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LGBTQ+ Student Safety on Western Michigan University's Campus

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LGBTQ+ Student Safety on Western Michigan University's Campus

Kaitlyn Sedorchuk

Lee Honors College Thesis

Western Michigan University

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Looking at Western Michigan University (WMU; Western) at first glance, it seems quite equipped to support its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer plus (LGBTQ+) student population. It has the Office of LBGT Student Services, where students can go for resources or a safe space to relax; counseling services at Sindecuse Health Center, where LGBT-specific group therapy is held and where there are LGBTQ+-friendly counselors for individual counseling; Spectrum House, the gender-inclusive residential floor in Britton Hall; and numerous registered student organizations (RSOs) for queer students, like OUTspoken and the Gay Pilots Association. The university also offers LGBTQ-based classes, such as LGBT Studies and LGBT Literature and Culture. The preferred name policy is available, where students and faculty can choose a name to use for a number of areas of campus, such as on class rosters. Along with that, Western's non-discrimination policy states that discrimination based on gender identity and sexuality are prohibited (Western Michigan University, n.d.).

However, just because a campus *looks* like it is safe for queer students, that does not mean those students feel the same way. Even though the campus climate was determined to be mostly positive back in 2013 when Western hired someone to conduct a campus climate survey, the results stated that marginalized groups attending WMU, including LGBTQ+ students, were more likely to report discrimination than non-marginalized groups (Western Michigan University 2013, 6-7).

When studying campus climate for queer students, their queer identities are not the only ones at play. Practically all of them are affected by their other social identities, such as race, disability, ethnicity, etc. This is where intersectionality comes in: interconnected marginalized identities intersect to create a unique lived experience. For example, even though two people

may share a gender identity, such as being a transgender man, their experiences can be wildly different if one of them was black and the other was white. Because of this, campus climate would be perceived differently, even between people who have the same sexuality or gender.

WMU's 2013 campus climate study allowed for a partial backdrop for the current research. For the survey, campus climate was broken down into multiple themes, including general campus climate, diversity climate, equity climate, and more. While, overall, the campus climate was deemed positive by most participants, there was still a significant number of people who either experienced discriminatory acts themselves and/or believed that the university was "maintaining only a level of engagement necessary to achieve minimum compliance" when it came to diversity and inclusion (Western Michigan University 2013, 7). The current research partially originated from WMU's campus climate study because I was interested in how queer students specifically perceived campus climate. Do they, like the previous study's participants, feel that it is positive overall, or do they believe there is room for improvement? Six years after the initial study, do they still encounter experiences where they are discriminated against? Do they have a sense of community and/or feel seen on campus? With these questions in mind, I designed the current study, where I interviewed small groups of queer students currently attending Western Michigan University. While Western does offer resources for its LGBTQ+ students, it can still work on both expanding those resources and making them more visible because a number of queer students still experience disrespect from faculty and peers alike, mostly through microaggressions. This research suggests that while a university such as WMU could offer LGBT-friendly resources and options, and claim it is friendly towards the LGBT community, it could still have areas to improve on, such as how it may run its gender-inclusive

housing. In the end, four themes emerged: general safety; visibility on campus; community; and respect.

The thesis is divided into nine different chapters, the first being this introduction. The second is a literature review, where a broad overview of campus climate and connected ideas are examined. Chapter Three consists of the methodology used for the study. Safety is explored in the fourth chapter: the idea of it, how the participants defined it, and what similarities and differences emerged. Visibility is the focus of the fifth chapter, mainly focusing on resources and how the university promotes those resources, and the chapter after that is about community of LGBTQ+ students on campus. The seventh chapter focuses on respect and comfort of queer students. After that, the discussion of what could be done in the future emerges, and finally, there is the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research on LGBTQ+ issues is not new by any means. It is now a large area of study, with research into high school students (Cochran, Flentje, and Heck 2011; Kosciw, Kull, and Palmer 2015), health (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2017; Mereish and Poteat 2015), mental health (Daley et al. 2012; Bennet and Douglass 2013), and much more. Along with that, there has been a growing body of research in campus climate for LGBTQ+ students. However, this area, much like general LGBTQ+ research, is quite broad: there are general campus climate studies (D'Augelli 1992; Brown et al. 2004; Blumenfeld et al. 2010), climate studies for particular schools within a university (Jacobson et al. 2017), and gender-inclusive housing (Davis, Galupo, and Krum 2013; Hobson 2014; Marine, Nicolazzo, and Wagner 2018).

Because this area of research is so expansive, I decided to focus on four areas of interest for the literature review: campus climate for LGBTQ+ students; LGBTQ+ resources on campus; gender-inclusive housing; and microaggressions towards queer people. The literature review is split into these four sections because they are either directly about campus climate, such as specific studies done on campus climate for queer students, or because they are related to campus climate, like resources that are available on campus or microaggressions faced by LGBTQ+ students.

General Campus Climate for Queer Students

The campus climate literature examined is primarily about LGBTQ+ students. While there are many studies on general campus climate where queer students are mentioned, the following research allows queer students to be the primary subject studied instead. Together, these studies examined LGBTQ+ campus climate from 1944 all the way through 2013. Overall,

the current literature seems to provide a model for future work. It covers a wide variety of content, from small studies including only one university to national studies including more than five thousand participants. Each have their limitations, but they all bring valuable knowledge to the forefront.

Campus climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students has been documented for at least the past twenty-seven years (D'Augelli 1992), and transgender students have been included for at least the past fifteen years (Brown et al. 2004). D'Augelli's study (1992) studied lesbian, gay, and bisexual students through quantitative means: two surveys were mailed out during two separate years in the late 1980s, in which questions were asked about campus climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Over 75% of the respondents were verbally harassed and although there were fewer verbal assaults reported in the second survey, "only 4% of the respondents felt that a lesbian or gay man would *not* be harassed on campus" (390).

However, according to Flint, Garvey, and Sanders (2017), there seems to have been a shift in the perception of campus climate, becoming more positive after 1998 (813). After that year, resources were becoming more available, possibly in response to the death of Matthew Shepard (813). For their study, the Flint, Garvey, and Sanders explored the differences in perceptions of campus climate for LGBT students throughout the past generations by using a concurrent triangulation strategy (802). They examined data from the National LGBT Alumni Survey (Garvey 2016) to create an online survey that they administered electronically. Before the 1990s, LGBT students largely did not feel safe on campus, and they felt pressured to not disclose their sexuality. LGBT students in the 2000s, though, reported a warmer climate, even though these perceptions were dependent on multiple factors, such as the major of the participants,

generational contexts, and more (813). However, even when the general perceptions of campus climate for LGBT student have gotten more positive, studies still show that it can be improved.

There has been a vast amount of research done in the 2000s on LGBTQ+ campus climate, including the perspectives of both students and faculty (Brown et al. 2004; Rankin 2005; Blumenfeld et al. 2010; Fette et al. 2013). These studies are usually done through surveys, either online or physically sent to the university by mail, as a way to accumulate as many responses as possible. Out of this group of studies, all but one focused solely on LGBT or ally participants (Rankin 2005; Blumenfeld et al. 2010; Fette et al. 2013).

The study done by Brown and his co-researchers, however, used a multiple perspectives framework, having participants of all sexualities and genders, not just those in the LGBT community (2004). Instead of studying campus climate from a queer student's perspective, they were interested in comparing the queer perception of campus climate to the non-queer perception, as well as analyzing personal characteristics to see if they have a connection to the different perceptions (2004). They gathered the data by mailing the surveys to a Midwestern university population. LGBT students viewed the climate as more negative than the rest of the participants, but they also had more knowledge and interest in queer-related activities. However, resident assistants (RAs) stated that their attitudes toward queer students changed by the end of the year; this could be due to "the RA selection process, RA training sessions, and their residence hall experiences during the year." (20). Brown and his co-researchers emphasized the need for more programs and classes to promote discussion on LGBT topics (2004).

Other studies also indicate negative perceptions of campus climate by queer students. Rankin (2005) found that many LGBT students do not consider the climate as positive due to multiple factors, such as fearing for their physical safety and concealing gender identity or

sexuality to avoid confrontation (20). If queer students had other marginalized identities, they experienced more harassment and had lower perceptions of campus climate than those who did not have extra marginalized identities (Blumenfeld et al. 2010; Rankin 2005). On top of that, if queer students were not given the needed amount of support from family or friends, or if they were not treated well by an instructor, campus was usually considered more hostile (Fette et. al. 2013).

