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## Promoting Persistence Among LGBTQ Community College Students

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# PROMOTING PERSISTENCE AMONG LGBTQ COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

GREGORY D. ROBINSON

216 Pages

A vast amount of research has been devoted to the persistence and retention of college students since the 1970s. Recent research has focused on targeted populations such as first year students, racially minoritized, students with low social economic status and students at the developmental/remedial level. Nevertheless, limited scholarly research has been conducted on the persistence and retention of another category of students, sexual and gender minorities. This qualitative study examined the experiences that promote persistence among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community colleges students. Interviews with eight LGBTQ students from three community colleges in the state of Illinois were conducted and institutional documents analyzed to explore students' experiences that contributed to their persistence. Findings indicate that campus climate; social integration; academic integration; faculty and student interaction; norm congruence; respect for diversity, equity and inclusion; enhancing the education on and awareness of the LGBTQ community; and grit all play a role in promoting the persistence of LGBTQ community college students. Moreover, the study's results reveal that the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students could be used to build upon William Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Vincent Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure. Based on the findings, implications for practice and

recommendations for future research are presented to support the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

**KEYWORDS:** persistence; LGBTQ students; community college

PROMOTING PERSISTENCE AMONG LGBTQ COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

GREGORY D. ROBINSON

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for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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# PROMOTING PERSISTENCE AMONG LGBTQ COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Overview

In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the topic of student retention in higher education seemed to be studied at length compared to other topics (Kalsbeek, 2013). Mancini (2011) also indicated that an abundance of scholarly work has been written on student departure and persistence. Kalsbeek (2013) further stated that

Scholars have studied it, journals and conferences are dedicated to it, and consultancies specializing in it abound. And an ever-growing chorus of policy and legislative groups calling for greater accountability in higher education has singled out retention and completion rates as essential measures of institutional success. (p. 5)

As a result, college and university educators are becoming more concerned with the persistence and retention of college students.

As a result, increasing the persistence and retention rates of all students is a hot button topic for higher education practitioners and policy makers. When referencing the persistence and retention of all students, it is imperative that educators and policy makers acknowledge honestly the diversity in racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and gender identities that currently exists on college campuses especially considering, according to Mancini (2011), White middle-class students have been the focus of majority of the research on persistence and retention. This is apparent from the scant research on disenfranchised groups such as LGBTQ students in higher education. According to Driver (2010),

there is a deficiency of information about the educational experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students on campuses of higher education.

Specifically, there is little to no research about the academic successes and retention of



LGBT students and whether sexual minority students feel that their educational experiences are being affected by their sexual identity. (p. 5)

Nonetheless, “A majority of the literature on LGBTQ students takes place in the 4-year institutional context and describes theoretical and developmental models developed using traditional-aged, racially homogeneous, 4-year college students” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016, pp. 47-48). Therefore, more research is warranted to assist the diverse population of students now attending colleges and universities, particularly for students who are more vulnerable to leaving college such as those who have been historically marginalized, such as LGBTQ students, as well as those enrolled at community colleges. Further attention to this topic is needed at all levels of tertiary education, including universities and community colleges.

As noted above, the persistence of community colleges is also of major concern because these students seem to be more prone to dropping out of college. Dropping out of college early is more of an issue at certain types of institutions and among certain groups of students compared to others (Barnett, 2011). “Most students who enter these community colleges never finish: fewer than four of every ten complete any type of degree or certificate within six years (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 1). “The disappointing outcomes of community colleges and indeed many four-year institutions have not gone unnoticed by policy makers, who have called for more transparency in and accountability for postsecondary performance” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 1). Moreover, certain factors may contribute to community college students being less likely to persist. According to Bailey et al. (2015),

The typical community college devotes considerable resources to helping academically underprepared students-who represent the broad majority of incoming students-reach the college’s standards of academic readiness. Most students who enter developmental

education never successfully emerge from it to embark on a college-level program of study. (pp. 14-15)

Therefore, the combination of the limited research on the persistence of LGBTQ students and the concern about the persistence of community college students is a reason to examine the experiences contributing to the persistence of LGBTQ community colleges students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research on student attrition and persistence has been conducted for many decades. The persistence and retention of college students is of major concern to the nation. If the United States desires to remain globally competitive, then effective strategies need to be implemented to decrease student attrition. Much of the recent research on increasing student persistence appears to focus on various target populations such as first-year, racially minoritized, low socio-economic status, and adult students. “Although the literature on underrepresented, underserved, marginalized students in 2- and 4-year colleges arguably calls for additional examination, little is known about LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) students at community colleges” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016, p. 47).

Additionally, in reference to studies on LGBTQ students at community colleges, “The few writings that have sought to center community college LGBTQ students in the discourse, offer synthesis and critique of existing studies that largely focus on LGBTQ students, policies, and practices at 4-year colleges and universities” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016, p. 48). Consequently, more research on community college LGBTQ students is necessary to highlight their experiences.

Furthermore, “More and more LGBT students are living openly when they apply to college and want to be able to self-identify — just as they do with their race, ethnicity, and

religion” (Windmeyer, 2016, p. 23). Therefore, it seems that higher education institutions would be interested in the studying strategies to help these students persist not only because it could contribute to an increase in overall persistence rates but also because of the societal issues these students face that might impact their departure decisions. Some of the societal issues present on college campuses involve harassment and discrimination. Sexual and gender minoritized students appear to experience harassment and discrimination more often than their heterosexual White counterparts. Based on the 2010 National College Climate Survey, it was found that LGBTQ participants experienced more discrimination and harassment than their heterosexual peers and pointed out the discrimination was a result of their sexual orientation and gender identity (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). These challenges can definitely impact a student’s decision to remain at or leave their college.

Consequently, a campus environment that is more welcoming to LGBTQ students and values inclusiveness and diversity will not only enhance the experiences of LGBTQ students but will also help others on campus to increase their understanding and awareness of diverse populations. As a result, there was undoubtedly a need to explore the experiences that encourage the persistence of LGBTQ students on higher education campuses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the experiences that contribute to the persistence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) students, a marginalized group of students, at American community colleges. This group of students is considered marginalized due to the heteronormative ideologies that permeate our society. The information obtained from LGBTQ community college students was intended to help the participating community colleges determine policies, strategies, services, and programs to

promote the persistence of these students. Additionally, experiences that encourage persistence and decrease attrition among LGBTQ students were uncovered by hearing their voices through qualitative interviews. As a result, this study identified programming to help this student population successfully achieve their educational outcomes as well as contribute to the persistence and retention literature on disenfranchised and oppressed students. In addition, this study was timely considering LGBTQ students are more visible on college campuses due to an increase in the number of students who identify as LGBTQ students, and the goal of higher education institutions is to increase the persistence and retention rates of all students.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions that guided this study included the following:

- (1) What experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges contribute to their persistence?
- (2) How can the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students be used to build upon or counter Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure?

These research questions were used to create interview questions (see Appendix A) that helped to answer these guiding questions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Merriam (2009) stated that “a theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study” and “the framework of your study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (pp. 66-67).” Maxwell (2005) defines theoretical framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your

research” (p. 33). Although several theories related to persistence and retention have been developed, this study used sociological-based theoretical frameworks.

The theoretical frameworks were based on William G. Spady’s 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Vincent Tinto’s 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Theory of College Student Departure, the latter also incorporating components of organizational and psychological theories (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). According to Spady (1971), his model of the undergraduate dropout process

regards the decision to leave a particular social system as the result of a complex social process that includes family and previous educational background, academic potential, normative congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment. (p. 38)

Spady’s Sociological Model of Student Departure notes that if norm congruence occurs between the student and their college or university, social and academic integration will occur for the student, thereby enhancing their probability of persisting (Berger et al., 2012). A study conducted by Spady also found that academic performance played a major role in student attrition (Spady, 1971), which of course can influence academic integration.

Tinto’s (1975) model of student integration posited that not only social integration but academic experiences, formal and non-formal, can impact persistence. Furthermore, the model suggested that a student’s success can be attributed to the level of commitment they have to their academic and career goals as well as to the institution. In Tinto’s 1993 Interactionist Theory of College Student Departure, a revised model of integration, he similarly claimed that students who develop a sense of belonging to their institution are less likely to leave that institution (Mechur-Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008). Spady and Tinto’s models are useful for studying the

persistence of LGBTQ students from a sociological perspective by not only examining these students' experiences but also the influence of their college's environment on their experiences that led to certain behaviors, such as remaining at or leaving the college. Moreover, these two theories have been the foundation for the development of other persistence and retention-related theories, such as Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) and Bean and Metzner (1985), and a substantial number of studies.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

As a student-centered, higher education professional with over two decades of experience at the community college level, I have worked in various capacities including 10 years as a professional counselor, six years as faculty in the psychology department, and 10 years as a student affairs administrator. Throughout my higher education career, I have devoted much of my time and energy helping community college students persist to goal completion and supporting two-year institutions to retain these students. Creating programs and services to achieve the aforementioned goals has been a passion of mine. My tenure project for the City Colleges of Chicago focused on the formation of an African-American Male Retention and Support Group. My training to become a counselor via my Master of Science in Guidance and Counseling and experiences as a professional counselor, in addition to being able to successfully navigate higher education as an African-American male, enabled me to facilitate the retention and support group.

Besides my positions as a professional counselor, psychology instructor, and administrator, I have functioned as an advisor, coordinator and/or mentor to student clubs and programs that focused on marginalized students. These clubs and/or programs included the Black Student Organization, Illinois Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (ILS-

AMP) Program, and TRiO Support Services Program, just to name a few. As an administrator, I initiated retention-related programs for first-year students, students with opportunity gaps, and student-athletes. As a higher education professional, I still have the opportunity to advocate for more services and programs that contribute to the persistence, retention, and completion of underrepresented students.

Furthermore, my disciplinary orientations have influenced the frameworks that were employed in this study. According to Merriam (2009), “Each of us has been socialized into a discipline with its own vocabulary, concepts and theories. This disciplinary orientation is the lens through which you view the world” (p. 66-67). Based on my education and professional experiences, these orientations include counseling, psychology, and higher education. Therefore, some of my theoretical perspectives are grounded in the fields of counseling and psychology. Being that psychology and counseling are related to the discipline of social and behavioral sciences, similar to sociology, the sociological-based framework used in this study has comparable underpinnings to my disciplinary orientation.

In addition to counseling and psychology orientations, I ascribe to the higher education discipline. As a higher education professional who has primarily worked in student affairs, the student development theories as well as theories or approaches that focus on helping students persist to goal completion and on helping institutions retain these students have been major influences on my career. Understanding and using student development theories has given me the opportunity, especially as a counselor and administrator, to create programs and services that help students to transform and learn more about themselves and how they can contribute positively to the global society. As an African-American male, I have always been interested in theories that include practical solutions and strategies that have a positive impact on

marginalized students' college experiences. For these reasons, my disciplinary orientations would also be considered to have an emic focus. Emic "refers to the perspectives of the members of the social group being studied" (Vogt et al., 2014, p. 377). Again, the social group being studied is LGBTQ students, who have been historically oppressed and marginalized.

In essence, although a few disciplinary orientations guide my work, the theoretical underpinnings are very similar among these orientations. Regardless of the lens, I am consistently striving to find effective ways to help students at community colleges, especially marginalized students, to develop their potential and meet their intended goals, as well as to enhance services, programs, and activities at higher education institutions. Moreover, I am interested in advocating for new mental models in higher education that can authentically address equity issues. As a result, I was intrigued by the idea of studying the experiences that promote the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

### **Type of Study**

A basic qualitative study was employed in this research design. According to Merriam (2009), "the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome of the product), of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 14). Miles, Huberman and Saldano (2014) validate the purpose of qualitative research by noting that "Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them" (p. 11). Consequently, in this particular study, I was interested in collecting data that would help to understand the "lived"



experiences LGBTQ students attribute to them persisting at the community college and what these experiences meant to them.

### **Research Paradigm**

The research paradigm used in this study was pragmatism. “In research methodology, pragmatism is a philosophical position that judges knowledge claims by how useful they are to the community of researchers and users of knowledge” (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 347). Moreover, pragmatists might be less concerned about what is the “truth” is but more so concerned with “what works” (Illinois State University, 2015, handout A). Miles et al. (2014) supports this point by stating that “Things that are believed become real and can be inquired into” (p. 7). This study was interested in determining what works to promote the persistence of LGBTQ community college students as a result of dialogue with this population.

In essence, being useful and practical is similar to being pragmatic (Vogt et al., 2012). This research was intended to lead to practical and useful targeted and equity-minded policies and programming that participating community colleges could retain and/or implement to encourage the persistence of LGBTQ students. Therefore, the pragmatism research paradigm was applicable because it “focuses on a real world problem, by whatever methods are appropriate, and tends toward changes in practice” (Illinois State University, 2015, handout A).

### **Significance of the Study**

As a result of this study, the intent was to examine and identify experiences that promote the persistence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) students at community colleges. Based on the analysis of the responses from the study’s participants, the findings generated information on programming and policies that could have a positive impact on the persistence of LGBTQ students on the campuses of the participating community colleges.

Additionally, LGBTQ community college students could find these results useful. Based on the findings they could advocate for certain services, activities, and support programs and justify the existence of resources or implementation of new initiatives and mental models that contribute to their persistence. Furthermore, the participants could benefit from participating in this study by knowing their feedback impacted institutional change and the heteronormative campus climate, whether during their tenure at their institution or for future LGBTQ students. Participants may also personally reap benefits from the study if the findings have a direct impact on them completing their intended educational goal(s).

Although some retention-related theoretical models can be applied to most students, sexual and gender minoritized students encounter unique barriers that require the implementation of specific models and strategies for their population. Therefore, academic scholars and educational practitioners need to develop and/or revise retention and persistence-related theories and models that address the distinctive needs of LGBTQ students. Thus, there was undoubtedly a need to examine and understand strategies that will enable these community college students to persist and complete their educational goals.

### **Key Terms and Concepts**

The important terms used in this research study include the following:

***Academic integration*** – involves the development of a strong affiliation with the college’s academic environment both inside and outside of the classroom through interactions with faculty, staff, and peers in an academic nature, for example, participating in study groups and working with academic advisors (Kraemer, 1997).

**Attrition** – “Student attrition is the rate at which students terminate college without completing a degree” (Tinto, 2012, p. 128). Berger et al. (2012) state that “attrition refers to a student who fails to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters” (p. 12).

**Community colleges** – “Community colleges, sometimes called junior colleges, are two-year schools that provide affordable postsecondary education as a pathway to a four-year degree” These community colleges offer a wide variety of options to postsecondary students including *open access to postsecondary education; preparation for transfer to four-year college or university; workforce development and skills training; and a range of noncredit programs, such as English as a second language, skills retraining, community enrichment programs and cultural activities* (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2012).

**Dropout** – refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete a credential but did not (Berger et al., 2012).

**Gender minority** – “Used to describe people whose gender expression and/or gender identity does not match traditional societal norms” (Fenway Health, 2010).

**LGBTQ** – An acronym used for individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer. However, it must be noted that lesbian, gay and bisexual are terms used to define someone’s sexual orientation / identity. Rankin et al. (2010) stated that “sexual identity is usually discussed more narrowly in terms of three distinct, immutable categories: heterosexual, gay/lesbian, and bisexual” (p. 48). Sexual orientation / identity, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is “an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction toward others” (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 48). The T in LGBTQ refers to transgender. Transgender does not denote sexual orientation but indicates someone’s gender identity. “Gender identity refers to an individual’s sense of hir (his/her) own gender, which may be different from one’s

birth gender or how others perceive one's gender" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 49). Sanlo (2015) noted that "transgender people may be lesbian, gay, bi or straight" (PPT slide #30). Queer, however, "is used by some—but not all-LGBT people as an identity category including sexualities and gender identities that are outside heterosexual and binary gender categories" (Renn, 2010, p. 132) and as fluid.

***Marginalized population*** – Marginalized populations are those excluded from mainstream social, economic, cultural, or political life.

***Minoritized*** – refers to "targets of discrimination and oppression by those in power" (Renn, 2017). Referring to students as "minoritized on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity highlights the role of societal heterosexism, which privileges heterosexuals, and cisgenderism, which privileges people whose gender identity aligns as society expects with the sex they were assigned at birth" (Renn, 2017).

***Persistence*** – "Persistence and completion refer to the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so" (Tinto, 2012, p. 127).

***Retention*** – refers to "the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to graduation" (Berger et al., 2012, p. 12).

***Sexual minority*** – "Sexual minorities are a group whose sexual identity, orientation or practices differ from the majority of the surrounding society" (National Institute of Health, 2013).

***Social integration*** – includes interactions between students, faculty, staff and peers in a social contexts, such peer interactions, participating in school clubs, and informal contact with faculty (Kraemer, 1997).

## Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the purpose of this study, which was to promote the persistence among LGBTQ community colleges students. Persistence and retention are a major concern for higher education practitioners because they are being held more accountable to internal and external stakeholders alike to improve student educational outcomes such as persistence, course completion, and graduation rates. Mullin (2010) noted “In a remarkable confluence, federal and state governments and foundations are urging a paradigm shift for community colleges and similar institutions, from one emphasizing access to one emphasizing completion” (p. 4). Student persistence effects completion. So, due to the growing number of college students who identify as being part of the LGBTQ community, this study was significant in helping to identify how to promote the persistence of this student population, which in turn can help to increase the overall persistence and completion rates at an institution. This chapter also discussed the relationship of the study to my professional experiences and role as the researcher, as well as the type of study, theoretical frameworks, and research paradigm that were employed. Additionally, important terms that helped bring clarity to the study and were used throughout the study were defined in this chapter. Finally, chapters two and three consist of a literature review on research and studies relevant to the persistence of LGBTQ community colleges students, and the methodology and procedures used in this research study, respectively.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature on the history of inquiry into student persistence and retention, as well as theoretical perspectives on the underlying causes of student departure. It also examines key studies of the LGBTQ student experience in higher education and then canvases what researchers have had to say about student persistence at community colleges. Overall, the literature reviewed in this chapter not only sets the stage for the study described in this dissertation, but also underscores the need for more research on the persistence of LGBTQ students at community colleges. As discussed by Mancini (2011), lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students continue to be insufficiently acknowledged and an under-researched group in retention literature. Garvey, Taylor and Rankin (2015) further confirmed this gap in the literature by stating

While recent scholars have explored the experiences of marginalized students in community colleges, such as racial/ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, women, and first generation students, there is an absence of literature examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community college students. (pp. 527-528)

Furthermore, “studies on coming out, intersections of identity, and campus climate largely do not take LGBTQ community college students or 2-year institutions into account, raising the question of whether or not they accurately and appropriately describe the experiences of students at community colleges” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016, p. 48). This is a serious limitation in the community college literature, given the fact that these institutions “provide access to higher education for over 10 million students, representing nearly half of the nation’s undergraduates” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 1). Not only is there insufficient research on

this marginalized population at two-year institutions but community colleges students in general are also deemed more vulnerable to attrition.

### **History and Definitions of Persistence and Retention**

The student departure puzzle has been analyzed for more than 70 years (Braxton, 2000). This section of the chapter offers a brief review of this history, describing how and why student persistence and retention became a concern in American higher education, what we know about retention rates over time, and noting terminology that has been used over the years in discussions of persistence and retention. Implications of this history are also discussed.

#### **What Triggered Concern for Persistence and Retention?**

According to Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski (2011),

The first studies of undergraduate retention appeared in the 1930s. In particular, a 1938 study lead by John McNeely and published by the U.S. Department of Interior and the Office of Education collected data from 60 institutions and examined demographic characteristics, social engagement and reasons for departure. This groundbreaking study is considered a precursor for many studies that would occur during the 1960s when undergraduate retention began to form into a well-researched subfield of higher education. (p. 301)

Yet, it must be noted that “By 1950, more than two million veterans enrolled in institutions of higher education using the GI Bill and, throughout the decade, institutions began to regularly monitor their student enrollment” (Thelin, 2004, p. 263). Nevertheless, Berger et al. (2012) asserted that it was not until the 1960s that colleges and universities really focused on persistence and retention. “The early 1960s focused on individual characteristics associated with academic failure, but the latter part of the decade saw some initial efforts to understand the role of affective

characteristics and social contexts in student departure” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 21). They also mentioned that in the 1960s and 1970s concerns about student retention and satisfaction were the catalyst for institutions to pinpoint factors as well as answers to the retention issue. As a result, theories were developed based on studies and reports dealing with persistence and retention. Interestingly, in the early 1970s, the first well-known study on persistence in higher education was Spady’s sociological model of student dropout (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

In the 1980s, the scope was broadened in reference to the differing types of higher education institutions, including community colleges, concentrating on retention efforts and student populations they were attempting to retain (Berger et al., 2012). During the 1990s, some of the theories developed in the 1970s and early 1980s were being examined by other researchers to determine if the constructs in these theories were reliable. The findings from these later studies posit that in order to understand student departure the focus should be on social integration and not necessarily academic integration. Additionally, in the 1990s, more studies began to explore how retention was influenced by finances (Berger et al., 2012).

In essence, within the past several decades, there have been many reasons why higher education professionals and researchers have placed more emphasis on persistence and retention. Educators and researchers not only wanted to understand why students were departing but an increase in the number and different types of higher education institutions, as well as the growth in and diversity of students attending college, required them to expand their knowledge of factors contributing to student persistence and retention.

### **What Do We Know About Retention Rates Over Time?**

In 1982, Tinto (1982) noted “rates of dropout from higher education have remained strikingly constant over the past 100 years. With the exception of the period during and



immediately following World War II when the GI Bill was in effect, rates of dropout have remained at about 45 percent” (p. 694). Based on more recent contemporary college data, 54.8 percent of students earn a college credential, which is approximately half of all college students (Gates, 2017). This means that about 45.2 percent of students are not obtaining a credential. While dropout rates have been consistent since 1980 and for over 120 years, attrition remains a concern (Braxton et al., 2014) for higher education institutions and improvements are undoubtedly warranted. Although our country has the highest number of students who start a college career, the United States is about number 20 in regards to the percentage of individuals who complete a credential (Gates, 2017).

### **Terminology**

According to Spittle (2013), compared to other terms, the term persistence has been central to discussions on college retention and became popular as a result of early research on student departure. Therefore, it is necessary to define persistence and retention considering they are used interchangeably (Hagedorn, 2012). The National Clearing House Research Center (2015) makes a distinction between the terms by stating that “Retention is defined as continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same institution for the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year whereas persistence is defined as continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any institution”. Hagedorn (2012) appears to agree with this distinction by noting that “institutions retain students and students persist” (p. 85). Tinto (2012) also supports this distinction saying “for the student’s view, we use the term persistence; for the institutional view, we use the term retention” (p. 127). Basically, persistence is measured by a student who begins their college career and eventually completes a credential regardless of the institution where the credential is earned or how long it takes. On the other hand, retention can be defined as

measuring whether a student who started their college career at one institution completes a credential at the same institution. For this study, the term persistence was primarily used considering the study examined how the experiences of students might impact their decision to persist to goal completion, whatever that goal may be and regardless of the institution in which the goal is completed. Even so, this study highlights the pivotal role higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, must play in producing experiences to help students persist.

### **Implications**

“While little attention was paid to retention in American higher education during the first few hundred years, the subject has evolved over the last thirty-five years at a rapid pace” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 31). Persistence and retention have become primary topics of discussion and there is an abundance of studies on these topics although persistence and retention rates remain low. Berger et al. (2012) also confirmed it is common for American higher education institutions to have retention efforts in place considering retention is used as a measure of student and institutional success.

A review of the history of retention clearly indicates that we should expect that the more we study and learn about this subject, the more we will recognize the complexities involved in helping a diverse array of students succeed in our equally diverse system of higher education (Berger et al., 2012, p. 31)

For that reason, more research on persistence and retention should be expected and is needed for LGBTQ students at community colleges who are part of the current diverse population of college students. But what does the research say about why students do not persist? Why do they depart from college prior to completing their intended educational goal,

such as a credential? How might this research help to promote the persistence of LGBTQ community college students?

### **Understanding Student Departure**

Since the 1970s, scholars have offered several theories of student departure. The most notable include those developed by William Spady (1970, 1971), Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993), Ernest Pascarella (Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), Alexander Astin (1975, 1993, 1999), and Barbara Metzner and John Bean (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean 1987). The contributions of each are described below, followed by a summary discussion of their common features and their implications for this dissertation.

#### **William Spady**

As noted above in the section on the historical perspectives, Spady's 1970 sociological model of student dropout is known as the first widely acknowledged theory of persistence. His model was partially based on Durkheim's 1951 theory of suicide (Spady, 1971) and on data Spady used in his 1967 dissertation on the attrition of first-year undergraduate students at the University of Chicago (Hader, 2011). For theoretical purposes, it appears that Spady equated suicide with departure. Durkheim's suicide theory asserts if an individual does not effectively become socially integrated into society than the probability of suicide is greater (Hader, 2011).

“Spady proposed five variables (academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support) contributed to social integration and could be indirectly linked to the decision to drop out of school through the intervening variables of satisfaction and commitment” (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011, p. 302). It must also be noted that the two factors of normative congruence and friendship support, identified by Spady as impacting attrition of students, are considered similar to the two features

of moral consciousness and collective affiliation discussed in Durkheim's suicide theory (Spady, 1971). Durkheim (as cited in Spady, 1971) stated "The process of integration is facilitated when moral consciousness is reinforced by intense patterns of affiliation with others who share similar sentiments" (p. 39). So, in essence, students who do not adequately become integrated into the social system of their institution, based on various variables including but not limited to sharing the values of and becoming affiliated with the institution, are more likely to dropout.

Nonetheless, even though it appears that Spady's model of student departure focuses more on social rather than academic integration, he felt that integration into the academic system was also important when examining the dropout process (Spady, 1970). As a matter fact, he acknowledged that the social experiences of students could be impacted by their academic experiences, for instance, grade performance and intellectual development, which could be influenced by a student's academic potential (Spady, 1971). Successful integration into the social and academic systems of a college can lead to satisfaction with the institution, resulting in institutional commitment, and consequently the decision to persist.

### **Vincent Tinto**

In addition to Spady's theory being partially based Durkheim's suicide model, Tinto's (1975) model of student departure was also framed in part on Durkheim's theories of suicide and departure. Tinto (1975) focused on one of four types of suicide proposed by Durkheim to explain student departure in his model. This type of suicide was egotistical suicide. It was inclined to happen if a person did not successfully integrate into new environment (Metz, 2002).

Similar to Spady, Tinto's 1975 model of student integration suggested that attrition was related to a student's academic and social experiences (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto (1975) indicated that academic integration consists of structural and normative dimensions,

the former involving the achievement of the institution's evident standards, whereas the latter relates to a student's identity aligning with the beliefs, values and norms essential to the academic systems of the institution. Social integration, alternatively, relates to how similar the social systems of the institution are to the student's attitudes, values and norms (Tinto, 1975).

In addition to a student characteristics, for example, family background, prior educational experiences, personal traits, and external influences such as a job and family, Tinto's model considered the component of "commitment" as influencing a student's decision to withdraw. Commitment was based on a student's initial aspiration to complete a degree as well as a commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975). The initial commitments to the goal of graduation and to the institution influences the degree to which a student becomes academically and socially integrated into their institution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). In other words, students who possess a higher level of commitment to and integration into the institution are more likely to persist.

Tinto revised his model of student departure and integration theory since its initial development. In this 1993 longitudinal model of institutional departure, the academic system of the institution consisted of academic performance and informal faculty/staff interactions with students and their effect on a student's academic integration (Tinto, 1993). The social system included involvement in extracurricular activities, peer group interactions and faculty-student interactions, which all influence social integration (Tinto, 1993). It is apparent from this model that faculty-student interactions are considered important in both the academic and social integration of students.

## **Ernest Pascarella**

Another model of persistence was presented by Pascarella (1980) on the relationship between student-faculty informal contact and college outcomes. His conceptual model was based on some of his studies and literature reviews. The model also adopted some tenets of Spady and Tinto's models, therefore positing that both background characteristics, college experiences, and some institutional factors warranted consideration when attempting to understand the impact of faculty and student informal interactions on persistence and other college outcomes (Pascarella, 1980). Pascarella (1980) stated "While these pre-enrollment traits have a direct influence on educational outcomes and, thereby, on students' persistence/withdrawal behavior, it is likely that they will also have an influence on the extent and quality of students' contact with faculty outside of class" (p. 570). Other college experiences could be viewed as peer culture, classroom, extracurricular and leisure activities, all which can effect social and academic integration whereas institutional factors might include college policies, organizational structure and values, to name a few.

Like Tinto, Pascarella (1980) regarded his model as longitudinal because studying the same cohort was required over a period time in order to assess the correlation between variables that reflect what students experience in college, such as informal contact with faculty, and educational outcomes, such as academic performance, satisfaction, and integration. His model would not be considered quite linear considering some of the variables can have a reciprocal impact on each other. For example, a student's college experiences can influence their informal contact with faculty, while their interactions with faculty could impact their college experiences or degree of social and academic involvement with the institution. Both variables, however, could contribute to a student's educational outcomes, whereas these outcomes could have a

reciprocal effect on college experiences and faculty interactions, subsequently influencing their decision to withdraw or persist. A student who is not achieving academic success may elect not to become involved in extracurricular activities or engage faculty outside the classroom.

His model as well as other studies and theories further propose that “what transpires between students and faculty outside of class may have a measurable, and possibly positive impact on various facets of individual development” and “underscores the potential importance of individual faculty members as informal agents of socialization during the student's college experience” (Pascarella, 1980, p. 571). Overall, Pascarella’s (1980) model proposes that students’ informal or non-classroom contact with faculty can contribute to their educational outcomes, and ultimately departure decisions. However, he also acknowledges the importance of in-classroom interactions between faculty and students on persistence.

### **Alexander Astin**

Another theory related to student departure was proposed by Astin. Astin’s 1985 theory of student involvement not only speaks to aiding in the development of students during college but also to the correlation between involvement and persistence (Astin, 1993). His theoretical model, originally developed in 1985 but later revised, proposed that the constant involvement with or persistence of students in higher education can be affected by the following components: (a) student background including demographics such as age, gender and race, and previous academic preparation; (b) environment, including residency, college experiences such as participating in extra or co-curricular activities or working on campus part-time, interactions with faculty, staff and fellow students; and (c) college know-how and perceptions of the benefits of a college education (Astin, 1999).

According to Astin (1999), “student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). He went on to say that “It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement” (Astin, 1999, p. 519). Involvement can include academic and social interactions with fellow students and faculty inside and outside the classroom as well as partaking in college events (Astin, 1993). He proposed that the level of energy a student invests in active learning and in the institution can impact their personal development and motivation to persist as well. Astin’s (1975) longitudinal study of dropouts also found that “the fit between student and college” makes it more likely that students will become involved with their institution and persist if they are able to identify with the institutional environment. In other words, similarities between the student and the institution, for example, a LGBTQ student attending a LGBTQ-friendly college, should exist in order for a student to identify with the college or university.

### **John Bean and Barbara Metzner**

Bean and Metzner also established a model related to persistence although it differed from previously discussed theoretical models. Their model of the attrition focused on students they defined as non-traditional, whereas other theories were based on four-year, residential students’ experiences. A nontraditional student commutes to college, is 25 years or older, and attends classes on a part-time basis (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Because of the characteristics of non-traditional students, they didn’t consider socialization as having as much influence on the persistence of these students as compared to traditional students, typically defined as full-time, residential, and 18-24 years old. This assumption was reinforced by Bean and Metzner’s (1985) assertion that “Older students, who have already developed self-control and values typically



identified with maturity, are less susceptible to socialization than their traditional counterpart” (p. 488). As a result, their model did not place much emphasis on the student integrating with the institution but more so on social interactions with the environment outside the institution.

Besides environmental variables, such as finances, number of hours worked, relationships with family and friends, and family responsibilities, which were likely to have a significant impact on dropout decisions (Bean & Metzner, 1985), their model of non-traditional student attrition was comprised of three other factors that can influence a students’ decision to drop-out. The first factor implies that students who are not academically successful are less likely to persist. Academic success could be impacted by academic variables such as study habits, declaration of major and course availability as well as college grade point average, which could be influenced by high school grade point average. Intent to leave is the second factor, “which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes such as stress and satisfaction but also by the academic variables” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 490). Background and defining variables such as age, enrollment status, residence, gender, ethnicity, and educational goals are the third of the four factors that can impact a students’ decision to drop-out. Similar to other models of student attrition, background variables are included in Bean and Metzner’s model, although age, residence and enrollment status were probably added to emphasize how they could decrease the likelihood of a non-traditional student persisting.

### **Common Features**

Although the models just discussed include background characteristics of students as important determinants of why students leave college, many researchers also seem to focus on factors that occur once the student begins their college career. “When attempting to explain student departure from college, many scholars emphasize the importance of student integration

or involvement in college, meaning engagement in academic and extracurricular activities associated with college” (Barnett, 2011, pp. 194-195). Tinto (1993) notes that “student departure is more a function of what goes on within the institution following entry than of what may have occurred beforehand” (p. 228). This viewpoint seems to reinforce the research on student departure, which has held that the more students become integrated into, involved in, and/or engaged with their institution the more likely they will persist to completion. This can be achieved through social integration, academic involvement, and/or faculty-student interaction, factors known to have a direct or indirect influence on student persistence. Nevertheless, other specific factors within the college experience such as academic performance, college satisfaction, educational and career aspirations, finances, norm congruence with the institution, family and outside friends, have also been identified as contributing to a student’s decision to drop-out. Interestingly, these other factors can influence a student’s degree of social and academic integration.

