transman, set up a meeting with a housing advisor long before he moved to campus so that he could request a roommate that was also a transman to feel more comfortable in his dorm room. After several months of conversations and work on the part of the housing coordinator, they were able to get him set up in a dorm situation where his roommate and a couple other of their hall mates were transmen within the men's dorm hall, making his experience with housing much more affirming and positive than many of the other students in this study. Andi's experience, however, could only be made so positive because of his ability to speak up before ever coming to campus and the university's willingness to work with him. Many students may not feel comfortable having these conversations if they are unsure of the institutional attitudes towards gender diverse students, especially if there is no outward marketing claiming any kind of gender affirming housing.

Ruth (she/her, LGBTQ center staff) described how her institution scored very low on the Campus Pride Index[3] because it does not have gender affirming/inclusive housing options. This can make it difficult for students to choose to attend the institution in the first place, or, if they do decide to attend, to feel comfortable starting a conversation with housing about inclusive options for them. She did go on to explain that, similar to other regional institutions, the options for single rooms, co-ed halls and buildings, and even gender diverse roommate pairings do exist at her university. These housing resources are marketed to incoming students and parents, however, as a sort of family and friends option. It would allow, for example, siblings or close family friends to cohabitate in the dorms no matter their sex assigned at birth or gender identity. It also

[3] The Campus Pride Index is the premier LGBTQ benchmarking tool in the United States for institutions of higher education to create safer and more inclusive campus communities. It is a free online database tracking the "friendliness" towards LGBTQ students on campuses across the USA. (Campus Pride, n.d.)

allows for gender affirming housing for those students coming to campus with close friends they know they will be comfortable living with. Hal (they/them), a first-year student, talked about these types of housing programs on their campus in which a new policy does allow students to room with any gender as long as the pair agree to the arrangement. He did not feel like this policy was for gender non-conforming people, but instead, as Ruth described, family members or close friends who wanted to room together.

Unfortunately, this leaves students who are embarking on their university experience alone without an inclusive option unless they are willing to specifically ask about it. Asking could be extremely taxing for students who are not sure of the safety of their campus. A student attending at Ruth's campus, for example, may not feel safe approaching the housing department because there is no marketing indicating the existence of gender affirming housing and therefore could end up in a living situation that could not be good for them. Hal explained that when they arrived on campus, they did not know anyone else, so they had to sign up for a dorm room that aligned with their sex assigned at birth rather than their gender identity which put him in a situation that neither they nor their roommate was comfortable with. Barriers like this make campuses feel inaccessible for gender queer students because they do not know what their options are or if options even exist for them (Hill et al, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017).

Moving Within the Housing System for a Better Experience. There are many reasons why a student in campus housing may need help moving within the housing system after arriving on campus. For students like Hal, they arrive on campus in a living situation they may not feel comfortable with because of limited options in housing or their limited knowledge of their options. At times, perhaps a student has not disclosed their identity to their parents or guardian and could not fill out their housing form the way they wanted, or only started identifying as transgender or gender queer after arriving on campus. In all of these circumstances, there are options for students to find safe and accessible, gender-neutral housing on the campuses within this study. As partners on campus, all the LGBTQ centers on the four campuses provide the support and advocacy needed to get students who come to them asking to be rehoused their desired and needed arrangement.

In the case of Angela's (she/her, professor/director) institution, she has access to funding from the housing department, allowing her to move students into a better situation when they come to her for help—making her institution more overtly accessible for gender diverse students

when it comes to housing. Nick, Noah, and Ruth, whom are all program/resource coordinators on their respective campuses, also explained how they work diligently with students who come to them for help with re-housing when their situation feels unsafe, uncomfortable, or just wrong for their gender identity, even if their institution does not boast gender inclusive housing publicly. Ruth explained, her institution will not claim gender inclusive housing even though options are available. Likewise, Noah talked about his university's lack of advertisement for gender affirming housing options despite their existence on campus. Noah and Ruth both discussed how it is frustrating because they are so anxious to help in any way that they can, but students have to be able to find them before they are able to do so. Noah (resource coordinator) explained how he feels:

> "…it comes across to some students like I have to find the right person who will give me the secret handshake…I know when students come to me and say I think I'm trans or I think dadadada and I don't know if I feel comfortable in my housing anymore, I know exactly who to plug them into and …these people are trauma informed and they are wonderful at their job and that is why I go to them because not only will they help with the housing situation, the logistics of moving them into or finding the right balance of where they could live, but also handle the situation with such empathic grace and earnestness that that situation deserves. Because at the end of the day it serves both students."

This explanation is indicative of the findings of this study as a whole, which is that there are countless people on these campuses who genuinely want and are trained to help with these situations. These people are driven to create accessible and supportive space for transgender and non-binary students on their campuses, but the administrative policies in place can make that difficult, forcing the students to find the correct office in which to advocate for themselves before they are able to find someone who can advocate for their specific needs.

Due to the conservative nature of this region and these campuses, students seeking help on campus feel as if they have to be careful about where they seek help and from whom, because they know not all spaces and people on campus are going to be safe for them, making finding those accessible and supportive spaces difficult to locate.

Building Accessible Academic Spaces Through Campus Culture

"The hardest thing is to create safe space in the hearts of the people across this community," Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) explained while speaking about helping to create a supportive and accessible environment across the campus and not just in his specific realm of the LGBTQ center. Access here refers to gender queer students' ability to sit in class, walk the halls of their respective departments, and stroll through campus common areas without harassment and with understanding and respect from the campus community at large (Beemyn, 2019).

All eight student participants brought up their experiences in class and other common spaces where they felt discriminated against, if not specifically the target of microaggression or even more blatant acts of discrimination. Cam (they/them, second-year student) talked about how they are constantly misgendered within the office they work at every day by their coworkers and their boss. They also shared a story about how they were continuously interrupted during an oral presentation in one of their language courses by another student to be 'corrected' for using masculine pronouns, which Cam uses when practicing languages without gender neutral pronouns. Cam, who is chronically ill and makes a point to wear COVID protection in public spaces, has a cloth mask they wear on campus that has 'THEY/THEM' written across the front, so they do not have to have to introduce themselves with their pronouns every time. It is out there so everyone who encounters them can see it easily, but they are still misgendered and deadnamed in their day-to-day life on campus despite their efforts.

Alternatively, Linus (he/him, second-year student) also studies a highly gendered language and spoke extensively about the positive experience he had with his instructor in his Czech class when he approached him about his pronouns. As a very feminine presenting person, Linus discussed how he has trouble in his daily interactions with people misgendering him, similar to Cam's experience, but when his Czech instructor noticed he referred to himself as male in a homework assignment, he deliberately sought Linus out to clarify his gender identity to make sure he was not being misgendered in class. The support provided by his instructor made Linus feel safe in that environment and, therefore, created an accessible educational experience in which he felt free to focus specifically on learning rather than navigating what part of himself to disclose and what to keep quieter in fear of the reactions around him. Inclusive teaching practices like the one Linus experienced are paramount to creating accessible learning spaces

because they allow students to openly know their instructors are working on acknowledging and affirming their identity in the classroom (Linley et al, 2016; Martikainen, 2020). But students navigate a myriad of spaces within their education experience, not just classrooms, and accessing these spaces is just as important as feeling safe within their class.

Finding these accessible physical spaces on campus is invaluable to students because in many of the larger social spaces—the library, the student union, the food court, etc.—transgender and non-binary students do not know what kind of conversations and interactions they may face (Effrig et al, 2011; Goldberg, 2019). Ezra (he/him, second-year student) shared that, "I go to class and students are making aids jokes before it starts…like it's hard to study in like the common area because people are just like constantly debating whether transgender people should be allowed in sports or whatever." Instances such as this make it extremely difficult to share common space with the campus community at large, especially if your identity and right to exist in these spaces is constantly up for casual debate.

Universal Design on Campus and the Effect it can Have

Predominantly, students feel as if spaces outside of the LGBTQ centers or individual classrooms in which the instructors make a concerted effort are not particularly accessible to them. Both Andi and Hal, first year students on their respective campuses, attributed it to the lack of acknowledgement or even awareness from the cis-gender population. "I feel like a lot of people don't kind of realize that trans people are active in their everyday life," Andi said, wishing there were more intentionally created spaces with gender equity in mind (he/him, first-year student).