Similar to Brown et al., research has been done on particular institutions. Jacobson et al. (2017) examined the campus climate within Schools or Colleges of Pharmacy throughout the United States. Although many of the pharmacy schools have organizations for queer students, whether that is within the School of Pharmacy specifically or the general university, the climate could still be considered negative. There are not many resources for LGBTQ+ students, outside of organizations, preferred name policies, and some benefits for same-gender couples (61).

Although this is not as researched as the other campus climate research, there is also work being done about LGBTQ+ students at community colleges. Ivory (2005) studied queer students' perceptions of campus climate at community colleges, as well as the hardships of researching them. There are struggles with connection: since the students commute between campus and home, they usually go straight home after class, not bothering to stay for events or organizations (65). On top of that, there is a lack of RSOs: they seem to start up for a few years, but disappear once the students who start them leave (66). While queer students at community colleges face similar dilemmas compared to students at four-year universities, they may face distinct challenges.

Resources for LGBTQ+ Students on Campus

Resources for queer students are very important for campus climate: they allow students places and people to go to when they need assistance with something related to their gender identity or sexuality or when they just need a safe space to relax in.

For example, Kraus et al. (2015) studied the usefulness of college counseling center websites in regards to the level they give about LGBT-specific information. They found that, out of 152 schools examined in the United States, only eight were determined to give thorough information for LGBT issues (119). On top of that, religious institutions are less likely to provide any LGBT information at all compared to nonreligious institutions, but they do not differ in the amount of information that they give. In general, fewer than half of the universities even provided resources to begin with (123). Universities, then, should do more with their counseling center websites – these websites allow students to anonymously look up LGBTQ+ counseling information and resources without risking harassment or being outed (123). Kraus and her co-researchers also state that counseling center websites should be advertised more in order for LGBT student to have easier access (124).

Safe spaces can also be useful resources for LGBTQ+ students, by advocating for education about the LGBTQ+ community and increasing awareness. They allow queer students to know whom they can reach out to if they have questions or concerns about their experiences or identity. Poynter and Tubbs (2008) study how these safe space programs can be best created and utilized. They both examine the pros and cons of training and not training the participants of these programs, and they note that, “regardless of who coordinates the program, college administrators should not rely solely on students to provide services and education to the campus community.” (123). So, while LGBT students should be involved, and their input should be

valued, they should not be the people ultimately teaching the rest of campus, according to Poynter and Tubbs.

A first-year experience (FYE) program specifically for incoming LGBTQ+ students has the potential to be another good resource for queer students. In 2014, Norris and Squire examined such a program at an East Coast university. They found that The One Project (the program's name) had a positive impact, where students were allowed to explore their identities within a safe space and created a community for themselves (2014). This resource had the ability to provide the community and visibility a lot of first-year queer students need by coordinating different events throughout the year, such as leadership camps.

Wexelbaum examined the argument that libraries are excellent resources for LGBT students through both qualitative and quantitative means (2018). She did so by comparing how students used LGBT resource centers to how they use libraries on campus. The author found that a lot of students use the LGBT resource center as a safe space to relax and be with friends, whereas the library was connected to identity development and studying (2018). This study shows that, while LGBT resource centers should be available to students and offer adequate information, libraries can also be a safe space for LGBTQ+ students. They are able to gather information without judgement. However, Wexelbaum recommends that libraries provide more resources, like brochures and assistants, for their LGBTQ+ patrons.

Gender-Inclusive Housing

While Pryor, Ta, and Hart's study is not about gender-inclusive housing specifically, it includes transgender students and their experiences with general on-campus housing. By using interviews, Pryor and his co-researchers studied how transgender students felt and what their

experiences were with general housing (2016). A number of participants felt unsafe while living in non-gender inclusive housing, and when some of them asked for accommodations, they did not find them useful because they often felt isolated due to being given their own room and bathroom, away from other residents (2016). This study could be used as a way to educate about the need for gender-inclusive housing, as well as a broader discussion with the general campus community about the LGBTQ+ community.

There is also research on what sort of gender-inclusive housing transgender and gender non-conforming students would want, where the researchers examined different housing options across the United States and then surveyed transgender students about what they wanted most out of gender-inclusive housing (Davis, Galupo, and Krum 2013). Beyond providing housing for transgender students,

Research has been conducted on how U.S. universities run their gender-inclusive housing and what they include and do not include within the housing (Marine, Nicolazzo, and Wagner 2018). By utilizing critical trans politics and critical narrative inquiry, the researchers gathered information on four U.S. universities and their gender-inclusive housing and interviewed a number of the residents of said housing, asking about their experiences with it. For the most part, transgender students' voices were not being centered in the conversations surrounding gender-inclusive housing. Instead, the authors argue that it is treated as a "one-and-done" issue: the university creates the housing, but then does not bother to continuously check to make sure it is running smoothly (2018).

Implementation of gender-inclusive housing was studied, as well: Hobson examined gender-inclusive housing at Ohio State University and then created a template other universities could use for their own housing (2014). For gender-inclusive housing to work efficiently, both

communication and community are needed, according to Hobson (2014). There needs to be consistent communication about gender-inclusive housing and what its uses are, and there should be an active community so the residents are not isolated or lonely, such as holding meetings to establish what kind of community the residents would want.

Microaggressions Against LGBTQ+ People

Microaggressions are prominent among many different marginalized populations, including LGBTQ+ people (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014; Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer 2005; Davidoff et al. 2016; Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson 2012; Issa et al. 2011; MacDonald 2013). They can result in different psychological dilemmas that can cause emotional and psychological distress (Davidoff et al. 2016).

The research on microaggressions against queer people can be broad and encompass a broad number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer 2005), or it can focus in on a specific subgroup, such as only bisexual people (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014), LGBTQ+ youth (Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson 2012; Issa et al. 2011), or psychotherapy patients (MacDonald 2013). Literature reviews are done, too, in order to examine where holes are in the research and what should be studied more (Davidoff et al. 2016).

Microaggressions against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often take the form of heterosexist remarks. When filling out a survey, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people rated heterosexist statements on a scale to determine how offensive they thought they were (Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer 2005). The participants found the remarks generally offensive, with lesbian and bisexual women finding the statements more offensive than gay men did. However, the researchers are clear that the study has its limits: there were not enough bisexual participants;

questions on biphobia were nonexistent; and participants may have been more open about their sexuality, which could have influenced the results, compared to if more reserved participants were included (2005).

Through the use of focus groups, Bostwick and Hequembourg have determined that bisexual microaggressions are part of the epistemic injustices that bisexual people are victim to (2014). Epistemic injustices of the bisexual community are able to occur because of the day-to-day microaggressions they face, such as hostility or denial (2014). They are often questioned or shrugged off, and bisexual people then feel silenced and unable to speak on their experiences and their truth.

LGBTQ+ youth deal with microaggressions as well. Issa et al. (2011) found that queer youth experience the same sorts of microaggressions that have been studied, plus a new one: threatening behaviors. Issa et al. argued that to be able to endure this harassment, students should have the ability to go to a safe space in the school, and microaggressions should be addressed at institutional levels (2011). While not exactly making them fear for their lives, microaggressions constantly wear down queer youth, and this can result in emotional and psychological duress.

Even though microaggressions can cause distress, that does not mean that the authorities within the school, like counselors, would know the full scope of what a microaggression is. When Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson (2012) asked school counselors if they noticed verbal harassment of LGBT students, they found that they were often not aware of what was happening. It is imperative that school officials and employees understand how pervasive microaggressions can be and how they themselves are part of the heteronormative system, whether they know that or not (2012).

This is also true for other professionals, such as therapists. When clients perceive microaggressions about their sexual orientation coming from their therapist, they often do not have as strong of a relationship with them (MacDonald 2013). There is also a relationship between microaggressions and the effectiveness of therapy: it seems that when the client perceives more microaggressions, the level of effectiveness of therapy decreases (2013). What this study suggests is important: if LGBTQ+ people, who widely struggle with mental illness, cannot feel comfortable with their therapist, then that could result in some disastrous outcomes, such as lower levels of effectiveness for therapy.