**Social integration.** Social integration is the first factor discussed and one of importance according to some theorists and researchers. It can be defined as interactions between students, faculty, staff and peers in a social contexts, such as participating in school clubs, and informal contact with faculty (Kraemer, 1997). There are many benefits to social integration according to Tinto (2012).

First it leads to a range of social support that eases the transition to college and reduces academic stress levels. Second, it enables students to more easily access informal knowledge from their peers, helping them navigate the often foreign terrain of the institution. Third, it promotes a sense of self-worth, which in turn influences academic

performance. Finally, it enhances students' attachment or commitment to the institution and their willingness to remain enrolled. (Tinto, 2012, p. 28)

Braxton et al. (2004) posited that social integration refers to the degree of congruency between the individual student and the social environment of the institution. More specifically, they found that "Social integration reflects the student's perception of his or her degree of congruence with the attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of the social communities of a college or university (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 9). Although social integration has been found to be one of the factors that enhance persistence, a great deal of the research on this topic seems to focus on four-year institutions. However, Metzner and Bean's (1987) study on the attrition of the non-traditional student suggested that social integration variables are less significant on the impact of the persistence of these students than academic variables such as GPA and/or intent to leave. Nonetheless, social integration not only appears to have an influence on student persistence, whether deemed minute by a few researchers, but also on other lines of discourse on persistence and retention, such as academic involvement and faculty-student interaction.

**Academic integration.** Academic integration is another factor that impacts student departure. It can be defined as the development of a strong affiliation with the college's academic environment both inside and outside the classroom through interactions with faculty, staff, and peers in an academic nature (Kraemer, 1997). Tinto (2012) stated that "Greater engagement in learning activities in the classroom, especially those that are seen as meaningful and validating, leads to greater time and effort students put into their studies, which in turn, heightens academic performance and retention" (p. 65). Tinto's statement was supported by Braxton et al. (2004), who stated "The community of the classroom represents another aspect of the academic dimension of commuter colleges and universities that directly influences student

departure decisions. Small communities develop around the college classroom, a community for each course” (p. 48). They also suggested that students in courses with faculty who employ active learning pedagogy are more likely to become academically integrated and remain enrolled in their college (Braxton et al., 2004). Harper and Quaye (2009) found that

Although the reasons for student persistence through degree attainment are multifaceted and not easily attributed to a narrow set of explanatory factors, we know one thing for certain: Those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside of the classroom, are more likely than are their disengaged peers to persist through graduation. This assertion has been empirically proven and consistently documented by numerous higher education researchers. (p. 3)

**Faculty-student interactions.** Moreover, faculty-student interaction can impact whether students become academically involved in the institution. Barnett (2011) noted that Rendón (1994, 2002) theorized her validation construct as “a type of faculty/staff interaction that predicts students’ academic integration and intent to persist in college” (p. 197). Rendón felt that validation may be more important for the success and persistence of nontraditional and historically underrepresented students which would include community college students. Furthermore, Tinto (2012) indicated that students who interacted more with faculty in and out of the classroom are more successful on a variety of outcomes.

A quantitative study conducted by Liu and Liu (1999) and involving over 14,000 students with diverse demographic characteristics at a commuter campus, found that “student-faculty relationships were often crucial to student retention. Student-faculty relationship consists not just of formal interaction in the classroom, but also informal contact, such as discussions during office hours” (p. 541). Liu and Liu’s (1999) findings about the importance of faculty and student

interactions led them to also acknowledge that students are more likely to be retained if there are faculty on campus with whom they can relate. They were implying how the socially constructed racial background of faculty, for example, could influence the persistence decisions of students who do not see faculty who look like them and therefore may not be able to relate to them. Chaden (2013) also confirmed that engaging faculty in retention is deemed important regardless if it occurs inside or outside the classroom.

Any institutional approach to improving graduation rates must include faculty. Faculty, more than anyone else, deliver an institution's promise, one course at a time. They also evaluate whether or not students have demonstrated mastery of the subject at hand to make progress toward their degrees. (Chaden, 2013, p. 91)

Even as early as 1980, research highlighted the value of faculty and student interactions in regards to persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) conducted a longitudinal study at Syracuse University on 1457 students who enrolled as freshmen during the 1976 fall term. In this study they wanted to determine if student-faculty contact was a predictor of freshmen's decisions to persist or voluntary withdraw (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). They used elements of Tinto's 1975 model of student integration, such as background characteristics as well as academic and social integration, to develop questionnaires throughout the study where "scores on five scales correctly identified the cross-validation persisters and students in the cross-validation sample who later dropped out" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, p. 72). The study's findings suggest interactions among students and faculty have a strong influence on student intent and persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) asserted

the quality and impact of student-faculty informal contacts may be as important to students' institutional integration and, thereby, their likelihood of persisting in college as

the frequency with which such interactions occur. Moreover, they underscore the potential importance of faculty, in both their formal teaching and informal nonteaching roles, as an influence on freshman students' decisions to persist or withdraw from a particular institution. (p. 72)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) also discovered that the quality and frequency of faculty and student interactions were essential for students who were deemed more likely to withdraw because of certain background characteristics and/or their inability to socially and academically integrate into the institution.

In summation, interactions with faculty members and peers can have a positive effect on student satisfaction and outcomes such as persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Reason, 2009; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Faculty undoubtedly play a vital role in engaging students in the social and academic systems of a college or university, and subsequently contributing to the persistence and success of students.

While some researchers may use different terminology, for example, integration, involvement or engagement, to define a student's connection with their college or university, is it apparent that the degree of the social and academic integration and faculty-student interactions, which can be influenced by background characteristics, contributes to a student's departure decision. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that most of the aforementioned theories and studies of student departure were developed on the basis of White students attending residential, four-year institutions during a time when researchers, with few exceptions (e.g., Bean and Metzner, 1985), devoted limited attention to the persistence of historically underrepresented students or those attending two-year colleges. Therefore, in order to understand how to promote the

persistence of LGBTQ students, it is vital to review the literature on the LGBTQ student experience in higher education.

### **The LGBTQ Student Experience in Higher Education**

Several researchers have examined the experiences of LGBTQ students in higher education (e.g., Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Ellis, 2009; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfield, & Frazer, 2010; Renn, 2010; Sanlo, 2004; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenburg, 2002; Wimberly, 2015). As Renn (2010) explains, “Higher education research related to LGBT/queer people has evolved in tandem with activism movements, following trends seen in research on more readily identifiable populations of underrepresented campus groups (e.g., people of color, and female students through the 1980s)” (p. 133). Again, sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and gender identities (transgender, gender queer) represent the LGBTQ acronym.

Wimberly (2015) noted that “Gender expression or transgender issues –the “T” in LGBTQ–remain a somewhat new and understudied area in education research” (p. 5). He also indicated that “Some use the label “queer,” once thought of as derogatory, to associate with queer theory or queer lifestyle; others designate the “Q” as questioning” (p. 5). However, Renn (2010) stated that “Queer is used by some—but not all—LGBT people as an identity category including sexualities and gender identities that are outside heterosexual and binary gender categories” (p. 132). Although this particular study uses the acronym LGBTQ as a reference for sexual and gender minorities, it should be noted that some researchers and people within the LGBTQ community also use acronyms such as LGBTQIA+ to represent additional identities affiliated with the community, such as I for intersex and A for ally or asexual. As members of

the LGBTQ community acquire more knowledge about themselves and their sexual orientation and gender identities, new terminology is being employed to reflect these realities.

“Colleges provide a platform for researchers to study students’ current and past experiences, attitudes toward LGBTQ issues, and perceptions related to education” (Wimberly, 2015, p. 3). This is probably due to the fact that higher education institutions have given a voice to the concerns LGBTQ students have encountered (Wimberly, 2015). However, this has not always been the case. Prior to the 1970s, the need for research on homosexual students and their identities and campus experiences was not recognized (Renn, 2010) because male and female students who were alleged to have participated in or were caught participating in homosexual activities were normally expelled (Dilley, 2002). Nonetheless, although more research is being conducted on LGBTQ students in higher education, it is scant and has focused on topics such as campus climate, in/visibility, and student identities and experiences.

### **Campus Climate**

Much of the research on the LGBTQ student experience in higher education focuses on campus climate, defined by Rankin (2005) as “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 17). This research highlights how LGBTQ students’ perceptions of the climate can be impacted by harassment and discrimination, which can lead to health-related stressors and affect student outcomes such as learning and persistence. Harassment and discrimination can be overt or in some cases take the form of more subtle microaggressions. Additionally, the literature discusses the role that classroom climate plays in how students perceive the campus. The influence of classroom may be especially important for commuter students at community colleges who spend the majority of their time on campus in the



classroom with faculty members. Moreover, the research speaks to a relationship between students who are engaged with the institution and, as a consequence, have a positive perception of the campus climate.

The impact of campus climate on LGBTQ students' experiences is supported by a mixed-methods study conducted by Rankin et al. (2010). This analysis involved more than 5000 students, staff, faculty and administrators, mostly from four-year institutions, who were asked about their experiences at their institutions and perceptions of the campus climate. Findings revealed that most LGBTQ students reported some form of harassment or discrimination on campus and twice as likely to experience harassment as their heterosexual colleagues. It was also found that "30% of all LGBTQ respondents were more likely to have seriously considered leaving their institution" and that "LGBTQ respondents who identified as queer (38%) were most likely to have seriously considered leaving their institution" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 118).

The research of Woodford, Lulick, Garvey, Sinco, and Hong (2018) corroborate that the psychological well-being of LGBTQ students who have been subjected to heterosexist discrimination can be negatively impacted. They also found that college policies and resources have an affect on LGBTQ students' physical and emotional health and experiences. The mixed-methods study, consisting of 268 participants from 58 colleges and universities, examined their "experiences of heterosexist discrimination (victimization, microaggressions), psychological distress (perceived stress, anxiety), and self-acceptance (self-esteem, pride)" (Woodford et al., 2018, p. 5) and the relationship of these experiences to certain institutional policies and resources. Specifically, the results of this study assert that LGBTQ students may be sheltered from heterosexist discrimination if a larger degree of institutional support and inclusion are demonstrated through policies and programming (Woodford et al., 2018). In turn, students'

psychological well-being will be supported by decreasing their level of stress while increasing their level of self-acceptance, which should enhance their perception of their campus climate.

One of the research questions asked in Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri's (2016) qualitative study on LGBTQ Community College Students' Experiences was whether students perceived their community college climate as welcoming. The study participants were from five community colleges and comprised of 11 students and seven faculty, three who were LGBTQ club advisors. It was discovered whether in or out of the classroom environment, students felt a campus climate of silence existed in regards to LGBTQ issues and that many faculty were not thought of as allies although they were viewed as supportive (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). As a matter of fact, some students gave examples of microaggressions they experienced from students and faculty alike. Sexual orientation microaggressions can have an obvious effect on the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth, causing emotions such as guilt, unhappiness and humiliation as well as a decrease in self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2011; Woodford et al., 2018).

Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri's (2016) study also found that participants did not believe their campuses were LGBTQ affirming because of the lack of LGBTQ curriculum. The researchers attributed this lack of curriculum infusion to the assumptions that two-year colleges should focus on general education and vocational preparation, courses on gender and sexuality seem more appropriate for third and fourth year of collegiate study, and these courses were not of interest to community college students (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). According to Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2016), "It is paramount to foster the importance of social justice, tolerance, and equality for all students across the spectrum of difference by designing/delivering curriculum and student support services that are sensitive to the complexity

of sexual and gender identity” (p. 59). Creating LGBTQ-focused courses and/or integrating LGBTQ-related content into courses could enhance the perception of the campus climate for LGBTQ students by affirming their identities and their presence on campus.

Another study examining campus climate for LGBTQ community college students was done by Garvey et al. (2015). This study used the data from the aforementioned Rankin et al. (2010) State of Higher Education for LGBT People report but only included the data of participants from two-year colleges, which was about 102 participants or 2% of the 2010 study. Student’s perception of the campus climate was found to be a result of the classroom environment (Garvey et al., 2015). Additionally, similar to the findings in Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri’s 2016 study on campus climate, students revealed that the campus climate could be improved by including more LGBTQ content into the curricular (Garvey et al., 2015; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Furthermore, the classroom environment was impacted by the interactions between faculty and students, which influenced students’ view of their campus climate (Garvey et al., 2015). Some LGBTQ students viewed faculty as supportive whereas others did not. Lastly, the study suggested there was a relationship between students’ educational success and outcomes and their attitude towards the campus environment (Garvey et al., 2015; Rankin, 2003). In essence, students who viewed their campus negatively as a result of harassment, discrimination, and/or perceived lack of institutional awareness and faculty support were more likely to have lower levels of success.

Whereas the research speaks to the how a chilly campus climate for LGBTQ students can be detrimental to their willingness to persist, the research also conveys the benefits of a welcoming campus environment. Wimberly (2015) discussed that

Across most studies of LGBTQ college students, it is clear that a positive campus climate in which the students are engaged in their studies, have social outlets such as clubs, sports, or other activities, have a community to connect with—be it straight or gay—can contribute to students' academic successes. (p. 130)

Moreover, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2017) research on LGBTQ college students primarily concentrated on academic and campus engagement activities. These activities appear to contribute to the engagement and positive perception of the campus.

However, the research posits that LGBTQ students who are more open about their sexual and gender identities are more likely to partake in activities such as reflective learning, study abroad, and classes focused on diversity (NSSE, 2017).

Regardless if LGBTQ students become engaged in campus activities, LGBTQ students (out or not) are less likely to rate their campus climate and environment as high as their heterosexual peers and are more likely to define it as hostile (NSSE, 2017; Wimberly, 2015). Could it be that the attitudes, behaviors and practices of those within the college or university, reflect the established biases of the larger society? Accordingly, LGBTQ students may experience the same level of discrimination and hostility on college campuses that individuals in LGBTQ community experience beyond the walls of the higher education institutions because of homophobia and heterosexual norms. If harassment and discrimination are allowed to continue on higher education campuses, in any form, such as micro-aggressions, then colleges and universities are clearly not meeting the needs of LGBTQ students if the educational experiences and outcomes of these students are jeopardized due to a negative campus climate. Again, much of the literature on LGBTQ students in higher education has examined the experiences of these students based on their perception of the college climate. Studies on campus climate are

important because they offer data on the beliefs about and experiences of LGBTQ students and have provided data for enhancing and/or implementing LGBTQ programming (Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenburg, 2002). The availability of programs and services for LGBTQ students can impact whether these students are made to feel visible or invisible at their institution.

### **In/Visibility**

Another area of research on LGBTQ students in higher education involves visibility studies. Much of the research, or lack thereof, on visibility studies might speak to the idea that LGBTQ college students are made to feel invisible. Even though more students on the LGBTQ spectrum may be coming out on college campuses, one could argue that some of these students may still feel invisible and therefore not engaged with their institution due to their negative campus experiences, institutional policies and practices, and limited resources addressing their specific needs. “Given the dearth of accurate information on how many people in higher education are LGBTQ, educators and scholars need to rely on a body of historical and contemporary visibility studies that establishes awareness of this population” (Wimberly, 2015, p. 142). Visibility studies can be defined as “narratives and descriptive studies that establish the presence of LGBTQ people on campuses” but have also been found to “tell of discrimination and invisibility” (Wimberly, 2015, p.142).

In 2009, the research suggested that in the United States, homophobia on college campuses is a problem (Ellis, 2009). As a result,

The subjective climate for LGBT students is one of fear, in which many ‘choose’ to stay silent and invisible. Most LGBT students report not feeling comfortable disclosing their sexual identity and many report deliberately making changes to their behavior (e.g.,

avoiding known lesbian/gay locations; ‘passing’ as straight; disassociating from known LGBT people) in order to avoid harassment and discrimination. (Ellis, 2009, p. 726)

Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson and Lee (2007) also found that the “The desire to fit in and be comfortable is consistent with findings that gay men seek to fit in by limiting their visibility; less visibility is predictive of a more positive self-perception” (p. 224). According to the 2003 Campus Climate Report, “out of 1,669 students surveyed across the U.S., more than one-third experienced antigay harassment, 20 percent feared for their physical safety and 51 percent concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation” (Rankin, 2003, p. 4). It appears it will be more difficult for students to be open and visible about their sexual and gender identities if they do not feel safe. LGBT students are placed at a greater risk of developing emotional stressors if they subjected to an unsafe climate due to experiences with discrimination and harassment (Ellis, 2009; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Consequently, LBGTQ students are probably being exposed to more stress compared to their heterosexual peers mainly because they do not adhere to the socially constructed norm of heterosexuality.

Furthermore, according to the research, the absence of LGBTQ specific resources and role models on campus can also make sexual and gender minoritized students feel invisible on their campuses. Sanlo et al. (2002) noted that the absence of LGBTQ centers for students validates the invisibility they sense on most campuses. LGBTQ Centers at colleges and universities, similar to identity centers for other marginalized and underrepresented students on campus, are places where students can be themselves without being concerned about the scrutiny they may experience in other areas of the campus (Renn & Patton, 2011). These identity centers can also help with the development of self-identity, intellectual, and psychosocial domains. Furthermore, “The existence of these centers is a powerful affirmation that the lives and

successes of this group of students, who have been overlooked or disadvantaged historically in postsecondary education matter” (Fine, 2009). Although there is evidence for these centers, as of 2018, the College Equality Index lists approximately 161 colleges and universities in the U.S. as having a LGBT Center although there are approximately 4,627 higher education institutions in the U.S. However, it must be noted that not all institutions submit data to College Equality Index. Nonetheless, without these campus centers or some allocated “safe” space, LGBTQ students will probably sense that their needs are not being acknowledged by and that they do not matter to their institutions, and thus are made to feel invisible. LGBTQ centers can also provide a place for administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are members of the LGBTQ community or allies to interact and/or develop mentorship opportunities. Yet, students are keenly aware of the absence of faculty, staff and administrators identified as positive, visible role models (NSSE, 2017; Sanlo, 2003), which can contribute to their invisibility.

Lastly, a lack of campus resources for LGBTQ students also contributes to their invisibility. Rankin (2006) noted that in a lot of circumstances, higher education personnel have ignored the needs of LGBTQA students by not offering sufficient services or resources to address their concerns. As a result, a campus climate that marginalizes these students is created. The lack of LGBTQ centers and lack of visible role models and relevant resources, according to Afshar (2004),

not only contributes to the invisibility of LGBT students, but also constructs and reinforces heteronormativity in our classrooms and across campus. It is their very invisible presence that demonstrates the power of heteronormativity to mask that which does not conform, and to naturalize that which does. (p. 33)

Even though visibility studies on LGBTQ students are somewhat limited, it must be noted that the experiences of LGBT youth and college students became more visible in the 1990s as a result of narratives about these experiences (Wimberly, 2015). It was also found that these narratives were complemented by a small number of qualitative studies, with most of them using a single institution within each study (Wimberly, 2015). Additionally, Renn (2010) stated that Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities have been effectively normalized and made visible in the field of college student development. Emergent work on LGBT students of color (e.g., Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008) is bringing the normalization and visibility agenda to a more diverse population. (p. 135)

Nevertheless, the visibility of LGBTQ students on college campuses appears to be based on smaller research studies and specific topics, for example, student development, thereby limiting exploring the totality of the students' experiences.

### **Student Identities and Experiences**

The third LGBTQ focus in higher education research highlights student identities and experiences. As previously discussed, the acronym LGBTQ is used for individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer. However, it must be noted that lesbian, gay and bisexual are terms used to define someone's sexual identity. Rankin et al. (2010) stated that "sexual identity is usually discussed more narrowly in terms of three distinct, immutable categories: heterosexual, gay/lesbian, and bisexual" (p. 48). Sexual orientation (identity), as defined by the American Psychological Association, is "an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction toward others" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 48). As discussed previously, the T in LGBTQ refers to transgender. Transgender does not denote sexual orientation but indicates someone's gender identity. "Gender identity refers to an individual's sense of hir (his/her) own



gender, which may be different from one's birth gender or how others perceive one's gender" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 49). According to Sanlo (2015), "transgender people may be lesbian, gay, bi or straight" (PPT slide #30). Some LGBT individuals use the term queer to describe sexual and gender identities that are external to the heterosexual and binary gender classifications (Renn, 2010).

According to Renn (2010) "The research area of greatest growth in volume and potential for theoretical richness is that of LGBT identities and identity development" (p. 135). However, Renn (2010) did note there is a dearth of research on transgender student identities. Renn (2007) also suggested that even in the research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual students there is limited research on transgender students because their specific needs are not addressed. Moreover, Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012) found services for as well as awareness of the unique needs of transgender students and their campus experiences are lacking. They substantiated the need for more research on transgender students by concluding that lived experiences of transgender students are often ignored in higher education and student affairs research, thereby marginalizing this student population (Dugan et al., 2012). However, in reference to existing transgender student studies, Renn (2010) acknowledged "Ongoing, postpositivist explorations of transgender student experiences provide valuable evidence for the ongoing visibility and normalcy agenda; and a few scholars employ postmodern and queer perspectives to provide theoretical depth to the study of gender identity, genderism, and higher education" (p. 135).

Nevertheless, studies of LGBT students' identities are based on identity development from psychological perspectives (Wimberly, 2015). Studies of LGBT student identities were a result of student affairs professionals embracing psychological models of gay identity

development, which led to a collection of quantitative and qualitative explorations of LGBT experiences and identities (Renn, 2010). Bilodeau and Renn (2005)

compared stage models of sexual orientation identity development to life span and other nonlinear models. They pointed out that the former—created before 1990—provide a clear, positivist conception of development as movement from less to more complex ways of understanding self and society; the latter—created since 1990—account more effectively for the contexts and processes of identity development. (pp. 27-28)

In essence, ethnographic studies of the experiences and identities of LGBT college students played an important role in establishing a theoretical connection from the previous psychological-based, stage models to the more current context-based models (Renn, 2010).

The research on LBGTQ identities also emphasizes that members of the LBGTQ community are not a homogenous group. Consequently, the separate social constructions of sexual and gender identities implies that the experiences and needs of a gay male student and a transgender student may differ based on their identities. Furthermore, because “LGB people are not a monolithic group, the impact of other systems of oppression (racism, sexism, ageism, classism, etc.) has prompted the development of communities within communities” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 122). For example, a student who identifies as Latinx, female, and lesbian could identify with three different marginalized communities, being racially minoritized, gender minoritized, and sexual minoritized. Nonetheless, although this student has two other identities besides being a member of the LBGTQ community, LBGTQ students are often seen as a monolithic group when programs and services are being designed for them (Renn, 2010). Based on multiple social identities, some LBGTQ students, such as students of color, may encounter discrimination in the LBGTQ community based on their race or ethnicity (Rankin, 2003; Rankin

et al., 2010) because “the LGBTQ community is largely defined by the privileged majority-white culture” (Rankin, 2003, p. 25).

Lastly, similar to studies on White students and racially minoritized students, studies on LGB and transgender students suggest “positive links between involvement in organizations and activism, and students’ identity and leadership development” (Dugan et al., 2012, p. 722). Therefore, it seems that although there is existing research on LGBTQ student identity development and their experiences, more studies in this area are warranted to enhance the understanding of this populations’ identity development and experiences.

In addition to examining the research on the history of persistence and retention, student departure, and LGBTQ issues in higher education, it is essential to explore the literature on community colleges considering the focus of this study is on LGBTQ students at this postsecondary level of education. What does the research state about community colleges and the persistence of community college students?

### **Community College Student Persistence**

Persistence and retention of community college students is the last area of discourse for the literature review. The community college system in the United States serves the diverse needs of students with varying goals. There are more than 1,100 of these diverse colleges that annually serve a diverse population of more than 12 million students, which account for almost half of all undergraduate students (Bumpus, 2018). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC),

community colleges are a vital part of the postsecondary education delivery system.

They serve almost half of the undergraduate students in the United States, providing open access to postsecondary education, preparing students for transfer to 4-year institutions,

providing workforce development and skills training, and offering noncredit programs ranging from English as a second language to skills retraining to community enrichment programs or cultural activities. (AACC, 2016)

With the varying goals of community college students it is a challenge to accurately measure the success of these students without considering their intent. Persistence and retention at community colleges are measured by the number of students who earn a college certificate or degree and the number who transfer. However, students with the initial intent to obtain a two-year degree and transfer to a four-year institution but at some point elect to transfer prior to earning the degree are not being counted as being retained, which is a success outcome, even though they successfully achieved their goal of transferring. Consequently, community colleges are tasked with developing persistence and retention initiatives that will increase these rates considering they enroll over 40% of the college student population but also because less than one-third of community college students complete a credential (certificate or degree) within three years of beginning college. The U. S. Department of Education (n.d.) found that for cohort year 2013, the graduation rate within 150% of normal time, which is three years, at 2-year postsecondary institutions was 32.8%. This is based on 1,885 institutions. Bailey et al. (2015) confirmed the low graduation and retention rates of community college by stating “Yet most students who enter these community colleges never finish: fewer than four of every ten complete any type of degree or certificate within six years” (p. 1). Based on this data, it appears that persistence and retention are undoubtedly a concern at community colleges.

Research has been conducted on persistence and retention at community colleges (Bailey, Smith Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015; Barnett, 2011; Clark, 2012; Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Haplin, 1990; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Schuetz, 2008) to determine why attrition rates are higher at two-

year colleges than at four-year institutions and to address strategies for increasing persistence rates. Some of the topical research focuses on the importance of integration, validating faculty interactions with students, the development of a sense of belonging, and environmental variables on the persistence of community college students.

### **Integration**

As discussed previously in the Literature Review section on Understanding Student Departure, research identified academic and social integration as important contributors to student persistence and retention. The research on community college student persistence and retention validates these findings. Haplin's (1990) study used Tinto's model to examine the persistence of freshmen at a community college. Similar to Tinto, he found that academic integration was significant for community college students, especially those who planned to transition to a four-year institution. Other researchers have posited the value of community college students participating in on-campus activities, such as student clubs, in regards to persistence (Schuetz, 2008). Despite this finding, it has been found that community college students participate in campus activities and organizations less than their peers at four-year institutions (Bryant, 2001; Schmid & Abell, 2003). Consequently, community college students are more vulnerable to dropping out due to their lower degree of participation in campus activities (Bryant, 2001).

### **Faculty Interactions with Students**

The importance of faculty interacting with college students in order to promote their persistence was also discussed in the section on Understanding Student Departure. Research confirms the value of these interactions at the community college and how the absence or limited interaction of faculty with students at community colleges could negatively impact their

persistence. Harper and Quaye (2009) noted that “the lack of interaction between community college students and faculty adversely affects persistence and transfer rates to four-year institutions” but also discovered “the problem of limited opportunities for dialogues with faculty outside of class is partly caused by the disproportionate number or larger percentage of adjunct faculty in comparison with full-time faculty, especially at community colleges” (p. 268).

Using 63 students from one community college, Barnett (2011) conducted a quantitative study of faculty-student interactions, noting that because community college students are primarily on campus to attend classes, the “only college representatives with whom they regularly interact are faculty members” (p. 194). Her study specifically looked at Rendón’s “validation construct as a type of faculty/staff interaction that predicts students’ academic integration and intent to persist in college” (p. 197) and measured the relationship between students’ intent to persist with their actual persistence. According to Barnett (2011), Rendón defined validation as “interactions with students, initiated by faculty and others in the campus community, that engender feelings of self-worth and a belief in the students’ ability to succeed in the college environment” and described it as “involving demonstrations of recognition, respect, and appreciation for students and their families and communities” (p. 196).

Results of the study indicated that

Validation by faculty significantly predicted students’ sense of academic integration and intent to persist in college. These findings are especially pertinent to community colleges as institutions where students’ primary opportunities to engage with the college environment occur in the classroom through interactions with faculty. (p. 215)

Four forms of validation were also uncovered, including *students known and valued*, *caring instruction*, *appreciation for diversity*, and *mentoring* (Barnett, 2011, p. 212). Not only did this

study support that faculty interactions with community college students are integral to students becoming integrated into the college, especially academically integrated, but also that particular types of faculty validation are ideal for this student population. But more importantly, the study posits that faculty validation of students leads to student integration, which in turn enhances the probability of their persistence.

### **The Development of a Sense of Belonging**

Another study of student persistence at community colleges was conducted by Clark (2012). The purpose of this qualitative study was “to explore students’ self-perceptions regarding factors that positively influenced persistence to degree attainment” (Clark, 2012, p. 512). This was accomplished by hearing the experiences of 15 community colleges students, typically defined as nontraditional students, who had just completed their associate of science degree in hospitality management and culinary arts, and who agreed to participate in a focus group using an open dialogue approach. Clark proposed that the “characteristics commonly associated with nontraditional students may positively influence persistence” (p. 511).

Three factors emerged from the study, supporting this hypothesis. They included the students’ perception that “a sense of belonging fostered by appreciation for shared struggle and nontraditional characteristics; encouragement from supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers; and the development of self-confidence and visualization of success” all fostered persistence (Clark, 2012, p. 514). In addition to developing a sense of belonging with the college due to an environment that enabled them to share their struggles with each other, the students felt support from faculty and fellow students, which in turn enhanced their confidence to complete their credential. Similar to other research on persistence and retention, this study also speaks to

the fact that meaningful faculty and student interactions promote persistence through the development of a sense of belonging.

Although a vast majority of the community college persistence and retention research has found that academic and social integration are important in reducing attrition among community college students, Davidson and Wilson (2017) posit that “the student’s inability to integrate into the life of the institution should not be viewed as a reason students dropout” (p. 522). The conceptual model they developed, the Collective Affiliation Model, focuses instead on the capacity of the institution to foster a sense of belonging with the student rather than on the student’s capacity to socially integrate into the college community. Their model suggest that students drop out because the institution does not collectively affiliate with the student.

Davidson and Wilson (2017) propose that their Collective Affiliation Model does not work from a student deficit perspective, which tends to blame or put the onus on the student. They therefore argue that students, in particular community college students, should not be asked to integrate into the college. Rather, the college should be expected to make connections with the students.

Davidson and Wilson (2017) felt that the construct of sense of belonging was more appropriate for community college students as opposed to social integration. When describing a sense of belonging they referenced a statement by Bollen and Hoyle (as cited in Davidson & Wilson, 2017) which says that “perceived cohesion encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group...sense of belonging comprises both cognitive and affective elements” (p. 521). In their conceptual persistence model, collective affiliation is defined as “the manner in which a person’s sense of belonging among his/her various communities (e.g., workplace, religious



community, civic organization, family, etc.) are able to function cohesively so that the individual can holistically maintain engagement in each community” (Davidson & Wilson, 2017, p. 521).

Nonetheless, a student’s sense of belonging to the various communities they are affiliated can increase or decrease depending on the needs of the student at the given moment. For example, if a student becomes homeless, they are not concerned about “integrating into the college” but more so about meeting their basic needs such as shelter and food. Consequently, they may consider dropping out of school not due to their inability to integrate with the college but because their sense of belonging to the college may wane. According to the Collective Affiliation Model, using the example above, colleges would need to demonstrate an affiliation with the student by offering services such as a food pantry and referrals to housing in order to increase the student’s sense of belonging. Davidson and Wilson (2017) felt that students will persist if they develop a powerful sense of belonging with their institution. On the other hand, students will leave if they perceive their relationship with the institutions has ended. In essence, this model proposes the onus to promote persistence among community college students falls on the institution by addressing the collective needs of a student based on their various affiliations, which should theoretically enhance a sense of belonging.

### **Environmental Variables**

Normally, when referencing social integration, most researchers focus on on-campus relationships. However, because the vast majority of community colleges are commuter campuses and many students have other outside obligations that reduce their ability to integrate to the same degree as residential students at four-year institutions, some researchers have reframed on-campus social integration for community colleges, as discussed by Davidson and Wilson, while other researchers deemed other constructs such as environmental factors as being

more important. For example, while retaining the academic integration construct of Tinto's retention model, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student attrition placed relatively narrow importance on the social integration component in Tinto's model. Based on Bean and Metzner's definition of the non-traditional student, more than likely these students do not have the time to become socially integrated into the campus. They found "environmental variables, for example, finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, opportunity to transfer, are expected to have substantial direct effects on drop-out decisions" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 490), as opposed to social involvement. Nevertheless, they did acknowledge informal faculty and student interaction as well as peer interactions could be contributing factors to the retention of some non-traditional students.

As stated by Bailey et al. (2015), the community college's role in serving underrepresented students in higher education is apparent when examining the demographics of their students. Many community college students are classified as racially minoritized, low socio-economic status, first-generation, and adult learners, just to name a few characteristics. Unfortunately, students who attend community colleges are already considered less likely to persist or complete a credential based on their demographic characteristics and aforementioned reasons. These reasons include being less likely to become academically and socially integrated due to the limited opportunity to interact with faculty and/or develop of a sense of belonging.

### **Summary**

This chapter concentrated on research and studies that are relevant to the persistence of LGBTQ students at community colleges. The literature reviewed concentrated on the history of persistence and retention, theoretical and conceptual models on retention and reasons for student departure, LGBTQ student experiences in higher education, and community college student

persistence. Social and academic integration as well as faculty-student interactions, which can result from being part of the college's academic and social systems, were found to contribute to student persistence. However, other factors such as congruency and affiliation with one's college were also highlighted in some theories and models as positively impacting persistence.