The staff participants in this study were not ignorant to these inaccessible and sometimes hostile spaces due to the culture on campus. Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) especially spoke to the concept of universal design when creating accessible space on campus, not just for transgender students but all students within marginalized communities by means of education and accountability for the faculty and staff that are regularly interacting with a highly diverse population. Concepts of universal design manifest in not only providing training and other educational services to established members of staff but also the intentional outreach to new employees and especially those with the agency for change. For example, Nick's (he/him, program coordinator) institution recently hired someone for a new position designed to be a leader for academic teaching excellence. Designing the structure for faculty and staff to create

safe campus culture for students influences other aspects of student life, making all spaces more accessible across campus.

With the new hire targeting teaching excellence on his campus, Nick was able to make contact and work closely with this position to help establish inclusive teaching methods across campus instead of on a department-by-department scale. He said specifically, "we're working closely with them to equip faculty…give them tools to making sure that they um not misgender anyone [and] having appropriate resources" to fully prepare them to work with a diverse population in an inclusive way (Nick, he/him, program coordinator). Nick highlighted his constant effort to connect with various offices and spaces on campus to bolster and influence them in their efforts to support diverse populations. Accessible space and support are not just about physical spaces on campus but providing education and support for the faculty and staff that are meeting with students on a daily basis who, unlike Nick, Noah, Angela, and Ruth, were not purposefully hired to constantly think about serving this particular community.

Accessible physical space on campus is vital to transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students' ability to thrive in their education (Beemyn, 2019; Hill et al., 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017; Schreiner, 2010). From social spaces like LGBTQ centers, to easy access to restrooms, housing, and the student fitness center, to be a full participant on campus students must be able to access all the campus has to offer without hinderances that could dilute the experience. Until all spaces on campus are designed with the full spectrum of human experience in mind regarding accessibility, then campus cannot be truly accessible.

The campuses represented in this study show deliberate efforts to create accessible and safe spaces for their gender queer students through the LGBTQ centers, but when students venture outside of that finite space, their experiences can vary widely. Access to restrooms and housing can be unreliable at best and completely inaccessible at worst. Instructors and fellow students can be affirming in certain spaces and unwilling to even engage in the conversation on gender identity in others. This makes navigating campus spaces tenuous for gender queer students because they do not know what kind of situation they will find themselves in from moment to moment, making the campus as a whole rather inaccessible. Unlike their cisgender peers, they do not have unfettered access to campus for fear of what kind of reception they might find there because of their gender identity and the way campus culture affects those spaces.

Campus culture in particular came up frequently with students and staff alike in regard to how that in particular severely influences how accessible physical spaces feel throughout campus. Without buy-in from administration, faculty, and staff who have major influence over student spaces, the culture at large is unlikely to change to support the transgender, non-binary, and gender queer population in the same ways it supports other students throughout their education.

Chapter 5

Programming for Gender Diverse Populations on Campus

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, accessibility at institutions of higher education within the Bible Belt tends to get restricted for transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse students due to patriarchal and heteronormative ideals which define gender as a binary. A region driven by highly traditional and, oftentimes, divisive interpretations of the Christian faith rather than ones steeped in love and understanding can create a hostile environment for anyone who falls outside of gender expectations (Barton, 2012). In addition to working towards universal design in the actual physical space, one of the ways public education is attempting to make more accessible space for gender queer individuals is by bringing visibility to this community through programming designed specifically for them to create an affirming and welcoming atmosphere (Hughto et al., 2015; Knutson, 2022).

Major change across the university at large starts at the top with the administration, per the discussion in Chapter 3, and can take extensive periods of time to really influence the day to day throughout campus. Accessible systems and space, though present, leave much to be desired by transgender and gender non-conforming students who must navigate their campuses on a daily basis. The existence of the LGBTQ centers directly provides the support these students need on a personal level, even if the systems at large are predominantly working against them. The affirmation of their identities through specialized support from their communities (the LGBTQ centers) and curriculum enables students to better thrive on campus (Beemyn, 2006; Hill et al., 2021).

One of the most significant ways these centers can affect students' daily lives and work towards creating more accepting and accessible spaces throughout campus is through their extensive programming. Programming can include the previously discussed training for faculty, staff, and students throughout campus, as well as health education and resources for students, providing space for student organizations to meet and program for themselves, and campus wide events so the campus community at large can engage with the LGBTQ center and the gender diverse community. These large scale, campus wide events help demonstrate to the entire campus wide community through education and events that gender queer individuals are not an anomaly but fellow students and staff wanting to participate in everything campus has to offer. When talking about what kinds of events and programming they choose to put in their LGBTQ

center, Nick (he/him, program coordinator) made a point to "focus more on queer joy," because "a lot of the time out narrative is a little bit trauma based."

In order to make sure the focus is not solely on the trauma suffered by many of the students in this demographic, the LGBTQ centers represented in this study all found ways to both nurture students through the trauma they may have suffered surrounding their gender identity, but also celebrate and affirm those identities outside of that trauma. This chapter will explore programming focused on the individual—evaluating the effectiveness of mental and physical health programs and community-based programming in creating accessible and supportive space on campus.

Mental and Physical Healthcare Access on Campus

Accessing on Campus Health Services as a Gender Non-Conforming Person

Access to healthcare on campus can be extremely taxing for gender queer students, especially for those who are trying to get set up with healthcare for the first time at the university health centers. Almost every public university in the United States has a healthcare facility on campus where students can be seen for anything from cold and flu season to annual pap smears to STI testing. These services are advertised to the entire university community and, occasionally, even the community at large surrounding the university, as accessible health care right on campus that anyone can use. However, the same issues that can arise in classrooms and other public spaces on campus due to the bias against anyone identifying outside their sex assigned at birth are prevalent in the healthcare system as well. Transgender, non-binary, and other gender queer students do not always feel comfortable using these 'highly accessible' campus resources for fear of the reaction to their presence in these spaces or being misunderstood/misgendered/mishandled by the medical and support staff. They are not sure what kind of reception they will receive, if the doctors and nurses have been trained in treating transgender individuals, or if the support staff—reception, technicians, etc.—have any experience working with transgender or gender queer people (Dolan et al., 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2020; Kcomt, 2019).

This uncertainty makes it extremely hard to feel comfortable enough to even approach the health center, let alone attempt to make an appointment to see someone. Ezra, a transman who has been on his campus for almost three years, discussed how when it comes to health care accessibility, he feels like any progress his institution is making is purely surface level. He

explained that their women's health center recently changed their name to the reproductive health center, which he admits is more inclusive on paper. However, when he went into the office to schedule an appointment for his annual exam, the reception desk turned him away, stating that he would have no reason to see an obstetrician. Ezra is masculine presenting which caused the front desk to assume he had no need whatsoever for an annual pap smear. After several attempts to get the receptionist to schedule his appointment and not feeling comfortable blatantly stating that he does indeed have a uterus and needs to schedule his annual exam in front of the crowded reception area, he instead decided to leave and forgo the highly necessary wellness exam.

Stories like Ezra's are not uncommon among transgender men trying to access reproductive health care, and other gender non-conforming people attempting to access sexual healthcare in general, because staff are often not provided with the necessary training needed to work with gender diverse individuals (Dolan et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2019). To combat these types of situations as best they can, several of the LGBTQ centers represented in this study have specific health care offices and/or practitioners that they deliberately send their students to as an alternative to accessing the healthcare center as any other student would. When Noah spoke about the way he helps students access health care on his campus, he discussed how it is not that every person working in the campus clinic has no idea how to work with gender diverse patients, it is just that if you are walking in there off the street there is no guarantee you are going to interact with one who does. As a result, he compiled a list of the clinicians who understand and advocate for gender queer individuals in the healthcare field so he can direct students specifically to those individuals when they are making appointments in the clinic.

Many of the staff participants also talked about how if their on-campus healthcare did not provide gender affirming care, like HRT (hormone replacement therapy) or other treatments, they had a list of practices that were off campus but still accessible where they could find affirming healthcare. As helpful and supportive as it may be to be able to provide direction for these students when it comes to their health care, it is still a glaring oversight by the institution that gender queer students are unable to simply walking into the university clinic and receive unhindered help at any given time like the rest of the student body. This hazard clearly stands in the way of the institution being truly accessible for all students.

