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Listening to Their Voices: A Narrative on Campus Climate for Trans\* Students

By

Cloe Bourdages

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2021

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that campus climate has on trans\* student academic and personal success. This qualitative study was explored through individual interviews by four participants. Participants discussed practices which enabled and inhibited their success; which lead to the finding of four themes: identity and validation, academic climate, climate outside of the classroom, and resources and services. Overall, a positive correlation in trans\* student success was found when institutions use inclusive practices within their work. Lastly, the study provided implications for higher education recommended by both the participants and the researcher.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>CHAPTER I.....</b>	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PURPOSE OF STUDY .....	2
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	2
PROPOSITION.....	3
SIGNIFICANE OF THE STUDY.....	3
LIMITATION AND DELIMIATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	4
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	5
SUMMARY.....	9
<b>CHAPTER II.....</b>	<b>10</b>
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	10
HISTORY OF TRANS* RIGHTS.....	10
COURT CASES.....	13
TITLE IX.....	13
TRANS* IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.....	14
GENDER.....	15
TRANS* IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.....	16
THE EXPERINCES OF TRANS* INDIVIDUALS.....	17
OPPRESSION.....	17

MENTAL HEALTH.....	18
CAMPUS CLIMATE.....	19
CLASSROOM CLIMATE.....	20
HOUSING.....	20
BATHROOMS.....	21
SENSE OF BELONGING.....	21
INVOLEMENT.....	21
UNIVERSITY RESPONSE.....	22
CAMPUS CLIMATE.....	22
ALLY TRAINING PROGRAMS.....	23
CHOSEN NAME AND PRONOUN POLICIES.....	24
GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERISTY CENTERS.....	25
FACILITIES PRACTICES.....	25
HOUSING.....	26
BATHROOMS.....	26
CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	27
CAMPUS ECOLOGY.....	27
SUMMARY.....	29
<b>CHAPTER III.....</b>	<b>30</b>
METHODOLOGY.....	30
DESIGN OF THE STUDY.....	30
PARTICIPANTS.....	30
RESEARCH SITE.....	31

DATA COLLECTION.....	32
INSTRUMENT.....	33
INITIAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT.....	33
THE RESEARCHER AS AN INSTRUMENT.....	34
DATA ANALYSIS.....	34
TREATMENT OF DATA.....	35
SUMMARY.....	36
<b>CHAPTER IV.....</b>	<b>37</b>
RESULTS AND FINDINGS.....	37
IDENTITY AND VALIDATION.....	37
COMING OUT.....	37
SUPPORT FROM PEERS.....	39
ACADEMIC CLIMATE.....	40
EXPERINCES.....	41
PROFESSORS.....	41
PRACTICES.....	43
LANGUAGE.....	44
PRONOUN AND NAME USAGE.....	44
GENDERING.....	45
CLIMATE OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM.....	46
RESOURCES AND SERVICES.....	50
GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSITY CENTER.....	50
PRIDE.....	51

HOUSING.....	51
HEALTH AND COUNSELING SERVICES.....	52
ON-CAMPUS JOBS.....	52
RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS.....	53
<b>CHAPTER V.....</b>	<b>54</b>
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	54
DISCUSSION.....	54
RESEARCH QUESTION 1.....	54
RESEARCH QUESTION 2.....	56
RESEARCH QUESTION 3.....	58
IMPLICATION FO HIGHER EDUCATION.....	59
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTHER RESEARCH.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	64
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>APPENDIX A.....</b>	<b>75</b>
EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS.....	75
<b>APPENDIX B.....</b>	<b>76</b>
CONSENT FORM.....	76
<b>APPENDIX C.....</b>	<b>80</b>
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	80
<b>APPENDIX D.....</b>	<b>82</b>
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.....	82

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

As society becomes more inclusive, the visibility of trans\* identities has risen (Goldberg, 2018). Increasing enrollment in higher education leads to an increase in the number of trans\* students attending college (Herman et al., 2017). These students experience “discrimination and harassment at college, which may have implications for their academic success and retention” (Goldberg, 2018, p.2). As the trans\* student population increases on college campuses, the need to support the gender and sexual diversity (GSD) community is growing (Goldberg, 2018).

Nicolazzo (2016) defines trans\* students as individuals “who transgress the socially constructed discourse of how we identify, express, and embody our gender” (p.169). The asterisk is used to encompass all genders under the trans\* umbrella. Individuals whose gender is congruent with their biological sex, which they were assigned at birth, are cisgender (Green & Maurer, 2017). It is important to note that the term gender and sexual diversity (GSD) is inclusive of trans\* individuals while lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) is not. Chosen names and pronouns are individuals’ names and pronouns which reflect the individual.