In general, the literature suggests that the perceptions of campus climate by queer students is usually negative. They often feel that they cannot be open about their sexuality and/or gender identity on campus. Microaggressions are commonly experienced by LGBTQ+ people, including queer students. On top of that, while they may have access to resources, that access and the resources themselves vary depending on where the student is attending school, among other things.

The current study adds to the literature by investigating the campus climate at a specific university, Western Michigan University. It offers more research into campus climate for queer students. While it coincides with the research arguing that microaggressions are a shared experience of many queer people, there seems to be a more positive outlook on campus climate than what past studies have shown. However, this research still argues that there is more that could be done to create a more comfortable campus climate for queer students at Western.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research started with multiple questions, the most prominent being: “What are LGBTQ+ students’ experiences regarding safety on Western Michigan University’s campus?” I wanted to know queer students’ perceptions of safety on campus and how they related to the current literature.

To explore this, I planned on having five small focus groups of four to seven participants each. Every interview was, at the most, 90 minutes long. Before each one, participants were given informed consent documents that they signed after reading through them, agreeing to take part in the research. They were also given both a resource document that had queer-friendly resources on and off campus in the unfortunate event that they experienced any psychological and/or emotional distress, and a demographics sheet, where they were asked to fill out information like their age, gender identity, sexuality, and year at Western. The participants were given a chance to provide a pseudonym to be used instead of their actual name in the transcripts and thesis, too. Funding from both the Lee Honors College and the College of Arts and Sciences enabled me to compensate participants with gift cards and purchase recording equipment.

I asked eight open-ended questions, which varied from what they think safety is, to their experiences with faculty and students. The interviews were semi-structured, so while there were the eight central questions that were asked, other questions came up as the discussion continued. After the interviews, participants were given a \$20 Target gift card. I transcribed the interview recordings verbatim, as well as analyzed them.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

While many scholars of campus climate use quantitative methods, like surveys or questionnaires, I selected focus groups. The focus group method was chosen for a variety of reasons. First, they allowed for more in-depth responses that may not be available through the use of surveys. Second, focus groups can be a way for participants to recall experiences and ideas more readily: as one participant recounts what happened to them, that could remind another participant of a story of their own. Being in a group and talking about these experiences in person allows the tone of the participant to come through as well, where it may be overlooked if the experiences were written down (Morgan 1996).

However, there are some drawbacks to focus groups. There is the possibility that a few participants could dominate the conversation and not give the quieter participants to speak up. The facilitator could limit this by prompting others to speak when appropriate. Another disadvantage is that the participants may try to find what the facilitator is “really” looking for and answer based off of those assumptions. The questions being asked as neutrally as possible could help to prevent that. On top of that, even though the focus group can allow for similar experiences to be conveyed, that very advantage could also stifle experiences that go against what is largely talked about within the group (Morgan 1996).

In the current study, the participants were able to bounce off each other’s ideas, going more in-depth about particular ideas or talking about something similar. By having the interviews only comprised of students, the participants may have felt more open to discussing their experiences with faculty, staff, and administrators. (The viewpoints of non-student university employees are deliberately not included in my research design, but could be a subject for future research.) Student participants were also able to discuss their experiences in a peer

group environment in more detail, but if most of the group agreed on similar experiences, it is possible that others who had different experiences may have had stayed quiet about them.

Recruitment

Two major methods were used for recruiting participants: social media and in-person announcements. Both the Office of LBGT Student Services and the Gender and Women's Studies Department shared the recruitment flier on their respective Facebook pages. The flier was also sent out in the Office of LBGT Student Services' monthly e-letter. I made announcements in two general RSO meetings for FemiNOW and OUTspoken. After both meetings, I posted the flier on their Facebook pages, as well. Once people contacted me through email or text expressing interest in the study, I would try to find a date that would work for them from the ones that I had previously selected for the interviews.

Participants

There were both inclusionary and exclusionary criteria for this study. The inclusionary criteria were that participants must have been between the ages of 18 and 25, be a current student at Western Michigan University, and be queer/LGBTQ+/not cisgender and/or straight, which also includes asexuality and aromanticism. However, it should be noted that the LGBTQ label does not always include asexual and aromantic identities within research studies. The exclusionary criteria were the opposite of the inclusionary criteria: if they were outside of the age range, not a current Western Michigan University student, and/or not queer/LGBTQ+/etc., they would not have been eligible to participate.

In total, there were 20 participants. As for demographics, they were asked to provide their age, gender identity, sexuality, and their year at Western Michigan University, if they felt

comfortable. Every participant did end up filling out the demographic sheet, even though it was not mandatory. Over half of the participants (thirteen of the twenty) were between the ages of 18 and 21, while the other seven were between 22 and 25 years of age. Seventy percent of the participants were within their first three years of attending Western, while the remaining thirty percent were either in their fourth or fifth year, or they were graduate students. The most popular year was the second, with six participants being in their second year at WMU, while only one person was a fourth-year student. Two were graduate students.

Over half of the participants were cisgender: seven were cisgender women, and six were cisgender men. There was one participant each that identified as the following genders/gender identities: questioning; trans woman; trans man; genderqueer; genderfluid; nonbinary; and queer/trans. When it came to sexuality, most participants identified as either bisexual or gay/homosexual: eight for the former and seven for the latter. Three participants identified as lesbians, two identified as queer, and one each identified as pansexual and questioning. There are more sexual identities than there are participants because some participants used more than one label for their sexuality. Nobody labeled themselves heterosexual or straight.

Though the original plan was to have five interviews with four to seven participants each, what actually happened was a little different. Because of schedule complications, there was one group each of two, five, and six participants; two groups of three; and a single one-on-one interview. Even with the unexpected groupings, the participants all provided riveting experiences and rich data.

The demographics of age and year at WMU were asked to see which age and year mostly participated in the research. Race was not asked for on the sheet; instead, I mentioned it verbally during the interview as an example for social identities that interact with the participants' gender

or sexuality. This was to see if participants noticed their race having an effect on their queer experiences or not. It turns out that many of the participants either wrote their race down on the sheet or discussed it during the interviews. In retrospect, I should have included race on the sheet to know for sure how many people of color and white people participated. Keeping in mind that appearance alone does not determine race, it seemed like a majority of the participants were white.

My Role

As the student researcher, I bring my own standpoint and identities to the table as well. I am not just an outsider looking in: I self-identify as asexual, panromantic (feeling romantic attraction toward another person regardless of their gender), and, overall, queer. Some of the experiences that participants mentioned were my experiences, too, and I would sometimes enter the conversation to give my perspective. However, I also realize that many of my social identities grant me more privilege, and because of that, my viewpoint can be limited on certain topics. I am a white, cisgender, able-bodied woman who was born in the United States. These privileges can affect how I perceive and analyze data. I also knew a number of the participants before the interviews were conducted, either as friends or acquaintances.

Together, these variables probably affected how the participants interacted with me and/or how I analyzed what was said. Already knowing me and knowing that I am also a member of the LGBTQ community could have made some of the participants more comfortable with speaking. However, on the other hand, some could have been apprehensive with sharing certain experiences because I did know them. They might have felt they could not share something, knowing that there was the possibility we could see each other again.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by me. I made small notes here and there throughout the transcription process of themes and events I noticed coming up repeatedly. After the transcriptions were finished, I read through them more closely, question by question, making more in-depth notes of overall themes and quotes I would have liked to include later. Once that was done, I wrote an outline for each theme. The themes that were prevalent throughout the interviews were: safety and privilege, visibility, community, and respect.

Chapter 4: Safety, White Privilege, and Straight-/Cis-Passing Privilege

Safety is an important aspect of people's lives. It can dictate many decisions, such as where to live, what career to choose, and who one allows into their social circle. Although physical safety is often most thought of, emotional and psychological safety matter as well. Feeling safe to express one's sense of self should be allowed and encouraged in all areas of society, particularly for marginalized communities. This especially applies to colleges and universities, such as Western Michigan University, since students' years attending college could be seen as time when they are allowed greater freedom to explore their own identities. This is one of the reasons why I wanted to study safety on campus for queer students: since their identities are often considered outside the norm for society, it would be interesting to see how safety could affect how they present, or do not present, their identities on campus.