Sexual Health Education, Clinics, and Testing. When considering students' physical health and the best ways in which the LGBTQ centers can help dynamically, the primary focus seems to be sexual health, through both education and in house clinics where students can get tested, pick-up free condoms, and talk to a clinician about safe sexual practices. Three of the four staff participants mentioned a sexual health clinic they put on through their center which takes place as frequently as every other week on certain campuses. Angela specifically brought up how the sexual health clinic put on through her LGBTQ center will perform HIV and other STI testing every time they open, which they try to host once a week. These clinics draw a large number of students, including those who do not utilize the LGBTQ center or do not identify in the community because the center offers much easier access to STI testing than the campus clinic.

Especially in the Bible Belt region of the United States, many schools provide some sort of sexual education during secondary education, but many public schools are limited to teaching abstinence-only education that is cis- and heteronormative focused (Mazzeo, 2020). So, when sexual and gender diverse students get to sexual maturity, they are largely in the dark about what their sexual and reproductive health should look like and how to take care of it. By providing these services within the LGBTQ center, they are educating this population to explore their sexual and gender identities intimately but also safely.

Nick (he/him, program coordinator) talked about how leading up to Valentine's Day one year they had a "workshop for student(s) about like 'what is sex ed?', but like, 'what does queer sex ed look like?'", to provide a conversation around what queer love and relationships can look like and how to safely and lovingly pursue them. Angela's LGBTQ center has an "NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] grant to digitize publications, [and] we have our sexual health ambassador program that teaches evidence based, sex positive sexual health curriculum," to create accessible sex education for the queer community on their campus in a supportive rather than judgmental environment (Angela, she/her, professor/director).

Andi, a first-year student, talked extensively about how great it is to have their LGBTQ center provide sexual health resources, not just in the form of providing condoms and testing when needed, but also the general atmosphere of education around sexual health in these spaces. He spoke on orientations and workshops about how to talk to a potential partner about sex, gender diversity and sexual health, and respecting your body through sex and partnership that

were really helpful when navigating dating, sexual activity, and partnerships in this new phase in their lives. By providing safe and affirming health care and sexual health services for transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students, LGBTQ centers are breaking the barriers between this student community and an oftentimes uncomfortable and even hostile environment of the healthcare.

Mental Health Access Including Counseling and Group Meetings

In addition to sexual health programming, the LGBTQ centers have extensive mental health programming for the students who utilize their spaces. Like with physical health clinics, the majority of public campuses in the United States contain some sort of counseling center within their on-campus health facility. But similar to physical health care spaces, unless a gender queer student already knows specifically who they should schedule their appointment with, they may be hesitant to use these resources because they do not know how they will be received by the practitioner. In order to create a more accessible counseling experience many of the LGBTQ centers participating in this study use their space for group and private talk therapy for all their students and specifically for their gender diverse students.

These programs are born through collaboration with the on-campus counseling facility as well as other resources surrounding the campus community. Noah and Nick both spoke about bringing in mental health practitioners from several practices within their city on a rotating basis to provide the most accessible mental health services they can for their students. Not only do they allow students to schedule individual appointments with counselors on a regular basis, but they hold group counseling sessions at least once a week that are open to whomever wants to join them. Many students brought this up as a great resource they utilize often.

Linus, a second-year student, talked about how at his institution there are at least two group counseling sessions a week, one for the members of the LGBTQ center at large to talk about community issues and shared trauma, but then another specifically for transgender and other gender non-conforming students in the center to talk about the hardships they have been through. He mentioned how grateful he was to have that space he could share with other members of his community. Even if it is not a resource he uses frequently, knowing it is there for him and that he does not have to attempt to find an affirming counselor and space on his own is a comfort to him.

Ruth talked about how the LGBTQ center she runs has a therapist in-house specifically for the transgender community who is there once a week for drop-in appointments. In addition to being in the LGBTQ center every week, this therapist works for the on-campus counseling center, so if students find help through these drop-in sessions, they can then schedule with the same therapist in the student health center on a regular basis. By bringing the therapist into a space where the students already feel comfortable and affirmed in their identity, it then opens up another part of campus they may have otherwise felt was inaccessible.

Providing these services to gender queer students in a space in which they already feel safe and affirmed allows them to be taken care of in many facets of their lives on campus just like every other student they share the school with. When transgender and non-binary students' mental and physical health needs are not being met like their peers, they can feel isolated and have unresolved issues that will get in the way of the pursuit of their education, so the LGBTQ centers health programming gives them a somewhat equal footing on campus (Dolan, 2020; Hendrickson, et al., 2020). Meeting with clinicians and mental health practitioners in this safe environment can make them feel more comfortable seeking them out from the campus clinic at large because they know who to schedule with that will be affirming.

Student Organizations and Student Led Programming to Promote Inclusion and Belonging

In addition to the programming that LGBTQ and other organizations on campus provide for this community, one of the ways institutions of higher education provide space, access, and support for their students of any demographic is the ease with which students are able to organize themselves and create programming of their own. Through the help of the LGBTQ centers, institutions are also able to provide the space and support for gender queer student organizations in several different forms, from therapeutic groups to activist and advocacy groups to purely fun social groups. These spaces provide students with the ability to engage with others in their community in satisfying and affirming ways.

Action and Activism Student Groups

If a student is interested in helping to enact change on their campus, fighting the fight for greater access and support for the gender diverse student population, there are often student advisory boards they can join within the LGBTQ center or the campus at large which focus on providing feedback to the administration about how student life can be improved. Nick, the director of the LGBTQ center on his campus, talked about how the student advisory board was

instrumental in large scale thinking about institutional support and big events that could significantly impact the LGBTQ community on campus in a positive way. The group on Nick's campus has been around for over fifteen years now and has been a major part in the (somewhat small but still significant) progress that has been made on their campus because, as many of the staff participants shared, it is the student voices that influence the most change. When student groups gain enough membership and demonstrate enough determination regarding their objectives, they are able to gain the respect of the administration in order to enact real change.

Similarly, though they do not have a student group specifically dedicated to advising and making recommendations to the administration the way Nick's LGBTQ center does, Noah discussed the activism work the students involved in his LGBTQ center engage in as well. Due to their location geographically, like all of the institutions in this study, oftentimes there are individuals representing extreme conservatism or fundamentalist Christian ideals who request space on campus to speak or preach and they are frequently granted that space based on free speech laws in public spaces.

Though students understand that as a public institution all kinds of ideals are welcome on campus and in the community due to the intent of exchanging ideas and starting conversations, they also know that does not mean they have to allow hateful and dangerous speech to go unchecked at their institution. Noah described how the students in his center will frequently either arrange for protests and/or counter protests to events that spew hate speech about the LGBTQ, and specifically the gender queer community. Or they will brilliantly put on an event either simultaneously or shortly thereafter which draws a larger, and obviously much more loving and accepting crowd in support of their community. By putting on their counter-events the student organizations are showing the community at large that they are present and thriving in these spaces despite any backlash they may face, and they are creating accessible and supportive space for themselves and for any new or potential students who are coming into the university unsure of what kind of environment they are entering.

Social Groups and Community Building

Though action and activism groups are extremely important, rewarding, and an integral part of the higher education experience for many people, social clubs and organizations are a cornerstone to community building on a college campus and can be wholly inaccessible to gender non-conforming students due to the binary nature of the campus structure (Goldberg and

Kuvalanka, 2018). Hal, a non-binary first-year student, described how many of the clubs they encounter or see predominantly marketed on campus draw very distinct gender lines on who the club is for—ex: Women in STEM, Future Women Engineers of America, etc. So even if it is a club they are wanting to participate in, they are not sure if it is acceptable or even safe for them to do so. This restricts gender diverse students' involvement on campus because they will not know how their presence in the social space will be received.

Despite this reality, however, many students in this study are active participants in several clubs and organizations across their campuses from general interest organizations—book clubs, gaming clubs, band, clubs within their major or discipline, etc.—to social student organizations specifically for LGBTQ and gender queer students through the LGBTQ centers. Though students like Ezra, a transman who is currently president of the women in engineering club on his campus, find themselves in gender exclusive spaces, they are still able to make those spaces safe and affirming for themselves to help them find and create community on campus (Davis, 1989; Freitas, 2017; Kilgo, 2009). And when students are unable to find already established clubs they feel comfortable in, they are empowered to start and grow their own.

