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## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# WHAT'S IN AN ALLY? CLOSING GAPS IN LGBTQ+ SUPPORT

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## ABSTRACT

*This study will explore the relationship between LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of and experiences with allies, and their perceptions of campus climate. LGBTQ+ ally training programs and visibility of LGBTQ+ allies contribute to both campus climate and LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of that climate, leading to more positive and healthy college experiences. However, it is not clear that current practice in training and educating allies truly reflects the needs of LGBTQ+ identifying students. While research is available for the design and implementation of ally training programs, there is little to no research on what LGBTQ+ identifying students expect of allies, nor is there research into the effect of those expectations on the perception of campus climate. Not only is there a dearth of knowledge on the perception of allies by LGBTQ+ identifying students, there is little knowledge of the effect of ally programs on the experiences of students who go through them (Worthen, 2011). Likewise, there is little to no available knowledge of the effect of ally programs on LGBTQ+ identifying students. Well-meaning individuals on many college campuses have undertaken the task to educate individuals as LGBTQ+ allies in an effort to improve the college experience of LGBTQ+ identifying students. However, well-meaning people run the risk of causing damage when they act without understanding the many aspects to a complex system of oppression (Davis & Harrison, 2013). Understanding LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies, as well as the effect of those expectations on perceptions of campus climate, is vital to understanding and addressing the LGBTQ+ experience on college campuses.*

## INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+ identifying college students often face different challenges than their peers. Campus ally programs and the increased visibility of allies contribute to improvements in campus climates for LGBTQ+ identifying students. However, it is not clear that current practice for training and educating allies truly reflects the needs of LGBTQ+ identifying students. This study aims to identify the gap between current practice and the needs and requests of LGBTQ+ identifying students.

While American culture is becoming more inclusive of people who identify as LGBTQ+ (Perrin et al., 2013), heterosexism is still prevalent in American society (Massey, 2009), and on college campuses (Rankin, 2006; Stevens, 2004; Worthen, 2011). Campus climate has a profound impact on the development and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ identifying students (Worthen, 2011; Stevens, 2004), including increased likelihood of experiencing harassment, and increased risk of mental health issues and thoughts of self-harm. The mere perception of a non-welcoming

climate can negatively impact on LGBTQ+ identifying students (Stevens, 2004; Rankin, 2006). In contrast to difficulties LGBTQ+ identifying students experience in college, Worthen (2011) points out that a university environment provides a unique setting for personal discovery, which makes it a powerful place to develop LGBTQ+ acceptance. Institutions of higher education have the opportunity and responsibility to attend to campus climate for LGBTQ+ identifying students.

While research is available for the design and implementation of ally training programs, there is little to no research on what LGBTQ+ identifying students expect of allies, nor is there research into the effect of those expectations on the perception of campus climate. There is, however, some research devoted to people of color's perception of allies (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Not only is there a dearth of knowledge on the perception of allies by LGBTQ+ identifying students, there is little knowledge of the effect of ally programs on the experiences of students who go through them (Worthen, 2011). Likewise, there is little to no available knowledge of the effect of ally programs on LGBTQ+ identifying students. Well-meaning individuals have sought to educate individuals as LGBTQ+ allies in an effort to improve the college experience of LGBTQ+ identifying students. However, well-meaning people run the risk of causing damage when they act without understanding the many aspects to a complex system of oppression (Davis & Harrison, 2013). Understanding LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies, as well as the effect of those expectations on perceptions of campus climate, is vital to understanding and addressing the LGBTQ+ experience on college campuses.

### **RESEARCH PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to identify the link, if any, between LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies, experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying students' interaction with allies, and LGBTQ+ identifying students' perceptions of campus climate. This potential relationship may have implications for current practice in LGBTQ+ ally training programs.

The following questions will be addressed during the course of this study:

- What is the effect on LGBTQ+ identifying students' level of satisfaction with ally experiences based on their expectations?
- Do those expectations have an effect on LGBTQ+ identifying students' perception of campus climate?
- Do LGBTQ+ identifying students' experiences with allies affect their perception of campus climate?