According to Renn (2010), "Visibility, campus climate, and identity studies form the core of literature on LGBT issues in higher education" (p. 136). Although several studies have been conducted on campus climate and student identities, more research is needed on the visibility of LGBTQ students, especially transgender students. The challenge with visibility studies lies with the limited ability to track or identify students within this population. Additionally, the dearth of research on LGTBQ students at community colleges and student persistence at community colleges supported the need to fill the gap in the literature on the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodology and procedures used in this qualitative study. The problem statement is revisited followed by a restatement of the research questions. Specific research procedures are also discussed, including why the qualitative research design, interviews and document analysis were used for this study as well as how the sample of participants were selected. Additionally, this chapter covers the data analysis employed. Finally, validity/trustworthiness and authenticity of the study, ethical issues, and the implications for this study are addressed.

### Problem Statement

“As higher education becomes increasingly important for success in a society that has become knowledge- and technology-oriented, retention and persistence are more important than ever” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 29). As a result, more research on these topics has been conducted and related initiatives developed. However, even as college campuses are becoming more diverse, especially community colleges, Ronni Sanlo (2012) noted that “Few community colleges acknowledge the presence of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff on their campuses, and there is extraordinarily little data or documented experiences of this population” (p. 467). In 2004, Sanlo noted similar findings about the dearth of research on community college LGBTQ students. She indicated that

Absent from this body of literature is information on the attrition and retention of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, although this population is at high risk for many of the issues identified in retention literature as predictors of attrition (Sanlo, 2004, p. 98)

Moreover, in a review of the persistence and retention literature regarding two-year institutions, Leider (2000) found that studies on LGBTQ students were essentially absent. He noted that “Given the state of current research in the field, it is not overstating the case to say that we know virtually nothing about LGBT students on community college campuses” (p. 15). Therefore, in order to promote the persistence of LGBTQ students on community college campuses, this study addressed the gap in the literature about this population.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions that guided this study included the following:

- (1) What experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges contribute to their persistence?
- (2) How can the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students be used to build upon or counter Spady’s 1971 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto’s 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionalist Model of College Student Departure?

These research questions were used to create interview questions (see Appendix A) that helped to answer the research questions.

### **Research Design**

The methodology used in this study was qualitative research. Interviews and documents were used as the method to collect data. Merriam (2009) says that qualitative research is used to “understand the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2016) also found that “in order to give agency, expression, and voice, qualitative research approaches are well suited for research exploring the experiences of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ students at community colleges” (p. 50). In this particular study, I was interested in collecting

data that would help in understanding the experiences that LGBTQ students attribute to their persistence at their community college and what these experiences mean to them.

Consequently, the phenomenological approach in qualitative research was used because its main goal is to gain a deeper understanding about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The phenomenon of interest for this study were the “lived” experiences of LGBTQ community students. These experiences can help to determine reasons why these students decide to leave or stay at their college. This study is also characterized as qualitative research based on the fact that “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and rich description characterizes the end product” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15).

### **Participants of the Study**

An institutional recruitment letter (see Appendix B) was sent to six community colleges located in the state of Illinois seeking their approval to involve their students as research participants. However, for various reasons, only three of the colleges were able to participate. Two of the colleges were not accepting research proposals from external parties. I was informed by LGBTQ club advisor at the other college that their students did not respond to participating in this study even though the college’s Institutional Review Board approved my research proposal. The criteria of participation was (1) a minimum of 5000 students enrolled in credit-bearing programs and (2) an officially recognized LGBTQ student club in existence for at least three years. A student club in existence for at least three years should have developed a sense of whether their institution is supportive of their members and its mission.

The three participating colleges were degree and certificate granting institutions that offer transfer and career technical education programs. Similar to many other community colleges, these institutions also offer non-credit courses. Furthermore, at least 47 percent of students at all

of the three colleges identify their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian. However, one of the colleges, College C, is identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) because at least 25 percent of their student population identifies as Hispanic or Latinx. The Hispanic or Latinx student population at the other two colleges, College A and B, were 23 percent and 17 percent, respectively. On the other hand, the Black/African-American student population at all three colleges ranged from eight to ten percent while the Asian/Pacific Islander student population was five percent or less at College A and C and approximately 23 percent at the College B.

The process for selecting participants began by identifying a non-probability sample considering probability sampling is not ideal for a qualitative study because it allows the investigator to generalize results of the study from the sample to the population from which it was drawn. Since generalization in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic sampling is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research. Thus non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research. (Merriam, 2009, p. 77)

One of the non-probability sampling techniques employed in this study was purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (2009), "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned" (p. 77). As a result, the sample population was LGBTQ community college students, because their lived experiences enabled me to address the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Students who were members of their college's LGBTQ student club were targeted participants because the research focused specifically on sexual and gender minoritized students. It must be noted that students who are "out" on campus or out in the LGBTQ community were part of the targeted sample.

However, another sampling technique called the snowball procedure was also used to identify participants. “Snowball sampling involves asking initial contacts for further contacts. It is especially helpful for populations that are rare or difficult to access. The key assumption of snowball sampling is that members of your target population know each other” (Vogt, Gardner & Haeffele, 2012, p. 129). For this study, students who elected to participate were also asked to inform other students who are not members of the LGBTQ student club but who identify as LGBTQ students to contact me via email if they wanted to participate in the study. Considering that some students may not be “out” on campus or just do not have time to participate in the student club, employing snowball sampling was ideal because these other students may have met the criteria for participation in the study. Also, the fact that this student population could be considered hard to reach is another reason the snowball sampling was appropriate for this study.

Potential study participants were contacted via a recruitment letter (see Appendix C) once the dissertation proposal and Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol were approved by my university and the Institutional Review Boards at each community college. The recruitment letter explained the purpose of the study and noted the following criteria for participation: (1) membership in the college’s LGBTQ student club and/or self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, (2) attended their college for a minimum of one semester, and (3) 18 years old or older. The recruitment letter was distributed via email and/or by a college official affiliated with the student club. If the students who met the criteria for the study expressed an interest in participating in the study by responding to or sending me an email, then I responded by acknowledging receipt of their email and discussing the schedule for an interview.

Although it was my goal to interview 12 participants, I was able to recruit eight participants. The rationale for wanting 12 participants in this qualitative study was based on a



study conducted by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), which found that 12 interviews are sufficient for research in which the goal is to understand experiences and views of people within a group who share some similarities. Because common themes and subthemes were observed during data collection, the eight interviews conducted provided ample data for analysis. Majority of the participants were from two of the three colleges, which still enabled exploration of a diverse and wider range of experiences.

The recruited students were required to participate in an audio-taped individual interview on designated dates and times that were convenient for me and the participants. The face-to-face interviews occurred between early May 2018 and mid-October 2018. It was a challenge to recruit students during the summer session, considering many students do not enroll in summer courses and/or the student club advisors may not have been available during the summer to assist with recruitment efforts.

### **Qualitative Data Collection Techniques**

Data used in this study constituted interviews and documents. Interviews were appropriate for this study because “the main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Wimberly (2015) confirms the purpose of a research interview by stating that “Interviews allow researchers to ask specific questions about issues and probe for in-depth information about the subjects’ feelings, attitudes, interests, concerns, and values” (p. 14). In other words, the interview also appears to afford the researcher the opportunity to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon. As discussed earlier, the phenomenon studied was the experiences of LGBTQ community college students. Furthermore, “some of the most in-depth and rich discussions of LGBTQ issues come from interviews” (Diamond, 2003, p.354). Therefore, using the interview method in this study

allowed me to ask specific questions about the participants' experiences and insights and delve or probe deeper into their answers. According to Merriam (2009), "Probing can come in the form of asking for more details, for clarification, for example" (p. 101). Consequently, probing is a technique that an effective research interviewer would undoubtedly employ.

The interviews were face-to-face or a "person-to-person encounter", which is "the most common form of interview" and "can be defined as a conversation" (Merriam, 2009, pp. 87-88). Vogt et al. (2012) also noted that "the formality of the site is mainly an issue in face-to-face interviews" (p. 43). "The degree of the formality in an interview site is likely to vary greatly depending on the needs and the characteristics of the people being interviewed and on the nature of the topics being discussed" (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 43). Therefore, because community college students were interviewed and they are primarily commuter students, the ideal scenario was to hold the interviews on their respective campuses in order to make the location convenient for the students. Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, privacy and confidentiality were a consideration when the location was selected. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in a secluded room in an area where there was not a lot of foot traffic. The rooms used did not have any windows and people only had access to the room through one door, which could be locked or a sign posted on the door to inform others that the room was occupied or not available.

At the beginning of the interview, the participants were required to complete a consent form (see Appendix D) stating that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study as well as agreed to have their interviews audio-taped. In reference to ways to record interview data, Merriam (2009) states that "the most common by far is to tape record the interview. This

practice ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis” (p.109). Information about the interview was also addressed in the recruitment letter that each participant received.

A guide was used during the interviews. The interview guide, which just contains the questions the researcher plans to ask during the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 102), consisted of fourteen (14) specific questions (see Appendix A). Two of the questions asked participants to note their sexual orientation and gender identity and number of semesters they attended their college. If participants stated a sexual or gender identity in which I was unfamiliar, such as demisexual, the participants were immediately asked to provide their definition of this identity. However, probing about this identity and other related questions even occurred near the end of the interview. It was noted by Merriam (2009) that

if some of the questions are sensitive (for example, if they ask about income, age, or sexual orientation), it might better to ask them at the end of the interview. By then the respondent has invested in the interview and is more likely to see it through by answering these questions. (p. 103)

As discussed previously, various sexual identities and gender identities were referenced in the recruitment letter to increase the probability of study participants representing the spectrum of the LGBTQ community.

The eight participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. According to Merriam (2009),

most interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured; thus the interview guide will probably contain several specific questions that you want to ask everyone, some more open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes, and perhaps a list of some

areas, topics, and issues that you want to know more about but do not have enough information about at the outset of your study to form specific questions. (p. 103)

The actual interviews ranged from 28 minutes to one hour and 3 minutes in length, even though the recruitment letter listed 60 minutes as the approximate maximum time for the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed within one week after the interview occurred.

Although interviews were the primary source of data collection because it is a strategy “designed to gather data that specifically address the research question” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139), online and hard copies of documents relevant to this study were examined, collected and analyzed. One of the reasons I decided to include document analysis as a form of data collection was because “the use of multiple data collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data” (Glesne, 2006, p. 37), which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. “Documents, however, are usually produced for reasons other than the research at hand and therefore are not subject to the same limitations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139) as interviews and observations, the other forms of data collection in qualitative research. Documents can be referred to as “printed and other materials relevant to a study, including public records, personal documents, popular culture and visual documents, and physical artifacts” (Merriam, 2009, p. 86). The documents used were either created prior to beginning of or during the research.

For the purpose of this study, I was open to using any type of document related to the study. Examples, however, included popular culture documents of flyers announcing a LGBTQ student club meeting and college sponsored LGBTQ events as well as mission and vision statements and academic course descriptions listed on the college’s website. According to Merriam (2009), “Once documents have been located, their authenticity must be assessed” (p. 151). I assessed the authenticity of the documents by “determining as much as possible about

the document, its origins and reasons for being written, its author, and the context in which it was written” (Merriam, 2009, p. 151) to decide whether they should be used in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected and analyzed for this study helped to determine the experiences that contributed to the persistence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community college students. “To analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). The data collected consisted of the transcribed interviews of the participants and the relevant college documents. A coding process was used to organize and manage the transcribed interviews. “Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 71). Vogt et al. (2014) supports Miles et al.’s definition by noting that “coding is a kind of translation of your data into symbols. The symbols can be words, numbers, letters, or graphic markers (such as + for more or ↓ for decreasing). You use these symbols to conduct an analysis” (p. 13). However, according to Vogt et al. (2014), “coding differs by design” (p. 13). “Two phases are typical in the coding work of researchers using interview designs. First you decide on the questions you will ask; the questions imply coding strategies. Then, you record and code the answers” (Vogt et al., 2014, p. 41). The interview questions for this study were designed to answer the research questions and address the problem statement.

The interview data was coded by dividing the process into a First Cycle and Second Cycle, as recommended by Saldana (2013). Saldana (2013) stated that

The portion of data to be coded during the First Cycle coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full paragraph to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images. In Second Cycling coding processes, the portions coded can be the exact

same units, longer passages of text, analytic memos about the data, and even a reconfiguration of the codes themselves developed thus far. (p. 3)

The First Cycle coding methods used in this research study were provisional and in vivo coding processes. The provisional coding process began with a start list consisting of codes that were categorized based on their relevance to the two theoretical frameworks being employed. According to Miles et al. (2014), “the provisional coding method is appropriate for qualitative studies that build on or corroborate previous research and investigations” (pp. 77-78). This study was intended to either build on or countered Spady’s 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto’s 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure. Using a start list, categories based on theoretical concepts in both models were created and given abbreviations. The theoretical concept of social integration, for example, was given the abbreviation of SI.

In Vivo coding was the other method used during the First Cycle of coding. In Vivo coding involves extracting the words or excerpts from the transcripts and using this data as codes (Miles et al., 2014) but was also appropriate for this study because hearing the participants’ voices (Miles et al., 2014) was essential to learning about their “lived” experiences. I used this data to determine major themes and subthemes.

Once the First Cycle of coding helped to summarize the data, then a Second Cycle of coding was used. Pattern coding was used in the Second Cycle of coding. “Pattern coding, as a Second Cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86). Miles et al., (2014) further noted that “pattern codes pull together a lot of material from First Cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (p. 86). Using the transcribed interviews, the Second Cycle

coding was used by assigning a code to words or excerpts in the transcripts that were associated with a major theme / concept, whereas data that represents a subtheme, such as sense of belonging, was assigned a subtheme code. In other words, the abbreviations helped to categorize concepts and themes. The following is an example of how coding was assigned to a major theme and sub-theme: Social Integration (SI) and sense of belonging (SENBEL) reads SI: SENBEL. The themes and concepts that emerged from the data collected are discussed in the results and analysis chapters.

Another step in this process included jotting down notes during the actual interviews, even though the interviews were audio-taped. This step can be referred to as open coding, because the researcher is open to whatever seems probable at the moment (Merriam, 2009) in reference to focusing on any data that might be meaningful. “Jotting holds the researcher’s fleeting and emergent reflections and commentary on issues that emerge during field work and especially data analysis” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 94).

The coding scheme process used enabled me to easily retrieve the data based on abbreviations of major themes and subthemes, and participant information that were stored in a spreadsheet. Although data collection and analysis occurred at the same time, after the coding process occurred, the constructed themes and categories were examined to discover answers to the study’s research questions (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, Merriam (2009) stated that “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” and “qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative” (p. 175). The comparative analysis strategy is used “to compare one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 177). For example, “after your second interview, you compare the first set of data with the second. This comparison informs the next data collected, and so on” (Merriam, 2009, p.

170). The data gathered from the actual interviews gave me the ability to compare these interviews as well as to gain insight on experiences that might contribute to the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

I also utilized analytical memoing as part of the data analysis and collection process. “An analytical memo is a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data. These are not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytical meanings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). Miles et al. (2014) further explained that “They are first- draft self-reports, of sorts, about the study’s phenomena and serve as the basis for more expanded and final reports” (p. 96). Therefore, because the analytical process occurs simultaneously with the data collection process as well as continues to help organize a researcher’s thoughts throughout the research process, the use of analytical memoing was definitely beneficial.

Another method of analysis incorporated into this study was the method of exploring but more specifically the utilization of a data accounting log. Methods of exploring are “documentary and provisional in their analyses-“first draft” attempts, if you will, at making sense of qualitative data (Miles et al., 2014, p. 122). I used the data accounting log as a method of exploring during fieldwork because it “is a record-keeping tool for the types and quantity of data collected” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 122). The accounting log helped me to organize key information, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, college attended, number of semesters enrolled, type of documents, etc., about the eight participants and the documents collected. I created a separate accounting log for the interviews and one for the documents. Utilizing the method of exploring fieldwork during the research process is ideal because it can help the researcher from becoming overwhelmed by all of the data collected (Miles et al., 2014).



The documents analysis process occurred after the documents were assessed for their accuracy and authenticity. Similar to the coding process employed with the interviews, I used abbreviations of concepts and themes to categorize the documents as well as a data accounting log to organize and identify key information about the documents. Analytical memoing was also used to analyze the content of the documents. Merriam (2009) mentions that “In qualitative studies, a form of content analysis is used to analyze documents. Essentially, content analysis is a systematic procedure for describing the content of communications” (p. 152).

In summation, the data analysis consisted of a coding process and using accounting data logs. Both helped me summarize and organize data gathered from the interviews and the documents into a format that was easy for me to comprehend. Analytical memoing gave me the ability to also summarize the data and to focus on themes that are consistent across the data as well as to consider missing information as I conducted the research.

### **Trustworthiness/Validity**

Trustworthiness, according to Vogt et al. (2012), is defined as “the conceptual equivalent of *validity* applied to research on qualitative data” (p. 355). “Trustworthiness or research validity is, however, an issue that should be thought about during the research design as well as in the midst of data collection” (Glesne, 2006, p. 37). In qualitative research, validity focuses on how reliable are the study’s findings (Merriam, 2009). In order to have confidence in how a study is conducted and in its findings, Lincoln and Guba (2000) recommend that a researcher should question if the findings are “sufficiently authentic...that I may trust myself in acting on their implications” (p. 178). Similar to quantitative studies having standards to determine if they are considered scientific or rigorous, tactics have also been established for qualitative research to check a study’s authenticity and trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). “Many writers on the topic of

authenticity and trustworthiness argue that qualitative research, which is based on different assumptions about reality and a different worldview, should consider validity and reliability from a perspective congruent with the philosophical assumptions underlying the paradigm” (Merriam, 2009, p. 211).

In order to make sure this study possessed validity and trustworthiness criteria of qualitative research, I incorporated some of the verification procedures discussed by methodologists such as Glesne (2006), Merriam (2009), and Linclon and Guba (2000). One of the procedures is triangulation, which is “the practice of relying on multiple methods” (Glesne, 2006, p. 36) to establish trustworthiness in one’s data. As previously discussed, the data collection process consisted of interviews and document analysis. Therefore, multiple data-collection methods were employed and triangulation was utilized. However, Berg (as cited in Glesne, 2006) discusses that the purpose for triangulation is not “the simple combination of different types of data but the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each” (p. 36), which is why the interviews and documents were analyzed for common themes. Besides multiple data-collection methods, triangulation can involve the use of multiple theories in order to enhance trustworthiness. This study employed two sociologically-based theories of student departure, further attempting to address the validity issue.

Member checking was another procedure used in this study to address validity/trustworthiness. Member checking is described as providing your participants with excerpts from their transcribed interviews, your notes and/or draft of your study to make sure the information you attributed to them is truly reflective of their statements and accurately represents them (Glesne, 2006). Member checking requires that the researcher ask the question “How can you know your interpretations of the data is the right one” (Glesne, 2006, p. 167). In order to

know whether I accurately captured the essence of the voices of the participants, I asked the participants to review a draft of the data analysis sections of the study. By soliciting feedback from the participants, Glesne (2006) noted that you can “(1) verify that you have reflected their perspectives; (2) inform you of sections that, if published, could be problematic for either personal or political reasons; and (3) help you develop new ideas and interpretations” (p. 167).

The third procedure used to boost the validity of this study was peer review and debriefing. This procedure involves “external reflection and input on your work” (Glesne, 2006, p. 37). Peer review and debriefing was accomplished by having fellow students in my doctoral program cohort periodically discuss the progress of our dissertations and provide constructive feedback. These peer reviewers were identified based on established relationships.

The last procedure used in this study to help address the validity/trustworthiness issues and discussed earlier was the verification procedure of clarification of researcher bias. According to Glesne (2006), this validity issue can be addressed by asking the question “Why do you notice what you notice” (p. 166)? This question requires you, as a researcher,

to reflect upon your subjectivity in terms of what you observe and hear, and to engage in reflexivity, critically thinking about the research process as a whole. Continual alertness to your own biases and theoretical predispositions assists in producing more trustworthy interpretations. (Glesne, 2006, pp. 166-167)

Clarification of researcher bias as well as how reflexivity was fostered in this study is addressed in an entire section of this chapter devoted to the researcher’s positionality and subjectivity.

Finally, in reference to trustworthiness, Merriam (2009) discussed that the creditability of a study, its trustworthiness, is based on the researcher’s ability to conduct the study in an ethical manner. Therefore, not only did I use four verification procedures to enhance the

validity/trustworthiness and achieve authenticity of this study but I also conducted the study in an ethical manner, which is described later in this chapter.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), reflexivity “is a conscious experiencing of the self as both the inquirer and respondent, as a teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of the research itself” (p. 183). Malterud (2001) reinforces Lincoln and Guba’s definition of reflexivity by noting “A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (pp. 483-484). My positionality and subjectivity could have undoubtedly influenced this study including but not limited to the information included in the literature review, the analysis of the data, and the implications. Peshkin (1988) noted “that researchers, notwithstanding their use of quantitative or qualitative methods, their research problem, or their reputation for personal integrity, should systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17). Moreover, “subjectivity offers a starting point for understanding how a researcher's perspectives, biographies, assumptions, and commitments shape the research process” (Harvard University, 2008). My positionality and subjectivity could have been impacted by the following: ally to the LGBTQ community, advocate for marginalized students, professional counselor/psychology instructor, and higher education administrator.

Being a member of marginalized group, an African-American male, my experiences have been mixed - both positive and negative - before, during, and after college, having experienced harassment and discrimination myself based on ignorance and our hegemonic culture.

Additionally, over 18 years ago, I co-facilitated a support group for African-American males

who were struggling with their sexuality. All of these experiences undoubtedly impacted this research. Because I believe I have an emic/insider perspective, it may have caused me to miss new, relevant information by beginning the research with the belief that I knew the results of the study based on my exposure to the LGBTQ community and our heteronormative college campus climates. However, although I am an ally to the LGBTQ community, I must admit that I still have a lot to learn about transgender college students and pertinent policies, which this study enabled me to do. Nevertheless, I feel that my subjectivity is a strength because I can empathize with LGBTQ students on various levels.

Moreover, as an African-American male who has successfully navigated higher education and has worked at the community college level for 26 years, I fill a deep sense of responsibility to help other African-American males and other marginalized students realize their potential and goals despite real and perceived social and institutional barriers. Therefore, as an advocate for marginalized students, I did my best to make sure this self-imposed role did not influence my decision to use the research data to highlight student experiences that will support the implementation of programming and new mental models that I professionally and personally believe are warranted for LGBTQ community college students. It was important to be cognizant of my positionality, especially considering my biases about the inequities that exist in the policy decision making and programming for marginalized students.

In addition, as an advocate for marginalized students, my belief that all students should have a right to higher education also influences my position on access and equity, which includes making sure students receive the needed, targeted resources to be successful and complete their intended educational goals, whether it's a certificate, a degree, or just a few courses. Being reared in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the U.S., I have experienced and still

witness how educational resources vary based on the demographics of a geographical location within a city and within a state, as well. These inequities in reference to educational resources are even more obvious to me now that I have been exposed to educational systems outside a major city. Therefore, access for all to an equitable and quality education is a priority for me as an educator. My belief in access to higher education for all citizens is based on the fact that I have confidence that a more educated society will not only help the local and national economy but will also help address some societal ills such as the crime rate. As a result, I view education as a social good. Therefore, focusing on the persistence and retention of college students is important to me. Studies on persistence and retention have mainly used data of White, middle-class males. Nonetheless, there is only scant research on the persistence of LGBTQ students. Therefore, I firmly believe research should be conducted to provide recommendations that will address the unique needs of all students. Theoretically, these uniquely based strategies and interventions should contribute to the persistence of more college students. I also believe that it is not only important to recruit marginalized students but just as important to retain them once they are enrolled at a college or university. There are many implications for not retaining these students, such as the possible loss of a student's self-esteem.

Furthermore, as a former practicing professional counselor and a former psychology instructor, I probed participants' responses that alluded to information about their emotional and personal well-being. This need to probe discourse outside the research topic would be similar to Peshkin (1988) noting that he knew when his subjectivity was engaged "when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs" (p. 18). Not only was it difficult to divorce myself from my counseling and psychology background in my desire to assist students but based on participants' responses to interview questions, I also speculated about traits of

disorders and how these traits influenced their experiences and answers. There was even the desire to discount some of their responses based on my perception of the participants.

My position as a college administrator as well as the researcher could have influenced my interpretation and analysis of the data. Consequently, though attempting to remain ethical there was the desire not to expose issues that might reflect adversely on participating community colleges. I had to remain focused on viewing the participants' feedback as constructive and beneficial to the purpose of the study regardless of the findings. Of course, one way to discover LGBTQ students' reasons for leaving or staying at their college was to examine, based on participants' feedback, experiences that contribute to attrition of these students. Therefore, I could not allow my familiarity with and respect for Illinois community colleges to seep into the analysis of the findings, because as a researcher I wanted the data to be trustworthy and reflective of the voices of the participants.

Lastly, my roles as the researcher for this study and an educational practitioner as well as an ally to the LGBTQ community and an advocate for marginalized students uniquely positioned me to help build bridges between the dominant/majority culture and the marginalized group that was being studied. Therefore, I have to respect the privilege bestowed upon me as a member of the academy who can advocate for this marginalized community through my research. But I also have to understand the power assumed in making sure LGBTQ community college students' experiences and voices are accurately represented. Based on the fact that I consider myself an ally to the LGBTQ community, I wanted the participants to view me as an indigenous-insider, which consequently should have allowed them to be honest and authentic in their interview responses. Nonetheless, as a person who identifies their socially constructed gender as male, I

also had to acknowledge that it might be difficult for female, transgender and queer students to feel comfortable opening up to me.

### **Ethical Issues**

“With the greater intensity of the typical interview comes a greater salience of ethical issues” (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 253). There are three kinds of ethical issues present when using interviews for research. Vogt et al. (2012) noted the following three issues: (1) “problems of obtaining informed consent from potential interviewees”, (2) “potential harm that could come to them in the process of being interviewed”, and (3) “challenges that can arise when trying to maintain interviewees’ privacy” (p. 253). These probable issues were addressed in this study.

In reference to obtaining consent, the participants were given consent forms to review prior to the interview and asked to sign them immediately before their individual interviews commenced. The consent form consisted of information related to the study that addressed potential ethical issues. The form noted the purpose of the study, its duration, the procedures including the fact that audio-taped interviews were required, the foreseeable risks/discomforts from participating in the study, and the benefits of participation. The form also discussed how confidentiality would be maintained, that participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or refuse to answer any questions, as well as who to contact about the study before, during or after the study for questions or to discuss the rights of participants.

In addition to the issue of potential harm to the participants that was addressed in the consent form, as the researcher I received certification in CITI Training, which covered basic information on Human Subjects Research, including but not limited to how to handle foreseeable adverse events, such as a subject being injured or becoming emotionally distressed. Vogt et al.



(2012) suggested that “As with surveys, the possibility of direct harm to interviewees from the process of being asked questions and answering them is comparatively small. The potential for harm to interviewees is greatest when privacy is breached” (p. 253). The potential for harm and privacy not being maintained in this study was further minimized based on the fact that I am also a Professional Counselor and a former psychology professor. As a result, I understand how to counsel subjects in distress and issues of confidentiality. My training and experiences are undoubtedly advantageous for conducting interviews considering that Vogt mentioned that due to “the very nature of the act of interviewing, anonymity is all but impossible, and that makes the burden of the confidentiality greater” (p. 253). Additionally, the only identifying information disclosed in this study was data on sexual orientation, gender identity and the number of semesters the participants attended their respective college. Lastly, pseudonyms were used as a substitution for the names of participants to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality and colleges were assigned a penname for record-keeping purposes.

Privacy was further addressed during this study, in reference to interviews, by using a room in a secluded location at the college that only had one entry door, which could be locked and an “occupied” sign posted. Additionally, privacy of data has been maintained by locking hard copies of the consent form, written notes, transcriptions, public documents, and digital audio recordings in a secure file cabinet and in password protected files on my personal computer. Besides myself, an authorized transcriptionist sworn to maintain strict confidentiality, had access to audio-recordings and transcriptions. Audio files of the interviews that are no longer needed will be erased, and digital files deleted three years after the interview. Similarly, field notes, transcriptions, and public documents such as popular culture documents, will be shredded after three years. Participants were informed via the consent form that any data

collected and used would be destroyed three to five years after the study. Finally, I did not use coercion or undue influence to solicit students as participants because these actions would be considered unethical.

Another ethical issue that I paid attention to in this study was reciprocity. “Reciprocity concerns balanced patterns of giving and taking between people. Research relationships are not necessarily reciprocal, but good research ethics practice requires that researchers consider what they take from research participants as well as what they give to them” (Crow, 2008, p. 740). Establishing reciprocity helps to create the initial relationship with the participants, which in turn can enhance the trustworthiness of the study. According to Crow (2008), “The research “bargain” is not only that honest and undistorted access to these often private realms of participants is granted to the researcher but also that the data collected about them may be put in the public domain in some form of publication” (p. 740).

In this study, I gave the participants the opportunity to make sure their answers were captured accurately and that what they were trying to convey was reflected in the write-up and analysis. This occurred by following up with the participants after the interviews via member-checking. The member-checking process helped to enhance reciprocity because the participants were made to feel their voices were heard. This sentiment is confirmed by Crow (2008), who posited that reciprocity can be achieved because “Researchers may also give something to participants through the opportunity to reflect on their lives and by providing a voice in the wider public domain” (p. 740), via the study.

However, sometimes the researchers may interject too much and steer the interview answers in a direction that was not the intent of the participants. This last point is significant because if the participants’ experiences and voices are represented accurately, then theoretically,

reciprocity should occur for them because the group being studied, in which they are members, could benefit from the research findings. In other words, “The opportunity to be listened to and given a voice is generally a more important motivation to be a research participant than the prospect of direct material benefit. Furthermore, the desire to contribute to the research process may be altruistic” (Crow, 2008, p. 740). As noted earlier, no compensation or direct material benefit was given to participants in this study.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an in-depth discussion on the methodology used in this study. A qualitative research design was employed utilizing the semi-structured interview technique to collect data from eight LGBTQ community college students who attended either one of the three participating community colleges. The interviews not only helped to address the study’s research questions but also allowed the participants to answer the fourteen (14) guided interview questions. Document analysis, another data collection method used in this study, was also discussed. Moreover, the sampling procedures employed to select the colleges and participants as well as the data analysis process including coding, analytic memoing and accounting log were also covered. Lastly, the chapter closed with a discussion on how trustworthiness and authenticity was achieved, how four ethical concerns were addressed, and how reflexivity and my positionality had an influence on my dissertation topic and study.

## CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges that promote their persistence. This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of data collected for this research study by highlighting the participants' profiles and institutional documents from the three participating community colleges. A thematic analysis was conducted and the results are discussed in relationship to research question one, which addresses the experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges that contribute to their persistence. A qualitative research design, which included the semi-structured interview approach and document analysis, enabled the researcher to analyze the interviews of the eight student participants to discover recurring themes among the participants and to analyze the institutional documents to determine if they supported the emergent themes from the interviews.

### **Participant Profiles**

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify the eight participants. Students from the three participating Illinois community colleges who were either members or non-members of the LGBTQ student club but self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ community were recruited to be study participants. I conducted in-person, audio-taped interviews with each student to obtain a better appreciation of their individual as well as similar experiences and how these experiences may have influenced their persistence at their college. In order to protect the privacy of the students and to make sure confidentiality was maintained, each participant was given a pseudonym in the form of a number and was referred to as Participant #1, Participant #2, Participant #3, etc. Additionally, the names of the colleges the students attended were not mentioned. The letters A, B and C were assigned to the three colleges.

Of the eight participants, four of participants identified their sexual orientation as gay. Three of the other participants identified as demi-sexual, asexual, and both lesbian and gay, respectively. One participant elected not to note a sexual orientation. In reference to gender identity, four of the participants identified as transgender, with two identifying as a transgender male, one as a transgender female, and the other as transgender. The remaining four participants disclosed their gender identity as female, cis female / questioning, male, and queer, respectively. The one participant who identified as female also identified as agender. With reference to racial identity, seven of the participants identified as White or Caucasian, whereas the other participant identified as Black. The fact that 50 percent of participants acknowledged their gender identity as transgender as well as the lack of racial diversity among participants could be considered a limitation for the study. This will be addressed in the limitations section of this study.

All of the participants attended their respective college for more than one semester. Four of the participants were currently enrolled in their third term when they were interviewed, while two were second semester students, one was in their fourth and last term, and the other participant was enrolled in their eighth semester. The one participant in their last term completed their degree in May 2018 and transferred to a state university. The other students interviewed in the spring 2018 term planned to continue their education and earn a degree at their respective institutions and/or transfer to a four-year institution. The students interviewed during the fall 2018 term had similar educational goals. The range of the number of semesters in which participants had been enrolled was sufficient enough for them to provide a trustworthy assessment of their campus experiences.