Ruth (she/her, LGBTQ center staff) discussed how her students organized an event they call Trans Thursdays which is "really just a casual weekly hang-out session" for any transgender and/or gender queer students on campus wanting to find community and socialize. Though technically this program is run through the LGBTQ center, it is entirely student led with one of the student staff members responsible for opening up the space and deciding on what kind of activities they are going to do that week. Sometimes they just spend time playing games and talking at the LGBTQ center, but they also plan outings to thrift stores and other places around town to get out in the community and spend time away from campus. Social clubs like the one Ruth described allow gender diverse students who may feel less than welcome in some of the other student social spaces, especially those specifically geared towards one gender, to find community and common interest among their peers with a relaxed atmosphere. This kind of atmosphere is a critical part of the experience of higher education (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017; Spade, 2011).

Social Spaces on Campus and Their Impact. Many of the student participants of this study focused on the student led organizations and activities on campus when discussing how supportive the space felt for them. Where they felt the institution at large lacked as far as

administrative support and access for gender queer students was concerned, they felt encouraged, supported, and affirmed in the small group student spaces they found and cultivated. They found the student led spaces some of the most accessible and supportive environments on their campuses because they were created by and for gender queer and other LGBTQ students, so their sole focus is to create affirming practices and spaces within the student organization for those populations (Beemyn, 2006; Kilgo, 2020; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017).

Not all of these student spaces are utopic, of course. Ezra discussed how there were several student organizations and clubs on their campus for LGBTQ students and even a couple specifically for transgender and non-binary students. However, they also asserted that they do not participate in these types of clubs very often because the focus of the student organizations is narrow in that they do not have any kind of impact on campus. So, unlike some of the activism groups brought up by other participants, the organizations that Ezra has attempted to be part of do very little, according to them, regarding creating space for gender queer students on campus. Ezra feels the groups are more just for social engagement and topical discussions. Ezra specifically said when the group holds their weekly discussion "there's no like discussion on any gay or transgender issues it's just like today is our 637th day of discussing polyamory," which is a perfectly valid discussion for an LGBTQ student organization, but in order to be the accessible and supportive space for everyone in the community, the conversations have to be more varied than just sexual or relationship queerness.

Student run organizations can be, and in many cases are, welcoming, supportive, affirming, and highly accessible spaces for the gender queer students because the fact that they are started, organized, and operated by students means the students can determine what serves their purposes. Though many of these students feel ostracized by the countless, highly gendered, student organizations and spaces, they are also able to find spaces with other students that cater to their own sensibilities, identity, and ideals, which is an essential piece of the higher education experience (Adair, 2015; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2015; Beemyn, 2019; Bilodeau, 2005; Goldberg, 2019; Kerr, 2001; Nicolazzo et al., 2017).

Campus Wide Programming and Events to Bring the Campus Community Together

Intimate social interactions through student organization are highly valuable for the gender queer community in that they are allowed the affirming space to be themselves with other LGBTQ and gender diverse individuals. But to make the campus at large more wholly

accessible, the campus at large has to be involved. Hosting campus wide events that center transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students, the LGBTQ centers and student led organizations can invite the rest of the campus into the community to learn, celebrate, and mourn with them (Pritcher et al., 2018). It is not enough to create designated spaces where gender queer individuals can talk openly about the issues they face on a day-to-day basis when the institutional community should be part of that conversation as well. The best way to do that is to host events centering these voices in a large-scale space where the entire campus can be involved.

All four staff participants in this study referred to Transgender Day of Visibility when discussing campus events centered on gender queer students. On March 31st, all four institutions implemented a large-scale celebration for the transgender and gender diverse population on their campuses. Noah's LGBTQ center hosted theirs in front of the student union, front and center all day long,

> "festooning the whole front of the [university's] union with trans flags, we had a transition closet out front with us providing gender affirming undergarments and they had a clothes rack out there. And [the student] who runs that said that she has never given out that many in one single event as she did on that day" (Noah, he/him, resource coordinator).

This type of event highlights how the presence of gender queer individuals on campus is perfectly normal and places gender affirming practices, like the transition closet, at the forefront as something to be celebrated rather than tucked away where no one can see it (Hill et al., 2021; Moreland & Willox, 2005).

Angela and Ruth also both referenced their version of transition closets when discussing their campus wide events. Though these closets are available year-round to students who come into the LGBTQ centers, having a public event normalizes the conversation about gender affirming clothing and presentation on campus. The events also make the closet and the LGBTQ center visible to students who may be in need of that kind of support and access who previously did not know it was available to them. This attempt at wide-scale visibility signals to the university, the students, and the community at large that this population is not only widely present on campus but welcome and respected like any other student population and identity on

campus. It normalizes and affirms the gender queer community and makes their educational spaces more accessible through visibility (Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

Some Student Dissatisfaction with Campus Wide Events

Unfortunately, despite the plethora of events from Trans Day of Visibility, to Trans Day of Remembrance, to binder exchanges, to gender affirmation closets, and the multitude of other events the LGBTQ centers at these institutions host, the students still feel as if things are severely lacking when it comes to feeling supported and visible on campus. Most of the students involved in this study did claim their contentment with the number of events that take place on campus that revolve around and bring visibility to the LGBTQ community on campus. However, they also felt, like everyone in this study did, that more could be done and that the events that are put on, though great, often pander to the cis-, hetero-normative sensibility by focusing on things that are already popular in the social milieu.

Cam and Ezra both talked about how the majority of the events they see advertised on campus that have to do with the gender diverse community are drag shows, which they agree are fun and always draw a crowd, but they also want to see more kinds of representation of their community. Nick (he/him), an LGBTQ center director, also brought up this challenge when putting on events and especially when helping the LGBTQ student organizations organize events saying,

> "Yea so we do a lot of drag shows, unfortunately. No! Not unfortunately. I try to be like 'okay, what about, you know, what about LGBTQ programs that are outside of drag?' but students just love it….so we have the title of being the largest drag show in the state [which is] so much fun."

This is not to say that leaning into the popularity of drag shows is not a wonderful way to draw attention to, normalize, and create space for the gender queer community, but students and staff alike know that in order for the campus to feel truly accessible and supportive for this community it must accept other forms of large-scale events as well.

Despite the numerous incredible events that these institutions put on, including an international gender and sexuality studies conference at one of the institutions, all participants expressed interest and need for more. This dissatisfaction seemed to stem from the lack of large-scale endorsement from the university administration. The staff participants of this study are encouraged by the type of financial and motivational support they receive from the university in

providing physical space, a usable (if not meager) budget to work with, and the ability to spearhead the projects they are passionate about and feel will best serve their student community. On the other hand, they feel that the administration and the socio-political part of the institution is standing in the way of progress and the ability to create a supportive space for these students, even in the sense of what kinds of events they can put on. Hal (they/them), a first-year student still learning to navigate their campus and the culture therein, stated "there's definitely room to grow" when discussing the kinds of events they have seen advertised. The reception they receive when they are put on, and the strides their institution can make regarding steps forward in making the space truly accessible to transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming people on campus and allowing them to navigate their education as freely and easily as any other student on campus.

Access to mental and physical health care in a safe and affirming environment, social organizations where students with similar experiences, interests, and/or lifestyles can get together to support each other, to campus wide events that validate the experiences and existence of transgender and gender non-conforming students on campus all impact the accessible nature of an institution. The staff within the LGBTQ centers work collaboratively across their institution and communities to provide programming specific to and about the gender queer population on their campuses in order to help create a more equitable and accessible experience for these students.

By providing lists of physical and mental health practitioners who are welcoming and knowledgeable (or at least non-discriminatory against the trans-community), they ensure this group of students can access health care on their campus without fear of misgendering, misunderstanding, or dismissal in these spaces that are crucial to thriving in any environment. Student organizations create space for camaraderie, shared experience, and a safe space for students to authentically live and share themselves. And campus wide events invite the campus at large to engage with the gender queer student space and understand that they are an ever present and normal part of campus that only want to be seen and respected for who they are on the grand scale rather than just within the walls of the LGBTQ centers.

Like the other topics presented in this study, institutions are attempting to create these types of supportive structures and spaces through the work of the LGBTQ centers on their

campuses, but, in many instances, they do come up short. Research, unsurprisingly, shows that inclusive and affirming practices in education are liberating for gender diverse individuals because they are able to live authentically beside their cis-gender peers (Knutson et al., 2022; Singh 2016; Singh & Jackson 2012). As far as these campuses have come in creating these spaces, they all have plans for creating greater inclusive and supportive spaces for this community—despite the social and political roadblocks they face due to the conservative disposition in their region (Barton, 2012; Thomas-Durrell, 2020).