Since 2010 universities have made advancements in supporting trans\* students (Woodford et al., 2014). Advances in ally training programs create supportive allies and advocates on campuses (Woodford et al., 2014). Also, institutions are beginning to adopt chosen names and pronoun policies (Goldberg, 2018). The number of GSD Centers has also been increasing since the early 1990s, and the functionality of these centers has seen significant advancements in current times (Beemyn, 2003). Although institutions are

taking strides forward, the government's judicial branch is working backward (Wilson, 2018). The Trump administration has "rescinded the Obama Administration's guidance which had protected trans\* students" (Bowman, 2017, p.1), many universities are still enforcing policies supporting these trans\* students (Bowman, 2017). Society is also moving towards inclusivity as activists and allies continue to lobby for inclusive legislation, including insurance companies covering medical transitions (Vitulli, 2010).

Though there have been steps taken to increase inclusivity and the availability of resources on college campuses, improvements are still needed. Trans\* students have lower retention rates and decreased academic performance than their cisgender peers (Goldberg, 2018). One way in which trans\* students' retention and academic achievement can improve is using campus resources. Gathering insight into the utilization of campus resources by trans\* students may be a critical factor in understanding the support needed for trans\* students to succeed.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how climate impacts trans\* student personal and academic success. Furthermore, this study will gain insight into the trans\* students' perceptions of how campus resources available to them provide the support they need. The study offers the university an opportunity to evaluate its climate to enable support for trans\* students.

### **Research Questions**

The following question was used as a guide to best understand the study: How does climate impact trans\* student success academically and personally in a collegiate environment? This will be investigated via the following research questions:

RQ1: How do trans\* students describe their level of comfort within their identities?

RQ2: How do trans\* students describe their academic performance?

RQ3: How do trans\* students utilize on-campus resources to be academically successful?

### **Proposition**

When trans\* students make and build connections on campus, it is proposed that they will be successful in the college environment, both academically and personally. However, it is also proposed that trans\* students avoid certain climate areas due to lack of support, which indirectly affects their success.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as there is an increase in trans\* students attending university (Herman, 2017). This trend is expected to continue. Institutions have begun creating policies and resources to support these students, both academically and socially, although support is lacking. Without adequate support, trans\* students are at higher risk of not completing their studies, lower retention rates, and lower academic performance (Goldberg, 2018). By understanding trans\* students' experiences and what enables them to be successful, student affairs professionals will be able to create an environment to better support and assist them. Lastly, by understanding what practices enable and inhibit trans\* student success, on-campus resources will be able to adapt policies and practices that positively impact trans\* student success.

## **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gather insight on how climate impacts trans\* student experiences however, the research is limited as the size of the target population is small. The research site's undergraduate student population is approximately 7,000; however, the target population is limiting as the trans\* community is a small population. In 2016 it was estimated that 0.6% of the population was trans\* (Flores et al., 2016). This small target population poses a challenge for recruitment. Therefore, the researcher will work with the campus's Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) Center and the housing and dining department to promote the study.

A related limitation is difficulty identifying participants who are willing to participate in the study. Given the vulnerability of the population being investigated, and despite confidentiality practices, some students may have concerns about being outed. Participants may be limited to safe spaces where they can complete the interviews because they are not out. The researcher will utilize snowball sampling methods to assist with this issue, allowing the study to occur where it might not have been possible due to the small population size (Stephanie, 2017).

Another potential limitation is transferability. Findings from this study may not be transferable to other universities with different demographics. The sample will reflect the university at which the study will be conducted, its GSD student population and characteristics, and the availability of its resources. The researcher will identify themes that occur within 50% or more of the sample to address transferability.

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic changed the universal norm and potentially could have impacted the participants' college

experience. Furthermore, it limited the researcher from being able to meet with the participants in person. The researcher had to create a relationship with the participants virtually through the zoom platform, and for two out of the four participants it was the first time the researcher had meet them. The last potential limitation is the researcher identifying as cis-gender. The researcher must be intentional when building relationships with participants to create an environment where the participants feel heard and validated.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following are a clarification of definitions that are used throughout this document.

- **agender:** “This is an identity signaling that one does not have, identify with, or align with any gender. Being agender does not mean people do not know their gender. Rather, it means not having or identifying with any gender” (Nicolazzo, 2016, p.165)
- **ally:** “A cisgender person who supports, affirms, is in solidarity with, or advocates for trans\* people” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.56).
- **biological sex:** “A person’s combination of genitals, chromosomes, and hormones, usually categorized as “male” or “female” based on visual inspection of genitals via ultrasound or at birth. Many assume that a person’s gender identity will be congruent with their sex assignment. Everyone has a biological sex” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.53).
- **chosen names:** Name that an individual has chosen that reflects how they view themselves.