Participant #1 (P#1), a student at college A, identifies their sexual orientation as lesbian, gender identity as female and race as Black. P#1 noted that

I identify as female, but I am also okay with identifying without a gender. Some people call it agender, but I prefer, like, I prefer just skipping the whole gender thing. I don't think I want to be defined as anything but myself. And I've come to terms with the fact that, like, maybe I don't have to be only seen as a woman, I can be seen as myself. And if you want to see me as a woman, that's okay, too. I wouldn't say I identify as male or a man, but definitely to me it just doesn't matter. And again, some people call that agender. I don't need a label for it.

When interviewed, P#1 was in their second semester at their college, which was the only college they ever attended. They were an active member in their college's LGBTQ student club and intended to transfer to a university to study animation after completing their general education courses at their institution.

Participant #2 (P#2) identifies as a White, gay male and was in their second semester at college A. College A was the first college they ever attended. P#2 was a member of the college's LGTBQ student club and planned to transition to four-year institution.

Participant #3 (P#3) identifies as White. The term they felt best described their sexual orientation is "possibly demisexual" and their gender identity is cis female, noting "I am still in the questioning category." P#3 elaborated on their sexual orientation and gender identity by noting

from my personal experience, I was always, as far as I knew, I was cisgender heterosexual, because I didn't have a term for asexual or demisexual. And it wasn't until I joined the LGBTQ club and we had a seminar on asexuality and they addressed demisexuality that clicked for me.

P#3 further stated "And the person gave a quick summary, but they're like here's a website for

you to learn a little bit more, so I was able to deep dive and be like that's me, that's my term.”

Yeah, so no longer am I a weird, prudish person. My identity is I don't like the explicit sexuality part. But when it comes to like a more romanticized situation, I get more comfortable with that. So it's no longer a part on me having to grow, it's something I identify as that cannot be changed, but can be accommodated for.

When P#3 was asked how they spelled and defined demisexual, they responded by stating “Yeah, D-E-M-I sexual. It's an offshoot of asexuality.” They further stated that “Demisexuality is when you don't feel any sexual feelings towards someone until you're romantically involved with them.” P#3 was in their eighth semester when interviewed and noted “I'll be attending my ninth semester in the fall”. Unlike the other participants at college A, P#3's goal is not to transfer to a four-year institution but to be admitted to the college's Nursing Program. Besides being a member of the LGBTQ club, they were a member of another student club.

Participant #4 (P#4) attended college B and stated they identified as “Transgender. I guess heterosexual”. They did not identify as female-to-male transgender (FtM/F2M) or male-to-female transgender (MtF/M2F). They noted that just using the term transgender “Makes it easier for everybody else”. In reference to racial identity, they stated they were White. When P#4 was interviewed, they were enrolled in their third semester at the college and never attended any other institution. As a matter of fact, they traveled abroad for a while after graduating from high school and before enrolling in college.

Participant #5 (P#5), who attended college B, identifies their sexual orientation as gay, gender identity as queer, and race as White. P#5 is a member of the college's LGBTQ student club, involved with student government, and a member of another club as well. At the time of the interview, they were enrolled in their third semester. However, unlike the majority of the

other study participants, P#5 attended another higher education institution, specifically a community college in another state, prior to enrolling at college B. Relocating to Illinois prompted P#5 to continue their education at college B. They indicated their major was paralegal and goal was to transfer to a private university in the northern Illinois area. P#5 would like to focus on human rights law in their career.

Participant #6 (P#6), who identified as White, stated they have been enrolled at their current institution, college B, for “two years, so four semesters” but they attended “a previous college before this one for one year”. When the interview was conducted they were enrolled in their last term at the college, with the goal to transfer to a public state university and pursue theater as a major. In reference to their sexual orientation and gender identity, P#6 acknowledged

I give it different names, honestly, because different people understand different things. So the answer I give to the general population is that I am a gay trans male. But it’s a lot more complicated than that because I identify as non-binary and gender fluid, so I fall more into the line of like trans masculine. And the term that I use is androsexual, which just means that I’m exclusively attracted to men, despite not identifying as either male or female fully.

Although P#6 was a member of the LGBTQ club, they admitted they “would go to the LGBTQ club we have here, but not all that frequently”.

Participant #7 (P#7) was also a student at college B and noted “I’m at the very beginning of my third semester”. However, P#7 attended a few other colleges before and disclosed “This is the first time I’ve taken it seriously.” P#7 self-identified as White. When asked to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity, they said “Oh, gosh. All right, so I’m transgender and



I'm comfortable with that. I am binary, which is to say I'm a trans woman. The sexual one is a little more ambiguous just because I don't have an answer to that". They later stated they were asexual. "Bi-romantic, I suppose. Prefer...I generally find women more attractive, but I mean, I could watch Luke Cage all day". P#7 is not a member of the college's LGBTQ club but planned to begin volunteering with the club. Their educational goal was to complete a degree at their current college and then transition to a four-year institution.

Participant #8 (P#8), identified as a gay man. "I like men". Additionally, they indicated "I'm a transgender man. Yep, female to male". They also noted "I'm just White". P#8 attended college C and was enrolled in their third semester when the interviewed was conducted. They were also a member of the college's LGBTQ student club, which was the only club in which they were involved.

Table 1 presents a profile of the research participants. The profiles consists of information provided by each student about their sexual orientation, gender identity, racial identity, and the number of terms enrolled at their current college. A list consisting of the terms and the definitions of the terms (see Appendix E) used by participants to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity is provided (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Table 1

*Profile of Research Participants*

Participant	College	Self-identified sexual orientation	Self-identified gender identity	Self-identified racial identity	Number of semesters at college
Participant #1	A	Lesbian, Gay	Female or Agender	Black	Second semester (spring 2018)
Participant #2	A	Gay	Male	White	Second semester (spring 2018)
Participant #3	A	Demisexual	Cis female and Questioning	White	Eighth semester (spring 2018)
Participant #4	B	?	Transgender	White	Third semester (spring 2018)
Participant #5	B	Gay	Queer	White	Third semester (spring 2018)
Participant #6	B	Gay, Androsexual	Trans male	White	Fourth semester (spring 2018)
Participant #7	B	Asexual-biromantic	Transgender female	White	Third semester (fall 2018)
Participant #8	C	Gay	Transgender male	White	Third semester (fall 2018)

**Emergent Themes from Interview Data**

The experiences of the eight LGBTQ students at the participating Illinois community colleges were uncovered through face-to-face, individual interviews. Analysis of these interviews, using the provisional, in vivo, and pattern coding processes, helped to identify

emergent themes based on the students' experiences and their persistence. As a result of coding, there were eight major emergent themes/constructs and six sub-themes that appeared to surface from the data chunks of the eight interview transcripts and assisted in answering the study's two research questions. These themes, constructs and sub-themes included 1) campus climate, which encompassed the subthemes of an accepting and supportive environment, a sense of safety, and curriculum infusion; 2) social integration, which contained the subthemes of a sense of belonging and family-like environment; 3) academic integration; 4) faculty-student interaction; 5) norm congruence, which contained the subtheme of institutional programming and policies; 6) respecting diversity, equity and inclusion; 7) enhancing education on and awareness of the LGBTQ community; and 8) grit.

Although all of the above themes emerged to address research question one, which asks about the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that promote their persistence, the discussion below consists of excerpts from participants' interviews to support the themes that arose from the analysis but are outside the themes/theoretical constructs in Spady and Tinto's models. This chapter will specifically focus on 1) campus climate, which encompassed subthemes of an accepting and supportive environment, a sense of safety, and curriculum infusion; 2) family-like environment, a subtheme of social integration; 3) respecting diversity, equity and inclusion; and 4) enhancing education on and awareness of the LGBTQ community. The themes consistent with the constructs in Spady and/or Tinto's theoretical models, which included social integration and a sense of belonging, academic integration, faculty and student interaction, norm congruence, and grit (goal commitment), will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Campus Climate

The major theme of campus climate arose when participants discussed their experiences at their respective college. The experiences of students on their campus can impact whether they perceive the climate as welcoming or intolerant, for example, and consequently their persistence. Although campus climate is not explicitly stated in Spady or Tinto's theories, it is discussed in the other persistence literature that references the experiences of LGBTQ college students. Participants commented their experiences were primarily positive in reference to the campus climate, feeling supported and accepted by their college in and out of the classroom as well as feeling a sense of safety. P#1 and P#3, two of the participants who attended College A, noted "there's never really been an issue of people, like, you know, who have blatantly said anything bad about the LGBTQ community" and "The campus is very welcoming. It's a very student-centered school", respectively. P#5, who attended College B, stated "I would say campus climate it's pretty good. I have never faced any discrimination, I feel, based off of that sexual orientation or gender identity." However, P#5 did admit

Well, I did have a friend who was a non-binary student who told me that their professor really didn't understand it, and their professor kind of shrugged them off when they were telling them about being non-binary. So I could be coming from my gay privilege and saying nothing's happening to me.

P#8, who attended College C, also spoke about their perception of their campus climate in reference to discrimination against LGBTQ students. They indicated

I've definitely faced a lot less discrimination than I did in high school. High school there were a lot of people coming up to me asking very personal questions, or calling me slurs.

Here I don't think I've experienced really any of that. It's if people have a problem they mostly stay quiet about it, and people are a lot more accepting.

Some of the other participants held similar sentiments about their college appearing to be generally welcoming and not encountering any major issues when asked questions about their overall experiences, experiences as a LGBTQ student, and the campus climate. P#4 indicated they "Have not had many problems as a student at this college. I think I had more problems before college, but none so far here." P#4 added

I mean, professors treat you the same as every other kid. Students don't really seem to care as much. Older students kind of give you weird looks, but eventually, I find if you just kind of own who you are, people are less likely to question you. Within the college, I don't think I've ever particularly had any incidences, other than if you dress more, I guess, femininely or masculine than the gender you're assigned, I feel like people might look at you when they walk by, like just glance at you. But most people don't seem to really care much. I think it's the eyes that you notice more than anyone saying anything. Again, I find if you walk with confidence that nobody looks at you.

As a transgender person, P#7 noted "I don't get misgendered that often, but when it happens, it stops you right in your tracks, just ouch. And that's been a great thing about school, is that it hasn't happened. I expected it among the students, at some point." Even though P#8 mentioned that they have encountered less discrimination at their college than in high school, similar to other transgender students, they said

It's, yeah, I mean, the worst thing is dirty looks, people avoiding eye contact, or avoiding looking at me, and misgendered I would say is the worst that I've come across personally here. But nothing has been so severe that I don't think I can continue on with my studies.

Two of the transgender students spoke of weird or dirty looks or being misgendered as part of their experience. However, majority of the participants noted an overall good perception of their campus climate. They felt their colleges were mostly accepting and supportive of LGBTQ students, including the transgender students who discussed the dirty looks.

**Accepting and supportive environment.** An accepting and supportive environment was a subtheme of campus climate. Most of the eight participants, regardless of the college they attended, used the term “accepting” while a few of them used other terms such as “supportive” when asked about their overall experiences and those as a LGBTQ student at their college and the campus climate. P#3, a student at College A, said that

The students here are generally accepting. They’re just like oh, okay, you’re this?

Again, it’s generally either accepted or just, again, not addressed. Being like, okay, you’re this? Well, I’m not going to make any point of that or signal you out, I’m just going to treat you as I would treat any other human being.

P#4, a student at College B, stated that “most kids my age are very accepting and don’t really care, per se. I’ve yet to run into anybody who really cares what your gender or sexuality is, or is negatively hateful towards it.” Similarly, P#6, who attends the same college as P#4, acknowledged that

People are generally fairly accepting. You always get the questions of people who don’t know anything that can sound to some people that are like mildly offensive, but I’m usually pretty chill with that and I just explain things. People don’t seem like upset or angry. They just seem curious and they want to learn.

P#8, a transgender man and the only participant from College C, also confirmed that their college was accepting. P#8 commented

For the most part I've received ... I guess acceptance, and people that do their best to gender me properly, and don't mind that I'm gay or whatever. Some people definitely look at me weird, because I am at the very least visibly trans. Because it's not a secret: I'm out to most everybody that I'm transgender and I'm gay. So it's—I haven't had any direct aggression towards me, but there are people that very obviously avoid talking to me, and I, of course I don't know if that's just because I'm, I don't know, weird or something, or if it's because of how I look or how I dress myself.

Lastly, both P#2 and P#7 noted they thought their colleges were supportive. P#2 shared an experience in their Speech class in which they disclosed their sexual orientation and felt supported by the students and instructor. P#2 stated

Everyone was positive. They were like that's really good that you're like up there and talking about it because not many people talk about it. And yeah, even the teacher was very supportive and was like all right, that was actually a good speech and such.

P#7 substantiated a supportive environment at their college by defining the campus climate for LGBTQ students as "Very good, as far as I know. Yes, I've... There must be bigots somewhere. But I haven't seen them. I see a lot of positivity, posters for pro-LGBTQ support.

In spite of the fact most of the participants noted an accepting campus climate for LGTBQ students, participants from College B discussed a specific campus incident that made the LGBTQ students initially feel uncomfortable. However, based on the administrations' response, the LGBTQ students felt the support of College B was genuine.

The campus incident discussed by participants P#6 and P#7, from College B, involved an organization that opposes LGBTQ rights. Both participants noted the organizations' campus visit prompted some LGBTQ students to question why the organization was allowed on campus

and to expose students to anti-gay rhetoric especially if the college was truly supportive of a diverse and inclusive climate. Both participants also pointed out that the college administration immediately responded to the organization's presence on campus or least where they were on campus. P#6 stated "It wasn't in the campus. It was like outside, which is allowed. And it was basically to hand out pamphlets about how gay people are immoral, and we're all going to hell" while P#7 indicated the organization was "one of those family values groups which were handing out flyers about how being LGBT is a choice, and it's the wrong choice, and God hates you for it and hell, brimstone, blah-blah-blah." P#6 and P#7 acknowledged the group had a right to be on campus but were in a location in which they were not authorized. According to P#6, "I think it was more the location of where they were at. The administration weren't going to ban them. They were just going to reevaluate the system and how that gets processed. Because they were right outside of our doors." Both P#6 and P#7 were also enrolled in a LGBTQ course when this incident occurred. They noted how the college was supportive of students immediately during and following the occurrence. P#6 commented that

we talked about it in class and heard about how the college was immediately responding to it and was trying to figure out how to change who can sign up for stuff like that. Because there were some students that were seriously like I didn't want to go to class because I saw them there.

P#7 even mentioned "And then, at least for our class—we had a counselor there, to talk to us in case people were stressed out about it, were worried about them coming back. So that was very supportive. That was surprisingly supportive, really."

Whereas P#6 and P#7 from College B shared one incident where they momentarily questioned the college's support of LGBTQ students, P#1 and P#2 from College A shared



experiences which made them question the authentic support of their college. Yet, majority of participants felt their overall experiences have been good.

P#1 stated

There has been history where the college they've gotten quite upset with our club for things, minuscule things like posters and maybe the way our poster is worded. But a lot of other clubs get...like what's that word? They don't get in trouble. So we did a test, and there's this thing we have to go through, this copyright thing. We have to make sure our posters aren't copyrighted from any source. We talked to a person who wasn't part of club to send in a poster with a copyrighted image, and to see if it would go through. It went through. It had a copyrighted image, and their club, like—and it was just for, you know, for, I guess, what's the word, research or to see what would happen. And their image went straight through, you know, even though it was just a joke to see like maybe they're just picking on us. It's like yeah, they were picking on us, because when we sent our image through right after, they kind of like canceled it. And it was like, really? They do that to our club, like a lot, and it's not even...it's not even...it's so bogus.

P#1 further suggested “It feels as if they're trying to censor us.” However, P#1 acknowledged that “Our posters are kind of provocative, I'll admit.” Apparently, the provocative posters are intended to better promote the events of the LGBTQ club at P#1's college. Interestingly, P#2 who attends the same college as P#1, expressed similar sentiments about feeling censored by the college noting that “there have been stopping points where people will try and stop us from doing things, even though other clubs do it freely.” P#2 was also aware of a survey that was conducted in which some LGBTQ students expressed feeling uncomfortable on campus.

Although P#2 did not have a lot of details about the survey, such as whether it a campus climate survey, they shared

Well, I'm not exactly sure why, but the college did conduct a survey and people have answered positively to having missed class and not being able to participate because of their gender or sexual orientation. I'm not exactly sure why. Not me personally, but I know that there has been a group of people who have. There was a separate question as well about comfort, and people have definitely felt uncomfortable in class.

P#8, a transgender man at College C, also expressed mixed experiences.

Here it's more accepting. I get gendered correctly more often—it doesn't happen all the time but it's more often. So compared to other learning environments it's definitely more positive. But it hasn't been so overwhelmingly positive that I can definitively say that it's had a positive effect. But it hasn't been negative in any sort of way.

Again, although majority of students alluded to an accepting and supportive campus climate for LGBTQ students, some of them also admitted the climate has not always seemed comforting. However, most of the participants felt their campus was safe for LGBTQ students.

**Sense of safety.** A sense of safety was a subtheme of campus climate. All of the participants expressed that they thought their respective college, for the most part, was a safe environment for LGBTQ students. Although P#1, felt the LGBTQ club “might be rejected by administration for something” or “may not be able to speak out about certain things,” P#1 indicated “I will say that there has not been an incident that I've experienced where I've been bullied, harassed or thrown aside because of my sexuality or gender identity. And I haven't heard anybody else go through that.” Nevertheless, P#1 noted “I feel like if you're not in the LGBTQ+ community at this school, it doesn't matter to you.” Moreover, P#1 felt their college

was a “safe place for people who do identify, even if they don’t recognize us as much. So I feel like that’s kind of important.”

P#4 and P#6, who attended the College B, also spoke about their perception of safety on their campus. P#6 indicated “with LGBTQ students and people who are not, there’s not too much hostility, not that I’ve encountered. I haven’t met anyone yet who was like openly hostile. In the campus.” On the other hand, P#4’s perception of the campus climate is slightly different from the perception of P#6. P#4 said “I feel like the campus climate in general is people just kind of...they’re not hostile, but they’re not necessarily accepting. Most people just, it’s there. You know, either they take it or they don’t, but they don’t seem to judge it at all. However, P#4 said there was “only one time I think we’ve ever experienced opposition.” P#4 discussed “an alt right group that was starting at this college. And it fell through. I don’t think anyone actually signed up for that group.” Nonetheless, P#4 noted “I feel like there was a lot of fear among the LGBT students and we all were very concerned because an alt right group were pushing to record liberal, I guess you could say, teachers and rile them up and get them on camera.”

As discussed by majority of the participants, they thought the campus climate at their colleges was accepting and supportive and contributed to a sense of safety. Moreover, as explicitly suggested by some of the participants, their experiences as well as perception of their campus climate have contributed to their decision to remain at the college. P#7 was adamant that “I think the only thing that would really kind of drive me out is, would be a very heavily transphobic atmosphere. Which I’m not experiencing at all.”

**Curriculum infusion.** Curriculum infusion was another subtheme of campus climate. When asked what existing policies, services, programs or activities do you feel that your college offers or what institutional policies, services, programs or activities do you feel that your college

should implement to address the needs and enhance the college experiences of LGBTQ students in order to help them complete their intended educational goals, all of the participants discussed the appreciation for the LGBTQ courses offered at their college. Nonetheless, the participants felt their college should offer more courses that focused specifically on the LGBTQ population. Some participants even noted that LGBTQ topics needed to be infused into non-LGBTQ courses to help normalize discussions surrounding the LGBTQ community and make the campus feel more welcoming to LGBTQ students. Interestingly, although the need for more LGBTQ courses were recommended by all of the participants, a few of the participants at colleges that offered more than one LGBTQ-focused course were not aware these additional courses existed even though the document analysis substantiated otherwise.

According to information provided by a college contact and in the course catalog, as well as participants P#2 and P#3, who both attended College A, there are two courses inclusive of LGBTQ issues offered by the institution. P#2 mentioned that “Our club advisor actually runs those courses. And I’m not...I believe one is referred to as gender studies, and I can’t remember the name of the other. But yes, there are two courses.” P#3 confirmed the existence of these courses but also discussed the importance of these courses and focusing on LGBTQ issues to enhance the experiences of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students. “Like there’s a few handful classes that focus specifically on LGBTQ, but besides that, the rest of the material kind of just like ignores it.”

Again, as I said, a lot of the faculty won’t address LGBTQ issues, which I do feel like is a big problem with helping those students. If those students might be more, especially if it’s like a psychology or biology course, might be more, become more invested in the

class knowing that their issues are being addressed compared to just the typical cisgender straight issues.

P#3 added that

I feel like we do need more courses for gender neutral, just because it's such a big thing. Because it's not like it's this new, upcoming thing. This is something that's been happening for centuries. And it's only being really addressed now. So I think having more history of LGBT topics. Like unless you're friends with a few of the members of the class, you're not going to know that Native Americans had a term for transgender people for centuries. The term is true spirited. So a lot of people don't realize that. Or that all the way back to Mesopotamia, if you were a male and wanted to become a priestess for the goddess, there was a way for you to become a priestess. And after doing the modifications—basically it was just castration—after making the modifications, you were considered a priestess. You were given the title of priestess. You were expected to live with the other priestesses and expected to perform the rites of a priestess, so any chores or ceremonies that took place. And unless you have that knowledge of the transgender community, you're not going to know it goes all the way back to Mesopotamia, so from the beginning of people.

Similar to P#3 from College A, participants from College B, also mentioned the value of courses inclusive of LGBTQ issues being offered at their college. All of the participants who attended College B, P#4, P#5, P#6 and P#7, discussed their awareness of and experiences with these courses. According to P#4,

There's an LGBT studies course. I think there's a gender studies course, or gender women's studies course. And I feel like, you know, I feel like a lot of people take those

courses, and there's never been a problem. I think maybe there's...not to my knowledge that there's ever been any issue, but I think that that also offers better educational training for the students within the college, if they want to take the course.

P#5 really enjoyed a LGBTQ studies course they took during the fall 2017 term and its relationship to black feminists. As a result, P#5 indicated they “wanted more courses in which we can kind of speak to those kind of things, especially like the neglected history of LGBTQ community. Most of the people even around society don't understand where we are in history.” P#6 also took a LGBTQ-focused course, specifically Introduction to LGBTQ Studies. They thought “the class itself was pretty great.” Additionally, P#6 said

So I think it helps, for those students who don't know anything about the community. I definitely think that one class isn't going to bring everything in. But, I mean, again, like I feel like I'm expecting a lot out of community college. But it can help improve the college experience and it's something we might need more of.

Although P#6 was a member of the college's LGBTQ club but only attended meetings periodically, they were only aware of one LGBTQ-related course offered by their college. Nonetheless, according to the college's online course catalog and LGBTQ web page at least four of these courses are offered at their college.

P#7 talked about the infusion of LGBTQ topics into other courses at the college. They shared an experience in which the instructor wanted to discuss LGBTQ issues in the course but initially assessed the class to determine their knowledge level. “So yeah, we do talk about it. I remember being thrown off guard.” P#7 recalled

And one of the sociology tests was...she kind of wanted to kind of get a feel for what people thought about gender identity, and kind of through one of the essay questions at

the end was having to do with gender identity. I can't remember the actual question, but it was a section we hadn't hit yet. So she had kind of...so she got a sense of where she needed to start. So I know it's something that's kind of on their mind, and something they're keeping an eye towards.

The only participant from College C, P#8, on the other hand, spoke about the limited discussions of LGBTQ issues in classes they had taken, when asked how the college could address the needs and enhance the college experiences of LGBTQ students. P#8 stated

The only thing I can think of like that is I took psychology and for like half, not even half of a period, but like half of the class we talked about sexuality, and it was very incomplete. Very bare bones. Just like, people are gay, they're straight, and they're bi, and that's it. And there was not any real touch on gender or anything like that, aside from like sexuality characteristics and like things like that. And I was like, well, that's probably the most I'm going to get out of that then. Yeah it was ... I don't even think a full class period.

Based on responses to some of the interview questions, LGBTQ curriculum infusion was undoubtedly important to all of the participants and many of them understood how LGBTQ-focused courses could contribute to a positive perception of the campus climate and subsequently, the integration of LGBTQ students into their colleges.

### **Family-like Environment**

A family-like environment was a subtheme of social integration. One the participants, P#1, specifically noted a family-like environment within the LGBTQ club. Others revealed that this type of environment existed for them though they did not use the term family-like environment. P#1 noted that "Everybody feels like family and, you know, we all, like, we're all

roughing around with each other, and it's like really fun, and we're like a big family." P#2 confirmed this environment, declaring "The LGBTQ club is definitely a tight clique, if you will. I feel definitely closer to the LGBT students that I've met so far than most other students that I've met. You know, they seem to understand me more." Interestingly, both of these participants attended College A.

### **Respecting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Respecting diversity, equity and inclusion, in reference to the LGBTQ community, was another major theme that was uncovered and enabled me to answer research question one. This theme arose because some participants felt the college valued these ideas whereas others participants felt somewhat differently. Many of the guiding questions elicited responses in reference to this theme.

When asked if the mission of the college aligned with their values as a LGBTQ student, many participants spoke about diversity, equity and inclusion especially since these concepts were mentioned in their college's mission statements. P#5, who attended College B, said the mission statement aligns with their values as a LGBTQ student "in principle." "When it comes to students from this campus, which tend to come from more low income backgrounds, or older students, it could be better with the equity thing, because it's not meeting at that intersectionality of finance." P#5 also questioned the college's vision of equity. "If we're going to have a vision of equity and stuff, we should not participate in blood donations because LGBTQ people, having gay men, cannot donate blood due to that very prejudiced law that's still in existence since the '80s." They further commented that "If we're going to have a policy for equity and against systemic social injustice, could the school protest that in a way, because this law is definitely systemic and inequitable? Additionally, P#5 noted that they are aware of the college's diversity



policy and that “I do think the college is ahead a lot more than others in how they relate with non-binary and trans people because they do have conversations over this kind of stuff, and I know about diversity training.” Overall, P#5 indicated that “People are more open-minded when it comes to LGBTQ, and just more affirming, across the board.” The statements by P#5 were not only indicative of their perception of how their college demonstrated a commitment to diversity but also how the college could enhance equity for LGBTQ students. P#5 credited the college and its president for the institution’s positive relationship with LGBTQ students. P#6, who also attended College B, stated “I feel like this college is pretty neutral ground in terms of diversity. I don’t feel like it attempts to really bolster it, but it also doesn’t attempt to sabotage it.”

P#1, who attended College A, stated that "I think so" when asked whether their college's mission statement related to their values as a LGBTQ student. However, they also said

But I don’t think they promote it as much. Like if they had that, like if they had a billboard for it, I’d say yeah, I agree with that, you know, diversity, inclusion, yeah, let’s do this, I love that. But I don’t think they promote it. I don’t know anything about it. I don’t know what their real goal is. Like is it just inclusion for diversity and are they saying that? And it’s like what about sexual orientation and stuff like that? Because our club has had multiple times where we’ve won awards for being one of the clubs that promote diversity. And then we get in trouble for doing something that the administration thought was oh, it’s too perverse.

P#2, who was enrolled at the same college as P#1, agreed that the college promotes diversity, which is in line with their needs as a LGBTQ student, but improvements in this area are warranted. "The college, as it will say, certainly does at least attempt to diversify. It is a very diverse college. There are certainly improvements that need to be made, but it definitely

aims towards diversity, which is always a good thing.” When asked why diversity was important to them as a LGBTQ student, P#2 admitted “Well, being in a family that isn’t exactly a diverse group, I certainly wanted to get out there and be more knowledgeable about the people around me. And that’s something that my college certainly helped me do.” “And like I said, they’re aiming for diversity, so obviously being a part of that, especially the push towards more diversity, is definitely making me want to stay.”

In reference to the mission statement, P#7 said

there are just a few points I feel that don’t intersect at all in terms of what I want as an LGBTQ person versus what they’re offering. As a...taking the LGBTQ part out of it, I guess, my values sort of integrate into their mission. Like I’m pleased by the idea of the quality education through all the time, like that.

Additionally, P#7 stated

And in terms of empowering and transforming students, I guess they do that. I mean, I think like any college there’s a certain amount of empowerment just because you’re more responsible for showing up. Like it’s not... You know, high school is your parents get you to school at a certain time and you’re not leaving that school until the bell rings, the final bell. And of course college is—you’re on your own to show up. It’s on you. So, I mean, that by itself is empowerment, I think. You get to decide how well you’re going to do. And, I mean, it... I guess transforming happens at any given college, if you participate.

However, P#7 did note that “If you’re like I used to be, and don’t go to class, then obviously the changes aren’t going to happen.

In addition to discussing respecting diversity, equity and inclusion when answering the question about the mission statement, participants shared experiences where faculty and other students are open to these ideas. Participants have also encountered experiences where they perceive others as not willing or wanting to learn about things they need to do, or not do, to make their campuses more inclusive and equitable for the LGBTQ community. For example, faculty not identifying a transgender student by their preferred name or pronoun even after the student has advised them of their preference.

However, P#8 noted, “I would say the faculty is for the most part accepting, definitely.” Most of the faculty that I interact with as part of Student Life call me by my preferred name and they all use the correct pronouns. And they never seem to have any hang-ups with it, or try to avoid any of that. I know a lot of people that try to avoid pronouns altogether, because it’d be more difficult.

P#8 continued by saying

Yeah, and they seemed like people that, if they had known (telling them I’m transgender), they would try their best to respect it. So from my experience and my position, the staff here is fairly accepting. They realize that they’re at a college and so people are learning themselves and people are learning to accept themselves, and they don’t seem to want to get in the way of people figuring themselves out. Which I think is pretty good.

P#6 also noted classroom experiences that would substantiate the value faculty place on diversity and inclusion. As a transgender student, their experience involved informing instructors about their preferred name. “Yeah, like at the beginning of every semester I would always have to email all of my teachers and explain to them my situation.” P#6 stated that the

instructors were “receptive.” “I never had a problem with a teacher saying no or anything to respecting my name difference. But I did have to take that step. There wasn’t a means for me to correct anything on any website.” Similar to P#6, P#7 felt their college was diverse and diversity was respected in the classroom. “I mean, diverse communities, I think we’ve got that. We’re still pretty, like, white people college.”

But yeah, I haven’t seen, certainly haven’t seen anything that favors any group over any other group. Everybody’s equal in the classroom. And I think that’s important. I think that’s a military value too, in terms of your, I guess, worth comes from what you do, or what you contribute. It doesn’t matter who you are, or where you came from, or what color your skin is, you just...you know, in the military, it’s the uniform. And so I think this college works under that same sort of principle. Nobody cares where you’re from.

More about what you can actually bring to the table in the classroom.

P#7 further validated how diversity and inclusiveness was valued in the classroom when discussing the use of preferred names and pronouns. “I think people get a chance to say on day one, usually, and we go around. The LGBTQ familiar teachers ask for pronouns as well. Yeah, it’s been...yeah, that was a big surprise.”

Whereas P#8 of College C and P#6 and P#7 of College B discussed experiences in and out of the classroom where others have made an effort to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students, P#3 had different experiences. It should be noted that P#3 did not attend the same college as either P#8, P#6 or P#7. P#3 commented “When it comes to LGBTQ, I feel like the college is a little lackluster. Like I’ve had many times in anatomy and physiology classes, and a few in psychology classes where the idea of trans won’t come up.” “Yeah, faculty won’t bring it up, or if it’s brought up, especially with my anatomy class someone did mention, how

does that apply to transgender people? And the teacher waived off the question. One reason I dropped the course.” P#3 mentioned another experience with faculty that did not indicate openness to diversity, equity and inclusiveness. P#3 said they

have heard school faculty complaining about the gender neutral bathrooms, and how annoying they are, and how unnecessary they are. And being a student who didn't know the teachers, I didn't want to go up and be like well, you're wrong, they're very important for this group of people, which is part of the students, which is part of the school message. But I refrained because, again, I didn't want to purposely embarrass these teachers. And it was in the middle of the hallway.

P#3 continued noting

Yeah. It was in the middle of the day, too. It was during the afternoon, where most people are here. So the fact that two faculty members, two male faculty members, were talking in the middle of the hallway for the student body to hear, that could cause an issue with some transgender and gender neutral people.

While P#4 did not explicitly state that their experiences led them to believe their college did not respect the idea of diversity and inclusiveness on their campus, they perceived that a few staff might not be open to strategies, for instance, trainings, to ensure a welcoming environment for LGBTQ students. P#4 clearly stated that “I feel like there are a few staff, maybe, here who aren't necessarily hateful, but just don't take the time to, or seem to have a wanting to take part in that kind of training.” They continued by stating “But overall I don't think I've ever run into an experience with any of the staff, or any faculty members whatsoever.” P#4 also mentioned that instructors are receptive to students contacting them about preferred names. “I think usually

they email the professor before the start of the class and be like hey, look, this is what's going on, this is the name I prefer. Most professors just say okay, cool, whatever."

Some of the participants also mentioned although faculty and student interactions are good, they wish more instructors would make a concerted effort to use gender neutral terminology in the classroom, which would make the classroom feel more inclusive. P#2 viewed the use of the incorrect terminology negatively even though they acknowledged faculty and other students were trying. Interestingly, P#1 and P#3 who attended the same college as P#2, also referenced the use of undesirable terminology in reference to LGBTQ students. According to P#1, "Students make fun of people who have different genders, though. I hear that being made fun of a lot. Like oh, Yes. I identify as a towel. Like oh, I identify as a helicopter." P#1 elaborated stating "People do that all the time. Like, oh, like I'm okay with gay people, I just don't understand the whole gender thing. Like there's two genders." P#3 has heard similar statements from students when they attempted to explain their sexual orientation. P#3 stated

Because my sexuality is more, like, still in question and not that, like, known, like if I go up to a person and say, well, I'm demisexual, which is part of asexuality, they're like I don't know what that is. And a lot of people will normally zone out as I try to explain that sort of thing to them. They're like okay, this is just another snowflake issue.