Chapter 6

Moving Forward, Protecting the Progress Already Earned, and Political Interference

How to Progress to More Accessible Institutions in the Future

Almost every participant, staff and student, acknowledged that in certain aspects they were extremely lucky when it came to the progress their institution is making towards a more universally designed campus that allows for equitable experiences through higher education for all students, gender queer students included. As discussed in the previous chapters, campuses are working towards creating equitable policies for transgender students where they can, providing physical space where queer students can feel seen and safe, and also creating affirming social gatherings. But being grateful for the small strides towards access on campus does not indicate that staff and students find these institutions particularly welcoming spaces for gender diverse individuals. All participants had an extensive list of goals and expectations for their institutions that would help them become an affirming and supportive place. Interestingly, the goals presented were mostly improvements on the progress that has already been made rather than expanding into new territory towards a universally designed campus.

Working Hard for the Money and Desperately Needed Space

Free to Pee, Finding Space to Take Personal Breaks During the Day. Unlike the staff members from their campuses, when directly asked about what students would like to see improved to make more accessible and supportive space for them on campus, they did not have a great deal to say. They mentioned one and at most two things that came to mind, but for the most part it seemed the dejectedness of these students at the thought of creating more inclusive spaces for them was overwhelming. As discussed in previous chapters, students were open and honest about the issues they faced on campus and how they felt their institution was letting them down when it came to creating an equitable experience for their education, but when directly confronted with the question of what they would like to see, they almost seemed reluctant to share. Many felt that wishing for some kind of progress would only lead to disappointment, because their access to resources is under a constant threat of being taken away, which will be discussed later in this chapter (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023; Knutson et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2019).

Of the few responses received to this question, the most prominent response was about accessible bathrooms. Most students pointed out that though they know there are gender neutral

and accessible restrooms on their campus, they are not always convenient because they are so few and far between. This mirrors national data indicating that approximately 24% of transgender students do not have access to appropriate bathrooms (Seelman, 2014). Noah, the primary staff member in his LGBTQ center, also brought up their center's primary goal of accessible restrooms for students which is a project spearheaded primarily by his graduate assistant and the student organization they run. Her project is a comprehensive map of the gender-neutral restrooms on campus in order to identify where the major gaps are, how far a student in any given building would have to travel to find an accessible restroom and how long it would take them to make the trip.

Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) cited a personal experience with a student of his who "would regularly hold their bladder all day" because the closest bathroom they felt safe using as a transgender person was two buildings away and their rigorous class and lab schedule did not allow for the time to travel between the two buildings and make it back in time without disrupting class. This project will pinpoint the areas of campus that are highly inaccessible for gender diverse students who are uncomfortable in gendered restrooms and present concrete evidence to administration where gender neutral and/or gender inclusive restrooms are needed because of these gaps.

Though many students pointed out the need for a better bathroom situation on campus, many expressed how they were not sure how to solve the problems they were pointing out. Linus, a second-year student who is highly involved on their campus, discussed his idea for progress on the bathroom issue saying it "can get really hairy because I don't know enough about things to have an opinion about the bathroom situation, but I would personally like only gender neutral bathrooms…" because they are inclusive to every single individual on campus and does not leave room for debate on who should be in which bathroom. Linus's suggestion speaks to the concept of universal design where spaces are specifically designed to be accessed by everyone rather than being exclusive to certain populations (McGuire & Anderson, 2022). When all bathrooms on campus are gender neutral, then no one has to guess which restroom they can use no matter their gender identity. Creating more accessible spaces on campus, like restrooms, was a prominent response by participants regarding goals for the future.

More Money, More Space, More Affirmation. Unsurprisingly, one of the most prominent things mentioned by the staff participants when presented with the question regarding

their goals was more financial support from the administration. All of the future plans of these centers—larger events around campus to shine a spotlight on these students, their lived experiences, and their validity as collaborators and equal participants on campus, more training for faculty, staff, and students, greater partnerships with health care services and other offices on campus and creating more accessible physical space for students—all stem from the ability to financially support these goals. Ruth, the director of the LGBTQ center on her campus, talked about how she had a folder full of hopes and dreams for her center and the campus at large, and every hope and dream had an estimated cost related to it so she knew exactly how much she would have to ask for before broaching the topic of expansion with administration.

Ruth, Noah, and Angela all mentioned the ability to hire more full- and part-time staff to work in the center as a primary goal if they were to have the financial means to do so. These centers rely so heavily on a single full-time staff member and then maybe one or two student employees. With just a few more people working for them, they could enact more change by having multiple projects going at once with a dedicated person working on it rather than one single director or overworked student trying to manage the whole thing. Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) specifically discussed the ability to financially support students with employment in the center to help them "hear their own voices and to see their own power" on campus. Noah firmly believes that change at the university stems from student engagement and activism. A greater budget would allow him to support those students who are doing the work to make progress on their campus.

Creating a Larger Space Means Serving More Students. In order to build up their staff and their capacity to serve more students, it is important that these centers have more physical space in which to house people, staff, and student community alike. Angela (she/her, professor/director) explained how,

> "Space is always a problem because as we grow more and more—there are some days I go in there and it's packed, like wall to wall, people are on the couches, sitting at all the chairs. It's so loud. Which I love to cause everybody's having fun but we need—I would love—ideally to have like, a common fun space and then a quiet space, because it is a library, but it's also a space where, you know, queer kids who've never gotten to be themselves, get to be themselves, so it's raucous in

> there. People are laughing, having fun, which is what I want, but all that is together in the library."

This sentiment was expressed by all four staff participants—that the first thing they need to do in order to serve their students better and one of the biggest goals they have is to gain more space to actually provide accessible, non-judgmental, and affirming physical space where students can congregate and feel welcomed and relaxed like their peers feel in other spaces on campus. Noah likened it to the *Field of Dreams* concept in which if you build the facility, the people most in need will find it. Especially for students who may have never felt comfortable enough to fully express their identity, these spaces provide a much-needed outlet for them to authentically present themselves without having to navigate potential rejection (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). The best way to increase the number of students he can support is to create a space large enough to accommodate them.

Creating Greater Visibility of Community and Its Impact on Campus

Like finally having wide access to bathrooms across campus, the other primary goal or aspiration the students had was not only the ability to update their record to their preferred/chosen name, but to have that reflected in systems throughout the university and used and respected by all faculty and staff they have to interact with. First year student, Glen, explained how they have to approach every new professor to tell them their chosen name because despite their ability to add the preferred name in the official system, on instructor rosters and other official documentation only their legal name appears. So, they essentially have to come out to each instructor every semester and hope that they do not receive any kind of negative response by having to do so.

Similarly, Cam, whose institution does include preferred name and a student's pronouns on official records, is frustrated by the lack of respect for those names and pronouns. Cam described how they are extremely femme presenting because that is how they like to dress, but despite their covid mask with 'they/them' written largely across it and their pronouns included in their student profile alongside their preferred name, they are infrequently referred to correctly when interacting with office officials. "There are so many people that are just rigid and very stuck when all I am asking for is for you to just respect me," they said in regard to their desired progress on campus (Cam, they/them, second-year student). Cam postulated that it is also likely that since this system is so new, and because the geographic location in which they live does not

emphasize gender diversity, it is ignorance on the side of those who work in records driven offices that causes this issue. Looking for preferred/chosen name and pronouns may not even be a consideration for many. The way they have been conditioned in western society and this region specifically is to believe in an explicit division between male and female where a preferred name would only refer to a nickname. Without an understanding of gender diversity and its prevalence on campus by those actively working with students, updating their name and pronouns in the system becomes a futile effort.

Greater Visibility Leading to Greater Change but Also Great Risk to Students. Many of the issues brought up regarding where accessibility can progress for the gender non-conforming community on campuses stem from the need for greater visibility and understanding from the campus at large. Cam's experience with campus offices and the issue with gender inclusive restrooms being so few and far between all come from a lack of knowledge or understanding of this community and their needs which has a significant impact on a student's feeling of inclusion and access on campus (Knutson et al., 2022).