The first group of questions that was asked in the interviews was about the definition of safety and what that meant for the participants. In particular, the group included, "What words would you use to describe 'safety?' Or what words come to mind when you think of 'safe?' How do you think these words apply or don't apply at Western Michigan University?" I was interested in how participants would define safety and whether or not they believed Western was safe. While there were slight differences in phrasing, most of the participants had a similar definition. However, there was one distinct difference in one participant's definition, which also included repercussions for those who have harmed LGBTQ+ people. On top of that, many of them recognized how they perceived safety on Western's campus was at least partially due to the privilege they carried. Finally, there were a couple of participants who were international students, and they had their own perspectives of safety at Western Michigan University.

Nuances of Safety

In each focus group, there were always slight differences in the way each group answered. It was usually based on what they each focused on: Group #3 focused much more on the different kinds of safety (physical, emotional, etc.), while Groups #1 and #4 discussed more about the ability to be visible on campus and being comfortable in one's day-to-day movements. However, there were some common threads between most of the interviews, which were ones revolving around security/protection, visibility, and community.

Security and protection were common themes when the participants were asked how they would describe safety. That makes sense, considering that they are both part of common definitions of the word "safe." One of the definitions from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "affording safety or security from danger, risk, or difficulty" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and the Oxford Dictionary defines it as "protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

However, it is more than a simple dictionary definition, especially for LGBTQ+ folks, since they are at the same level of risk or higher to be victims/survivors of violence, including intimate partner violence (Breiding, Chen, and Walters 2013; Anafi et al. 2016). Wanting physical protection and having it be center to one's definition of safety seems almost common sense, especially for the people in the LGBTQ+ community who are further marginalized, such as people of color or disabled people, who face greater threats of violence due to their other oppressed identities.

Many of the participants said they felt physically safe. Ray, a gay 20-year-old, said that he usually felt safe, especially with the call boxes around campus that are available to use in case

of an emergency. A cisgender lesbian, Amanda, appreciated how well lit the campus was at night. That does not mean that everyone had the same experience, though. Arden, a queer trans person, said that when they “present[ed] more trans,” – meaning not appearing inside the hegemonic gender roles that were prescribed to them – they would often feel less safe: “I would say as a trans person who used to present mo – ‘present more trans’ than, uh, I currently do, I didn’t always feel safe on campus ‘presenting trans,’ um, which is part of the reason I don’t anymore.” So, while most participants felt physically safe, it did depend slightly on their gender expression and how they presented themselves.

Other common themes that were brought up multiple times throughout the different groups when asked about safety were visibility and community. A number of participants remarked that being visible on campus was part of feeling safe. Hyacinth, a first-year lesbian trans woman said that she considered visibility “...in terms of the university acknowledging us as a community and publicly showing that they support us.”

Community was also important, and it is connected to visibility: being able to find a group of people with similar experiences could possibly make others feel safer. At the very least, it could possibly make them feel less isolated and alone. As Lucas, a gay first-year student, said, “Um, when I think safety, I think, like, together. Uh, because there’s safety in numbers, I suppose.” Not only would a community help build relationships between queer people, but it could also keep them safer due to being around a larger amount of people with similar identities and experiences. On top of that, there was a distinct difference in how one participant defined safety, namely through the way of repercussions.

Jeffrey, a pansexual genderqueer student at Western, brought up the concept of repercussions as connected to safety. To them, safety and repercussions were tied together:

“When I think of safety, especially from an institutional standpoint, I like to think of repercussions because the only thing that really enforces safety from other people is people being afraid to do it.” They also went on to say they believed that if there are few to no consequences for people who do or say derogatory things, then they did not feel safe on campus. They did not believe that the university does a good enough job handling these situations: to them, the university has the “attitude of sweeping things under the rug” and not doing what should be done to hold perpetrators accountable. While others in the focus group agreed with them, they were the only participant in the study who spoke of this aspect of safety. Since other participants agreed with them but did not say anything themselves, this could mean that the other participants felt the same way, but did not want to voice it themselves. It could also mean that they had similar feelings, but that part of the definition was overlooked for other aspects that were more important to them, such as visibility or community.

So, overall, while most participants agreed that security/protection, visibility, and community were all part of their own definitions of safety, there was one student’s concern with institutional accountability for harassing behavior and to ensure safety.

Privilege and Safety

While there were a few people of color in the focus groups, it seemed like the majority of the participants were white. However, it is unreliable to assume race based on appearance alone: many people of color can be considered white-passing, and they may not identify as white. With that said, privilege came up in nearly every interview. It was most often talked about during the first group of questions, asking what safety means for the participants, as well as the sixth group of questions, “How do your other social identities interact with your gender identity and/or

sexuality? How do they affect your perception of safety and your experiences on Western Michigan University's campus?"

Many of the white participants brought up their race, and how they did not have to worry about their safety as much because of it. Some of them may have had to worry more due to not fitting heteronormative and cisnormative rules of society, but they agreed that they still held privilege in their lives. While they were marginalized in some ways, they realized they were not oppressed in others. One of these ways was through their racial privilege. Aaron, a gay man, mentioned how he personally felt safe on campus and that he would not be harmed, but he could not show public affection to his past partners on campus because they did not feel safe due to the intersections of their identities.

Other privileges that were brought up in regards to safety were straight-passing and cis-passing privileges, the "privileges" of being considered straight/heterosexual and cisgender by the dominant society, when one is not. Though an argument could be made that cis- and straight-passing privileges are not actually privileges at all, given the erasure of one's queer identity(ies), a number of the participants nevertheless considered themselves to be privileged in this way. When talking about housing, for example, Sylvia – who is a nonbinary lesbian – believed that they would have little trouble living somewhere on campus that does not have gender-inclusive housing because they considered themselves cis-passing. So, while they may not have their gender identity reaffirmed like it may be through gender-inclusive housing, Sylvia expected to be able to live relatively safely without other residents harassing them or criticizing their outward gender expression.

Amy, a bisexual third-year student, had a similar experience. While she was marginalized through her bisexuality, she stated, "I think that, ya know, 'cause I'm [pause] straight-passing, I

guess, um. I don't really talk about my sexual identity, ya know, in class or with people I'm not, like, close with. I guess I'm not, like, out and proud, I guess." By society's terms, since Amy was not "out and proud" with her sexuality and did not publicly present with a partner of the same gender, she would be considered straight, and she would not be harassed unless something outwardly obvious indicated she was not heterosexual.

Some of the participants, such as Jake, used their privilege as a way to keep the queer people around them safe. Jake is a gender-questioning gay person, and he is currently in his first year at WMU. When talking about safety and how he feels safer partially because of his privilege, Jake mentioned how he uses his privilege to keep the people around him safe. He said, "I feel like, at least for me personally, I have the responsibility to help make other people safe. So if someone's walking with me maybe people won't – maybe people would be like, 'Oh, well, I'm not going to mess with that person because this person's there,' so I kind of feel like I can maybe use that to kind of further the community as best I can." As a white and cis-passing person, Jake held certain privileges that his friends may not have, and, as a result, he would intentionally walk with them in an attempt to discourage anyone who would want to harm them.

Many of the participants understood that, while they were queer and were marginalized because of that, they also had a certain amount of privilege compared to other queer people who have other marginalized identities. The most common privilege that was recognized was white privilege, but cis-passing and straight-passing privilege were identified as well. Some participants then used their privilege to protect their friends who may not possess those same privileges.

International Perspectives on Safety

Two international students provided a distinctive lens to questions about safety: Max, a gay first-year undergraduate student, and Gus, a gay graduate student. Both of their perspectives are valuable because they are not originally from the United States, and they contrasted how they felt at Western with different geographical locations and cultures.