P#3 explained snowflake as

being that derogatory term for people who have like-- The super special snowflakes that want everything to be put into their category. I'm like, well, it's part of who I am. And the fact that not as many people understand it is a problem I have trying to come out and trying to express that.

P#3 acknowledged that some of their experiences are "just part of the current social climate" but "compared to some of the bad stories I've heard about outside of the college, the students here are generally accepting. They're just like oh, okay, you're this?" Moreover, P#3 agreed that some students appear to be making an effort in regards to using the correct terminology such as names and pronouns.

Like we have a trans student who still looks kind of masculine, but is trans female and goes by her female name, and I know that her friends are still having an issue addressing her as her female name and under female pronouns, but I've seen them make the effort. I've seen a few of the friends call her by her birth name and then be like oh, wait, shit, what's your other name, what's your name again? And she'll correct them, and they'll be like, yeah, that name, that. So there is the effort.

Participants' varying experiences with faculty and other students, opinions of whether their college's mission statement aligned with their values as a LGBTQ student, as well as their understanding of institutional policies impacted the participants' perception of whether their college respected diversity, equity and inclusion. Based on responses, the participants' perceptions were mixed.

### **Education and Awareness**

Education on and awareness of the LGBTQ community was another theme that arose from the analysis. All of the participants mentioned that educating others on as well as enhancing awareness of the LGBTQ community, programming, and policies was warranted at their college when asked what institutional policies, services, programs or activities do you feel that your college should implement to address the needs and enhance the college experience of LGBTQ students in order to help them complete their intended educational goals. Moreover,

they felt LGBTQ students needed to be made aware of additional resources they could utilize. Research question one, which inquired about the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that contribute to their persistence was answered via this theme. Safe Zone training was also recommended by the participants as possible programming to help educate faculty, staff, administrators, and students who do not identify as LGBTQ as well as LGBTQ students about the LGBTQ community.

Despite that P#1 and P#4 attended different colleges, they both specifically addressed the need for more education and information. P#1 said, “I feel like we need more awareness posters, maybe. I feel like there needs to be more discussion and events.” P#1 continued by stating

You know, just a day, just like they have for all the other clubs, to celebrate LGBTQ individuals. If everybody’s having a good time associating that with the LGBTQ+ groups and people, then just like the Pride Parade, you’re celebrating, but you’re celebrating for a bigger cause. And it makes people feel less scared about it. So kind of normalized. They have National Hispanic Heritage Month. We had National Arabic Month. We barely had Black History Month. But we don't celebrate Pride Month.

P#4 agreed, noting “In terms of LGBTQ+, I feel like they could do more, and definitely more for the LGBTQ+, because there is not a day where we celebrate at all. Like, you know, one day, you know? Like one day.” P#4 further stated

I feel if colleges had information packets or posters on the wall, or something where people could be like, you know, hey, I’m going through this, I need an external source, you know, friends other than the college, or I need some support with this, or I need low income housing, or I need options here. I feel like that can be... Because, for example, I’m actually leaving here to go to the Broadway Youth Center in Chicago right now.



P#4 elaborated on this statement noting,

Yeah. To look for some housing options. Just because of my situation. I learned about them on my own. But I feel like if they showed those more, I feel like they would be more helpful for LGBT students.

"In terms of services, obviously more education of the culture of LGBTQ+ and their needs" is warranted, according to P#2. "And certainly with transgender students and gender fluid, if you will, students, more support in terms of help."

Some of the other participants also discussed the benefit of celebrating LGBTQ-related days or Pride Month, offering more LGBTQ courses, and having related discussions in and out of the classroom as a way to educate others. P#3 felt that

I think we should start addressing some of the LGBTQ because I know unless the club is doing an event for Trans Day Remembrance, which is a big deal in the LGBT community, or National Coming Out Day-- unless the club is doing it, the school does not address that or have any events for those days. So I think that it, again, it would help a lot with not just the community, but if any cisgender heterosexual people want to know more about this community and have a chance to be allies, but don't want to explicitly deep dive into the world, just want a few helpful hints so they can be more accepting in their everyday, day-to-day life, having those accommodations would help.

P#3 also said that

Having the classes so they could learn a few things and learn the history, or have a few of those extra events so they could be like okay, I didn't know that. And if they get interested and hooked, they might want to attend those classes, and maybe want to come to club, and might want to start participating.

P#6 agreed that in-class discussions would help to teach others about the LGBTQ community.

"Discussing topics from an LGBTQ perspective in class gives them the opportunity to educate others. And I'm always open to say discuss stuff like that and people listen and think about what I'm saying."

P#8 also indicated that LGBTQ days of celebration could be used to share information with others about and maybe even help them develop an understanding of the community.

"We're going to try to do something for the Day of Silence. Something that involves tabling and informing people of what the day is about and what the silence is about." P#8 explained that

The Day of Silence is a day that like people stay silent to represent the silence of those who couldn't come out, and couldn't speak out for themselves. Personally, I don't know how I feel about the whole thing revolving around being silent. Like I understand what it's trying to do, but I think it's more important that we be vocal about it, than silent. And I understand the symbolism of it, but I just don't think that's the best way to go about it, in raising awareness. There should definitely be a lot more informing about the LGBT student experience.

P#8 gave an example of the type of information they envisioned for the Day of Silence. "We should have something to share with people, and be like, here's a story from a student who came out, and things like that." However, P#8 felt that people who do not identify as LGBTQ will "never understand the experience if they're not LGBT but they can learn how to empathize." According to P#8, "A lot of them just have an unawareness of ... they go, oh it's hard to be gay, coming out is hard, and that's kind of the extent of it from what I've seen."

Another out of class activity to help educate people about the LGBTQ community was discussed by P#5. They stated

I'd love for us to have a panel talk about at least how trans black women are profiled by police, because nobody talks about that. As much as everyone's on Black Lives Matter and everything like that, and taking guns away, we don't even talk about... We talk about black lives mattering, but we don't exactly talk about those who are most subject to profiling and otherwise, which are black trans people.

Additionally, P#5 felt "the programming around that LGBTQ issues is kind of lax. I mean, I think sometimes we get into the fad activism and stuff here, too, that everyone else does."

Moreover, a few of the participants, P#2, P#3 and P#4, specifically mentioned educating instructors on using the correct terminology, enhancing awareness of college LGBTQ resources for the LGBTQ community and those not in the community. P#2 stated that "Other than teachers using the right terminology and obviously just better knowledge, I mean, teaching people that it's not like a disease or something...it doesn't make us different, necessarily." P#3 felt that the

Administrators make the accommodations in the campus, but they don't promote it.

They're not like and if you're part of the LGBTQ community, we have preferred names for our school system so you can go by your preferred name. We have gender neutral bathrooms on campus so if you're uncomfortable using a cisgender bathroom, you can use a gender neutral one. We have accommodations for...we have clubs and we have a specific administration council that will address your issues, so if you go to the club they can bring it up and it might get addressed with the board. And they don't promote that. With the gender neutral bathrooms, the club was mainly the one that was promoting all that information.

The all-gender restrooms were an issue for P#3. They said “From experience I’ve also found that finding the gender neutral bathrooms on maps is kind of hard.” “They’re identified on a map. It’s the fact that with the map there’s like a little extra asterisk next to them. So unless you’re specifically looking for the gender neutral bathroom you could completely miss it.” P#3 also implied, due to a lack of awareness, the restrooms continue to be an issue. “Because most of the signs have been renovated from female to gender neutral, a lot of people will forget that it’s gender neutral and think that it’s a female bathroom. Someone will see a male and it’ll cause an issue.”

Although P#4 attended a different college than P#3, P#4 also conveyed the need to educate people about the all-gender restrooms. They said

I feel like talking to certain students regarding transgender people and bathrooms would be helpful. I mean, we already have gender nonconforming bathrooms and it seems to work fine, but I feel like, you know, just in case they could implement that as hey, look, you know, there are transgender people at this college. I am actually surprised by the number of us. I feel like they could kind of educate people a little bit better. I feel like most people know. Most people don’t care. But that could be an option route.

Furthermore, P#4 advocated for more training programs such as Safe Zone “to expose professors and other staff members to certain terminology and other ways to interact with students.” “Don’t get me wrong. The terminology for LGBT people is vast and complex. And I feel like a lot of staff get confused by it and don’t necessarily understand it. So I feel like implementing just basics would be helpful.”

A few of the participants believe it should not just be the college’s responsibility to educate others about the LGBTQ community but members of the LGBTQ community should

also assume the responsibility. P#1 revealed although they occasionally feel disconnected from the college because of their sexual orientation and racial identity that the experiences have motivated them to remain at the college and they see the potential for educating other people.

“I see the potential of me growing as an individual, and I see the potential of me learning how to be able to educate people. I can’t say that I am, but I’m trying to learn how to do that now. Because who I am will forever be who I am, and I need to learn how to be able to say that—this is who I am. Like I feel like, you know, this will probably be good for me, you never know. Like maybe I should be somewhere where people don’t understand me at all, and that’s how I can grow and learn that, like, if I’m in a place where people don’t understand me, it’s my job to like try to make them understand. And if they don’t want to, it’s not my fault.”

P#1 goes on to state

Just because I come out as gay, you don’t need to be like oh, okay, yeah, like you don’t have to censor yourself and be PC about anything. I just need you to realize that that’s what’s going on, because if you don’t know, then I’m the bogus person, because you could be talking about my boyfriend, and everybody else knows I have a girlfriend, and you look like an idiot. I would hate for you to look like that.

P#4, who is a transgender student, agreed that students in the LGBTQ community also have the responsibility to enhance the education of others. They advocated for opening a safe space where non-knowledgeable staff members can sit down and ask questions that may appear offensive at first. But, you know, having some transgender students or however they identify, sit down and be able to understand that the questions may come out as offensive, but they still just want to learn.

P#4 went on to say

I feel like people, once they can ask their questions without fear of being jumped on or criticized openly, I feel like we could kind of educate them more, you know what I mean? Because some people do say things, but they don't know any better.

P#4 continued, saying

Now the trick is, though, finding students who are okay with sitting there and getting insulted a little bit while answering the questions. That can be tricky. But I feel like that kind of opportunity for students would kind of be like look, you can educate these people. They're willing to learn. But they may just come off as offensive at first. Instead of I've seen some transgender students push those people away who just say offensive things and not offer them a chance to educate themselves because they feel like they're being personally attacked. So I feel like if we offered that it would be better for everybody. It would help everybody kind of understand everyone's situation and everyone can be a student, faculty, whatever.

There was a hesitancy by P#4 to share this suggestion because they felt students within the transgender community would not be open to it. "There are some trans people who are just very, very sensitive to every kind of wording or description of a thing because they can feel that as offensive to them or to another individual, even if they don't know them."

According to participants, more education and awareness of LGBTQ issues is needed in the form of celebrations, courses, discussions and trainings. This will help to increase knowledge of relevant terminology and existing college programming and policies as well.

## College Documents and Website Information

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, which were the primary source of data for this study, data in the form of online information or hard copies of institutional documents from the three colleges were viewed or collected and analyzed as part of the document analysis process. The utilization of documents as another form of data helped to lend trustworthiness to the study by employing the multiple data-collection method. Content analysis of this data was used to reveal emergent themes and whether the themes were similar to the themes uncovered through the interviews. The documents used consisted of mission and vision statements, course descriptions in college catalogs, and promotional materials such as flyers and brochures. The colleges' websites were also searched for LGBTQ-related information. Table 2 presents the college documents collected and website information viewed.

Table 2

*College Documents and Website Information*

Community college	Mission and vision statements promoting diversity	Website information	Course descriptions in college catalog	Other documents	Flyers
A	Yes	Separate diversity and inclusion statement; Non-discrimination statement; LGBTQ resource page	Two courses inclusive of LGBTQ issues		LGBTQ club meetings and activities; LGBTQ college sponsored events
B	Yes	Separate equity and inclusion page; separate LGBTQ statement; LGBTQ resource page	At least four courses inclusive of LGBTQ issues	Proposal for All-Gender Restrooms; Transgender Student Participation Policy	LGBTQ college sponsored events; Being An Ally and Promoting Inclusive Classroom handouts
C	Yes	Non-discrimination statement	Two courses inclusive of LGBTQ issues		LGBTQ college sponsored events



In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participating colleges, specific language from their mission and vision statements or other documents is not cited in this study. However, it can be noted that the mission and/or vision statements of the three colleges reference welcoming, promoting, embracing and/or being committed to diversity. The statements also suggest that the colleges aim to address the unique needs of their diverse populations by implementing and designing targeted activities and learning. Notwithstanding their emphasis on diversity, only one of the colleges mentioned the term equity in their mission and vision statements and none of the colleges used the term inclusion, although valuing an inclusive environment seems to be implied. Nonetheless, after searching the colleges' websites, it was found that all three colleges possess a diversity, equity and inclusion, and/or non-discrimination statement separate from their mission and vision statements. These statements not only speak to an inclusive and safe learning community for all students but also lists the terms sexual orientation and gender identity with respect to all students.

In addition to the mission and vision statements housed on each of the participating colleges' websites, as previously discussed, separate diversity, equity and/or inclusion statements or web pages and/or non-discrimination statements were present on these sites. Colleges A and B contained a web page focused on topics such as access, equity, diversity, and inclusion. This page provided a link to a LGBTQ page. Safe Zone training, gender-neutral restrooms, preferred name, national LGBTQ days of awareness, other national related resources, including legal and health information, and LGBTQ student club information were included on these web pages. It must be noted that although each LGBTQ student club at the three colleges has a formal name, the names were not mentioned in this study in order to retain the privacy of the institution.

The examination of catalog course descriptions was to confirm whether LGBTQ-focused courses were offered by the college. Based on feedback from college contacts and searching the online course catalog, all three of the colleges offered at least two courses inclusive of LGBTQ topics as part of the curriculum. College A offers one course, College B at least four courses, and College C offers two courses. Nonetheless, most of these courses do not solely focus on LGBTQ topics but more so on sex, gender, human rights, social justice, biology, and psychology. College B, on the other hand, offers a course exclusively on LGBTQ studies.

The flyers obtained from College A and B market LGBTQ student club meetings and activities. They included information about the days, times, locations, Facebook and email addresses, and officer and/or club advisors' contact information. Additionally, the flyers highlight the various types of activities sponsored by the student club and/or the diversity taskforce including but not limited to Back to School events, college-wide discussions on LGBTQ topics, LGBTQ national events such as National Coming Out Day, Transgender Day of Remembrance and Day of Silence. College C was not able to provide a lot of flyers. However, a college contact did state that the institution uses binary gender terminology on all of their forms.

The descriptions of the online and hard copies of the documents collected and examined were utilized as data in this study to explore promoting the persistence of LGBTQ community college students. The following is a discussion about the connections found between the interviews and the document analysis.

### **Connection between Interviews and Document Analysis**

Similar to the interviews, the online and hard copies of college documents were also analyzed to discover themes and determine the themes that aligned with those that emerged from the interviews. The following themes were derived from the both the interviews and document

analysis, thereby supporting the trustworthiness of the data. These themes included campus climate, supportive environment and curriculum infusion; norm congruence and institutional programming and policies; respecting diversity, equity and inclusion; and enhancing education and awareness.

First, all of the documents analyzed point to campus climates that aim to provide a supportive environment and be inclusive, two emergent themes from the interviews of LGBTQ students. However, based on these documents, the level of support appears to vary among the three participating colleges. Nonetheless, many of the participants shared experiences which demonstrated that their college was supportive of the LGBTQ community even though other participants questioned the genuineness of their college's support.

Furthermore, majority of the participants discussed the value of LGBTQ courses and/or infusing LGBTQ topics into the curriculum of other courses. According to the document analysis, all three of the colleges offer at least two courses inclusive of LGBTQ-related topics in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the participants, whether knowledgeable of how many LGBTQ-focused courses were being offered by their college, felt that more of these courses were needed. They felt these courses would not only demonstrate their college's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as enhance the education and awareness of the LGBTQ community but could also help to create a supportive campus climate.

Moreover, the documents collected and information viewed on the website provided an indication of the type of LGBTQ programming offered by the college. All of the colleges offered some level of LGBTQ programming although similar to the level of support, it also varied from college to college. All of the colleges had a LGBTQ student club, which of course was one of the criteria for participation in this study. With the exception of one participant, the

other participants were members of their college's LGBTQ club and expressed the benefits of a being a member. By each college having an officially recognized LGBTQ student club, the college seems to be in congruence with the participants' values and needs. Other documents, such as flyers, highlighted programming inclusive of events celebrated by the LGBTQ community. In spite of the documents promoting these events, many of the participants felt that more discussions and LGBTQ events, for example, National Coming Out Day or Trans Remembrance Day, were needed to enhance the awareness of the LGBTQ community not only for LGBTQ community members but also for non-LGBTQ community members.

Additionally, based on the document analysis, the programming provided by the colleges appeared to point to colleges that respected diversity, equity and inclusion. The participants discussed whether they believed the mission and/or vision statements aligned with their values as a LGBTQ student. Some of the participants noted that their college's mission statements, diversity and inclusion statements, and/or LGBTQ statement promoted diversity, equity and inclusion and based on their experiences these ideas were reflected in some of the institutional processes and policies. However, P#7 discussed their relationship between the college's mission and their identity as a LGBTQ student. "What I'm getting from the LGBTQ community, or as part of my LGBTQ identity, just kind of is outside the mission statement area."

In terms...like--I just feel like they're two separate areas. Like the school is over here, being LGBTQ is over here, and neither really conflicts with the other, I guess. I mean, I can tie ideas together, I suppose, in terms of educating yourself throughout a lifetime. Certainly learning what's going on in the LGBTQ community, keeping up with it, does require sort of a constant vigilance.

## Summary

This chapter highlighted the profiles of participants and the documents collected and/or viewed. Moreover, an analysis of the one-on-one interviews with LGBTQ students who attended either one of the three participating Illinois community colleges and institutional documents collected from these colleges was presented. The analysis led to emergent themes to help address research question one and a discussion of the themes was presented using quotes from the participants and inferences from the documents. Research question one asked about the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that promoted their persistence. Even though eight themes and six subthemes arose from this question, only the themes or subthemes that were not highlighted in Spady and Tinto's frameworks were discussed. These themes included campus climate, accepting and supportive environment, a sense of safety, curriculum infusion, family-like environment, respecting diversity, equity and inclusion, and enhancing education and awareness. A discussion about the connection of themes derived from the interviews and the documents was also presented.

## CHAPTER V: DATA ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### Introduction

Chapter four presented an analysis of the data from the interviews and institutional documents with the purpose of exploring the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that promote their persistence. This chapter, however, examines whether the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students could be used to build upon or counter Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionalist Model of College Student Departure. In other words, are the constructs noted in these theoretical frameworks related to the promotion of persistence among LGBTQ community college students? Answering this research question will be accomplished by presenting and examining findings from the interview data that relate to constructs in the two theoretical models. The themes that arose from the interviews and were generally consistent constructs in Spady and Tinto's theoretical models included the following: 1) social integration and the subtheme of a sense of belonging; 2) academic integration; 3) faculty-student interaction; 4) norm congruence; and 5) grit. Table 3 is used to demonstrate the relationship between the research questions, themes generated from the interviews, and theoretical framework constructs.

Table 3

*Relationship between Themes / Constructs and Research Questions*

Themes / Constructs	Research question one - What experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges contribute to their persistence?	Research question two - How can the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students be used to build upon or counter Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure?
Campus Climate	X	
Accepting / Supportive	X	
Sense of Safety	X	
Curriculum Infusion	X	
Social Integration	X	X
Sense of Belonging	X	X
Family-like Environment	X	
Academic Integration	X	X
Faculty-Student interaction	X	X
Norm Congruence	X	X
Programming and Policies	X	
Respecting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	X	
Enhancing Education and Awareness	X	
Grit	X	X

## Spady's Theoretical Model

In Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure, social integration and norm congruence were just two of several theoretical constructs used to explain why students might elect to drop out of college, as shown in Figure 1. Social integration and norm congruence were also emergent themes from the analysis of the interviews considered as contributors to the persistence of LGBTQ community college students. Norm congruence was also discovered during the document analysis.

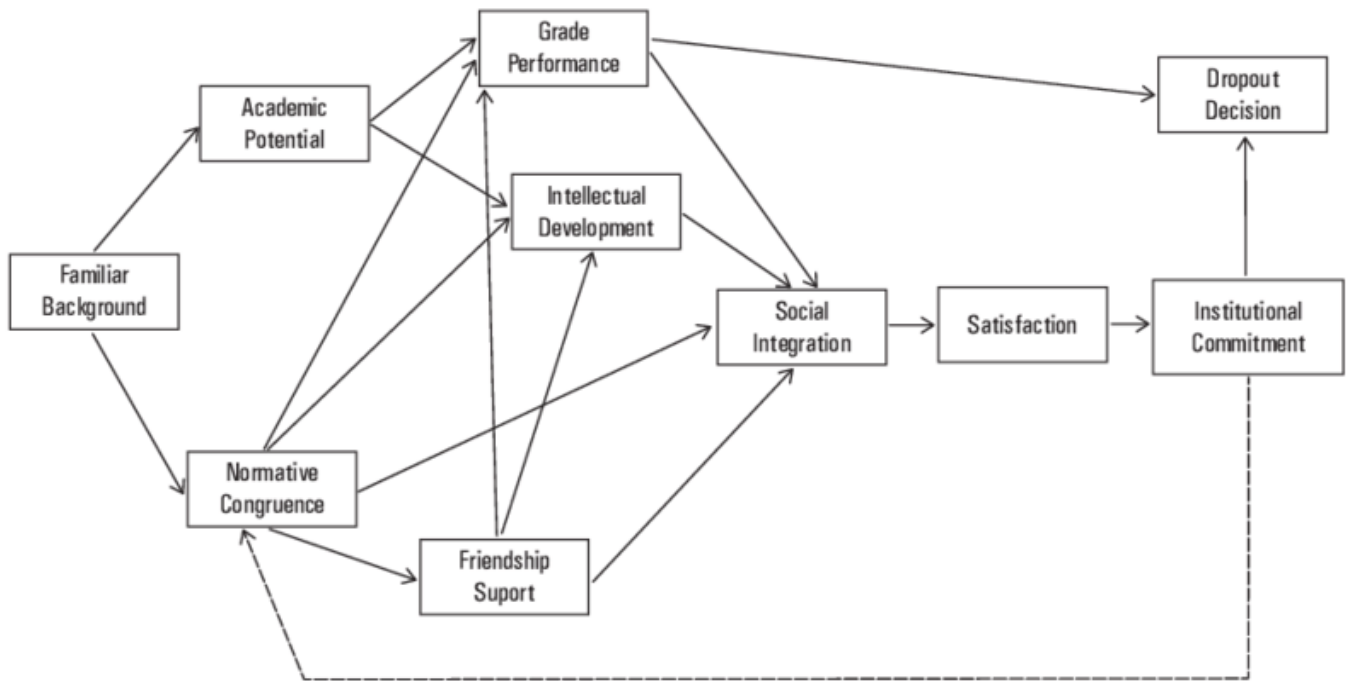


Figure 1. Spady's Sociological Model of Student Departure. From "Dropouts from higher education: Toward an empirical model," by W. G. Spady, 1971, *Interchange*, 2(3), p. 39.

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"Spady proposed five variables (academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support) contributed to social integration and could be indirectly linked to the decision to drop out of school through the intervening



variables of satisfaction and commitment” (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011, p. 302). Social integration is a student’s perception of their own sense of belonging, feelings about cordiality of personal relationships, and perception of the lack of stress as a result of differences with other students in reference to attitudes, values and expectations (Spady, 1971). If a student’s values, attitudes, aspirations, and expectations are compatible with those of their institution and others then normative congruence should occur. According to Spady (1971), as a result of norm congruence, these students “should perceive a greater sense of affinity and identity with the college, be more likely to establish close relationships with others, achieve intellectual and academic success, and feel more tightly integrated into the fabric of campus life” (p. 42). Spady’s model illustrates a dotted line between norm congruence and institutional commitment to the college, implying a cyclical relationship and that a student’s degree of congruency can influence their level of commitment to the college and vice-versa (Spady, 1971).

Moreover, Spady’s variable of friendship support is considered similar to the feature of collective affiliation discussed in Durkheim’s suicide theory (Spady, 1971). Durkheim (as cited in Spady, 1971) stated “The process of integration is facilitated by intense patterns of affiliation with others who share similar sentiments” (p. 39). Spady’s construct of friendship support speaks to the importance of students developing relationships with others, especially peers, in order to enhance social integration and norm congruency.

Spady’s model suggest that based on a student’s family background and experiences in high school, they begin college with a certain set of values, goals, and interests. If these values, goals, and interests are not congruent with their college, a student’s degree of interaction with the college can be impacted (Spady, 1971). Further, Spady (1971) posited that in order for a student to completely integrate with their institution, they need to interact not only with the social system

but also the academic system of the college. Even though Spady did not specifically use the term academic interaction in his model, he noted that a student's academic potential (high school grades), grade performance (grades obtained during college), and intellectual development helps to meet the demands of the academic system. In essence, successful integration into the social and academic systems of a college can lead to satisfaction with the institution, resulting in institutional commitment, and consequently the decision to persist.

### **Tinto's Theoretical Model**

In Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration, social integration, academic integration, faculty and student interaction, and goal commitment (grit) were four of many theoretical constructs, as shown in Figure 2, that were used to explain why a student might decide to depart from higher education. Social integration, academic integration, faculty and student interaction, and grit were also themes that arose from the analysis of the interviews as explanations for promoting the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

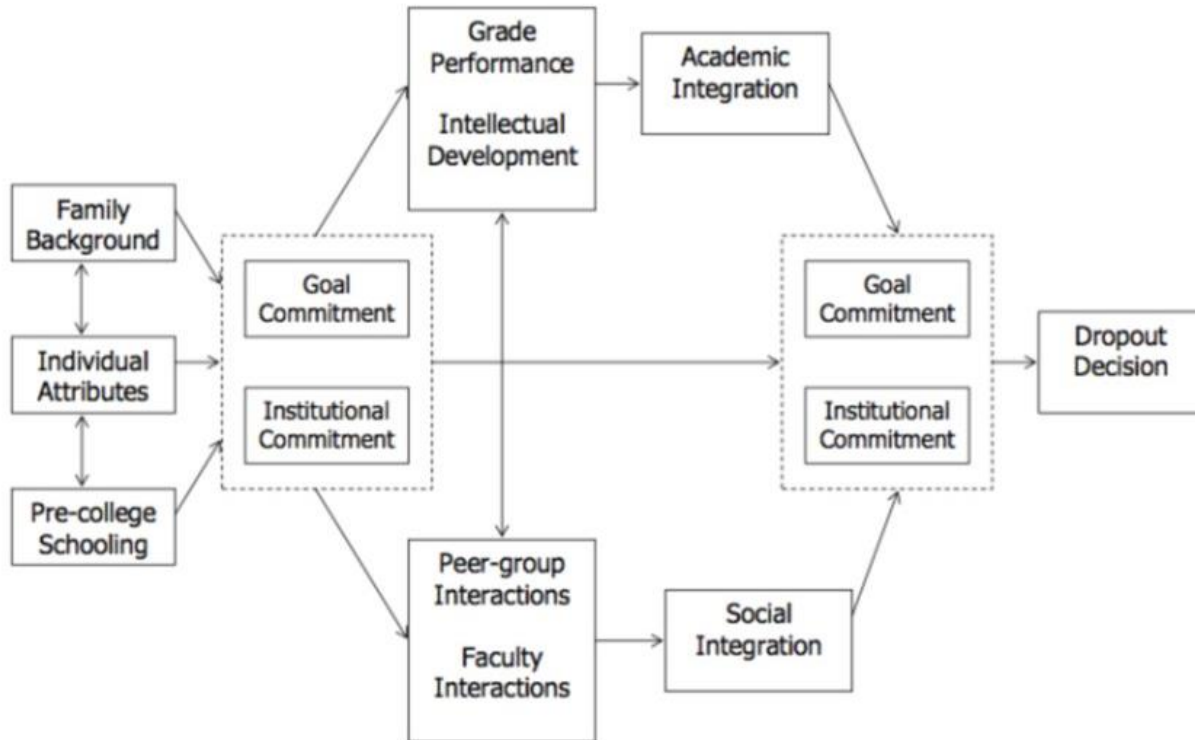


Figure 2. Tinto's Model of Student Integration. From "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, 45, p. 95. Copyright [2019] by Sage Publications. Reprinted with permission.

Tinto's 1975 model of student integration suggested that attrition was related to a student's academic and social experiences (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto (1975) indicated that academic integration consists of structural and normative dimensions, the former involving the achievement of the institution's evident standards, whereas the latter relates to a student's identity aligning with the beliefs, values and norms essential to the academic systems of the institution. Social integration, alternatively, relates to how similar the social systems of the institution are to the student's attitudes, beliefs, values and norms (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's model also considered the component of "commitment" as influencing a student's decision to withdraw. Commitment was based on a student's initial aspiration to complete a

degree as well as their commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975). The initial commitments to the goal of graduation and to the institution influences the degree to which a student becomes academically and socially integrated into their institution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). In other words, students who possess a higher level of commitment to and integration into the institution are more likely to persist.

In Tinto's revised 1993 Interactionist Model of Student Departure, he elaborated on his definitions of academic and social systems. The academic system of the institution consists of academic performance and informal faculty/staff interactions with students and their effect on a student's academic integration (Tinto, 1993) whereas the social system includes involvement in extracurricular activities, peer group interactions, and faculty-student interactions, all influencing social integration (Tinto, 1993). It is apparent from this model that faculty-student interactions are considered important in both the academic and social integration of students.

### **Emergent Themes and Theoretical Constructs from Interview Data**

As previously mentioned, the following themes/constructs including 1) social integration and the subtheme of a sense of belonging; 2) academic integration; 3) faculty-student interaction; 4) norm congruence; and 5) grit (goal commitment) arose from the interviews and were compatible with constructs in Spady and/or Tinto's theoretical models. These themes/constructs will be discussed below.

#### **Social Integration**

The major theme of social integration enabled me to answer both research questions. Social integration is one of the constructs present in both Spady and Tinto's theoretical models on student departure. Social integration occurs by becoming involved in campus activities and developing relationships with not only students but faculty and staff. The impact of social

integration on persistence, as explained by Spady and Tinto, was also evident for participants based on responses about their experiences.

Most of the participants reported they believed being part of their LGBTQ student club and/or other activities impacted their decision to continue their education at their college and afforded them the opportunity to do more than just attend classes. Two of the participants, P#1 and P#3, from College A definitely agreed with this feeling while P#2, the third participant from College A, noted that

I wouldn't, per se, say it helped me stay in the college, but it definitely made me feel more like accepted, if you will, and more like into all the activities instead of just going to college and like going to the classes, the mundane stuff. It certainly helped me have more fun and be a part of everything.

On the hand other, P#1 indicated that being part of the LGBTQ student club "actually helps a lot". P#1 further stated "I've been enjoying it. Sometimes that's the reason I come to school. Sometimes I look forward to it because there's people who want to talk about the disconnect I feel sometime between us and the college. I am completely immersed". P#3 stated that

Clubs and activities kept me remaining at the college mainly because they gave me social interaction, so it's not just me coming to class and then leaving campus. It's me coming to class and then going to a club and maybe talking to friends, and getting to know people. And then maybe being able to discuss any problems I'm having on campus. So instead of me just closing myself off and just going from class to class, I'm getting a chance to talk and communicate with people, which is always very nice.

P#4, P#5, P#7 and P#8 concurred with most of the other participants about the significance of the LGBTQ club. P#4 said

I feel like having a social network outside of the classroom is helpful. It kind of provides an extra support system. If you, you know, have, if you do encounter any problems within a class, or you're having trouble with a professor, or you just want some friends and social life, I feel like adding that social life to class instead of just classwork, go home, go to class, come back, I feel like it makes college more inviting, more of a home versus just an institution that you just dread coming to because you have homework.

P#5 noted that being involved in a variety of college activities including the LGBTQ student club has contributed to them remaining at their college. "I would say they've contributed a lot because they've provided the friendships and stuff that I need." P#5 added that the development of friendships has also helped them persist considering "I'm not only held accountable to myself being here, but it gives me accountability to others, my friends, and them holding me accountable, because we're all kind of in the struggle together as community college students. So that accountability helps." P#7 was not an active member of their college's LGBTQ club at the time of the interview considering it was the beginning term but had done some volunteer work with the club. However, P#7 wanted to become a member in order develop relationships with other students, which they acknowledged was harder for them to do at a younger age.

I'm trying to continue to expand, which is really the primary motivator for joining that LGBTQ club, is just... You know, you're... That's not even true for me. You know, you're 16, you're supposed to be good at making friends. I never really was even then, but it's harder as you go. So that's part of it, is just getting into the club so I can meet people and at least, you know.

P#8 held that

The LGBTQ club definitely gives me a reason to stay so I can help create, or help be a part of an environment for LGBTQ students to come and meet other people from their community, and like be themselves and find a place where they're accepted. And yeah that definitely is part of the reason why I stay here, is so I can be a part of that, and help others with that.