The need for access, support and the ability to live authentically on campus is a fine line to walk, however. As much as more accessible space, investment in this community on a larger level, and providing visibility to this community to *normalize* their presence on these campuses is wanted and needed, both staff and students all also expressed fear of becoming too exposed, spending *too much* money that it draws excessive attention. Putting the transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse community in a spotlight to better direct them to needed resources means this population is also on display in a region that is widely hostile to their mere existence. All progress must be made conscientiously and carefully so as to attract only the right kind of attention, or it could immediately be set back because the wrong person found out that institutional dollars were being used to support inclusivity.

"I live in a constant state of like, elation and fear": Societal Obstacles to Needed Change

While Angela was discussing how her office works towards serving her students and the plans they are making, she had a moment in which I could see the conflicting emotions running through her. She is incredibly proud of how her staff works to create access and space for these students, but, like all the participants in this study, feels incredibly defeated by the nature of the regional culture in which they live and work. She explained,

> "I don't know, doing this work, it's the most amazing thing ever. I'm so happy I went down this path but sometimes I'm like, I just think to myself, like 'what are we doing?!' like, the fights we're fighting are just- it blows my mind. Like I said, when I wake up every morning I don't know if I'm going to get a grant for thousands of dollars to give someone binders or if someone's going to shut down my entire program. I live in a constant state of like, elation and fear" (Angela, she/her, professor/director).

Angela is alluding to the overabundance of anti-transgender, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-race theory legislation that has already passed through various state senates across the United States and is highly concentrated within the Bible Belt. Bills such as these threaten the efforts to create accessible and equitable space, or even basic safe experiences, for gender non-conforming students on college campuses across this region, because they are designed to deny the existence of gender diversity and actively work against its presence in public spaces.

Current Legislation and the Threat of What is Coming

Angela postulated that the United States, specifically the Bible Belt region, first started seeing the initial surge of laws targeting transgender and non-binary individuals around 2017. The inauguration of President Donald Trump, who frequently articulated his disdain for the gender queer community throughout his campaign, bolstered anti-transgender legislators to take greater action against this population. Similarly, Noah pointed to the bathroom ban in North Carolina in 2016 as the point in which the major legislative turn on gender queer individuals began (Kopan & Scott, 2016). Since 2016 and the inauguration of President Trump the following year, support from the White House and national governing bodies emboldened highly conservative and fundamentalist Christian states to file and pass anti-gender diverse legislation (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023).

Restricting Space Through Funding Cuts. Several participants, both staff and students, discussed legislation that was passed only since 2021 restricting public institutions' ability to serve their gender diverse population, among others. These legal restrictions hinder the progress that has already been made on these campuses by pulling away resources allocated to the LGBTQ and other DEI offices. Angela and Noah, staff participants from different states, both discussed legislation that restricted state funding to gender programs (like Gender Studies) within their state, cutting off major resources for entire departments within institutions of higher

education and forcing them to seek funding to stay intact and effective from other—less reliable—resources like donors.

In removing the funding for programs that highlight gender diversity and, therefore, causing those programs to lose their space on campus, students within the community begin to lose the hard-won accessible spaces they took solace in. Some states, such as Texas, are attempting to remove diversity, equity, and inclusion centers from higher education completely rather than just going after funding. Texas state Rep. Carl Tepper filed a bill that would completely ban any offices whose purpose is to focus on equity and diverse populations in institutions of higher education in the state, which includes almost forty campuses (Lieb, 2023). The passing of bills such as this one would immediately create a hostile environment for not only gender diverse student populations but any other diverse community actively participating on these campuses.

Angela discussed how the LGBTQ office is one of the most well-known entities on her campus. “We are everywhere. We do so many events…but in the back of my head you know you have to fight, you have to explain, you have to keep justifying because it’s always under attack from somewhere,” she explained (Angela, she/her, professor/director). These sentiments were echoed by the other staff participants who know that the ways in which they are spending money, what—and more importantly who—they are spending it on is always under constant scrutiny not necessarily by the university but by the state representatives who determine the budget.

In order to continue providing the accessible and supportive space, LGBTQ centers must get creative when documenting how their budget is spent in order to not draw too much attention. Nick talked about it being a balancing act of advocating for and supporting students without creating too much of a stir—which could get the attention of the wrong alumni constituents who might use it as their reason for discriminatory legislation. Naturally, this undermines what they are trying to accomplish in making the gender queer community more universally seen and affirmed on campus by putting a spotlight on them in safe and engaging ways.

Removal of Training for the Tampus Community. Several states have banned any mandatory diversity and inclusion training at public institutions—primary, secondary, and higher education—as well as limited the language and topics that can be covered during any voluntary

trainings students or staff opt in to. This has restricted everything from what kinds of inclusive education public institutions are able to provide as well as the vocabulary they are allowed to use. For example, one staff participant claimed, "it is illegal…according to legislature to talk about race, gender, or sexuality" during any kind of diversity training. Similarly, in the state of Oklahoma, though "DEI programs have not yet been banned…two school districts suffered penalties to their accreditation last year because of related activities [to DEI]," threatening the operation of any publicly funded institution in the state (Martinez-Keel, 2023).

These types of legislation establish a large roadblock for diversity, equity, and inclusion educators to discuss anything of import or substance in their trainings within that state. With these laws already in place when students enter their institutions of higher education, their access and support on campus is hindered before they even get there. Despite the progressive steps the institution, and specifically the LGBTQ centers, are making, the state legislation is actively working against them—making it impossible to create a truly equitable space for this community on campus. And due to the highly politicized nature of the gender queer community and their rights as citizens in this country, the already established laws are not the only one's institutions have to worry about when making progress on their campuses as new legislation is continually being introduced.

How the Continuing Threat of Anti-Trans Legislation Hinders Accessibility

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, a legal organization dedicated to fighting unconstitutional legislature in the United States, who is currently tracking and intensively mapping all anti-LGBTQ bills currently being submitted through state and national governing bodies, there are currently 429 anti-LGBTQ bills that have been submitted for consideration as of April 2023. Of these bills, 226 have been filed within the approximately fourteen states that comprise the Bible Belt (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023), meaning only 28% of the country is responsible for over half of the proposed anti-LGBTQ legislation. These bills pose a direct threat to the ability of institutions of higher education to continue to be accessible and supportive spaces for transgender and non-binary students.

When discussing the current campaigns, both staff and student participants extensively discussed how the changes they want and need to be made must be approached carefully and almost covertly because of the threat of legislation. Nick, the director of his respective LGBTQ center, spoke about their efforts to help students update their gender markers both legally and

through the university system, but that the current threat of future legislation stalls, and even completely prevents, any kind of outward campaign for this type of service. All four staff participants discussed how when they have accessibility goals they are working towards, those efforts must be measured and under the radar of the population at large on campus.

With the political culture being what it is in this region, if the wrong student, staff member, or even community member heard about an attempt at accessible space that they may not agree with—such as transgender women being allowed to live in the women's dorms—they could easily bring that issue to the state legislature which could result in a law banning gender affirming housing across the state, not just at a single university.

Though this fear of retribution over a single policy may seem somewhat paranoid and hyperbolic, it is not beyond the realm of reality. Angela discussed how she received phone calls from students' parents and grandparents complaining about the topics and terminology covered in their students' orientation, diversity training, and sexual health programming even after legislation had been passed banning topics such as gender, sexuality, and diversity. So even after restrictive legislation had been passed, community interference continued to persist and go on to affect legislation going forward. The constant threat of legal restrictions causes institutions to be almost private about the ways in which they create accessible and equitable space for gender queer individuals on their campus. Noah (he/him, resource coordinator) summed up the practice perfectly when he stated, "I refuse to push for a policy that if it trips a certain wire could in real time harm my students."

Protecting Student Information. With more and more anti-trans legislation being introduced into state, local, and even national legislatures in the Bible Belt region, one of the greatest efforts institutions can make to support their gender queer community is protecting their information (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023; DemocracyNow!, 2023). This practice, however, is a bit of a catch-22 in that in order to continue getting funding from the university for their resources and operation, LGBTQ centers have to have some kind of record of how many students they are serving on a day-to-day basis and at major events. Asking someone to swipe their student ID card and be recorded as attending a Trans Day of Visibility celebration on campus can, unfortunately, cause mixed feelings from students.