Max started off by saying that he came “from a background that it was illegal and very dangerous to be homosexual or any kind of LGBT” and that he “feels safe when I can be myself, and [pause] feel secure that, I mean, there’s no obligation to pretend that I’m somebody else.” Part of his definition of safety came from wanting to be visible, like other participants felt. He wanted the ability to be who he truly was – a young gay man – without having to worry about rejection or violence. Later on, he talked about safety on campus in general and how, around other international students, he did not feel protected enough to come out to those around him, even while in another country. For example, he went to a meeting, and he felt unsafe while talking to another international student. He was cautious because he did not know if the other person would accept his sexuality or not, and he felt slight distress due to that. However, overall, about the students he interacted with, he said, “They are more ignorant. They are not necessarily homophobic, but they are definitely ignorant.”

However, Gus, who was in a different group, listed different words for what “safe” meant for him: “I think of peace, tranquility, respect, inclusiveness, as well.” He did not define “safe” as visibility or community, but instead, mentioned respecting everyone and making sure spaces are inclusive to all were tenets of his definition. Compared to his home country, he said that WMU is living up to his definition. By saying that, “it does apply to WMU, for the most part, because this university is very inclusive. From where I come from, I’m not used to all this

diversity, all this inclusivity, no. I'm not used to this, this is new to me, and I've been here almost two years." Gus marveled at how different Western's campus is compared to the city he grew up in. Contrary to Max's experience, Gus has had a positive one so far. While there are still ignorant people at Western Michigan University, he has had a mostly positive experience, where he has been able to connect with others pretty easily.

This disparity between Max and Gus could be due to the fact that while, yes, they are both international students, they would not have the same exact experience. Like many other identities, that of being an international student is not a monolith. Max is an undergraduate student while Gus is a graduate student, and they are in different programs. It is very likely that they run in different circles and that the people Max would spend time with would not be who Gus would spend it with. If they were in the same group, they may have found commonalities, but there still could have been differences due to the cultures they each have. Regardless of who either of them interact with, it is important that both of their voices are highlighted. As the only two international students that participated in this study, their experiences provided a hint of the diversity of perspectives that may get lost in general accounts of safety.

Knowing the participants' ideas around safety creates a context for their assessment of the general climate at WMU. Many of the participants mentioned privilege, and how even if they were oppressed due to their queer identity, they still held privilege due to their other identities. While there were a small number of differences in the definition of "safety," both within and between groups, many of the definitions included protection, community, and visibility as themes. The last two themes in particular appeared again numerous times as the interviews continued and participants opened up about their experiences, indicating once again that they are common sources of hope among some queer students at Western Michigan University.

Chapter 5: Visibility

Visibility is an important aspect of identity and community. When a marginalized person can see other people like them and resources for them, they may not feel so alone. They might be able to easily find others with similar experiences as them and create a community; they may also become more comfortable with their identity, knowing, again, that there are others who are similar to them. Western Michigan University, according to queer students, seems to be a mixed bag when it comes to visibility: while some areas on campus, like the Office of LBGT Student Services, are absolutely wonderful when it comes to resources and being visible on campus for students, other areas seem to lag behind, like the Sindecuse Health Center (Sindecuse) on campus. This shows how even though WMU as a university does offer resources, they may not be as helpful due to not being boosted enough. In discussing visibility on campus, students called attention to three elements of it: the general university and visibility, the resources available and how they were promoted, and the Office of LBGT Student Services.

The General University and Visibility

When it comes to Western Michigan University, students had many ideas for improvement of visibility on campus. During campus tours, where prospective students and their families are taken around campus and learn about the college, several students noticed that the groups do not go towards the Trimpe Building, which is where, among a number of other important offices, the Office of LBGT Student Services is. Instead, they walk in the general direction of the building as the tour guide gives a general overview of the Trimpe Building before moving on to the rest of the tour. Even if the office is talked about, prospective students do not go and see it unless they do so by themselves. According to Amy, who gives those tours, “that can kind of make the resources a little bit daunting, to come into [the] building.” From the

eyes of a queer student looking at Western as a potential fit, prospective student tours only highlighting the office from afar without actually setting foot inside, could make it appear as if the university does not value the LGBT community on campus.

During orientation and Fall Welcome, students do enter the Office, but it can often be rushed, since there is a lot to cover in a certain amount of time. It is a good start that WMU acknowledges that the Office of LGBT Student Services exists, but some of the participants were not impressed. Jake mentioned how little time his orientation group spent in the office compared to the ten minutes they spent in Parking Services. Max stated that, during the orientation for international students, there was not a desk for LGBT resources; he found the office and other resources by himself.

That does not mean all is lost, though. Amanda thought that Western had a very visible LGBT community. At the graduate student orientation, she said that there was something with the Office of LGBT Student Services, and that it was easy to find resources when she sought them out. Even with how brief the graduate student orientation was, she was impressed that those resources were highlighted. She said that the office seemed vocal by being part of the graduate student orientation.

LGBTQ+ Resources

By far, one of the best resources that Western has, according to the participants, is the Office of LGBT Student Services. It will be discussed in more detail in a later section, but everybody who mentioned it said that it is doing a wonderful job with both being visible on campus and giving out resources when needed. To the participants, the office is as vocal and as visible as it could be on campus when considering the funding it is given. However, part of this

perspective may have been due to the fact that the focus group interviews were held in the office, so they may have discussed it more than if the groups were not there. Many, though not all, of the participants were also previously connected to the office in some way, which may affect their perceptions.

The Sindecuse Health Center was mentioned, as well. How it advertises its resources for LGBTQ+ people relates back to Kraus et al.'s study on the College Counseling Center Websites (2015). While Sindecuse does give information on LGBT-specific counseling services, it seems like few people actually know that they offer them unless they know someone who does. There is still the issue of promoting certain resources, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ resources. To many of the participants, who seemed knowledgeable about the resources WMU provided, it feels like they are the ones who are responsible for knowing the resources for themselves and letting other LGBTQ+ students know about them when they ask. They were frustrated because of this: to them, students should not have to advertise needed resources because others cannot find them; the university should be able to promote them in a way that the majority of people know what they do or do not have access to on campus.

Some of the participants who took advantage of the opportunities Sindecuse provides were happy with their experiences. Others, though, were more critical: one participant commented on the lack of medical resources for transgender people. As of when this is written, someone could get an already-existing prescription for hormones filled at Sindecuse, but the doctors at Sindecuse are not able to write new prescriptions. Transgender people who use Sindecuse must then go off campus to get a prescription written.

The Office of LBGT Student Services

The Office of LBGT Student Services is a well-known and well-loved resource for queer students. Even if students are not directly brought to the office during prospective student tours and the time spent there during orientation is so little, many of the participants believed that most queer students know that the office exists. It is a great resource for queer students, both for information and for community. Similar to other LBGT resource centers, where they are often seen as community centers as well as informational resources (Wexelbaum 2018), the office is great for relaxing in a safe space.

However, there is one criticism that was brought up over and over again throughout the interviews: the location of the office. Trimpe, the building that holds the Office of LBGT Student Services, is nearly off campus. It is probably one of the most inconvenient buildings to get to on Western's campus. Along with that, there is little-to-no student parking nearby.

Because of this, even if students have heard of the office during orientation and tours, they may have forgotten about it because of how inaccessible it can be. For example, both Arden, a queer trans person, and Carly, a queer woman, have either worked in the office in the past or currently work there now, and they say it is up in the air about whether or not somebody knows where Trimpe is, let alone whether they know what offices are held in there.

With the office in its current location, participants mentioned that they believed not as many students would be apt to visit. Because of that, they may become more isolated on campus, depending on where they live and if they were able to find a community of their own. This lack of visibility for the office could be affecting the campus climate for queer students because it is

the biggest LGBT resource on campus. If it is not convenient, then there could be students who are not receiving information that they could very well need or want.

While the university overall seems to do an adequate job with mentioning certain resources on campus for queer students, such as during tours and orientations, it can still do better with promoting these resources in general. By having these resources, such as the Office of LGBT Student Services and counseling services through Sindecuse, more visible, some queer students may have a more positive view of campus climate than if they thought there were little to no resources for them.

Chapter 6: Community

Community can have different meanings depending on the group, but for many LGBTQ+ people, and marginalized people generally, community often includes those who have had similar experiences to oneself and bonding over those experiences. Along with that, it may also include supporting one another in the process. Finding a community can allow queer students to become more comfortable on campus. Like Lucas, a participant, said, a larger group allows for more strength, and a community means more safety for many marginalized people.