### **VARIABLES**

The variables involved in this study are defined below, and include the independent variable, dependent variables, and extraneous variables. The independent variable is LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies and allyship. This study will explore LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies through qualitative interviews. The first dependent variable is LGBTQ+ identifying students' satisfaction of experiences with allies. This study will gauge LGBTQ+ identifying students' satisfaction of experiences with allies through the use of qualitative interviews. The second dependent variable is LGBTQ+ identifying students' perceptions of campus climate. This study will qualitatively assess LGBTQ+ identifying students' perceptions of campus climate. Extraneous variables include: Degree to which the

student is “out,” or publicly shares their LGBTQ+ identity; LGBTQ+ identity(s); Age; Major of study; Race; and Ethnicity.

## METHODS

Because this study specifically addresses the perspectives of a marginalized and relatively small population, the study will benefit from a qualitative design. While Mertens (2015) does not specifically address the LGBTQ+ population, she does point out the benefits of using qualitative methods with both racial/ethnic minorities and feminist perspectives in order to address systemic oppression, which the literature shows to affect the LGBTQ+ population, in addition to the presence of intersecting identities within all three populations.

Mertens (2015) goes on to describe some situations in which qualitative design is the most practical approach, including the need for detailed and in-depth knowledge of specific populations, a focus on diversity and unique qualities of individuals, and the lack of an available quantitative measure. The research questions outlined above require a qualitative approach because of the detail required to fully provide answers, as well as the focus on individual experiences. In addition, as shown in Chapter Two, no measure exists to answer these questions.

### Grounded Theory and Data Collection

Because of the foundational lack of current knowledge on the topic of LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies, experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying students' interaction with allies, and LGBTQ+ identifying students' perceptions of campus climate, grounded theory (Mertens, 2015) is an ideal qualitative method. Therefore, data will be collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed in order to create a foundational theory. Interviews will be conducted with open ended questions in order to understand the particular sexual orientation and gender identity of the participant, their coming out experiences, experiences and relationships with allies, qualities they look for in and expectations they have of allies, as well as their perception of the campus climate at their institution. Consistent with qualitative and grounded theory interviewing (Merten, 2015), the questions outlined will serve merely as a guide, as the actual path of the interview will be determined by the participant's responses.

### Sample

The sample for this study will consist of LGBTQ+ identifying undergraduate students at a mid-sized, private, Catholic, research institution. Because the LGBTQ+ population consists of significant diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity, it will be important to not only seek participants that represent a variety of LGBTQ+ identities, but also to refrain from generalization if the participant diversity is not comprehensive.

This study will utilize a snowball sampling method (Merten, 2015) in order to gain access to a largely invisible and private population through starting with personal connections based on trust. The hope is that those connections will yield 10 diverse LGBTQ+ identifying participants.

## STUDY SIGNIFICANCE

While research is available for the design and implementation of ally training programs, little to no research exists that addresses the desires and expectations of the population such

trainings are intended to support. There is significant literature focusing on heterosexual ally behavior and identity (Burgess & Baunauch, 2014; Ji & Fujimoto, 2013; Jones, Brewster & Jones, 2014; Massey, 2009; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012; Munin & Speight, 2010; Poteat, 2015; Russell, 2011), but none of these studies are grounded in empirical research on LGBTQ+ identifying individuals perceptions or expectations of allies. This study will start to explore those perceptions and expectations that are currently missing from the literature. Understanding LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of allies, as well as the effect of those expectations on perceptions of campus climate, is vital to understanding and effectively addressing the LGBTQ+ experience on college campuses in a socially just manner. The study of the potential relationship between expectations, experiences, and perception of campus climate may, therefore, have significant implications for current practice in LGBTQ+ ally training program design.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the relationship between LGBTQ+ identifying students' expectations of and experiences with allies, and their perceptions of campus climate. The results of this study may highlight areas of deficiency or opportunity in ally training programs on campuses across the country, especially religiously affiliated institutions. In turn, improving ally training programs may improve both campus climate and LGBTQ+ identifying students' perceptions of that climate, leading to more positive and healthy college experiences for LGBTQ+ identifying students.

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