Students are often excited to participate in such a wonderfully inclusive and affirming event that provides gender affirming clothing and an accessible space for these students which

they need to feel truly included and a part of the university experience (Beemyn, 2006; Kilgo, 2020; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017). But alternatively, they may feel apprehensive giving their student information to the organization running the event because then there is a record of their presence there, which in the hands of the wrong person could be dangerous for them. Naturally, student records are private, and the data collected at events such as these are for the exclusive purposes of the offices that hold them, but since these events are happening at a public institution and funded by publicly sourced funds, the threat of subpoena or even an illegal cyber-attack could threaten the privacy of gender queer students.

Campus Culture. Something I have touched on before, and what was mentioned extensively by students, is the campus culture posing the biggest obstacles to accessibility and a sense of support for transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students on campus, especially in this region. Since public institutions are purposefully designed to educate and serve the population of the state in which they reside, the culture on campus is indicative and reflective of the state and regional culture at large. Though oftentimes the hateful and inflammatory speech of legislative officials can be elevated and hyperbolic in nature due to the extreme nature of the American political system, the socio-religious culture of the region reflects that discriminatory thinking and influences the way the community and individuals interact with each other and specifically gender queer people (Berry et al, 1997; Martikalnen, 2020; Wright, 2021).

Campus culture can hinder the recruitment of gender queer people to campuses, because of the natural fear of what kind of environment they are walking into. The staff participants all mentioned how encouraged they were by the number of students they serve in their offices and how they continue to grow, but they also know that there are a lot of people they are missing because they are too scared to come into the office or enter the university at all.

The political atmosphere of the region fueled by its religious fundamentalism directly influences the social environment of these campuses as the staff and students will predominantly be long standing citizens of the region who have been raised in these traditions and values. This makes planning future goals for LGBTQ centers difficult because as much as they want to help the gender queer student population at their respective institutions, they must walk a fine line. In order to create more accessible and equitable spaces for these students, they must demonstrate the need for these kinds of resources. They have to bring enough attention to them that the

universities see the necessity of investing institutional funds to create change for this population--but drawing that much attention to them could easily have the opposite effect.

State legislatures can and have easily removed funding from these public institutions if they deem them 'misused.' Meaning that if LGBTQ centers start advertising too much, bringing too much attention to themselves and this population and the way in which money is being spent in order to support them, the legislature can react and remove any and all funding for these purposes. Many states in this region have already created barriers to teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion at public institutions let alone supporting diverse populations on these campuses as discussed earlier in the chapter.

In order to best serve the transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming populations on their campuses, institutions have to provide as much support and access as possible without drawing too much attention to themselves. The wrong kind of attention could cause irreparable harm to their programs and their students if the meager support they are currently able to provide then gets stripped from them.

Chapter 7

Discussion: Accessibility, not Accommodation

There are many obstacles that stand in the way of progress at public institutions in higher education in the Bible Belt of the United States due to the religious fundamentalist ideals that heavily influence the region and their effect on political agendas affecting all public spaces including schools. From legislation banning the mention of same sex relationships in any way in the public school system as law makers are attempting in places like Florida and Texas to the widespread attack on family friendly events like drag story hour and brunches held in public spaces, the LGBTQ, and specifically the gender queer community, is under siege by the extreme right-wing political system. The cultural hostility of the region impacts both the ways in which public institutions are able to serve their students and create safe and accessible space for them on campus, and also how transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students, faculty, and staff are received by the campus community at large. Since these institutions are designed to educate the population of their state and region specifically, the culture on campus reflects that of the state at large, so even if certain offices and administrative backing supports and attempts to create a more equitable environment for gender queer individuals, they must still navigate the social aspect of campus which can be openly restrictive.

Despite this cultural and societal resistance to the existence and humanity of transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming individuals, there are clearly dedicated efforts throughout this region in public institutions to create an environment where transgender students feel safe, seen, affirmed, and capable of completing their degree just like all their cis-gender peers. The terms accessibility and support were chosen to focus this research rather than a term like accommodation because transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse students do not want or need to be accommodated on campus as if their presence is somehow a hindrance to the everyday working of the institution. They are not asking for special treatment or a different means of moving through their education. They are merely asking for an equitable footing within their institution to earn a degree alongside their peers.

This looks like access to on campus health care without fear of misunderstanding or denial and having their chosen name on their official record so that they do not have to disclose to every new instructor, class, or office each and every time. It is feeling safe in their on campus living situation, which many institutions in the United States require for first-time students.

There is a myriad of obstacles that stand in the way of gender queer individuals on college campuses which make navigating their education more difficult than their cis-gender peers creating an environment that is unequitable and, therefore, making an already challenging goal—earning a degree—even more grueling due to unnecessary hindrances that other students may not have to face. The services provided by LGBTQ and multi-cultural centers on these campuses help to create a more equitable and accessible campus for these students, so they can focus on their education more than where they are going to be able to relieve themselves with the least probability of being harassed in the restroom. The staff dedicated to thinking about and supporting this population of students work diligently in an attempt to create accessibility on campus for gender diverse students, and students feel and appreciate that support coming from these offices. But access and support at large institutions with tens of thousands of students cannot just come from a single office.

Creating space for students of all gender identities does not mean accommodating those who do not fall nicely into the binary construct of male versus female with a single office dedicated to their well-being on campus, but to intentionally make the entire university systems accessible to all students attending that institution. Making exceptions, developing accommodations on a case-by-case basis for a student who may find themselves at a disadvantage due to the systemic misunderstanding of gender identity and gender diversity in these spaces does not create a supportive environment for transgender individuals, it merely addresses one issue at a time, one student at a time instead of developing a system that is universally beneficial to all students on campus.

Due to the highly conservative nature of the Bible Belt region of the United States and the influence that cultural norm imparts on the political and social systems of the region, public spaces, including institutions of higher education, are highly effected by these ideals to the point where spaces that should be welcoming and enriching for all citizens of the region become hostile and exclusive to those who identify outside of the constructed gender binary. Though institutions attempt to support and create accessible experiences for these students through the creation of LGBTQ offices who advocate for and encourage activism by students, the students themselves do not feel as if the administration and institutions as a whole are supportive of their participation or even existence on campus.

This study's goal was to provide a voice for the gender queer student population in this region and see how it compares to the active efforts of staff on their campuses with the intent of discovering where the gaps in access and support might be and promote further research and development for equity at public institutions for this community. By attempting to discover to what extent institutions in this region create accessible educational environments for transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students on their campuses and how students are feeling the impact of those efforts, if at all, I attempt to lay the groundwork for research on best practices going forward.

Unfortunately, since this research began, the creation of accessible space and equitable education in this region has only become more and more hindered through legislative interference. Several of the staff members represented in this study who ran LGBTQ centers at their institutions now hold different titles within different offices because the use of government funding for DEI services is now illegal in their state. Three of the four LGBTQ centers/offices represented in this study have been closed on their campuses. The staff members interviewed still provide the same kind of support for gender queer students, but they now have to operate using vague and nondescript language in order to maintain the funds they need to provide that access which makes it even more difficult for students to find them and get the support they need.

Conclusion

This study sought to discover to what extent public institutions in the Bible Belt created accessible and supportive spaces for gender diverse students on their campus and, if so, how. Through extensive conversations with staff members on four campuses it was established that the small, dedicated staffs within LGBTQ centers on campus work tirelessly to make their campuses as accessible as possible for these students. The participants identified three major factors when it came to defining access and support for transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse identities at institution of higher education. Inclusive and accessible systems, accessible space, and extensive programming for and reflective of gender queer individuals significantly impacts the students' standard of living, their capability to thrive, and their feeling of affirmation in identity while on campus. All of these factors better allow the transgender community to navigate their education without unnecessary hindrances.

In thinking on the primary research question, which asks to what extent institutions in this region create supportive and accessible environments for this population, it is clear that their involvement primarily only extends to the creation of dedicated LGBTQ centers. In this way, the institution creates accessible space for this population, a place for them to feel safe, advocates for them to reach out in case they need any kind of support and provides community on campus to lean on in times of need. But a singular office block in one building on a sprawling campus does not even come close to providing all the needed aspects of accessibility that would create a truly equitable experience for gender queer students. The lack of follow through and large-scale support from administration due to fear of political backlash and loss of funding causes students to feel as if the institutions themselves are not supportive of their identities and place on their respective campuses.