In reference to the ability to socialize with others outside the LGBTQ community and the nature of the relationship with LGBTQ students and other students on campus, P#7 commented "It's very easy. I think it's great. I've never seen anyone cast aspersions at all. You know, which has shocked me. P#4, on the other hand, described relationships with LGBTQ students and other students on campus as "very neutral." Noting that

I feel like there is kind of a, you know, a kind of mindset, I guess you could say, among the other students of our generation where it's similar to being like, you know, they don't, no one really cares who you sleep with, no one really cares how you identify, but if you can play video games, and you can laugh at the same memes they do, people will find connections, and then those other barriers of differences seem to fall away. And then people just seem to treat you as a human being like everyone else.

P#4 further indicated

I have yet to hear from any of the LGBTQ club members of any interactions they've had with students that was negative. I mean, everyone...I think there's just a mindset at this college that we're just people. You know, find the same common, similar grounds, make friends. Nobody seems to really care, I guess you could say.

The experiences discussed by participants could definitely be used to support Spady and Tinto's Models of Student Departure in regards to the value of social integration on persistence.

**Sense of belonging.** A sense of belonging was a subtheme of social integration that helped to answer both research questions. It was also discussed by Tinto (2012) as influencing departure although it is not featured as a major construct in his theory. A sense of belonging can be developed through relationships with faculty, staff and/or other students. Additionally, not experiencing the feeling of isolation or not feeling that the campus is more excluding than including as well as being treated respectfully makes a student feel they are part of the college community. Most of the participants indicated that their campus experiences made them feel they were connected to other students and part of a community.

As a matter of fact, P#5's impression was that "students really stick together with each other, they're like glue, which they believe contributes to students remaining at the college."

P#8 also spoke about feeling connected to other students, by explaining that

Yeah, the students in the club are very nice. I'm glad I can connect with other LGBT students and I can share my experiences with them, and they can share their experiences with me. Most of the other students, like the non-LGBT students, they're all fairly fine. Additionally, P#2 sensed their LGBTQ club was able to help them address other needs besides just attending meetings. "Definitely our group I've found has helped because it's not just going to a group. It's about making change and helping people that are in the group, because we also talk about each other and how each other are doing", according to P#2.

Other participants, including P#7 and P#6, undoubtedly felt a sense of belonging based on their statements. P#7, a transgender female, conveyed that

I think it's been empowering for me to see other queer people, other trans people. There's someone—and I actually think I know who it is, but I never verified—that has, it's like a cartoon cat, that has, is sort of overlaid with the transgender pride flag and I kind of want



that. It's a little magnet for the back of the car. But just seeing that, especially my first semester starting, even after I'd been here for a while, it still felt good to see.

Similar to P#7, P#6 stated "In the group itself, it was the people that were great, and I got to meet a lot of people and spend time with them outside, so that was good to just find a connection as a steppingstone, sort of." P#6 further indicated that "I know quite a few people in the community on campus, partially because of the group." Even though P#6 valued the connections they were able to make through the LGBTQ club and thought the "group was good," they also noted that "I wasn't a fan of the club just because of what I wanted out of it. I thought we just should enjoy just having a group and just talk about stuff, and just be chill and relax." However, according to P#6, "people kept wanting to focus on goals and getting things done as opposed to just enjoying each other's company." Nevertheless, P#6 did acknowledge that before they joined the club, the club was "working on getting a gender neutral bathroom in here, and they managed to succeed at that, and that's great."

### **Academic Integration**

Academic integration was another major theme uncovered from the data and also addressed both research questions. However, the actual term academic integration is only used in Tinto's model, which is described as academic performance and student interactions with faculty and staff. Nonetheless, Spady (1971) acknowledged that "a college student's social role overlaps with his academic role" and "full integration into the common life of the college depends on successfully meeting the demands of both its social and academic systems" (p 39). Examples of academic integration or interaction include but are not limited to becoming engaged with the curriculum, informal contact with faculty, formally working with faculty and/or other students on a research project, or participating in study groups. Academic integration can also be

attained through academic success or what is defined as grade performance by Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975). However, the participants were not asked about their grade point averages and only one of them admitted leaving college due to academic issues even though this occurred several years ago. The fact that all of the participants attended their respective college for a minimum of two semesters suggest that they experienced some level of academic success to persist to the term in which they were interviewed.

According to participants' responses about their experiences, academic integration was primarily achieved while in the classroom. P#5 acknowledged the classroom environment created by the professors was a motivation for them to remain at the college.

I was at a community college before in Florida. That's where I'm from. The professors here tend more to emphasize free thinking, and it doesn't feel like they're just teaching their tests and stuff, like they really want us to own our learning. So yeah. I would say definitely that these experiences have encouraged me to stay here. They do actually care. Similar comments were made by P#6 about their classroom experiences. P#6 indicated

So in terms of classes, I always feel like I'm welcome to put my viewpoints as someone who is a part of the LGBTQ community out there. I can always say stuff like oh, as someone who is gay, I can say that this is my experience in relation to like this book that we're reading. And I'm always open to say stuff like that and people listen and think about what I'm saying.

P#3 also spoke from the perspective of a LGBTQ student in the classroom, noting that sometimes they had to question instructors on the accuracy of information being disseminated and the instructors were open to their inquiry. P#3 referenced one example by stating "Like there was a teacher, when we were learning about reproductive, basic contraceptives in a human

sexuality class, the teacher kept mentioning women with uteruses. And I'm like, well, men have uteruses, too. And the teacher was like, no." However, P#3 countered by declaring "And like trans men do have uteruses. And the teacher was like you're right, I'm sorry. I mean, trans men do have uteruses where menstruation does become a problem for them."

Additionally, P#7 felt that in order to speak to their experiences at the college they needed to focus more on classroom experiences, which "I think it's been great." They stated "Because I'm returning to school older, I've had the time of my life in terms of school, at least at this level, is relatively easy, the work. And that's not to say I don't struggle, I do. You know, certain papers cause challenges, but it's not... I was in the military. It's not the same as loading an airplane for war. It's not the same stress level. So I've had a great time and I'm thoroughly enjoying it."

They further remarked that

The classroom experiences are mainly just where I've kind of sat. I have a certain amount of social anxiety, so I haven't really been involved in clubs. I volunteered to get involved in a club this fall, but they just haven't set up a meeting room yet, so I don't know how well I'll like it. And so mostly it's just show up, take the class, go home.

P#7 also mentioned a specific out of class experience they really enjoyed and helped to connect them with the course material. "So this particular instructor did a walking tour of the city of all the queer places. Yeah, it was like everybody in the class. We learned about some of things we covered in class"

Similar to social integration, the LGBTQ community college participants reported that some of their experiences led to them becoming academically integrated into their colleges. It

appears that academic involvement enhances engagement with the college, which theoretically contributes to persistence according to both Spady and Tinto's models.

### **Faculty and Student Interaction**

Another major theme that was derived from the data on LGBTQ student's experiences was faculty interaction with students. This theme assisted in answering both research questions. In Tinto's 1975 model, the relationship between the constructs of faculty interaction and social integration is discussed. Moreover, in this model, faculty interactions with students are shown to have an influence on students' intellectual development and grade performance, both which can effect academic integration. In Tinto's 1993 revised model, he discusses faculty/staff interactions with students and its effect on a student's degree of academic integration (Tinto, 1993). Similar to the construct of academic integration, faculty and student interactions was not explicitly depicted as a construct in Spady's theoretical model. However, in addition to the variable of friendship support shown in Spady's model, he felt that other structural relations for students such as involvement in extracurricular activities and faculty contacts, which are not displayed in his model, also impacted departure decisions (Spady, 1971). Visiting faculty during their office hours can be characterized as a form of faculty and student interaction. Additionally, some of the statements made by participants that were discussed in the section on academic integration can also be used as examples of faculty and student interactions. For example, when P#7 noted "So this particular instructor did a walking tour of the city of all the queer places. Yeah, it was like everybody in the class. We learned about some of things we covered in class."

Even though many of the participants mentioned they had interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom, including participating in class, their statements alluded to only a few consistent interactions, maybe with one or two instructors who may or may not have been the

LGBTQ club's advisor. Additionally, participants' responses to the nature of their relationships with faculty were mixed, some positive while others were neutral. Some of the participants focused on relationships with faculty who they could relate to because they were also part of the LGBTQ community. P#1 admitted that

There's only one faculty member that I talk to on a daily, and they're the advisor of the LGBTQ Club. They were also my teacher for half the semester for the spring semester, so eight weeks of their class. And that's really the only faculty I feel like I talk to, that I depend on, that I look forward to seeing on a daily basis. I don't really talk to any other teacher. And if I do, it's like maybe to ask for office hours, and I'll show up to office hours, like maybe three times in a semester.

P#1 also admitted "I've never had a teacher say anything that made me feel uncomfortable."

Likewise, P#5 discussed a relationship with faculty with whom they could relate. "I mean, it doesn't seem like they write us off here, but there is a genuine kind of care for students." "Like there's one professor I'm taking for the second semester because I got close to them, but they're also a member of the LGBTQ community, too, so there's that relation." Similar to P#1 and P#5, P#6 referenced a relationship with a faculty who was a member of the LGBTQ community. "One of my teachers for my LGBTQ studies course was also the head of the LGBTQ group, so that's probably the closest relationship I have. It's just like I have spent more time with her than other teachers." P#6 added that the relationship "just made me want to take her classes more." Furthermore, "Teachers have always been pretty accepting. I've never felt like affronted by a teacher. I've never felt like a teacher was offended by my existence, which—so it's always nice. I mean, like in terms of like in classes, I don't really hide myself. I'm not, quote, unquote, "stealth." P#8 also acknowledged the majority of their interactions with faculty

was with “their club advisors.” They continued by stating “The faculty is very kind, I guess.” Nevertheless, P#8 said their interactions with faculty “somewhat” contributed to the decision to remain at the college but also noted “Instructors haven’t given me any reasons to want to leave the college, which I think is a good thing.” However, according to P#8

I’m not a very good student, so ... my experiences with art classes and things like that are definitely a reason I want to stay here, because the art teachers, from what I’ve had, they are not bad. Some of them are good, and some are just, the most I can say is that they’re not bad.

Besides relationships with faculty who are members of the LGBTQ community, participants spoke about their perception of faculty’s relationship with LGBTQ students. P#2 stated that

Professors, yes. Since they’re working directly with the students, they’re definitely more open and cool with everything, if you will. Yeah, they’re definitely open. Some obviously miss terminology because they don’t know. But most of them are very, like, laid back and very cool with the whole situation.

P#2 also spoke about their interactions with faculty. “There are certainly a few teachers here that I would say I developed an outside of class and more comfortable relationship with, even ones that aren’t necessarily ones that I go to class for, just ones that I’ve met.” P#7 described the relationship between faculty and LGBTQ students as “really very supportive.” “I had anxiety about classes. I was pretty confident I’d be ok in the LGBTQ class. But I wasn’t sure if I was going to get misgendered or whatever in other courses, and it hasn’t happened. Everybody’s been great.”

Other participants mentioned interactions with instructors in and out of the classroom. According to P#3, "I'm one of those students who participates heavily in class. So if the teacher asks a question and I'm capable of answering it, I will answer it. Like if I'm not understanding the material, I'll ask questions." Regarding out of class interactions, P#3 commented that

I've had a few interactions with teachers outside of the classroom. Not just because I've had a few teachers be guides for my clubs, so they'll be like the advisor over the club, but I've also had a few times where I've had, like I've sat down and talked to teachers after I've taken the class, because they're just generally friendly people. And there's other times where I've asked teachers, previous teachers for assistance with a class. Maybe I'm not understanding the material correctly or I'm trying to go into another class, and since they probably know the teachers who are running the classes, who might better fit with their teaching style, so I'm not trying to learn an entirely new teaching style.

P#4 hinted at how interactions with faculty members have contributed to them remaining at their college.

I feel like I can gain more knowledge from them outside of the classroom and also within the classroom because I'm asking questions. Within the class I feel like I'm more likely to raise my hand to answer questions than other students. But no, I feel like it provides a better environment, I guess you could say, to gain more knowledge and apply yourself.

Additionally, P#4 stated

I feel like I have interacted with a few instructors outside of the classroom. One instructor was a psychology professor who was very fascinated by how much hormones rewire your brain. And then I had another professor I interacted with regarding my trips to the Middle East, because he also had been to Afghanistan and other places. But that's

about it. Usually it has just been a sharing of information. I feel like...like I said, with the professors regarding, like my psych professor who interviewed me regarding how much changes there are with hormones on the brain, it's like a 180, I feel like that could be a positive, it's a positive relationship because you can actually explain things to people that they have no idea what you're talking about. But it's easier once, you know, it builds a connection between you and that person when you can describe your experience, I guess, openly, without fear of judgment.

P#7 also spoke of their interactions with faculty inside and outside of the classroom.

“Yes, yeah. I try to participate and try to occasionally provide some small talk before or after class. Most of the interaction outside the classroom comes online.” Additionally, P#7 mentioned that although

My therapist tried to talk me into taking maybe just one course in the spring but I decided that I would jump all the way into full-time, which thankfully worked out because there was a fantastic teacher that was our intermediary, and I was able to get into classes that really kind of spoke to me. And that helped a lot, and I've been lucky that way, that I've had some good teachers.

According to the participants' answers to some of the interview questions, many of them developed relationships with a few faculty. These interactions resulted from in and out of classroom experiences and could be influenced by social and academic integration and vice-versa. Students' descriptions of interactions with faculty promotes the value of these experiences on persistence, which is congruent with Tinto's theory and noted in Spady's theoretical discussion on structural relations.



## Norm Congruence

Another major theme that was uncovered from the data analysis was norm congruence. Norm congruence occurs when the norms, attitudes, values, and beliefs of a student and of their college are compatible. Norm congruence is one of the constructs in Spady's theoretical model, which is shown to have an impact on several other variables that can contribute to the persistence or attrition of a student. According to Seidman (2012), Spady posited that "if the student and the environment are congruent in norms, the student will integrate both socially and academically, increasing the likelihood of persistence" (p. 23). Although norm congruence was not a specific term used to describe a construct in Tinto's model, he did note that the social and academic systems of the institution needed to align with student's beliefs, values and norms in order for social and academic integration to occur (Tinto, 1975). For LGBTQ students, congruence with their institution is more likely to occur when the institution values diversity, equity, and inclusion through institutional programming and policies that support them. Institutional programming and policies was a subtheme of norm congruence.

When asked the interview question about current policies, services, programs or activities that the college offers or should offer to address the needs and enhance the college experience of LGBTQ students in order to help them complete their intended educational goals, the participants highlighted services, programs, and policies. These programs and policies were inclusive of their college's LGBTQ club, gender management policy, Safe Zone training, all-gender restrooms, and other resources.

As previously discussed, based on several participants' statements, membership in their college's LGBTQ student club contributed to their social integration into the college as well as a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, participants also felt that having a LGBTQ club on their

campus was congruent with their views and principles and therefore, important to them. P#3 offered “The fact that there are a few accommodations here and there, like the LGBTQ club, and then we have a council that addresses specifically LGBTQ issues,” attends to some of the needs and enhances the college experience of LGBTQ students. “And then we have the gender neutral bathrooms.” P#2 agreed that “I’ve definitely found our group has helped because it’s not just going to a group. It’s about making change and helping people that are in the group, because we also talk about each other and how each other are doing.” Moreover, not only did P#8 state that “having a club, that’s great” but they also noted

it would be cool to have maybe ... maybe not full-time or whatever, but like just have a counselor that has knowledge of that field and of the community that people could go. Whether they’re out or not, or whether they know it yet or not, and whether they’re accepting of it or not, it just ... I think it would help if there was someone who has taken extensive training in this field. I think that would definitely help.

P#1, P#2 and P#3’s, who all attended College A, comments about having a process in place for students to use their preferred name also supports norm congruence between the college and LGBTQ students. Both P#1 and P#2 said “Oh, yes. Students can change their name, yes. Change to their preferred name, yes” in response to an existing policy they thought enhanced the experiences of LGBTQ students. P#1 explained “So if you’re an individual who wants to switch your name and kind of that goes with a different gender that you may prefer and stuff like that, we have something like that.” However, P#3 stated that

Like we’re still trying to push the knowledge that we have preferred names on our school website. So if you’re in class and you’re known as your... If you’re like a trans female and you go by your female name, before you would be on the class roster, you’d be put

under a male name, which would dissuade people from taking any online or online heavy courses. But now that we've made that accommodation. Your preferred name is put onto the class roster. So if your classmates see that name, they know it's you.

Despite that P#3 appreciated preferred name as an accommodation, they felt the use of the preferred name should be extended to other areas such as letters and grade reports from the college as well as at the graduation ceremony.

When you actually enroll into the school I understand you go by your legal name. I think being able to put your preferred name on a form would be a better option so when you're getting letters or grades from the administration it's under your preferred name, not legal. So you're not getting Joe Smith on your report card when you prefer Jane Robertson.

Additionally, P#3 noted "I know for a lot of trans students that don't go to the graduation ceremony. They don't want to go up to the platform under the name Jane Robertson especially when the student body knew them as a different name." "And now you're outing them in front of the entire school populace."

Although participants from College A discussed why it was beneficial for the college to have a policy on preferred names, participants from College B and C stated this type of policy was not present at their college but also noted why it would be valuable to them. P#6, who attended College B, felt "a preferred name system would be so great." P#6 further noted that

Yes, because, I mean, stuff like our online discussion board, like it's...there's no need for that to be my legal name. I mean, there's no financial fees, there's no documentation on that. It's basically like a blog site for your class almost. Like there should be no need to block off giving a preferred name for that. People get confused. And then like if I'm emailing another student through D2L, they're like who is this?

They continued stating

This college's systems file everything under one name, every single thing. Like...it doesn't allow for preferred name to be headlined in cases where legal name is not necessary. As a trans student, I had to email teachers before every class.

The participant from College C, P#8, stated that they also wished their college used preferred names on class rosters.

I would be interested in preferred names on the rosters. I have to correct every teacher, and every once in a while I'll get a teacher that asks me my pronouns because the name that I prefer is a very drastic difference between my birth name. Some of them recognize that, some of them don't and just think it's a fun nickname and they don't use the right pronouns. And I'm not going to—if I have a chance, like they have a sheet or something that they pass out, I'll be like “hey, I'm transgender”—but if I have to verbally tell them, I will most likely not tell them. And that sucks!

In addition to sharing their thoughts about practices and policies on preferred names, offering Safe Zone training or at least seeing safe zone decals on their campus was discussed by all of the participants. This training provides faculty, staff and students with the opportunity to learn information about the LGBTQ community including but not limited to identities, relevant terminology and misconceptions. The participants felt the training demonstrated their college's support of LGBTQ students and provided opportunities to create safe spaces and allies for students, thereby aligning with the beliefs of LGBTQ students. Furthermore, Safe Zone trainings are relevant to the two themes of respecting diversity, equity and inclusion and enhancing education and awareness, which were previously discussed in chapter four. Even if training was not offered at their colleges, participants felt the decals indicated support of LGBTQ students.

Safe Zone training is offered at College B, as noted by a few participants who attended the college and by the college's web site. P#5 felt that even though “the safe zone needs to be better advertised, it made me feel better about attending the college.” P#4, who also attends College B confidently indicated that “we do offer safe zone training here for faculty members.” They further noted

I feel, I've actually attended some of the practice and have been informed that some of the different gender identities and sexualities that we describe to the staff they are still confused by. But generally, when you tell them an umbrella term like I'm transgender or whatever, most of them don't seem to mind as much. They don't really ask many questions unless you offer.

P#7, another participant from College B, stated “I couldn't tell you if the college provides this training.” However, they mentioned the safe zone decals.

P#7 said

I've noticed it's, like the office, like right outside offices, or even on the office doors, the professors decorate them, so there are specific ones that have LGBTQ supportive ones where maybe others have History Club or whatever. It's not that they don't support, it's just not present one way or the other. So you kind of know, though, the ones that have those decals up will prioritize, and they say, you know, “this is a safe space for LGBTQ people” or this is someone I can contact.

In reference to Safe Zone training at College A, P#2 mentioned that “I have seen decals about the training posted around campus but I am not sure if the college offers the training or not or if the decals were just to show support for the LGBTQ community.” P#8, who attends College C, also noted that

I am glad to see the ally stickers in some members of faculty's offices but I really do need to figure out if they go through training or figure out if they just slapped a sticker in their window. Either way I am glad to see the stickers.

Majority of the participants noted that Safe Zone training should be provided to students, also. They recommended that the training for students begin with the student clubs and organizations on campus considering these individuals are usually leaders on campus. They felt if the student leaders initially went through the training they could help bring awareness to other students about the LGBTQ community.

Another topic mentioned during the interviews that aligns with the college's norms being in congruence with LGBTQ students was all-gender restrooms, referred to by the participants as "gender neutral" restrooms. The term "all-gender" is now preferred because gender neutral implies the binary reference is appropriate. P#5 referenced the fact that "the country is currently embroiled in a discussion about the transgender community and their bathroom rights and there's a strong push of either for or negative."

Majority of the participants, including P#5, P#4 and P#6, from College B, spoke about the importance of all-gender restrooms. P#5 felt the all-gender restrooms

...kind of helps a lot of the transgender or gender nonconforming, or however they identify, kind of feel more safe within the college. Because I feel for transgender people...I feel like just kind of looking between the two bathrooms and trying to figure out where to go can be very stressful. But, you know, I mean, I feel like that is definitely very helpful.

P#4 attributed having all-gender restrooms on campus to the advocacy of the LGBTQ club. “I feel like the one thing we did push for in our LGBTQ group is the gender neutral bathrooms. We have two, I believe, on campus.” They further stated

But it’s kind of funny because, I mean, teachers go in there, male students go in there, female students go in there. There are some students who will see the sign and get really confused or embarrassed. But generally people...everyone goes in there. There’s never been a problem.

P#6, a transgender student, added that they believe having all-gender restrooms on campus enhances the experiences of LGBTQ students

Because it makes it less awkward. Like for those people, like when I was early in my transition, and it’s like you don’t feel you pass, you don’t know which one to use.

Because you don’t want to admit defeat and walk into...you know, I didn’t want to admit defeat and walk into the girls’, but I also didn’t want to get weird looks if I walked into the guys’.

P#6 also stated that

And so like me now, I feel more comfortable going into the men’s bathroom, and that’s fine for me. But to be that person who has to walk out of class, feel uncomfortable with the bathroom that’s nearby, and feel like you’ve got to walk all the way to the lunchroom—that’s where it’s at. It’s like in the middle of the building. It just makes it less awkward for those people who feel like the gender neutral bathroom is the only one they feel comfortable in. They don’t have to go out of their way if there were more gender neutral bathrooms.

Additionally, P#6 acknowledged that the all-gender restrooms

were brought around from the club sort of like asking for it and just being like where's our gender neutral bathroom, kind of like pestering about it. And so that was accomplished by the club. And it's a really good bathroom. It's like the best bathroom on campus.

P#6 also felt that "More gender neutral bathrooms are always good. It always feels greedy to say that when there's one, but then you realize that there's like a bazillion gendered ones."

P#7, another transgender participant from College B, said "the college clearly shows their position on LGBTQ issues with a gender neutral restroom." They also mentioned that it was "very convenient and nice" to have this restroom "very centrally located."

And I've seen all genders use it at one point or another, which kind of surprised me, because I expected it to be a strictly transgender only zone. But everybody seems comfortable. I use the women's room. Nobody has batted an eyelash. And yeah, I know I've seen cis people go in there.

Participants from College A, P#3 and P#1, also confirmed the existence of all-gender restrooms at their college but also discussed concerns with the restrooms. From their perspective, if these concerns are addressed then the experiences of LGBTQ students could be enhanced. Similar to one of the students from College B, P#3 also felt their college

needed more gender neutral bathrooms, because right now we only have the renovated female bathrooms. And there's only one of those in every building. So finding the one bathroom that accommodates you in every building can definitely hinder your learning experience. Like when you have a class on the second floor and you have to go all the way down to the first floor to get to the one gender neutral bathroom, that's taking more time out of your learning process.



P#3 further commented that

So I do think that they should have more bathrooms, and this time make them male, so if you're a trans male and you want to use a male bathroom, but don't want intra male bathroom, you can go into the male orientated, gender neutral bathroom. So you can still go into the male bathroom, and you get to walk into a male setting, but you're not hindered by your actual gender.

From P#1's perspective, also a participant from College A, "straight and cis individuals have a problem with using the gender neutral bathrooms. I just don't think they read the signs, so that's why. I think that's it. Because it's like it says it on the door, gender neutral."

In addition to previously discussed programming that was congruent with the norms and values of LGBTQ students, some of the participants mentioned other services or programs they believed would support LGBTQ students even though these programs were not currently present at their college. P#5 felt "There should be a room for us within the college. I think we need a space. I know other colleges have like a Pride Room or something like that. But it would be cool for us to have a Pride space, or an LGBTQ space. P#5 said this type of space would be beneficial because

I mean, it's one thing to, like, have community within a room meeting, but it's another thing to actually say this is our place. And like some students, especially that go to this college, some are not safe coming out. But if they go into the Pride offices or something like that, it could be a safe space for them to be around other LGBTQ people for community and have a safe space to come out at.

P#6 agreed that a room for LGBTQ students was needed. "The college has a diversity center, which is a generic diversity center. I don't know if it's necessarily targeted, because it's just generic diversity. It's not like an LGBTQ room or anything else. It's across the board."

One of the last topics discussed about programming that participants thought would improve experiences for LGBTQ students and would be in line with their principles was some form of financial assistance specifically for LGBTQ students. P#4, a transgender participant, said "There's not really any tuition assistance for LGBT students, there's not really specified, you know." P#4 elaborated on this statement, by noting

I feel like personally, for me, I mean, in my case my father is retiring, so I'm not going to be able to afford college as much. But for other students, I've talked to them, some of the other transgender male students have been either kicked out of their homes or had parental issues that kind of made finishing an education difficult. I feel like if they had, you know, because most students don't normally have that problem, but the LGBT students do. I feel like if they offered tuition support or some form of special thing they could do so students could help afford education. Because, you know—and I think it is hard when you kind of are kicked out of your house and you have nowhere to go, or you're forced to pay bills you can't afford and then you're kind of stuck on your educational requirements. You can't really pay for college. You can't afford it. So if they had tuition support or they had some kind of deal they could work out with the LGBT students that would be helpful.

Norm congruence between participants and their college as well as others, as defined by Spady and mentioned by Tinto, was alluded to by many of the participants. They spoke about current programming and policies as well as those that should be implemented that aligned with

their values and attitudes as a LGBTQ student. Moreover, they noted relationships with people who had similar interests and beliefs. If norm congruence is not present, the development of stable interpersonal relationships could be hampered, thereby impacting persistence of students.

## **Grit**

Grit was another theme that arose from interviews. This theme helps to answer research question one and is affiliated with research question two, which asks about building upon or countering Spady and Tinto's models on student departure. Grit encompasses one's ability to persist toward a goal (Duckworth, 2016). The actual term grit is not a construct mentioned in Spady or Tinto's theoretical models but the idea of being committed to a goal is discussed in Tinto's models of integration and departure. In Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, he focused on goal commitment as one of the influences on student persistence. He suggested that goal commitment can result from social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975). When participants were asked about whether their overall experiences as a student motivated them to remain at their college, some of them noted it was not just the experiences but also because they had the goal of completing a degree and/or transferring to a four-year institution.

P#6 very adamantly stated "I don't really think that being involved in any activities contributed to my remaining here. My remaining here is mainly as a starting point to move on to the university." "I mainly remain here for my own educational goals. Activities didn't necessarily have to bolter that because I already had reason to stay here. I came here with a goal and I'm almost done completing it, and that's pretty much it." P#6 even referenced the idea of their grit when addressing whether the college's mission statement aligned with their values as a LGBTQ student. By the college using the term empower in their mission statement, P#6 stated

I feel like it's an exaggeration of what they do. I never really felt like this college was necessarily like a force of empowerment. Most of how I was empowered in this college was done by myself and my own works, and not by assistance from the college. It was something that I had to be active in. It's trying to make itself sound like it's at the frontier of empowerment and diversity, and I feel like it's just more of like an open field of you can put in what you want and we won't stop you.

P#3 is one of two participants who stopped out of college. They acknowledged that although "My experiences as a student have kept me motivated. It's been more personal stuff that has motivated me. Personal issues." P#3 pointed out that "A few semesters ago I ran out of money, and instead of getting loans I found a job and took a semester off. It's been my work that that's been changing and problems have evolved, so that's a hotbed issue." Nonetheless, they noted "Because I'm paying for college all by myself, I am very focused on completing my education". P#1 offered that their source of goal commitment was an intrinsic motivation to do well in college. "I think it's because...I don't know. I guess it's because I'm trying, I just want to try my best."

P#8, a transgendered male, was confident in their statement about the goal of attending school by expressing "And going to school is more important than making sure that everyone says "he" every single time. It's like, it's fine. I don't care at this point. Kids not saying the right pronouns isn't the worst of my problems." P#7, another transgender student and the other participant who stopped out of college, felt their grit "comes from being trans, but not in the way you might think."

I was lost most of my life. Part of my hate for school back when I was 19, 20 was that I didn't understand the point of it. I couldn't see a future. Planning for the future at all,

really. I didn't at that point really understand I was trans. Or I didn't understand I could do anything about it. But also it just felt like I was on the outside of society looking in. So now, now I'm starting to see a future, and that's been a lot of therapy to get to this point. But I can imagine transferring maybe to one of the other local schools, and then even going beyond that to a master's program.

P#7 expounded on their statement by sharing that

I...my nightmares, for 20 years, were about school. Usually it would be, I would be in the first grade and be failing out. At the age I was currently at, as adult, with a bunch of first graders. It felt like it was just—That was the worst. So just getting my foot in the door was a big step, but yeah, I guess yes, I'm now committed to doing this because I see the value it has for me personally.

P#7, was academically dismissed many years ago. Now that P#7 is more mature and comfortable with their identity, they decided to return to college. "In my much younger years I failed out, so that's been part of my planning for school, is redoing my Fs and turning them into better grades."

Although only two of the participants had to stop-out at some point during college, P#4 also mentioned that financial issues might require them to stop-out. "Due to personal, financial situations, as of recently I may have to stop for a little while and find an actual career for a bit and then come back and take night classes. I am motivated to complete my degree."

Even though grit is not a term mentioned in Spady or Tinto's models, it is implied in Tinto's model. It is an attribute that drives an individual to commit to a goal and therefore nicely aligns with Tinto's model, which depicts how goal commitment can influence persistence.

Remaining committed to one's educational goals, which is understood as possessing grit, was not only cited by the two participants who had stopped-out but also by other participants.

### **Summary**

This chapter addressed research question two, which inquired about how the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students could be used to build upon or counter Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure. Emergent themes from the interviews, based on students' experiences, were discussed to determine if the themes were compatible with the constructs in Spady and Tinto's models on student departure. The themes and constructs discussed were 1) social integration, including the subtheme of a sense of belonging; 2) academic integration; 3) faculty-student interaction; 4) norm congruence; and 5) grit (goal commitment).

## CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a summary of this research study, which was conducted to examine the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that will promote their persistence. A summary of the purpose of the study, the methodology, research design and participants are included. Additionally, the study's findings based on the themes highlighted in chapter four and five are discussed and further compared to constructs in Spady's (1970) and Tinto's (1975, 1993) theoretical models of student departure as well as existing literature on student persistence, LGBTQ students, and community colleges. The limitations of the study, researcher's reflections, implications for practice and future research, and a conclusion of the study are also presented.

### **Overview of the Study**

Persistence of all college students is important to higher education institutions for a variety of reasons. For one, it is an outcome measure used to assess the effectiveness of institutions in their ability to help students complete a credential (Berger et al., 2012; Kalsbeek, 2013). Prospective college students and their parents/guardians also use this measure in the college selection process. Similarly, state policy makers use persistence and retention data as an institutional accountability measure (Bailey et al., 2015; Kalsbeek, 2013).

Although helping students persist can be a challenge at four-year as well as at two-year institutions, the persistence rate at community colleges is lower than at four-year institutions (Bailey et al., 2015; Harper & Quayle, 2009). Community college students are considered more vulnerable to attrition and less likely to persist to completion of their educational goal or a credential due to various reasons, including being classified as first-generation, non-traditional, racially minoritized, part-time, and/or beginning college at the developmental level (Bailey et al.,

2015). These explanations as well as other obligations, such as working full-time and raising a family, have been found to contribute to the attrition of these students (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). However, research has been conducted on first-generation, racially minoritized, and developmental/remedial student populations, just to name a few, to explore how to increase their persistence rates. Yet, there is limited research on the persistence of LGBTQ students at community colleges, a historically marginalized student population (Garvey et al., 2015; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). These students are marginalized because the heterosexual ideology in our society views them as sexual and gender minorities, thereby not necessarily valuing their needs. Nonetheless, community colleges should be interested in helping all students within their diverse student population, inclusive of the growing population of LGBTQ students, to persist.