Western Michigan University has many groups and events that allow for community building, such as RSOs, the Office of LBGT Student Services, and Fall Fab Fest. Spaces that are meant to be for fostering community, such as the Spectrum House residence hall, however, seem to be seen negatively by a number of the participants, mostly due to the perceived lack of communication between Residence Life and Spectrum House and the lack of training for the Spectrum House Resident Assistant (RA).

Gathering Places

Although Wexelbaum's research (2018) focuses on LGBT resource centers and libraries, its observations about resource centers also acting as community centers, where queer students can come together and interact, could also extend to RSOs. Many students find community within organizations on campus, and this includes those with marginalized sexualities and/or gender identities. The finding also rings true for the Office of LBGT Student Services, since it offers both resources and groups for queer students of particular identities that foster community.

Many of the participants mentioned RSOs, either in general or naming some in particular. They said that organizations, like OUTspoken (the organization for LGBT students on campus)

or a cappella groups that specifically recruit LGBTQ+ students, are one way that they create community at Western. RSOs are also available for dispensing information and resources for LGBTQ+ students. For example, OUTspoken runs a drag show competition every year, where both contestants and performers put on a show for the broader Kalamazoo community. All of the proceeds from the show this year, \$1000 in all, went into a fund that is exclusively for helping WMU transgender students afford a new student ID that displays their chosen name. That OUTspoken did this is evidence that community is a strong component for this particular RSO because it provided monetary support for transgender students when they needed it.

There are also groups that meet regularly in the Office of LBGT Student Services, such as Bi-Weekly Panel (for people who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise attracted to more than one gender), People of Shades Exclusively (for queer people of color), and Trans Thursday (for transgender people). These groups allow certain subgroups of LGBTQ+ people a space to decompress and talk about issues that are specifically relevant to them. The discussion can be more nuanced and in-depth than if the group was for general LGBT students, and individuals can create smaller communities within the wider queer community on campus.

However, some participants voiced their frustrations over the limitations that the office has, such as only having one full-time employee and the rest being part-time students. With more full-time staff, the participants felt that the office would have the ability to offer more campus-wide events, for both the queer community and the campus overall. It may also be able to offer better advocacy for students. They emphasize that they feel the office does an excellent job with the resources available to it, but they wish that it could have the ability to do more.

Residence Life

Gender-inclusive housing has been studied before, and it has been found that universities can fall into the trap of creating gender-inclusive housing that ends up failing to protect their residents (Davis, Galupo, and Krum 2013), or it can otherwise be harmful for the residents if they are not involved in the process because “there may be a risk of not creating a policy that speaks to the students’ actual lived experiences on campus” (Marine, Nicolazzo, and Wagner 2018, 232). To many of the participants who have lived in Spectrum House before or are currently living there, WMU’s Residence Life has not created such a policy and, as a result, has let them down. However, Spectrum House as a whole may not be simply a success or a failure: it may be a mixture of both.

On its webpage, Western Michigan University describes Spectrum House as an “empowering, inclusive and supportive environment where students of all gender identities and sexual orientations, including or inclusive of allies, can live and learn together” (n.d.). It is meant to be gender-inclusive housing, as well as a place where LGBTQ+ students can live together as a community. Participants who have not lived there before, such as Amanda and Joan (who is a bisexual cisgender woman), saw it as a suitable resource on campus, where fellow queer students can connect and become friends.

However, those who are currently living there, have lived there in the past, or know people who have lived there, told a different story. To many of the participants who lived there before, it is not a place for community building. Instead, it is one of great frustration, largely due to the perceived lack of resources from Residence Life and perceived extra demands that the RA for Spectrum is put under.

Some of the past and current residents agreed that Residence Life did not adequately assess their needs until it was too late. They said that for the past three years, since Spectrum was created, there have been issues on the floor that do not seem to be happening as much or to such an extent on other floors or in other residence halls, such as hostility between residents and clashes with personality. In the Fall 2018 semester, they continuously asked for an immediate assistant to help the RA, and Residence Life responded by giving the floor a Learning Community Assistant (LCA) in the following fall. An LCA is a member of Residence Life, similar to an RA, whom residents can come to with issues specifically pertaining to the community they are living in. For example, if a resident is living in the Engineering Community, they could go to LCA living in that community for assistance with engineering classes or questions about the degree. The participants pointed out that while this may be a step in the right direction, it was too little too late for them. By the end of Fall 2018, around half of the residents on the floor left due to the above issues that were happening, many of them moving to off-campus apartments. One participant left for an apartment halfway through the semester because he felt he did not fit in, being both the oldest resident and the only graduate student.

This fallout is partially due to the expectations placed on the RA without suitable resources or training. A few of the participants are currently RAs or have been in the past, though not necessarily for Spectrum House, and they said that outside of a one- or two-hour workshop with the director of the Office of LBGT Student Services, no other additional training was given for the Spectrum House RA position. On top of that, when an RA for Spectrum House did ask Residence Life for help or other resources, it felt like they did not offer adequate assistance to solve the problems that were unfolding, according to some participants. However, they said that Residence Life expected the RA to be much more than an RA could or should be,

such as providing more emotional support than is typical of the position. Between not having the needed resources and having too high expectations, the participants believed there was too much pressure being put on the RA to be able to assist the floor appropriately.

However, what happened may not have been fully due to the lack of resources. It may have been that Spectrum House has just been unlucky in the sense that many of the residents seemed to have clashed when it came to personality. Not everyone is going to get along, and some may choose to move out because of these differences. Differences in RA training may not change the outcome if/when such a thing happens, though it could help minimize some hostility among the residents.

Ultimately, for a lot of the Spectrum House residents, these issues led to a loss of community, both literally and metaphorically, since many residents did leave the hall after the previous Fall semester. After the residents left, Sylvia said, “we have reached a point where if you don’t like each other, you just don’t speak to each other, interact with each other. So, it is really frustrating, and I wish that we had had a better experience.” This, then, is not what Western had in mind, if their description of Spectrum is anything to go by. The residents who left could have felt unsafe, stressed out, or both from living there, which is the opposite of what Western intended. Hyacinth, who is currently living there, said that, “the sense of community on that floor evaporated almost instantly.” After a pause, she continued: “And to this day, Spectrum House is, uh, a lot more empty than it used to be, and it feels like a ghost town in comparison to the beginning of the year.”

That is not to say that all the participants believed the blame is entirely placed on Residence Life. A couple suggested that while Residence Life should have done something more proactive and/or preventative, some of the responsibility landed on the residents of Spectrum

House as well. As Gus said, “For me, it’s a 50/50 thing. 50% Res. Life, 50% the residents because even though us as students go through [what] every person does go through, mentally and physically-speaking, when it comes to college life, you still have to put in your part if you want to make your experience --- ya know, to make the best out of your experience.” While he agreed that Residence Life should partially be at fault, the residents who lived there should have taken some responsibility for the problems and worked things out between themselves.

Cookie, a gay transgender man, said that the residents were the biggest issue. He stated that the residents were the worst part of Spectrum House and that they did not behave well or as they should have. To him, some of them were antagonistic towards others on the floor, and if Spectrum House is deemed a safe space for people, then it should be enforced as a safe space.

There could be a silver lining from these negative experiences with Spectrum House: even though the participants there have at least partially disliked some of their time there, they could also be creating their own community rather than looking to Western to provide it for them. Since community often means bonding over shared experiences, people who have had negative experiences through Spectrum House could build and/or strengthen their own community among themselves.

From what the participants said during the interviews, it does not sound like Residence Life facilitates enough communication between itself and the residents of Spectrum House in order to establish what should change or stay the same. Instead, they seem to only take action when the residents can no longer be ignored, and even then, their responses are often perceived as mediocre. Many of the participants believe that Western can and should do better when it comes to Spectrum House, especially when the university often points out that they believe in diversity and inclusion. There should be an ongoing conversation with queer students and the

leadership of Residence Life when it comes to Spectrum House because, otherwise, Spectrum House's reputation could be damaged and students may stop choosing to live there.

