

Executive Brief: LGBTQA+ Undergraduate Students

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LGBQA+ Student Population: Overview, Who are they?

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and Asexual + (LGBQA+) college students are minoritized by their sexual identity/attraction (Kilgo, 2020 p. 4-6). They are students that do not identify with the heteronormative standards of sexuality/desire/attraction dominant within the context of the United States.
- Out of a sample of 8,000 undergraduate students, 21% reported that they identified as LGBQA+ (American College Health Association, 2020).

Relevant Terms/Definitions

- **Sexuality/Sexual Orientation:** “multidimensional construct. . . an individual’s positioning on. . .sexual attraction, sexual behavior, romantic orientation, and sexual orientation identity” (Mustanski et al., 2014; Hall, 2019; as cited in Hall, 2021).
- **Gender:** defined as both “a cultural phenomenon” (Stryker, 2008) and the way people identify, express, and embody the socially ascribed norms relating to their assigned sex at birth (Nicolazzo, 2016b, p. 166 as cited in Kilgo, 2020).
 - Sexuality and gender are distinct but often conflated concepts/identities resulting in various acronyms formed to represent these minoritized groups. For example, in the common LGBT+ acronym, T represents trans individuals defined by a minoritized *gender* identity, not necessarily sexuality (Kilgo, 2020, p. 4-6). Thus, different acronyms are used depending on the source used.
- **LGBO+ & LGBQA+:** This brief primarily uses LGBQ+ & LGBQA+ as acronyms to represent the following student identities (Kilgo, 2020, p. 4-6):
 - **GL:** Gay/lesbian-romantically or sexually attracted to the same gender.
 - **B:** Bisexual-experience sexual or emotional attraction to more than one gender.
 - **Q:** Queer-umbrella term for nonnormative, minoritized gender and sexual identities. . . "has a complicated history as a reclaimed slur" (Braquet, 2019; cited in Kilgo 2020, p. 3).
 - **A:** Asexual- experience little to no sexual attraction. “A” represents asexual not ally as a means of combating asexual erasure (Meyer, 2019).
 - **+:** represents other unnamed minoritized sexual identities such as pansexual and questioning.
- **Heterosexism:** “The ideology that denies and rejects people who identify as other than heterosexual” (Woodford et al., 2018, as cited in Kilgo 2020 p.8).
- **Coming Out:** A unique, personal, and ongoing process where an LGBQA+ individual identifies and accepts their minoritized sexual identity (Kilgo, 2020, p. 4). There are varying levels of “outness” that each individual determines based on safety. LGBQA+ individuals who are not out are still valid in their identity.

LGBQA+ Historical Background Trends, Statistics, Current issues, Concerns/Challenges

- **Historical Foundations:** Student population groups developed via secret societies due to institutions persecuting LGBQA+ individuals and not recognizing non-heterosexual identities (Rankin et al., 2019).
- **LGBT+ Groups/Centers:** Student/community activists pushed institutions to provide campus centers, which started emerging in the early 1970s (the University of Michigan as cited by Jourian, 2022). In 2020, 62% of student LGBT+ groups were officially recognized at 4-year colleges and universities (Coley), with more student groups than official centers at institutions (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2020).
- **Seeking Acceptance Today:** A Recent report shows LGBTQ students were four times more likely to report having picked a university in a different city or state to seek a more welcoming climate than non-LGBTQ people (Conron et al., 2022).
- **Current Mental Health Concern:** LGBTQ students attending 4-year colleges were three times more likely to report poor mental health than their non-LGBTQ+ peers, including being twice as likely to report a diagnosis of a mental health problem such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, suicidal ideation etc. (McGill, C. M., et al., 2021; Access to Higher Education Survey 2019, as cited in Conrad, 2022).

Their Collegiate Experience (Social and Academic Realm, Curricular and Co-curricular)

- **Campus Climate:** LGBQ+ negative perceptions of campus climate persist today, with campus climate as one of the most studied LGBQ+ college student topics, indicating that a safe campus environment is necessary for LGBQ+ students and their development (Kilgo, 2019).
- **Academics:** LGBQ+ academic-related concerns are similar to the population's overall concerns including campus safety, curricular content, and structure, rapport with faculty, and writing ability (Kilgo, 2020).
Lack of: support from peers and faculty, LGBQ+ inclusive content courses or program offerings, and resources along with the ability to engage with those campus resources, significantly impact how LGBQ+ students perceive their classroom environment (Kilgo, 2020).
Administrative Level: Even as campuses become more inclusive, gay & queer students can feel invisible on an administrative level. Research into retention and graduation rates does not typically reflect an intentional search for data on the experiences of this population, despite the risk they pose for dropping out due to the hardships they experience due to their identity (Mendenhall, 2021).
- **Co-Curricular/Social:** With the current research that LGBQ+ students have perceived their campus climates as unsafe, there has been more of a drive to understand how a negative campus climate can impact LGBQ+ individuals' involvement in cocurricular and social environments.

Issues of Development

- **Barriers to Development:** LGBTQ students are more at risk than their peers to suffer from harassment, bullying, and poor mental health (Conron et al., 2022).
- **Development Models:** Models such as the Unifying Model of Sexual Identity Development (Dillon et al., 2011) consider social identity an important part of LGBQ student development, but according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety needs must be met before social needs (love and belonging, esteem) can be explored (Maslow, A. H., 1943, as cited in Kurt, 2021).
- **Conclusion:** This suggests that LGBQ students might need to feel safe in their environment from bullying and harassment before they can develop fully socially.

Diversity within the Population

- LGBQA+ students & spaces often favor white, cisgender, non-disabled, gay men through a white, cisnormative, and able-bodied lens, neglecting that LGBQA+ students can hold other minoritized identities based on gender, race, ethnicity, ability, & social class (Lange et al., 2019, p. 514; Graham, 2022; Jourian, 2022).
- Bisexual, asexual & pansexual students can be marginalized individuals within LGBQA+ groups based on a lack of visibility and acceptance for their particular minoritized sexuality from gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals (Meyer, 2019; Tavarez, 2022).
- A study found "LGBTQ+ students thrived in spaces that recognized and affirmed their multiple identities, including both LGBTQ+ specific spaces and other identity-or affinity-based groups" (Hill et al., 2021).

Implications for Higher Education

- Institutions should create and maintain comprehensive LGBQA+-oriented policies, resources, programming, and safe spaces for students to explore and/or affirm minoritized sexual identities (The Jed Foundation, 2021).
- LGBQA+ resources and programming should always be informed by intersectionality ideology to ensure that the needs of minoritized individuals within an LBGQA+ student population are met. (McGill, C. M., et al., 2021).

Strategies for Working With LGBQA+ Students

- Give space for students to safely explore and/or express minoritized sexual identities without judgment.
- NEVER assume a student's sexual identity or pressure students to come out. Protect each student's full autonomy over conceptualizing their sexuality and whether they decide to share it or not.
- Validate closeted and out students' experiences.
- Support/promote LGBQA+ representation and affirming resources at the institutional level while exercising discretion if needed when connecting students at the individual/group level to supportive resources.

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Additional Recommended Resources

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