Therefore, more research was justified on the persistence of LGBTQ students at community colleges not only because of the challenges they face as sexual and gender minoritized students but also because they attend a community college, which again, on the average, have lower persistence rates than four-year institutions. The research would be mutually beneficial to LGBTQ students at community colleges as well as the institutions helping to promote their persistence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research study was conducted to understand the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) students at community colleges that promote their persistence. By hearing the voices of the eight study participants, experiences were uncovered that encourage the persistence among LGBTQ students at the three participating colleges.

Additionally, the study's findings were intended to add to the persistence and retention literature



on underrepresented and disenfranchised college students, but more specifically, LGBTQ community college students. Moreover, the study was timely considering the increase in the number of college students who self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The research design used for this study was a phenomenological qualitative research design. This type of design was used to explore the experiences of LGBTQ students that promote their persistence at community colleges. As part of the qualitative design, the semi-structured interview technique was employed to collect data from the eight participants. The interviews were audio-taped and consisted of 14 guided interview questions. The answers to the questions enabled me to hear the voices and stories of the participants and to address the study's two research questions. The interviews were transcribed and a coding process was used to determine and analyze themes and categories that emerged from the interview data. Additionally, document analysis was conducted to help contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Moreover, other verification procedures such as member checking, peer review, and examination of researcher bias were used to enhance the trustworthiness/validity of the research. Furthermore, to address ethical concerns, a recruitment letter and consent form that explained the entire research process and the rights of the participants was also distributed to participants.

### **Participants**

In order to explore the experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges that promote their persistence, the participants in this study consisted of eight students at three Illinois community colleges who identify as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community. The participants were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling. Majority of the student participants recruited for the study were

members of their college's LGBTQ student club although there was one student who was not a member of a LGBTQ club when the interviews occurred. The participants were limited to LGBTQ students because the research specifically focuses on this marginalized population at community colleges.

All of the eight participants completed at least one semester at their respective college. Out of the eight participants, four noted their gender identity as transgender, while the others identified as male, female/agender, cisgender female/questioning, and queer, respectively. In reference to sexual orientation, four of the participants self-identified as gay, with one noting they were androsexual also. Three of other participants identified as demisexual, asexual, and lesbian/gay, respectively, whereas another participant preferred not to identify a sexual orientation. All of the participants except one identified as White, in regards to racial identity.

### **Summary of Findings and Connection to Literature**

Data in a qualitative study in the form of categories, themes, concepts and theory reasonably result in findings (Merriam, 2009). Themes and concepts derived from the interview data and document analysis were thoroughly discussed in chapter four and five, which enabled me to present findings in relations to the study's two research questions, two theoretical frameworks employed, and literature on student persistence, LGBTQ students' experiences and community colleges. Based on the experiences of the participants, this study's findings are mostly compatible with the literature on student persistence and retention, LGBTQ students' experiences, and community colleges although there were themes that arose that were not found in the literature reviewed. Additionally, the results are generally consistent with some of the major constructs in Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure.

Research question one asked, “What experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges contribute to their persistence” whereas research question two examined “How can the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students be used to build upon or counter Spady’s 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Tinto’s 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure”? The data from the interviews revealed that the experiences of LGBTQ community college students related to their persistence were not only explained by the following themes but that the experiences of LGBTQ community college students also aligned, to some degree, with constructs in Spady and Tinto’s models. The themes, subthemes, and constructs included: 1) campus climate, which included the subthemes accepting and supportive environment, sense of safety, and curriculum infusion; 2) social integration, which included the subtheme sense of belonging; 3) academic integration; 4) faculty and student interaction; 5) norm congruence and institutional programming and policies; 6) respecting diversity, equity and inclusion; 7) enhancing education and awareness; and 8) grit.

### **Campus Climate**

Campus climate relates to the campus environments of higher education institutions (Rankin et al., 2010). The findings in this study suggest LGBTQ community college students’ perception of an accepting and supportive as well as safe campus climate could contribute to their persistence. Nonetheless, the findings also posit that other factors could influence a LGBTQ students’ perception of their campus climate. These factors are inclusive of 1) support of LGBTQ students through existing policies and programming; 2) the impact of harassment and discrimination, including microaggressions; 3) generational differences; 4) a sense of safety; 5) intersecting minoritized identities; and 6) infusion of LGBTQ curriculum. These findings, to a

large degree, are compatible with the research on the role campus climate plays in the persistence of LGBTQ students and community college students.

**Supportive policies and programming.** Many of the participants used the terms accepting and supportive to describe the campus climate based on their in-class and out of classroom experiences. Some of the participants from College B spoke about perceiving a supportive campus climate based on experiences in which their college intervened when an organization spewing anti-gay rhetoric was on campus. The policies and services the college had in place to address this situation made students feel supported and safe, though not immediately, by the college. College B's actions were in line with the results from a study conducted by Woodford et al. (2018), which asserted that LGBTQ students may be sheltered from heterosexist discrimination if a larger degree of institutional support and inclusion are demonstrated through policies and programming. Woodford et al. (2018) also determined that college policies and resources have an effect on LGBTQ students' physical and emotional health and experiences. Sanlo (2004) noted the stigmatization and harassment sexual minority students face could impact their physical and emotional well-being and consequently, their success and retention.

**Harassment and discrimination.** In regards to harassment and discrimination on the perception of campus climate, the study's findings slightly differed from other studies on LGBTQ's perception of their campus climate. While other studies revealed most LGBTQ college students report some form of harassment or discrimination on campus (Garvey et al., 2015; Rankin et al., 2010; Yost & Gilmore, 2011), the participants in this study did not disclose that they faced overt discrimination or harassment in reference to their sexual orientation or gender identity. P#1 indicated "I will say that there has not been an incident that I've experienced where I've been bullied, harassed or thrown aside because of my sexuality or gender

identity.” P#1 also felt their college was a “safe place for people who do identify, even if they don’t recognize us as much.” P#6 indicated “with LGBTQ students and people who are not, there’s not too much hostility, not that I’ve encountered. I haven’t met anyone yet who was like openly hostile. Nevertheless, a few participants did acknowledge that there was “less discrimination” than they had encountered in high school or referenced the “weird or dirty looks” they received. The weird and dirty looks comments were made by two transgender students but not by participants who did not identify as transgender. Despite that a few of the participants alluded to some degree of discrimination and weird looks, none of the participants stated they considered withdrawing from their college due to these experiences. As a matter of fact, P#7 adamantly stated “I think the only thing that would really kind of drive me out is, would be a very heavily transphobic atmosphere. Which I’m not experiencing at all.” However, other studies have found that LGBTQ or sexual minority students have considered leaving their institutions or have stopped out or dropped out due to harassment and discrimination (Rankin et al., 2010; Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994).

***Microaggressions.*** Even though participants in this study stated they did not experience overt discrimination or harassment, some of the experiences they shared could be considered subtle forms of discrimination or harassment, known as microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle but can be construed as verbally or nonverbally hostile and unpleasant (Nadal et al., 2011). The use of undesirable terminology discussed by P#1 and P#3 would be considered a form of microaggressions. P#1 noted that “Students make fun of people who have different genders, though. I hear that being made fun of a lot. Like oh, Yes. I identify as a towel. Like oh, I identify as a helicopter.” P#3 mentioned the term “snowflake,” which they described as “being that derogatory term for people who have like-- The super special snowflakes that want

everything to be put into their category.” However, P#3 went on to state “compared to some of the bad stories I’ve heard about outside of the college, the students here are generally accepting. They’re just like oh, okay, you’re this?” Moreover, P#3 indicated that some students appear to be making an effort in regards to using the correct terminology such as names and pronouns.

According to several researchers, LGBTQ students are regularly exposed to sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions on college campuses (Nadal et al., 2011; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Lotus, 2012). Woodford et al. (2012) posited that the phrase “that’s so gay” is not only an insensitive phrase but also “is frequently tolerated on college campuses, even though it embodies heterosexism and may contribute to creating and maintaining a social environment that GLB students perceive as unwelcoming and exclusionary, if not outright hostile” (p. 433). Because microaggressions are considered a form of harassment and discrimination, similar to the impact of other forms of heterosexist harassment and discrimination, sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions can also have a negative impact on a LGBTQ student’s physical and psychological health, and therefore on academic success and persistence.

Rankin et al. (2010) found the dominant type of harassment against LGBTQ college students was in the form derogatory remarks. Regardless that overt discrimination was not discussed by majority of the participants, the findings suggest derogatory remarks were revealed in the form of microaggressions. Could it be that the participants perceive their campus climate as accepting and supportive as well as safe, and their experiences with harassment and discrimination as very limited because, according to Rankin et al. (2010), there has been an increase in the number of higher education institutions that have implemented policies and programs to address the negative campus climate experiences of LGBTQ students?

**Generational differences.** Could participants' perceptions of the campus climate on today's college campuses, especially in regards to harassment and discrimination, compared to perceptions ten to twenty years ago be related to generational differences? An interesting finding in this study proposes the perception of campus climate could be based on interactions and/or experiences with different generations of students. P#4 did not perceive the campus climate as hostile but as "neutral" because of generational differences on campus. P#4 consistently mentioned these differences when discussing an accepting and supportive climate. They stated "Older students kind of give you weird looks" and "most kids my age are very accepting and don't really care, per se". P#4 later asserted that younger students have been exposed to transgender and LGBTQ students during their education prior to college and therefore appear to be more accepting.

**Sense of safety.** The findings also revealed a sense of safety at the college molded the experiences of the participants. They expressed that they currently felt the campus was a safe environment for LGBTQ students despite the incident at one college when it seemed an alt-right student group was being established. Some of participants also noted that the college was a safe place to be themselves. Unfortunately, this is not the experience of all LGBTQ college students. In a 2003 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, it was noted that "one in five respondents (1600 LGBT-identified students) feared for their personal safety because of their sexual and/or gender identities, and half concealed their sexual and/or gender identities to avoid intimidation" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 30). Feeling a sense of safety on one's campus is vitally important to help with the persistence of all college students but especially for those who are minoritized, like those in the LGBTQ community, considering the cultural, social, and institutional challenges and discrimination they might encountered.

**Intersecting minoritized identities.** Another finding in the study appears to posit that the perception of the campus climate for students with intersecting minoritized identities is not as positive as White LGBTQ community college students. The responses of P#1, the only racially minoritized participant, occasionally referenced a disconnection between the LGBTQ club and the administration. Nonetheless, P#1 often mentioned personally feeling disconnected from their college and other students outside of those in the LGBTQ student club. P#1 stated

I feel like it's like a disconnect between everybody. I don't feel comfortable sometimes trying to relate to people. I don't feel as if... I don't feel as if I can be myself a lot of the times. I feel like I have to censor a lot, like censorship, like the things I say, the way I say it.

Could it be that P#1 did not deem their campus climate as supportive or accepting as others because of their intersecting minoritized identities, being a racial and sexual minority? Because LGB people are not a homogenous group (Quaye & Harper, 2015), the influence of racism and heterosexism can impact the experiences of students who identify as a member of more than one socially constructed marginalized group.

**LGBTQ curriculum.** The findings on participants' perception of campus climate are somewhat consistent with the research on LGBTQ community college students believing their campuses were not as LGBTQ affirming as they could be based on the lack of LGBTQ curriculum (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Although most of the participants thought their campuses were accepting and supportive of LGBTQ students, all of the participants still felt their colleges should offer more LGBTQ-focused courses or infuse LGBTQ-topics into other courses. Despite that some participating colleges offered more LGBTQ-focused courses or related courses than the other colleges, participants felt more courses were warranted. The



courses would not only create a more welcoming campus for LGBTQ students but would also help to educate all students on the LGBTQ community and their contributions as well as to normalize LGBTQ-related discussions and events. Research has found that LGBTQ students asserted that the campus climate could be improved by including more LGBTQ content into the curricular (Garvey et al., 2015; Yost & Gilmore, 2015; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016).

The climate of a community college can undoubtedly impact persistence of LGBTQ students. Studies have shown that students who become socially and academically engaged with their institution develop a sense of community, which in turn can lead to a positive perception of their campus and consequently enhance their persistence (NSSE, 2017; Wimberly, 2015).

### **Social Integration**

Social integration is another theme that arose from the study's data. The findings suggest that this type of integration contributed to promoting the persistence of LGBTQ community college students. This finding is in line with not only Spady and Tinto's theoretical models on student departure but also other literature on persistence and retention, which posits that social integration is correlated with students' decision to withdraw or persist. Even though some theorists and researchers (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1980) may use different terminology such as involvement, engagement or interaction to describe integration, they all speak to the importance of students becoming socially connected with others and their institution. As discussed previously, Spady (1971) defined social integration as a student's perception of their own sense of belonging, feelings about cordiality of personal relationships, and perception of the lack of stress as a result of differences with other students in reference to attitudes, values and expectations. Tinto (1975) offered that social integration relates to how similar the social systems of the institution are to the student's attitudes, beliefs, values and norms. In essence,

social integration can take place by joining a student club, participating in extracurricular activities such as an athletic team, being part of a learning community, conducting research, or by interacting with faculty, staff and other students. However, Tinto (1993) pointed out that the lack of integration can result in feeling isolated. He stated isolation is present when students experience very limited or no social integration. In essence, the lack of social integration and support can lead to a feeling of isolation, which can contribute to a students' decision to depart from an institution, or higher education in general, before achieving their academic goal.

Based on participants' statements, social integration as a result of membership in their LGBTQ club contributed to them to persisting at their college by helping to create new friendships and thereby feeling more connected to the college. Researchers have posited the value of community college students participating in on-campus activities, such as student clubs, to positively impact their persistence (Schuetz, 2008). However, other studies have found that community college students participate in campus activities and organizations less than their peers at four-year institutions (Bryant, 2001; Schmid & Abell, 2003), which seemingly could make them more vulnerable to not persisting. LGBTQ community college students might be less likely to become involved in campus activities based on their commuter student status. Sanlo (1998) stated the ability for LGBT students to become engaged in LGBT campus programming could be adversely impacted by residing off campus and/or working full-time or part-time during college. Nonetheless, because all of the participants, except one, were members of their college's LGBTQ student club and some were members of other groups, the findings would support the importance of participating in student clubs to promote persistence. The one participant who was not officially a member of their college's LGBTQ club had just begun to

volunteer with the club prior to the interview. Their goal was to join the club in order to connect with other LGBTQ students.

A few of the participants even mentioned that relationships with students who do not identify as LGBTQ were decent although they did not specifically state these interactions motivated them to remain at their institution. But they also did not indicate that the interactions with students who do not identify as LGBTQ motivated them to consider dropping out, which can be viewed positively in reference to persistence and the campus climate. Relationships reported by participants with a few faculty, especially outside the classroom, also supports how social integration would have occurred for these students. Pascarella's (1980) model posits that students' informal or non-classroom contact with faculty could contribute to their educational outcomes, and ultimately departure decisions. However, he also acknowledged the importance of in-classroom interactions between faculty and students on persistence.

Despite that this study's findings support the importance of social integration on the persistence of LGBTQ community college students, they are somewhat at odds with Bean and Metzner's research on non-traditional students. Bean & Metzner (1985) defined a nontraditional student as one who commutes to college, is 25 years or older, and attends classes on a part-time basis, which are descriptors for many community college students. They did not consider social integration to be a primary influence on persistence of these students because they were more mature than the traditional age student. While I did not obtain the ages of the participants, some were definitely traditional age students considering they recently graduated from high school whereas others would be considered older or adult students. Therefore, regardless of age, social integration had an impact on the persistence of this study's participants. However, Bean and Metzner (1985) also found that environmental variables, such as finances, were likely to have an

impact on dropout decisions of non-traditional students. This conclusion is in line with this study's findings. One of the participants noted they had withdrawn previously because they needed a job to continue financing their education. Another participant acknowledged "Due to personal, financial situations, as of recently, I may have to stop for a little while and find an actual career for a bit and then come back and take night classes" This student asserted they intended to return and complete their education.

**Sense of belonging.** While social integration is a construct in Spady and Tinto's theoretical frameworks, a sense of belonging was used to define or describe social integration in these frameworks. Spady (1971) implied that social integration consisted of a student's perception of their own sense of belonging. Tinto (2012) noted that "Student retention is shaped, directly or indirectly, by social forces internal and external to the campus, especially those that influence students' sense of belonging and membership in the social communities of the institution" (p. 27). Therefore, a sense of belonging emerged as a subtheme of social integration in this study. A sense of belonging was validated by participants' statements in reference to becoming socially integrated into the campus and thereby contributing to their persistence. The importance of sense of belonging and its influence on persistence through involvement with their college's LGBTQ club was clearly articulated by P#1 who stated

If we lose the LGBTQ club, I can't imagine how I'd feel about my college anymore because it's like I already don't have any friends here, and I already can't connect with some of the students. But now the students that I did connect with, we're all dispersed everywhere and we have no place to go with each other.

The importance of LGBT students becoming involved with their institution and its impact on a sense of belonging was also discussed by Sanlo (1998). She noted that students who just

attend classes but do not participate in campus activities experience commuter campus syndrome, which can negatively influence a LGBTQ students' ability to establish relationships with other LGBTQ students or develop a sense of belonging with the campus (Sanlo, 1998). Again, majority of participants seemingly developed a sense of belonging through their experiences with the LGBTQ club and relationships with other students and faculty and staff as well. Many of them mentioned that they did not want to just come to campus for classes and then leave, thereby avoiding the commuter campus syndrome.

The findings on a sense of belonging are somewhat compatible with the view of a sense of belonging proposed by Davidson and Wilson (2017). They felt that the construct of sense of belonging was more appropriate for community college students as opposed to social integration. However, they noted that community college students should not be asked to integrate into the college but the institution should foster a sense of belonging with students by addressing their collective needs (Davidson & Wilson, 2017). They suggested students drop out because the institution does not collectively affiliate with the student (Davidson & Wilson, 2017). In other words, community colleges students will depart from their college if the needs of the various communities in which they belong are not being met. This viewpoint can be corroborated by one participant who discussed the need for more resources for LGBTQ students. P#4 stated "To look for some housing options. Just because of my situation. I learned about them on my own. But I feel like if they showed those more, I feel like they would be more helpful for LGBT students". P#4, a transgender student, also felt that

If they offered tuition support or some form of special thing they could do so students could help afford education. Because, you know—and I think it is hard when you kind of are kicked out of your house and you have nowhere to go, or you're forced to pay bills

you can't afford. Some of the other transgender male students have been either kicked out of their homes or had parental issues that kind of made finishing an education difficult.

Personal experiences of some participants or their knowledge of the experiences of other LGBTQ community college students, align with Davidson and Wilson's Collective Affiliation Model. Collective affiliation is defined as "the manner in which a person's sense of belonging among his/her various communities (e.g., workplace, religious community, civic organization, family, etc.) are able to function cohesively so that the individual can holistically maintain engagement in each community" (Davidson & Wilson, 2017, p. 521). This model posits that colleges need to demonstrate an affiliation with a student's various communities by offering services to help the student maintain balance in each community, which in turn will increase their sense of belonging with the college. A student who has been kicked out their house is more concerned about securing stable housing as opposed to completing class assignments.

### **Academic Integration**

Tinto (2012) noted if students are more academically and socially engaged with others, especially other students and faculty, the more likely they will persist to graduation. He posited that "This appears to be true for all students, majority and minority alike, and applies even after controlling for background attributes" (Tinto, 2012, p. 64). Findings in this study are compatible with those of Tinto's and other researchers (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2004; Mancini, 2011; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971) about the influence of academic integration on persistence. Academic integration was one of the themes that arose from the data analysis and is a construct in Tinto's model and implied in Spady's model. Even though Spady did not specifically use the term academic integration in his model, he felt that integration into the

academic system was important when examining the dropout process (Spady, 1970). As a matter of fact, he acknowledged that the social experiences of students could be impacted by their academic experiences, including grade performance and intellectual development. Academic integration encompasses being associated with the academic systems of the college, whether in or out of the classroom. These associations can be developed through academic interactions with faculty, staff and fellow students as well as academic performance.

Mancini (2011) also recommended that if the contributions of the LGBTQ community are not considered in a college's curriculum, a "perceived lack of representation may affect the strength of sexual minority students' academic integration, such as academic confidence and positive relationships with one's teachers" (p. 14). As discussed in chapter four, all of the participating colleges offered at least one LGBTQ-focused course or infused LGBTQ topics into the curriculum of another course such as Sociology or Gender Studies. Although all of the participants felt their colleges should offer more LGBTQ courses, the fact that these courses are part of the college's curriculum could contribute to the persistence of LGBTQ students. As a matter of fact, 50% or more of the participants mentioned taking a least one of these courses.

Research has also posited that students in courses with faculty who employ active and meaningful learning pedagogy are more likely to become academically integrated and remain enrolled in their college (Braxton et al., 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2012), compared to students who are not engaged. Additionally, according to Braxton et al. (2004), the sense of community created in the classroom characterizes another feature of the academic environment at higher education institutions that impacts students' attrition decisions. The fact that the participants felt they are expected to "own" their learning, can freely share their opinions in class, enjoyed their classroom experiences, and were being successful in their courses, speaks to

how they would become academically integrated into their colleges. Moreover, a few of the participants found that the academic support services helped them to achieve academic success, which in turn contributed to them persisting. P#4 held that using “tutoring definitely does help in keeping good grades”.

### **Faculty-Student Interaction**

As just discussed, academic integration can lead to positive relationships with faculty. As cited earlier, Tinto (2012) stated “The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things being equal), they will stay and graduate from college” (p. 64). Similar to the construct of academic integration, faculty and student interactions was not explicitly depicted in Spady’s theoretical model. However, Spady (1971) felt that other structural relations for students, such as faculty contacts, also impacted departure decisions. The importance of faculty and student interactions, especially informal and out of classroom interactions, on student success outcomes such as persistence, has also been suggested by several other researchers (e.g., Barnett, 2011; Liu & Liu, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016).

This study’s findings, to a large degree, are consistent with the research on the influence of faculty-student interaction on persistence. Although the results did not point to faculty-student interactions being a stronger contributor to student persistence than other factors, as posited by Astin (1975), it was a major theme that emerged from the data analysis. Many of the participants felt most faculty were accepting and supportive. Nevertheless, majority of the participants acknowledged that the relationships they developed with faculty were limited to a few faculty. These interactions highlighted by participants were primarily with faculty who taught LGBTQ-related courses and/or were advisors for the LGBTQ student club. These type of



interactions are in harmony with research conducted by Liu and Liu (1999). Not only did Liu and Liu (1999) find that interactions among faculty and students was critical to community college student persistence but that students are more likely to be retained if there are faculty on campus with whom they can relate. P#5 confirmed this sentiment, noting “I’m close to one teacher, but they’re LGBTQ. And I find it easier...I mean, I find it easier with the LGBTQ professors to interact with them because they kind of understand that plight in some way”.

Similarly, P#1 admitted that

There’s only one faculty member that I talk to on a daily, and they’re the advisor of the LGBTQ Club. They were also my teacher for half the semester for the spring semester. And that’s really the only faculty I feel like I talk to, that I depend on, that I look forward to seeing on a daily basis.

Students developing relationships with faculty with whom they can relate is also supported by Harper and Quayle (2009) and Barnett (2011). Harper and Quayle (2009) recommended that LGBTQ student relationships with LGBTQ or other minoritized faculty and staff who have experienced marginalization but have successfully navigated these experiences might not only be viewed as role models and mentors but will also help students to develop or increase their self-confidence. Barnett (2011) also asserted that

Validation by faculty significantly predicted students’ sense of academic integration and intent to persist in college. These findings are especially pertinent to community colleges as institutions where students’ primary opportunities to engage with the college environment occur in the classroom through interactions with faculty (p. 215).

Through her research, four forms of validation were uncovered, including *students known and valued, caring instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring* (Barnett, 2011, p. 212).

Participants discussed experiences involving faculty interactions that seem to consist of these forms of validation. Nonetheless, participants' responses were mixed in reference to feeling validated by all faculty.

As evident from the experiences of the participants and the research on persistence and retention, faculty-student interaction can influence a student's perception of their campus climate and their degree of social and academic integration, which all contribute a student's persistence.

### **Norm Congruence**

The findings from this study also suggest that norm congruence among participants and their college was present, to some extent. Norm congruence is a major construct in Spady's (1970) sociological model of student departure. It occurs when the norms, attitudes, values, and beliefs of a student and of their college are compatible (Spady, 1971). Congruency between a student and their college should occur for students to become socially and academically integrated, thereby enhancing the probability of student persistence. Norm congruence was not a term used in Tinto's model, but he noted that academic and social integration of students are related to how similar the academic and social systems of the institution are to the student's beliefs, values and norms (Tinto, 1975). He further declared that incongruence can occur for students who feel they have considerable differences with their institution (Tinto, 1993). Hurtado and Carter (as cited in Hader, 2011) criticized the concept of norm congruence in Spady's theory because they "believed that the theory did not capture the multiple communities on campus and students' multiple affiliations without adopting a single or predominant set of norms" (p. 327). However, participants seemed to experience norm congruence with their colleges to some degree because institutions currently recognize the diverse student populations on their campuses and are making positive strides in demonstrating they value diversity, equity,

and inclusion through institutional programming and policies that support LGBTQ students. Furthermore, the development of relationships with peers and staff who share similar values and ideals can lead to norm congruence. However, norm incongruence also occurred because the participants felt their colleges needed to enhance or implement other programming that aligned with their needs.

Norm congruence was alluded to when the participants discussed the importance of all-gender restrooms on campus, the value of Safe Zone training and/or ally decals, preferred name policy, LGBTQ courses, and a diversity and/or LGBTQ task force. P#3 offered “The fact that there are a few accommodations here and there, like the LGBTQ club, and then we have a council that addresses specifically LGBTQ issues” aligns with some of the needs and enhances the college experience of LGBTQ students. An institutionally recognized, active LGBTQ student club speaks to the college’s commitment to support all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Moreover, norm congruence is produced through membership in the LGBTQ student clubs because students are interacting with other students and faculty / staff who ideally share compatible norms.

Besides the all-gender restrooms, ally decals, and LGBTQ courses that were present at the three participating colleges, other initiatives mentioned by participants were not offered at all of the colleges. Consequently, participants at those colleges would probably feel less congruence with their institution compared to LGBTQ students at the other colleges. Participants who attended the two colleges without a preferred name policy noted they wished their college used preferred names on class rosters. P#8, a transgender student, stated “I have to correct every teacher, and every once in a while I’ll get a teacher that asks me my pronouns because the name that I prefer is a very drastic difference between my birth name”. Moreover,

they discussed the importance of preferred name for hybrid courses considering even if an instructor uses a student's preferred in the face-to-face portion of the class, the online portion of the course displays the student's legal name, thereby essentially "outing" the student.

Transgender students cannot move toward norm congruence with their college without gender management policies, which should focus on more than just including preferred name on the class roster.

### **Respect for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Although this study posits that norm congruence for the participants with their colleges exists, to some degree, the participating colleges' demonstration of respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion helped to establish norm congruence. Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion is not concept or construct in either Spady or Tinto's theories on student departure but is discussed in the literature on campus climates for LGBTQ students and other marginalized student populations. This study's findings suggest that participants' experiences at their college were also influenced by their perception of their college's respect for diversity, equity and inclusion or lack thereof.

Many participants felt their college's mission, vision, non-discrimination, and/or diversity statements, attempted to convey their respect for diversity, equity and inclusion especially since these concepts were mentioned in these statements. Rankin et al. (2010) noted that the visibility of the LGBTQ community would be heightened by incorporating their concerns into the institutional cultural. Minor actions consisting of adding inclusive language on institutional documents signals to members of the LGBTQ community an affirming campus. Nonetheless, some participants, felt their colleges were lacking in some areas of demonstrating their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion and the words in these statements may not really

be reflective of the institutions' actions. P#5 said the mission statement aligns with their values as a LGBTQ student "in principle." P#5 continued by stating "When it comes to students from this campus, which tend to come from more low income backgrounds, or older students, it could be better with the equity thing, because it's not meeting at that intersectionality of finance."

Furthermore, despite programming and policies present on their campuses to support LGBTQ students, some participants believed the actions or inactions of some administrators and faculty made them question whether they truly valued diversity, equity and inclusion. According to Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2016), "It is paramount to foster the importance of social justice, tolerance, and equality for all students across the spectrum of difference by designing/delivering curriculum and student support services that are sensitive to the complexity of sexual and gender identity" (p. 59). More all-gender restrooms and LGBTQ-focused curriculum, a gender management policy, equitable support for the LGBTQ student club, and training programs were discussed by participants as strategies and initiatives that would help to enhance LGBTQ students' perception of their college's stance on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Safe Zone trainings were definitely recommended by participants on the campuses where it was not offered in order to help educate the faculty and other students on the LGBTQ community, especially in reference to appropriate, non-offensive terminology. A student's perception of whether their faculty member values diversity, equity and inclusion could impact the student's interaction with the faculty member. As previously emphasized, faculty-student interaction can contribute to a student's decision to persist, especially for community college students who spend the bulk of their time on campus in the classroom. P#6 noted classroom experiences substantiating the value faculty placed on diversity and inclusion. As a transgender student and in regards to preferred name, P#6, said "Yeah, like at the beginning of every

semester I would always have to email all of my teachers and explain to them my situation.”

The instructors were “receptive” and “I never had a problem with a teacher saying no or anything to respecting my name difference.” On the other hand, P#3 commented “When it comes to LGBTQ, I feel like the college is a little lackluster. Like I’ve had many times in anatomy and physiology classes, and a few in psychology classes where the idea of trans won’t come up.”

When a college values the principles of equity and inclusion, along with diversity, it emphasizes an awareness that having a diverse student population and staff alone is not sufficient. The college also recognizes that in order for students to feel welcomed and integrate with the college, it needs to provide all students with equitable, targeted resources relating to their identities, which will theoretically contribute to their persistence and success.

## **Grit**

This study also found the concept of grit as contributing to the persistence of participants, despite participants may have used different terms, such as motivation, to describe the characteristic of grit. According to Duckworth, the psychologist and researcher who conceived the term grit, it is “passion and perseverance for long-term and meaningful goals” (Duckworth, 2016). As mentioned earlier, grit involves the ability to persist toward a goal because a person is passionate about achieving that goal. Grit is not identified as a construct in Spady or Tinto’s theories but the idea of being committed to a goal is highlighted in Tinto’s model. In Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Model, he focused on goal commitment as one of the influences of student persistence. He proposed that goal commitment can result from social and academic integration. Grit and motivation, believed to be synonymous by some, are both mentioned in more current research on persistence and LGBTQ college students. Tinto (2016) noted that persistence is a type of motivation and that students need to possess determination in pursuit of

completing their credential. “Without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely – institutional action aside” (Tinto, 2016, p. 1).

Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) also theorized that pre-college attributes such as high school grade point average played a role in a student’s decision to drop-out. However, Duckworth’s explanation of grit appears to imply that prior academic achievement may not be as important as grit. Duckworth explained that grit is vital because it is a catalyst of success, despite and outside the contributions of talent and aptitude (Duckworth, 2016). Even though participants were not asked about their current academic standing or high school academic status to determine if these pre-college characteristics would more likely be a predictor of them completing their educational goal, they had the goal of transferring to a four-year institution and/or entering the workforce upon completion of their associate degree. The desire to transfer and/or pursue their career goal contributed to their persistence, as noted by participants. P#6 adamantly stated “I don’t really think being involved in any activities contributed to my remaining here. I mainly remain here for my own educational goals. I came here with a goal and I’m almost done completing it, and that’s pretty much it.”

Despite that grit was found to contribute to participants’ persistence, the concept of grit has been challenged by some researchers because it doesn’t seem to take into account socio-economic obstacles some students may encounter. Grow (2014) discusses how the initial concept of grit was meant to focus on positive qualities such as perseverance but is now being used in a narrative that places the blame on individuals for not being able to achieve their goals. He further noted that socio-economic conditions such as racism and poverty are related to students’ ability to achieve academic success. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this study, the realities of heterosexism and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ students is recognized.

The fact that participants mentioned their ability to persevere toward goal completion, even though they identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, was the reason grit surfaced as having influence on their persistence.

Majority of the aforementioned influences on the persistence of LGBTQ community college students are seemingly interrelated. For example, students who established relationships with faculty outside the classroom may have also become more socially and academically involved with the college as a result. Similarly, students' perception of faculty could also influence their view of the campus climate and whether the college values diversity, equity and inclusion, which in turn could impact whether they felt their norms were aligned with others as well as with college policies and programming.

### **Limitations of Research**

As with many research studies, there were limitations present in this study. First, because the person reading qualitative research cannot generalize in a statistical sense (Merriam, 2009), it is not being suggested that the findings in the study can be applied to the LGBTQ students at all community colleges. Additionally, generalizability cannot occur due to the small sample size and only using colleges in the state of Illinois.

Secondly, this study focused on promoting the persistence of LGBTQ students at community colleges. Therefore, although there is an awareness that LGBTQ students are not a homogeneous group, this study was not intended to examine the differences in experiences of LGBTQ students based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or racial identity. Nonetheless, only having one racially minoritized participant, which was outside the researcher's control, could be construed as a limitation. Due to the intersecting minoritized identities of a student who identifies as lesbian and African-American, they would probably encounter different



experiences than a White LGBTQ student. As previously discussed, all of the participants were White except for one who identified as African-American. Even though all three participating colleges had Latinx student populations of at least 17%, none of the participants identified as Latinx. However, the African-American student population at the three colleges was ten percent or less, which could explain why only one participant who identified as African-American was recruited. Interestingly, the African-American participant continuously mentioned throughout the interview that they felt “disconnected” from their college. Neither the term “disconnected” nor similar terms or sentiments were expressed by other participants, including the two participants who attended the same college as the African-American student.