Western Michigan University has promise when it comes to building a community for queer students, such as having multiple student-created RSOs specifically for LGBTQ+ students, the Office of LBGT Student Services, and Spectrum House. However, when it comes to Spectrum House, even though it would not fix everything, more open communication between Residence Life and the residents could be beneficial. It goes to show that, again, the university has a steady foundation, but it could take further steps to really make the campus welcoming for its LGBTQ+ population.

Chapter 7: Respect

Respect and comfort are other important aspects of campus climate for LGBTQ+ students. Most participants mentioned that they felt comfortable and respected in many areas on campus, such as certain departments or schools like Gender and Women's Studies and the School of Communication. However, many of them also pointed out that they have experienced at least one moment where they have felt disrespected, either by faculty or other students. This was mostly through microaggressions, "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue 2010, 3), particularly microaggressions towards bisexual people. The lack of asking for pronouns, and heteronormativity and cisnormativity within the classroom, were also common experiences.

Interactions with Faculty

Most of the ignorant comments coming from faculty at WMU are often seen as being due to lack of education on the subject. Much like how school counselors may not consider certain statements or actions as microaggressions (Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson 2012), faculty also may not be able to recognize when their words can be hurtful towards another person, even if they did not intend for it to be so. On top of that, some faculty members use cisnormative and/or heteronormative examples and texts within their classes and lack awareness of how and why they are problematic.

For example, Max often experiences instructors using only cisgender men and cisgender women as couples in their examples. He said, "And the professors are more, like –having

stereotypes. For example, they are talking about family, it's just man and a woman, or for example, they are talking about love, it's between men and women.”

Amanda mentioned, too, how many of the texts that are used in her program can be largely homophobic or otherwise bigoted, even though they are considered to be foundational texts. She said that she has already talked to one of her instructors about it, and he agreed that when he teaches the class again, he would review the syllabus and the course schedule with their conversation in mind.

Another area of concern is how pronouns are dealt with within a classroom setting and making sure all faculty are adhering to the preferred name policy. Even though some faculty members in departments like Psychology ask for pronouns and most follow the preferred name policy, not everyone does. There is not consistency throughout the university, especially with asking for pronouns. This is similar to the findings of Jacobson et al.'s study, where they examined the queer campus climate in Colleges/Schools of Pharmacy, in which there was no “uniform implementation of inclusive practices to improve campus climate for LGBT students, faculty, and staff” (2017, 64).

Not asking for pronouns has the possibility of significantly affecting students' comfort levels and capacity to focus on learning during class. It could also be seen as disrespectful; although not asking for pronouns may not be a microaggression in and of itself, misgendering someone could be. Some participants suggested that asking for pronouns should be mandatory, much like how preferred names should be used instead of a legal name. This would be an easy way to make sure that students, especially transgender and nonbinary students, feel safe and comfortable within classroom settings, and it would reduce the chances of misgendering others for those who notice the addition.

However, while there could be a policy where instructors should ask for pronouns, it should not be mandatory for students to disclose them. If one is questioning their gender and not sure about what pronouns they should use, they may be pressured into picking a set for themselves that they are not wholly comfortable with. On top of that, they may not feel comfortable with naming their pronouns verbally, when other students could hear. Instead, it may be best if instructors pass out notecards for the students to fill out their information, like many do at the beginning of the semester, where pronouns could be optional.

Interactions with Students

Much like faculty, there are issues with other students engaging in microaggressions towards their queer peers, which can make them feel disrespected or uncomfortable. While some participants say that most Western Michigan University students do not harass others and stick to themselves, there are always those couple of people that make a comment or give a look. Some of the participants had friends or acquaintances who would say something that would make them uncomfortable. For example, Emily had an acquaintance who would challenge her more openly out bisexual friend on bisexuality, saying that it does not exist. When she confronted him about it, he said that she was straight because she was in a relationship with a man when she was a woman.

Another issue often pertains to how one expresses themselves and their gender. If someone's gender expression is not within the heteronormative guidelines society gives, they are often subjected to more scrutiny or snide comments from other students. However, this is not always the case. While Sylvia and Arden both had comments thrown at them, they also had compliments about their clothes or their makeup, which helped them be more comfortable with their gender expression at that particular moment in time.

Some participants discussed how they have more experiences with other students regarding their gender than their sexuality, especially the participants who were cisgender women. Emily mentioned how she did not usually have issues with her peers about being bisexual, but she did sometimes feel unsafe in certain environments, such as at a party or a fraternity house, due to her gender, being a cisgender woman. She and the other participants who discussed being impacted more by their gender than their sexuality did not specifically mention sexual assault or misogyny, but it could be alluded to. If there was a question specifying experiences with misogyny or violence, participants may have been more apt to open up about it, but only a few participants mentioned it otherwise.

Jeffrey brought up accountability and students in regards to safety. They believed that while some students' thinking may not change due to bigoted ideas being ingrained into them by the environment they grew up in, they should still be held accountable for what they say and do. They said that Western should take what students (and faculty) say more seriously, as a way to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ students.

Many of these encounters push some of the participants into code-switching, where they accept being perceived as heterosexual or cisgender when they are not in order to stay safe in environments that they feel uncomfortable or unsafe in. Ray does it often: "Like, I do that all the time. Having to hide parts of yourself because you know that like, 'This is not your crowd.'" Whenever the participants did do it, they reported wishing they did not have to, but for them, it was a way to stay safe when in an unfamiliar or unsafe environment, usually with other students. Out of the twenty participants, at least one quarter of them spoke about their experiences with code-switching, though not necessarily using that specific term.

Biphobia and Erasure

When talking about disrespect and microaggressions, many of the bisexual participants mentioned erasure of their sexuality by others. A number of them mentioned it when talking about their experiences with other students. Often enough, they would receive comments about how they are “actually” gay or straight, depending on their partner’s and their own gender. Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) made a list of common bisexuality-specific microaggressions: hostility; denial/dismissal; unintelligibility; pressure to change; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender legitimacy; and dating exclusion and hypersexuality. Many of these, like dismissal, legitimacy within the community, and hypersexuality, were common experiences for the bisexual participants.

For example, some of them have been doubted by others within the queer community regarding their sexuality, being told they are either straight or gay. They often feel uncomfortable in broader LGBTQ+ spaces because of the microaggressions they face. Wes, a bisexual man, had a conversation with someone where the person commented that now that he is single, he is “actually bi”: “Um, I recently got out of my straight-passing relationship, um, a few days ago. To which an acquaintance of mine said, ‘Now you’re bi.’ And I said, ‘You’re right ’cause now that I’m single, I’m going to go have a threesome with a man and a woman, so I can finally confirm to you that I’m bi cause that’s – ’cause you can’t possibly be bisexual unless you’re having sex with a man and a woman at the same time.’”

Some of the participants mentioned that they experienced a number of these microaggressions from others within the LGBTQ+ community. Emily’s acquaintance from before was gay, for example. Evelyn had a similar experience with a lesbian partner, where she said that Evelyn was “lucky” because she “can always go back.” Presumably, the partner meant

that Evelyn could “go back” to being straight, even though, being bisexual, she is attracted to multiple genders.

Hypersexuality was also brought up: some of the bisexual participants mentioned how when they tell someone they are bisexual, it is often met with requests for sexual favors or asking if they want to have a threesome. The participants were often frustrated over this, stating that even though they are bisexual, that does not mean that they should be hypersexualized to the point that people constantly ask them for sexual favors.

It is hard to find a way to make students themselves responsible for what they say, but when it comes to something like biphobia, education may help. Safe On Campus is a voluntary educational program led by the Director of the Office of LBGT Student Services that serves both faculty and students. In addition, for the broader campus population who may not think of attending that training, brochures and posters explaining microaggressions may also work, as well as a social media campaign. This could help everyone on campus, not just students, figure out what microaggressions are and how they may be perpetuating them.

While the participants felt mostly respected in regards to their gender and/or sexuality, they still faced disrespect and discomfort due to both faculty and students, usually in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions pertaining specifically to bisexuality seem to be especially common. Not asking for pronouns, while not a microaggression in and of itself, was a popular topic that was brought up, and many of the participants believed asking for them should become more consistent throughout campus. This chapter suggests that both faculty and peers can often disrespect queer students through microaggressions and cisnormative and heteronormative examples and statements within the classroom.

Chapter 8: Discussion – What Can Be Done?