The second objective was to identify if transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identifying students on campus perceive the effectiveness of these measures. The student participants were quick to acknowledge the steps that have been made by their institution, but also criticized the topical nature of the way in which the university chose to address certain issues. They recognized the value of the LGBTQ centers, the programs they put on, and the impact they have had on campus is helping to create and accessible space for gender queer people at their institutions. And though students knew there were places on campus where their identity was affirmed and celebrated, the majority felt that campus at large was not the most accepting, supportive, or accessible environment for them.

This study attempted to extend the ever-growing literature regarding transgender individuals in education and the best practices in creating inclusive spaces for them by focusing primarily on student voices and experiences in higher education. By focusing on the Bible Belt region of the United States, this research focused on a regional demographic previously unexplored that held heightened social and political complications in serving this population of students. Because of its regional parameters, this study was able to explore the socio-political impact on higher education and how the religious ideologies of a region impact their political leanings, and, therefore, the ways in which public institutions operate and serve their dedicated populations.

Both students and staff participants recognized that publicly funded institutions are at the mercy of their state legislature which severely hinders any kind of real progress when attempting

to create equitable, accessible, and supportive spaces for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identities in this region. Despite these major impediments to progress on these campuses, the staff and students involved in the LGBTQ centers are not deterred from their missions of improving the lives of this community and other marginalized communities like them in their state and on their campuses. One of the prominent themes that came out of the conversations had for this study was articulated best by Nick who said everything he does for his students is done with intentionality because his job is to help create equitable space and experiences for his students, but he will never be the reason to make life harder for his students. Knowing how far in what direction to push to better the educational experiences of his students is important because a wrong step could create backlash within the social constructs of this region and negatively affect his students rather than helping them.

Creating accessible and supportive spaces for transgender, non-binary, gender queer, gender non-conforming, and all other gender identities in public higher education in the Bible Belt of the United States is a balancing act of constant care and work and delicate messaging as to not attract an excess of attention from the kinds of people who would want to stand in the way of progress. This is naturally frustrating to students within this community because the progress is slow and they feel as if there is really only one office on campus that is fighting for them rather than an entire administration worth of support and progress makers, but having those few spaces on campus where they do feel safe, affirmed, and able to live authentically just like every other student on campus is worthwhile and strengthens their academic path.

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets

Participant information sheet—Staff

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about accessibility and support services for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students in institutions of higher education in the Bible belt region of the United States. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to discover how institutions of higher education are providing accessible spaces and supporting gender non-conforming students on their campuses as well as how their gender non-conforming students perceive the effectiveness of these gender affirming practices. By looking at both established institutional practices and student feedback this research seeks to find places of improvement in serving this student population for not only the institutions within the study but across higher educational systems in other regions as well.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because you work within your institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion office which actively works towards an equitable environment for all students on campus and therefore would have the greatest knowledge of the support systems in place for this community on campus. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve a 30-60 minute interview with the researcher where you will be asked about current university practices and potential plans for the future the institution wants to implement as well as you providing any official university marketing or policies regarding accessibility and support services for this community.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
The benefit to taking part in this study would be your ability to speak about all the ways in which you are serving the gender non-conforming population on your campus as well as having access to any findings regarding your school (and others in the region) after the study is completed.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary and non-participation will not affect your position at the university.
What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymized or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after the participatory interview.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, but participating will require 30-60 minutes of your time for the formal interview. The risk to participation is low, but never zero, so if discussing this topic is likely to be uncomfortable for you, you would be advised not to take part.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g., your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project, however, reference to your connection with the equity office (use of your title) in your university, though the university itself will remain anonymous and only be referenced by region, may be noted in findings to demonstrate experience and expertise on the subject matter unless you explicitly ask for it to be removed.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles as well as presenting my findings at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g., from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in **our publications.**

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g., your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself, m.whobrey@lancaster.ac.uk**, or my supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Jackson:** c.jackson2@lancaster.ac.uk**,. If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Prof. Paul Ashwin, Head of Dept. of Education Research,** paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Participant information sheet—Student

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I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about accessibility and support services for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students in institutions of higher education in the Bible belt region of the United States. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to discover how institutions of higher education are providing accessible spaces and supporting gender non-conforming students on their campuses as well as how their gender non-conforming students perceive the effectiveness of these gender affirming practices. By looking at both established institutional practices and student feedback this research seeks to find places of improvement in serving this student population for not only the institutions within the study but across higher educational systems in other regions as well.

Why have I been invited?
I would like to invite you to participate because you identify as transgender, non-binary, or another gender non-conforming identity and are an on-campus student at your respective university. Your insight and experiences on campus will be invaluable to the purpose of this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, you will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview via ZOOM with the researcher to answer questions about your experience on campus, your perceptions of the ways in which the university is serving/supporting/affirming gender non-conforming students on campus, and any insights you have regarding where the institution could improve in that respect.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
The benefit to taking part in this study would be your ability to speak towards your experiences in higher education and how your chosen institution has or has not supported you and other members of the gender non-conforming community through accessible spaces and inclusive practices and shed on light potential for improvement.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary and non-participation will not affect your position at the university.
What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymized or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after the participatory interview.

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It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to taking part but participating will require 30-60 minutes of your time for the formal interview. The risk to participation is low, but never zero, so if discussing this topic is likely to be uncomfortable for you, you would be advised not to take part.

Will my data be identifiable?
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How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles, presenting my findings at academic conferences, press articles, or policy documents.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g., from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in **our publications.**

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself, m.whobrey@lancaster.ac.uk**, or my supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Jackson,** c.jackson2@lancaster.ac.uk**,. If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Prof. Paul Ashwin, Head of Dept. of Education Research,** paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk**.**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions—Staff

Personal/Center Specific

1. How would like to be described in the report? What title would you like used in the write up?
2. Is it alright if you are referred to by that title when referencing information you provided?
3. What role do you play in creating a supportive and accessible environment for students at the university? Day to day general processes
4. How many students are using the services provided by the center?
5. Can you talk a little about the demographics of who is using the services on campus? If you keep internal records would you be willing to share them with me?

Professional

6. Specifically thinking about the LGBTQ+ community on your campus, what efforts has the university made to create a sense of inclusion for this population in particular?
7. Within these efforts are there specific efforts to address equity and inclusion for students who identify outside of the gender binary, specifically transgender and non-binary student?
    a. (If yes)
        i. Can you provide an examples?
        ii. How do you expect these efforts to support this population of students?
        iii. How did the institutions decide on these particular support systems? Committee? Student input? Etc.
    b. (If no)
        i. Is this something the university is attempting to address and how?
        ii. Do you have a timeline?
8. What future plans, if any, does the institution have for creating a more accessible, supportive, and affirming space for gender non-conforming students on campus?
    a. Who are the integral players in creating these changes? Faculty, staff, students?
    b. How do those entities talk to each other and work together?

9. Outside of specific, targeted efforts to create an inclusive environment for students what other practices does the institution have to educate the campus population at large about diversity, equity, and inclusion?
    a. Are faculty and staff required to participate in DEI training?
    b. Does any training the institution provides specifically address the gender non-conforming community? How so?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about how your institution is supporting transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming students on campus?

Closing

Part of my research involves speaking with transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students on the campuses I am looking at. Would you be willing to circulate or post of recruitment flyer for me so I might speak to some of the students who benefit from your services on campus?

Interview Questions—Students

Personal

1. You will only be referred to by a codename in the findings, but if you are comfortable sharing, would you tell me how you identify and what your pronouns are so they can be referenced correctly in the write up?
    a. If you would like to come up with your own codename you are welcome to do so, otherwise I can just assign one to you?
2. How long have you attended your current institution?
3. What kind of involvement do you have on campus? (Classes? Organizations? Teams? Etc.)

University

4. Do you feel as if the institution as a whole is affirming and supportive of transgender and non-binary students?
    a. If yes
        i. How so and in what ways?
        ii. Are there specific offices/programming/systems in place that you could speak of?
    b. If no
        i. Why do you feel that way?
        ii. Could you speak to any specific examples of where you have found this to not be true?
5. What kinds of gender affirming practices/efforts, if any, do you see around campus?
    a. Do you think they are effective and how so?
    b. How would you like to see these already established efforts improved?
6. What kinds of issues regarding gender identity, if any, do you face while on campus?
7. Where do you see room for improvement on the part of the institution to make the campus a more affirming, inclusive, and supportive environment?
    a. Are there specific aspects of university life that you think could be improved upon?

8. Is there anything else you would like to speak on or be included regarding accessibility and support for transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-confirming student on your campus?

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