Finally, while there was a shortage of racially minoritized participants, 50 percent of participants noted their gender identity as transgender. Consequently, again, although the intent of the study was not to explore differences in experiences of students based on sexual or gender identity, people might speculate whether the findings are more reflective of the experiences of transgender students.

### **Researcher Reflections**

Although the number of participants was smaller than anticipated considering a minimum of twelve participants were intended for this study and only eight participated, the sample population was representative of the spectrum of the LGBTQ community. As addressed previously, institutional recruitment letters were sent to a total of six community colleges in the state of Illinois despite the fact that only three community colleges were able to participate. It was also a challenge to find reliable student participants. Even though students may have agreed to participate in the study even after I conducted in-person presentations about the study to the

LGBTQ student clubs, some of the prospective students did not show for their scheduled interviews. Consequently, the eight interviews were conducted over a seven month period.

After reflecting on the findings, another concern for me was my familiarity with administrators at the participating community colleges. Although the participating colleges were not identified by name, initial assistance to conduct research at these colleges was sought from administrators with whom I have professional relationships.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings generated from this study have many implications for community college practitioners as well as LGBTQ community college students at the participating colleges. Sanlo (1998) stressed limited institutional support and chances to engage with other LGBTQ students as well as faculty and staff might negatively impact the persistence of sexual minority students. This study suggest the promotion of persistence among LGBTQ community college students can be addressed by implementing and/or providing institutional support in terms of the following programming, policies, and resources: 1) market the benefits of student social and academic involvement; 2) more inclusive classroom environments and curriculum; 3) professional development and training related to LGBTQ students, especially for faculty; 4) more all-gender restrooms; 5) a gender management policy; 6) grit development programming; and 7) other LGBTQ-related resources.

### **Market the Benefits of Social and Academic Involvement**

First of all, it is recommended that colleges should encourage all students, regardless of whether they are defined as a sexual or gender minority, to become engaged in the institution by considering some of the following options: joining a student club, an athletic team, a study group, and/or developing relationships with faculty, staff and other students. However, while the

persistence literature has supported the effectiveness of these approaches, the most well-known student departure models are largely based on the experiences of White males of middle to high socio-economic status (Mancini, 2011). Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggested the participants were socially engaged with their college as a result of participating in the LGBTQ student club and other clubs or activities. Therefore, colleges can help to increase the awareness and recruitment efforts of the LGBTQ student club by allocating needed resources.

Moreover, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2017), LGBTQ students, especially those who are “out”, are more likely to participate in academic and social campus opportunities such as study abroad, classes focused on diversity, or activities involving reflective learning, just to name a few. Therefore, student affairs professionals, advisors for LGBTQ student clubs, and/or allies could collaborate with academic affairs to implement co-curricular programming focused on reflective learning, work with the International Education Program to conduct a special presentation on study abroad opportunities for the LGBTQ students or advocate for more inclusive curriculum. Because participating in study abroad can be expensive for many students, establishing a scholarship for low-income and marginalized students interested in this opportunity could be a consideration. Not limiting the scholarship to LGBTQ students will enable more students, especially those who have not historically been able to afford this luxury, to participate in study abroad opportunities. Of course, all of the aforementioned strategies would require institutional support in terms of resources. For LGBTQ students who are not “out” and may not want to associate with an identifiable LGBTQ club, emphasizing the importance of becoming integrated into the college through other activities would be a recommendation. Regardless of a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity, students who participate in student clubs, academic organizations or co-curricular activities enhance their

competitiveness and marketability when applying to a four-year institution, for transfer scholarships, or jobs.

Besides becoming socially integrated by participating in student clubs, the research has shown that faculty and student interaction can lead to social and academic integration. Consequently, colleges need to place more emphasis on the value of students engaging with faculty in and out of class. An example of this type of interaction would involve students working with faculty on a research project or co-curricular activity. Moreover, these relationships could be developed via a mentoring program, which have shown to play an important role in the retention of racially minoritized students. LGBTQ students could also benefit from a comparable program or at minimum from knowing who on campus is considered an “ally” to their community. Harper and Quaye (2009) advocate for LGBTQ role models and mentors for LGBTQ students. They stated that LGBTQ students who develop relationships with LGBTQ or other minoritized faculty and staff who have been marginalized but have successfully navigated these experiences might not only be viewed as role models and mentors but will also help students to develop or increase their self-confidence (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **More Inclusive Classroom Environments and Curriculum**

Even though the research confirms the value of faculty-student interactions on persistence, it also proposes that the interactions within the classroom are extremely important for community college students considering majority of their time on campus is spent in class. The classroom environment and interactions with faculty can lead to the concurrent development of social and academic integration as noted by both Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975). Therefore, it would also be recommended that more LGBTQ topics and LGBTQ-sensitive pedagogy be brought into the classroom considering community college students’ primary experience is the

curriculum (Renn, 2017). When the identities of minoritized students are acknowledged and incorporated in the curriculum they are more driven to learn (Renn, 2017). These type of courses will not only enhance inclusion in the classroom but will also have a positive impact on the academic and social integration and norm congruence of LGBTQ students with their college.

Moreover, this curriculum will help to educate other students on the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, not only could information about sexual and gender minorities be infused into classes but it could also be used as discussion topics for student clubs and/or college forums. “Exposure to new ideas and sources of knowledge, along with a rich and dynamic dialogue concerning a range of issues, is precisely what the university/college should encourage in the campus community” (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 16). To normalize discussions about sexual and gender minorities and counter the invisibility some LGBTQ students might perceive, it is imperative to include information about and the contributions of the LGBTQ community into diversity and equity efforts and the institutional culture as a whole.

### **Professional Development and Training**

Of course, in order for faculty to create more LGBTQ-focused courses or infuse LGBTQ- topics into their curriculum, faculty development and training is recommended. Additionally, training on culturally-relevant teaching focused on how to improve the classroom environment for LGBTQ students and other minoritized students would be warranted. These trainings should also include how to eliminate microaggressions in the classroom perpetrated against marginalized students by students and faculty alike. Considering the diverse student populations on most community college campuses, it is imperative that faculty become more cognizant of the diversity of students within their classes. But they should also use this awareness to create a welcoming and affirming classroom environment, and subsequently campus climate, by using

pedagogy that is relevant to all students. Furthermore, to create a classroom environment that respects diversity, equity and inclusion for LGBTQ students, faculty need to be exposed to gender-neutral terminology, the benefit of using a student's preferred name, and include discussions about the LGBTQ community, if relevant to the curriculum. Participation in Safe Zone training, a program designed to educate campuses on and engender support for LGBTQ students, would be encouraged for faculty to acquire more knowledge of appropriate terminology and other relevant knowledge needed to assist LGBTQ students.

This training would also be recommended for staff, administrators and other students. In order for administrators to understand the specific needs of LGBTQ students and provide supportive resources and programming, they should also participate in Safe Zone training as well as other professional development opportunities. Harper and Quaye (2009) indicated that students and staff could benefit from this type of training by having

Staff within student affairs work with key student leaders, both LGBTQ students and their allies, to form programming and communication guidelines for student clubs and campus departments that help foster and support an inclusive, non-heterosexist environment. These guidelines can be used to train student leaders and staff to avoid holding events and activities that perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism (p. 72).

Normally, when individuals complete the Safe Zone training they receive a decal to place on their office doors or windows to demonstrate they are an ally to LGBTQ students and that their offices are "safe" places if students need to speak with someone. The awareness, strategies and interventions resulting from these trainings will help to validate LGBTQ students' existence in the class and at the college, create a welcoming campus climate, and consequently have a positive impact on the persistent of these students. On the other hand, ineffective training of

college employees could create classroom and co-curricular environments that make LGBTQ students susceptible to microaggressions and invisibility, and subsequently, unsafe spaces for these students (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

### **All-gender Restrooms**

Another implication of this study is for community colleges to provide more all-gender restrooms on their campuses. All the participating colleges had at least one all-gender restroom, referred to by the participants as gender-neutral restrooms, on their campus. However, the term all-gender is desired since it is clearly inclusive of everyone and gender neutral can infer the nonexistence of expressed gender. Majority of the participants, whether they identified as transgender, gender non-conforming or not, advocated for more all-gender restrooms. The very limited number of all-gender restrooms and the locations were an inconvenience for some participants but also made participants wonder if the college truly valued the needs of transgender students. Participants also spoke about the safety of transgender and gender non-conforming students who were forced to use gender binary restrooms due to the locations of the all-gender restrooms.

Jaschik (2017) noted that all-gender restrooms are a critical issue for transgender students. Therefore, higher education professionals should acknowledge that the existence of one or few of these restrooms does not create an environment that is inclusive and supportive of transgender students. Jaschik (2017) also stated that the gender binary discussion is allowed to continue on college campuses when only one or a few all-gender restrooms are available compared to the number of gender binary restrooms and other facilities. Harper and Quaye (2009) also recommended that gender-neutral bathrooms should be housed in various campus locations including areas where students normally gather. They also suggested the creation of

campus maps displaying the locations of these restrooms. The participating colleges had campus maps showing the locations of their all-gender restroom(s) even though some participants still felt the maps and all-gender restrooms on the maps were hard to locate. Consequently, more all-gender restrooms in convenient locations are warranted at the colleges. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike need to remember that all-gender restrooms are available for everyone's use, which is not the case with gender binary bathrooms. More education about the benefits of all-gender restrooms especially in reference to creating a more inclusive campus is needed.

### **Gender Inclusive Policies**

Another recommendation as a result of this study is for colleges to create gender inclusive policies. Based on the study's findings, these particular institutional policies will help to create a more welcoming and affirming campus climate for LGBTQ students, especially transgender and gender non-conforming students. According Jaschik (2017), gender inclusive policies are vital to the success of transgender college students. Although the recommendation is for gender inclusive policies, this study points specifically to a policy on preferred names, especially on class rosters. As a student affairs administrator and as a result of this study, I am aware that providing students with the option of using their preferred name on class rosters, email communication, academic scholar letters, and during the graduation ceremony makes transgender students feel respected and welcomed by their institution. Moreover, as previously discussed, colleges that do not offer this option to students are essentially "outing" some transgender or gender non-conforming students. Students enrolled in hybrid courses, for example, at a college without this type of policy might be referred to by their preferred name in the face-to-face portion of the course because they informed the instructor of their preferred name. However, because most learning management systems (LMS) for the online portion of



the course extract names from the official class roster, students' legal names are being used on discussion boards. This practice can cause unwarranted stress, an inhospitable climate, and incongruence between the student and the college for a student who prefers that their name reflects their gender identity, which might differ from the gender assigned at birth. Nonetheless, it must be noted that this policy can also be applicable to other students who might elect to be referred to by another name, such as their middle name.

My professional experiences in higher education and this study have also made me cognizant of the fact that some transgender students elected not to participate in their graduation ceremony because their legal name will be announced as they cross the stage even though have been known to others by their preferred name. As educators, whether intentional or not, we are preventing some students from being recognized and celebrated for their academic achievement even though they persisted to credential attainment. If certain students are not willing to participate in the graduation ceremony because they fear being "outed," colleges need to reevaluate their policies that are harmful and inequitable to students. Seelman (2013) declared that the barriers faced by transgender students in pursuit of changing their gender is a form of indirect discrimination. Of course, a student's legal name will have to be used on certain institutional documents such as transcripts and financial aid records.

### **Grit Development Programming**

Grit encompasses one's ability to persist toward a goal (Duckworth, 2016). Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly (2007) posited there is a strong correlation between grit, a non-cognitive skill, and a commitment to longstanding, multi-year goals such as education. Therefore, based on this study's findings, it is recommended that colleges offer programming to help students with the development of grit. Possessing grit should lead to persistence and goal

completion. This programming, however, has to address the impact adversity has on the development of grit for marginalized students.

As a higher education professional, I am aware of curriculum in first year experience or college success courses that is employed to help students develop a growth mindset, which is related to grit. This type of programming could be infused in the curriculum of LGBTQ-focused courses as well as included as an activity in LGBTQ student club meetings. As a matter of fact, the Short Grit Survey developed by Duckworth and Quinn has been administered to LGBTQ individuals to assess character strength (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

### **Other LGBTQ-related Resources and Programming**

This study also advocates for colleges to provide additional resources and programming to support the persistence of LGBTQ community colleges. For example, although community colleges offer counseling services or some form of psycho-social support for students, having a counselor or wellness professional on staff who is sensitive to and understanding of LGBTQ students' needs, as noted by participants, would be ideal. Counseling could be offered on an individual basis or in a group setting such as a support group. The support group would enable students to connect with other LGBTQ students, outside the student club, leading to a sense of belonging, social integration, and an affirming campus climate. Rankin et al. (2010) stated that there is need for counseling support for LGBTQ students and employees considering her study's findings on experiences encountered by this population at heterosexist colleges.

Additionally, resource information about housing and financial scholarships would be highly recommended. Similar to offering counseling services, these additional resources will help to increase students' sense of belonging but also their collective affiliation with the college. According to Davidson and Wilson (2017) colleges can demonstrate an affiliation with students

by helping students holistically maintain engagement with their various communities, such as their college. Some of the participants were aware of other LGBTQ students who had been kicked out of their homes. The primary and immediate need for these students was to locate affordable housing. In order to help the student remained focused on completing their education, colleges should have information on local housing readily available. Furthermore, as mentioned by participants, celebrations of national awareness days and events are warranted to provide education to LGBTQ students and about LGBTQ students and the community. Again, these type of resources signal to students that colleges are aware of their unique and potential needs and value diversity, equity and inclusion, as well.

Based on this study's findings and research related to persistence, LGBTQ students, and community colleges, there are several implications for the practitioners at the participating colleges. The aforementioned recommendations for programming, policies, and resources could have a positive impact on the persistence of LGBTQ students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Upon completion of this study, there are a few recommendations for future research that would be useful and worth exploring in order to help LGBTQ community college students persist and ultimately, achieve their intended educational goal. First, and again, this study was not intended to examine the varied experiences of LGBTQ community college students in regards to differences in socially constructed identities. Nonetheless, the fact that only one of the participants identified as a racial minority warrants research on whether the intersectionality of LGBTQ students based on sexual orientation, gender identity and racial identity influences their persistence at the community college. Considering racially minoritized college students face barriers that other students may not encounter, research has been conducted on the persistence of

these students. However, being an African-American gay male on a college campus comes with extra challenges, considering this person would fall into two marginalized groups and more than likely experience bias based on the social constructs of racial identity and sexual orientation. Therefore, because the LGBTQ community is not homogeneous, research needs to be conducted on the various sub-populations within this community. In order to obtain a larger sample of LGBTQ community college students to represent various intersecting identities, a quantitative study would be recommended. The quantitative study would enable an investigation of within group differences in experiences and factors that affect the persistence of LGBTQ community college students based on intersecting identities.

Speaking of sub-populations within the LGBTQ, another recommended area of research would be on the persistence of transgender community college students. Fifty percent of participants were transgendered students. Despite the fact that the students who did not identify as transgender clearly empathized with the transgender students, especially in reference to being misgendered and needing more than one all-gender restroom on their campus, it seems that the transgender participants would internalize these experiences differently than the other participants. This student population undoubtedly brings unique needs and concerns to a college environment which could impact their perception of a welcoming environment and in turn their desire to remain at an institution. I would recommend that a qualitative research design be employed to study promoting the persistence of transgender students at community colleges, since there is a dearth of literature on this topic (Dugan et al., 2012; Wimberly, 2015).

An additional area for research would be the impact of LGBTQ-focused courses and/or infusing LGBTQ topics into course curriculum on the persistence of community college students. Even though the participants felt that more LGBTQ-focused courses were needed for

various reasons, inclusive of enhancing the education and awareness and visibility of the LGBTQ community, it would be ideal to research the benefit of these courses. Would offering more LGBTQ-focused courses or infusing LGBTQ topics into course curricula promote persistence of LGBTQ students? In addition to the benefits for LGBTQ students, I would be curious about empirical research focused on the impact of these courses for the entire campus.

One more area of research that should be considered is the impact of microaggressions on the departure of LGBTQ community college students. According to Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, and Renn (2015), there is a lack of research about LGBTQ college students' experiences with microaggressions. Notwithstanding the fact that none of the participants in this study actually cited the term microaggression, participants referenced experiences and interactions that would be construed as microaggressions. For example, hearing other students say "that's so gay" when referencing something they deem weird or different. Or being called by one's legal name even after informing faculty and staff one's preferred name and pronoun could be perceived as a microaggression. Consequently, research on the influence of microaggressions on LGBTQ community college students' persistence seems warranted.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study are valuable because they help to fill the gap in the literature on the persistence of LGBTQ community college students. The results of this research offers evidence on how to promote persistence among LGBTQ community college students at the three participating Illinois community colleges based on the experiences of eight LGBTQ students. Moreover, the findings support that some of the major constructs in William Spady's 1970 Sociological Model of Student Departure and Vincent Tinto's 1975 Model of Student Integration and 1993 Interactionist Model of College Student Departure are not only applicable to LGBTQ

community college students but that their models can be expanded upon by including other explanations that promote the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

The major constructs in Spady and Tinto's theories that are generally compatible with the study's results are social and academic integration, sense of belonging, faculty and student interaction, norm congruence, and goal commitment (grit). However, in addition to Spady and Tinto's constructs, a safe, accepting and supportive campus climate that values diversity, equity and inclusion as well as enhances the awareness and visibility of LGBTQ students and the community play an important role in the persistence of LGBTQ community college students.

I hope the conclusions drawn from this study convey the pivotal role of higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, in promoting the persistence of LGBTQ students. This view is important considering it challenges the deficit perspective of placing the onus on the student for dropping out, which was the opinion of a substantial amount of early persistence and retention literature. Even though there are many explanations for students' departure, Liu and Liu (1999) suggested that departure is not just an individual student's decision but also the function of the institution. Remember, a student's goal is to persist to completion regardless of the institution in which they earn a credential, whereas a college's goal is to retain students at their institution until completion. As Tinto (2016) noted, "institutions have to adopt the student's perspective and ask not only how they should act to retain students but also how they should act so that more of their students want to persist to completion" (p. 1).

Consequently, the participating community colleges can promote the persistence of LGBTQ students by helping them to develop grit and by creating social and academic environments consisting of programming and policies that are congruent with students' values and beliefs and encourage the integration of LGBTQ students and interactions with faculty.

Moreover, these institutions need campus climates that are accepting and supportive of and safe for LGBTQ students. These colleges also need to demonstrate respect for diversity, equity and inclusion and enhance the awareness and visibility of LGBTQ students and the community.

As higher education and the earning of a college degree have become more important to society, the persistence and retention of all students including LGBTQ students, has also become more important. Therefore, traditional student departure models need to reflect the unique needs of LGBTQ students and community college students. Wild and Ebbers (2002) noted that new viewpoints should be added to student retention models in order to provide the appropriate approaches for community college students. This study acknowledges influential theoretical concepts of traditional student departure models on the persistence of LGBTQ community college students but also advocates for additional explanations to be included in promoting persistence among this student population.

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## APPENDIX A: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

1. How many semesters have you attended this college?
2. What term best describes your sexual or gender identity?
3. Tell me about your experiences as a student at this college?
4. Are you involved in any in-class or out-class activities and/or organizations? If so, how has being involved in these activities contributed to you remaining at this college?
5. How often do you interact with faculty inside the classroom? What about outside the classroom?
6. How does the mission of the college align with your values as a LGBTQ student?
7. How has your sexual or gender identity affected your experiences as a student at this college?
8. Have your overall experiences as a student motivated you to remain at this college?
9. How would you define the campus climate toward the LGBTQ community?
10. How would you describe the relationships with LGBTQ students and other students on campus?
11. How would you describe the relationships among faculty, staff, and administrators with LGBTQ students on campus?
12. What existing policies, services, programs or activities do you feel that your college offers to address the needs and enhance the college experiences of LGBTQ students in order to help them complete their intended educational goals?
13. What institutional policies, services, programs or activities do you feel that your college should implement to address the needs and enhance the college experience of LGBTQ students in order to help them complete their intended educational goals?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences at your college?

## APPENDIX B: COMMUNITY COLLEGE RECRUITMENT LETTER

\_\_\_\_\_, 2017

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, Vice-President or Dean of Student Affairs/Student Services:

As the Chief Student Services Officer at your college, I am writing you to seek approval to use currently enrolled students at your college in a research study about Promoting the Persistence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community college students.

\_\_\_\_\_ community college is one of two colleges being contacted because your institution has a LGBTQ student club listed as a registered student organization. Additionally, your student population meets the minimum student population of 5000 as criteria for institutional participation. Because more than likely, the management of registered student organizations as well as student support groups fall under your auspices, I thought you would be the appropriate administrator at your college to contact.

This study is being conducted by Gregory D. Robinson, a doctoral candidate at Illinois State University in the Higher Education Administration Program. The study will explore experiences of LGBTQ students at your institution that encourage persistence among these students at community colleges. As part of the recruitment process, I would like to invite students who meet the following criteria to participate in this research study: (1) membership in the college's LGBTQ student club or support group and self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, (2) have attended your college for a minimum of one semester, *and* (3) be 18 years old or older. The club's advisor or designee will be asked to distribute the student participant recruitment letter to members of the LGBTQ student club. Moreover, if your college has a LGBTQ support group, I would also like to invite these students to participate in this study. Similar to the recruitment process for the student club, the college official who facilitates the support group would distribute recruitment letters to the support group members. I am also requesting to obtain public documents, such as club meeting notices, support group flyers, admission applications, etc., from study participants and the college that can also be used during the data analysis process.

Participants will partake in an audio-recorded one-on-one interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. In order to address confidentiality issues and make the interviews convenient for study participants (students), with permission and assistance from your college, the interviews will be conducted on your campus during the spring 2018 term in a room that is deemed secured based on the ability to lock the door and/or post a sign on the door noting the room is occupied / not available. Preferably the room would not have any windows. However, if students feel more comfortable meeting off campus, special arrangements will be made. Additionally, the audio-recorded interview will not have students state their name or the name of college in which they are enrolled. Students and the two participating colleges will be assigned pseudonyms and pennames, respectively, for record-keeping purposes. The information collected from the study participants via the audio-recorded interview and transcription of the interview will be locked in a secure cabinet off-campus and in password protected files on my personal computer. The only individuals that will have access to audio-recordings will be myself/co-investigator and an authorized transcriptionist sworn to maintain strict confidentiality. The students' responses from the interviews will be analyzed to



answer the study's research questions. If the data is used for conference presentations or in a college report, personal identifiers such as email addresses or names will NOT be used. Any data collected and used will be destroyed 3-5 years after the study.

Study participants as well as the participating colleges could benefit from the findings and recommendations of this study. The information obtained from this study could help the participating community colleges enhance their understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that encourage persistence and decrease attrition among these students by hearing their voices through qualitative interviews. Consequently, these students' experiences can help determine policies, strategies, services, and programs that will promote their persistence. The direct benefits for the research participants would be to utilize the data from the study to justify and advocate for the existence of certain resources and programming such as Safe Zone training for the campus community and/or to implement new initiatives that might contribute to the persistence of LGBTQ students. As a result, this study could identify targeted programming to help this student population successfully achieve their educational goals as well as contribute to filling the gap in the persistence and retention literature on disenfranchised and oppressed students. Moreover, this study is timely considering LGBTQ students are more visible on college campuses due to an increase in the students who self-identify as members of the LGBTQ community but could also help to address the harassment and discrimination sexual minoritized students appear to experience on campuses more often than their heterosexual White counterparts. Plus, the goal of higher education institutions is to increase the persistence and ultimately the completion rates of all students.

The foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research study could be a potential breach of confidentiality. Even though I will make a concerted effort to keep the identity of the participants and the colleges confidential by using pseudonyms and pennames for participants and colleges in written and audio-recordings, there is a small risk that non-study participants who advise the student organization or facilitate the support group could determine the students who participated in this study. Additionally, participants' responses to questions about personal experiences could possibly trigger some discomfort while reflecting on their answers. However, I am trained as a professional counselor and am also a former psychology professor. Consequently, although I know how to counsel students in distress, I will be in possession of contact information on available counseling services at your college in case referrals are warranted.

It must also be noted that participants will not be compensated as well as the fact that participants who elect to participate may withdraw from the study at any point without penalty considering participation is strictly voluntary. Furthermore, study participants will be asked to complete a consent form at the beginning of the interview. A consent form is used at higher education institutions if human subjects are used in research.

If approval from your college is obtained to use your students in this research study, please know I will include a sentence in the study participant recruitment letter noting that I obtained permission from their college to recruit their students in this study.

If any additional information is needed about this study, please call me at 773-392-\_\_\_\_ (cell) or 847-214-7274 (office). You can leave a message on a password protected voicemail. Please

note that a request for more information does not obligate your institution to participate in this study.

I would like to thank you in advance for reading this letter and considering being an institutional participant in this study that has potential positive benefits for both students and the college and that focuses on a topic that requires more research in higher education. If you are not the correct person who can approve your college's participation in this study, I would appreciate if you could refer me to the correct person at your institution.

Sincerely,

Gregory D. Robinson  
Doctoral candidate, Illinois State University  
Dean of Student Services and Development / Elgin Community College  
gdrobin@ilstu.edu or grobinson@elgin.edu

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

\_\_\_\_\_, 2018

Dear current Community College Student / Potential research participant:

I am writing to inform you about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the Promoting the Persistence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community college students. This study is being conducted by Gregory D. Robinson, a doctoral candidate at Illinois State University in the Higher Education Administration Program. This study will explore experiences of LGBTQ students that encourage persistence among these students at community colleges. Persistence is measured by a student who begins their college career and eventually completes a credential regardless of the institution or how long it takes.

You are receiving this letter because you were listed as a current member of your college's LGBTQ student club or support group and are 18 years old or older. You should have also attended your college for a minimum of one semester. Participation consists of an audio-recorded one-on-one interview that will be approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this study is an excellent opportunity to obtain feedback from students, examine perceptions of students, and gain insights that may not occur without soliciting students' opinions. Recommendations based on an analysis of responses from all research participants and public documents, such as club meeting notices, support group flyers, admission applications, etc., will be made to help with the persistence of LGBTQ students. Please know that before contacting you, I obtained approval from your college to use their students in this study.

If you would like to be a part of this research study, please contact me via email at [gdrobin@ilstu.edu](mailto:gdrobin@ilstu.edu) noting your interest in being a research participant. I will contact you within 2 – 4 days to set up a convenient time and the location for the interview.

Participation is voluntary and there will not be a direct or indirect penalty if you elect not to participate. Additionally, please note that I will request your written consent to participate in this study at the time of the interview.

If you would like additional information about this study, please call Gregory D. Robinson at 773-392-\_\_\_\_. You can leave a message on a password protected voicemail. Please note that a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in this study.

I would like to thank you in advance for reading this letter and considering being a participant in a study that has potential positive benefits for both students and the college and that focuses on a topic that requires more research in higher education.

Sincerely,

Gregory D. Robinson  
Doctoral candidate, Illinois State University

## APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Illinois State University Educational Administration and Foundations**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Mohamed Nur-Awaleh, 309-438-5155, manuraw@ilstu.edu

**Co-Principal Investigator:** Gregory D. Robinson, 773-392-\_\_\_\_, gdrobin@ilstu.edu

#### **Title of Study:**

Promoting persistence among LGBTQ community college students.

#### **Introduction:**

I am inviting students who meet the following criteria to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of LGBTQ community college students that promote their persistence: (1) membership in the college's LGBTQ student club or support group and self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, (2) have attended their college for a minimum of one semester, *and* (3) 18 years old or older. Participants will partake in an audio-recorded one-on-one interview. Please read the following explanation carefully and feel free to contact me with any questions at the number or email listed above. Please know that before contacting you, I obtained approval from your college to recruit their students for this study.

#### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this research study is to answer the following questions: (1) What experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges contribute to their persistence? (2) How can the experiences reported by LGBTQ community college students be used to build upon or counter research that examines the reasons why students elect to remain at or depart from their colleges?

#### **Duration:**

Participation (audio-recorded one-on-one interview) in this research study should take approximately 60 minutes.

#### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will consist of partaking in an interview that will be audio-recorded. The interview will examine the experiences of LGBTQ students at community colleges that contribute to their persistence. This consent form will be completed at the beginning of the interview. Consent forms acknowledging agreement to participate will be stored in a secure file cabinet, requiring a special key to access the cabinet.

#### **Risks/Discomforts:**

The foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research study could be a potential breach of confidentiality. However, the process for maintaining confidentiality is addressed below. Additionally, your responses to questions about yourself and your experiences could possibly trigger some discomfort while reflecting on your answers. It must also be noted that participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Benefits:**

The students who are members of the LGBTQ community as well as their community college would benefit from this research study. The data on this targeted population would be valuable because it would enhance the college's understanding of experiences that contribute to the persistence of LGBTQ students. The direct benefits for the research participants would be to utilize the data from the study to justify the existence of certain resources and programming such as Safe Zone training and/or to implement new initiatives that might contribute to the persistence of LGBTQ students.

**Confidentiality:**

The interview will be conducted on campus in a room that is deemed secured based on the ability to lock the door and/or post a sign on the door noting the room is occupied / not available. Preferably the room would not have any windows. However, if students feel more comfortable meeting off campus, special arrangements will be made. Additionally, during the audio-recorded interview, you will be advised against stating your name or the name of the college you attend. Instead, prior to the beginning of the interview you will be assigned a pseudonym and the college will be assigned a penname for record-keeping purposes. In order to maintain the confidentiality of others, please do not mention the names of other individuals during the audio-recording. The information collected from you via the audio-recorded interview and transcription of the interview will be locked in a secure cabinet off-campus and in password protected files on my personal computer. The only individuals that will have access to audio-recordings and transcriptions will be the co-principal investigator and an authorized transcriptionist sworn to maintain strict confidentiality. Your responses from the interview will be analyzed along with other participants' responses to answer the study's research questions. If the data is used for conference presentations or in a college report, personal identifiers such as email addresses, individuals' names, and the college's name will NOT be used. However, certain data will be used in the research study and possibly a college report. This information will include the number of unidentifiable participants from the college, the sexual or gender identity of unidentifiable participants from the college, the number of semesters unidentifiable participants attended the college, group themes that arose from interviews, and quotes from unidentifiable participants. Any data collected and used will be destroyed 3-5 years after the study. Specifically, audio-recordings will be deleted while transcription of interviews and consent forms will be shredded.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Please note that if you elect to become a research study participant that you will not be compensated. Participation is strictly voluntary. You do NOT have to participate in this research study or if you elect to participate you may quit at any point without penalty. Additionally, because participation is voluntary, participants have the right to refuse to answer any interview question.

**Offer to Answer Questions:**

If you have any questions about study-related activities prior to, during, or after the research project, you can contact Dr. Mohamed Nur-Awaleh, principal investigator and dissertation committee chair at 309-438-5155 or Gregory D. Robinson, co-principal investigator at 773-392-\_\_\_\_. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University at (309) 438-2529 and/or rec@ilstu.edu.

**Interview Consent**

Participant Preferred Email Address:

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\*\*I agree to participate in the study by partaking in an audio-recorded one-on-one interview.

\*\*

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Participant Signature (*must be 18 years old or older*)

Date

## APPENDIX E: DEFINITIONS OF TERMINOLOGY USED TO IDENTIFY PARTICIPANTS'

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

**Agender – *adj.*:** a person with no (or very little) connection to the traditional system of gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either man or woman, and/or someone who sees themselves as existing without gender. Sometimes called gender neutrois, gender neutral, or genderless.

**Androsexual – *adj.*:** being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to men, males, and/or masculinity. Despite not identifying as either male or female fully.

**Asexual – *adj.*:** experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behavior. Asexuality exists on a continuum from people who experience no sexual attraction or have any desire for sex, to those who experience low levels, or sexual attraction only under specific conditions. Many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels, e.g., demisexual. Sometimes abbreviated to “ace.”

**Cisgender /“siss-jendur”/ – *adj.*:** a gender description for when someone’s sex assigned at birth and gender identity correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, and identifies as a man). A simple way to think about it is if a person is not transgender, they are cisgender. The word cisgender can also be shortened to “cis.”

**Demisexual – *adj.*:** little or no capacity to experience sexual attraction until a strong romantic connection is formed with someone, often within a romantic relationship.

**Gender fluid – *adj.*:** gender fluid is a gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders, but may feel more man some days, and more woman other days.

**Queer – 1 *adj.*:** an umbrella term to describe individuals who don’t identify as straight and/or cisgender. **2 *noun*:** a slur used to refer to someone who isn’t straight and/or cisgender. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, and how it is still used as a slur many communities, it is not embraced or used by all LGBTQ people. The term “queer” can often be use interchangeably with LGBTQ (e.g., “queer people” instead of “LGBTQ people”).

**Questioning – *verb, adj.*:** an individual who or time when someone is unsure about or exploring their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Transgender – 1 *adj.*:** a gender description for someone who has transitioned (or is transitioning) from living as one gender to another. **2 *adj.*:** an umbrella term for anyone whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity do not correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, but does not identify as a man).

**Transman; Transwoman – *noun*:** **1** An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transgender people or transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as assigned female sex at birth. **2** Identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transsexuals or transgender people to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as assigned male sex at birth.