At first glance, Western Michigan University has many resources for its LGBGTQ+ community: the Office of LBGST Student Services, Spectrum House, counseling services for queer students, and more. However, drawing from the interviews and my research, there is more that Western could implement in order to create a comfortable and safe environment and community for LGBGTQ+ students. WMU could especially work on visibility for queer resources, as well as community and comfort in regards to Spectrum House and faculty education.

Visibility

One of the biggest things that Western could do for queer visibility is have the Office of LBGST Student Services be closer to the center of campus. Every group where the office was brought up commented on how they would love if the office (or all of the offices in the Trimpe Building) were moved to a more central building that is easier to locate. There are a significant amount of experiences where the participants were questioned what the Trimpe Building even was, and if the general population does not know where the office is, then there is a good chance that LGBGTQ+ students do not know either. Having a more obvious location can allow for a more open community: people would know where it is and could be more interested in going to the events and group meetings that are put on by the office. However, visibility is not confined to just the office: there are other ways to create more visibility for the LGBGTQ+ community.

Another way that WMU could create a more visible community with access to queer-specific resources is by promoting its resources for LBGST students more than they currently do. The LGBGTQ+-specific group therapy program and queer-friendly therapists seem to only be promoted on their respective pages. The Sindecuse Health Center does not seem to talk about it on any of their social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), even though many

LGBTQ+ students have issues that would need the help of a counselor. Having more of a voice about these services could allow more queer students get the help they may need. On top of that, Sindecuse could also think about allowing their doctors to write scripts for hormones for transgender and gender non-conforming people (and other people who would need it for other reasons). Some of the participants commented on how it would be better than going to a hospital off-campus. It could be something to think about implementing and how it could benefit transgender students, at the very least. Overall, participants noted that promoting resources more regularly would benefit the queer community: not only would it allow other queer students to become aware of services that are provided, but it could also supplement the current practice that relies heavily on users of the services sharing their experiences through word-of-mouth.

Community

When it comes to community, the first initiative WMU should adopt is opening up communication about Spectrum House. Having a continued dialogue with the residents in Spectrum, as well as the RA and any other assistants, should be a start. They could possibly create an advisory group for the housing, possibly a group of residents or previous residents who come together with the RA and Residence Life to make sure needs are being met. Many of the participants involved in Spectrum House mentioned that it may help if there were more communication involved, and one said that Spectrum House should be run by LGBTQ+ people, particularly transgender and nonbinary people. Perhaps when selecting an RA for the fall, LGBTQ+ students could be part of the interview and give input. Overall, there should be a constant conversation between Residence Life and those in Spectrum House, including between the RA and Residence Life, in order for everything to run smoothly, at the very least.

RA training is another area that could be improved. Obviously, the RA for Spectrum House should be especially versed in LGBTQ+ issues, but RAs all over campus should have more training on how to interact with their queer residents. They have an hour-long workshop put on by the Office of LBGT Student Services, but some participants, who were either RAs themselves or have run the workshop, thought that it could be improved upon.

Another community-based idea could be to improve the queer presence in orientations and Fall Welcome in general, but in international and graduate student spaces specifically, since participants from both groups mentioned how there does not seem to be a lot. Whether that is more events for LGBTQ+ students or tour groups spending more time in the Office of LBGT Student Services, things could be done to help facilitate a larger community, especially for LGBT students who may have other identities that particularly interact with their queer one. This could also be considered under recommendations for visibility, but it also builds community because by increasing the LGBTQ+ presence through queer-specific events at orientations, queer students could find each other more easily than without such events.

Respect

As for LGBT students' respect, and combatting microaggressions specifically, there are a few things that could be implemented. To reduce the risk of using the wrong pronouns for students, there could be a pronouns policy, where instructors across the campus ask for pronouns much like many ask for other introductory information in the beginning of the semester (even though that is not currently a campus-wide policy). A number of psychology classes/instructors ask their students for pronouns and the other information to be written down on a notecard to be turned in, for example. That system could work so that queer students who are uncomfortable sharing their pronouns to a group of people can still let their instructors know them.

However, while asking could be mandatory for faculty, answering should be optional for students. Some students may not want to answer in fear of outing themselves or because they are in the process of questioning their gender and/or pronouns and do not wish to constrain themselves to a set that they do not fully identify with. At the very least, faculty could ask for pronouns in such a way that may not be so confining, such as “What pronouns do you use within this space [indicating the classroom/lab/etc.],” while still making it optional for students to answer.

Having mandatory training could also educate faculty across campus on the basics of the queer community, since many of the participants encountered microaggressions, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity from faculty before. Safe on Campus could be talked about to a broader audience, and faculty may even benefit from having a program specifically for their department, where there is emphasis on interacting with queer students in the classroom, texts that are used in the class, and other related ideas. Either way, faculty should become aware of how to respectfully discuss queer topics and interact with the community while causing as little harm as possible. This does not mean that there are no workshops or training for faculty to begin with: there are currently workshops offered to faculty members at Western that center around inclusivity and diversity within the classroom.

Overall, though, something that can be implemented across the board is for Western Michigan University to take a more active position with the queer community on campus. A number of the participants believe that the university should reach out more – whether it is to Spectrum House, the Office of LBGT Student Services, or just the community in general – instead of what they perceive as the community reaching out to the university whenever they want their voices to be heard. Not that Western is supposed to know every single thing that

happens on campus, but if someone within the administration periodically reached out to the community in some way, that would show that queer students were at least on their radar. The participants were not clear on who they would want to reach out, but Student Affairs would probably be a good start.

It may seem like Western has a lot to improve to truly be considered a safe campus from queer students' perspectives, but it has the foundation. It already has resources for LGBTQ+ students: it is just a matter of both expanding or refining them and making them more visible so a larger number of people know about them. Along with that, it could also look into more in-depth training for faculty and resident assistants so that they are more knowledgeable about interacting with the queer community on campus.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Overall, Western Michigan University seems to have an acceptable foundation when it comes to LGBTQ+ students on campus: the Office of LBGT Student Services is extremely vocal and active, Spectrum House is offered as gender-inclusive housing, the Sindecuse Health Center has some LGBT-specific resources, and there are multiple RSOs that are specifically for queer students. There are various events throughout the academic year that are put on, such as Fall Fab Fest, a drag show, and Lavender Graduation. On top of that, the office offers various scholarships, and a few academic departments periodically offer queer-specific classes.

When compared to other universities in Michigan, Western still holds up pretty well. Out of the sixteen universities and community colleges in Michigan that the Campus Pride Index evaluates, WMU is fifth on the list as of spring 2019 (Campus Pride Index, n.d.). According to the index, Western holds a four-star rating out of five stars. While there are two subsections of the “LGBTQ-friendly report card” that Western has fully achieved all the basic requirements for a positive designation (LGBTQ Support & Institutional Commitment and LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention), there are other sections of the “report card” where WMU has only have half or an even smaller fraction of the components required. Western pales in comparison to Oakland University, which is considered the highest rated school in Michigan by the Campus Pride Index (Campus Pride Index, n.d.). While Oakland University only has one section where they possess 100 percent of the listed attributes, in most of the other sections, they lack only one or two items. Even though Western is within the top five schools in Michigan according to the Campus Pride Index, it still has work to do when compared to the highest rated university.

As stated earlier, Western could do a better job of welcoming and serving its queer students. By using the participants’ definitions of safety as a backdrop, one realizes that

improvements could be made in terms of visibility, community, and respect. While the majority of research participants did tend to view Western Michigan University as safe, they also had their own critiques. First and foremost is finding the Office of LBGT Student Services a new home that is directly on campus and not so far away. Along with that, Residence Life could work on its relationship with Spectrum House by opening dialogue between itself and the residents, possibly through a board of students. Faculty could also be given more training on the LGBTQ+ community and how to communicate with them, specifically learning how their class content could be perpetuating heteronormative and cisnormative exclusivity. A pronoun policy could also be implemented, taking into consideration the concerns of students who are in the process of questioning their identity while working to prevent misgendering transgender and nonbinary students.

Western Michigan University states that it values diversity and inclusion, and in terms of its queer community, it has the foundation to match those claims. However, it should take the extra step to really make itself a university that takes pride in its LGBTQ+ community.

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