- **cisgender:** “An adjective to describe a person whose gender identity is congruent with (or “matches”) the biological sex they were assigned at birth” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.53).
- **discrimination:** “Any of a broad range of actions taken to deny trans\* people access to situations/places or to inflict harm upon trans\* people. Examples of discrimination include not hiring a trans\* person, threatening a gender non-conforming person’s physical safety, denying a trans\* person access to services, or reporting someone for using the “wrong” bathroom” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.53).
- **gender and sexual diversity (GSD):** Individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (Green & Peterson, 2006).
- **gender conforming:** “A person whose gender expression is perceived as being consistent with cultural norms expected for that gender. According to these norms, boys/men are or should be masculine, and girls/women are or should be feminine. Not all cisgender people are gender-conforming, and not all transgender people are gender non-conforming” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender dysphoria (GD):** The distress a person feels due to a mismatch between their gender and their sex assigned at birth is commonly associated with trans\* individuals (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender expression:** “A person’s outward gender presentation, usually comprised of personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection, and body language. Gender expression is typically categorized as masculine or feminine, less commonly as androgynous. All people express a gender. Gender expression

can be congruent with a person's gender identity, but it can also be incongruent if a person does not feel safe or supported or does not have the resources needed to engage in gender expression that authentically reflects their gender identity” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).

- **gender identity:** “A person's deep-seated, internal sense of who they are as a gendered being—specifically, the gender with which they identify themselves. All people have a gender identity” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender marker:** “The marker (male or female) that appears on a person's identity documents (e.g., birth certificate, driver's license, passport, travel or work visas, green cards, etc.). The gender marker on a transgender person's identity documents will be their sex assigned at birth until they undergo a legal and logistical process to change it, where possible” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender neutral:** “A term that describes something (sometimes a space, such as a bathroom; or an item, such as a piece of clothing) that is not segregated by sex/gender” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender neutral language:** “Language that does not assume or confer gender. For example, “person” instead of ‘man’ or ‘woman’” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).
- **gender non-conforming:** “A person whose gender expression is perceived as being inconsistent with cultural norms expected for that gender. Specifically, boys/men are not masculine enough or are feminine, while girls/women are not feminine enough or are masculine. Not all transgender people are gender non-conforming, and not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender. Cisgender people may also be gender non-conforming. Gender non-conformity is

often inaccurately confused with sexual orientation” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54).

- **gender performativity:** Understanding oneself and the perceptions in which society sees oneself are interlinked in understanding one's identity (Butler as cited by Nicolazzo, 2016).
- **passing:** “Describes a person’s ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as heterosexual” (Green & Peterson, 2006, p.6).
- **oppression:** “an interlocking multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups and... consists of three levels: (a) individual, (b) institutional, and (c) social/cultural” (as cited in Nicolazzo, 2016, p.32).
- **non-binary:** “A continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/ woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. Words that people may use to express their nonbinary gender identity include ‘agender,’ ‘bigender,’ ‘genderqueer,’ ‘genderfluid,’ and ‘pangender’” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.55).
- **pronoun:** Pronouns selected by an individual that best reflects their gender, which may or may not reflect their assigned sex at birth. Examples of pronouns are: she/ her/ hers, he/ him/ his, they/ them/ theirs, ze/ hir/ hirs, etc.

- **sex assigned at birth:** “The determination of a person’s sex based on the visual appearance of the genitals at birth. The sex someone is labeled at birth” (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.55).
- **Trans\*:** individuals “who transgress the socially constructed discourse of how we identify, express, and embody our gender” (p.169)
- **transphobia:** “The irrational fear of those who are gender diverse and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity” (Green & Peterson, 2006, p.10).

### **Summary**

This study is focused on the impact which climate has on trans\* student success. Chapter one discusses the study’s purpose, research questions, the study’s significance, limitations, and definitions, which provides a detailed introduction of the study. Chapter two will provide a thorough review of the literature developed regarding trans\* students and student success.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

As trans\* student populations are rising, institutions are taking steps to create welcoming and inclusive environments. Although the trans\* population is often grouped with the LGB population when research is conducted, there are gaps in the research as they face different challenges (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015). The purpose of this literature review is to review the history of trans\* rights, trans\* identity development, the experiences of trans\* individuals, and university responses. This study will focus on how the student interacts with the institution and how the institution interacts with the student while applying campus ecology theory.

#### History of Trans\* Rights

Trans\* activism began in the early 1900s and has continued into today (Stryker, 2008). The emergence of trans\* activism began when new identities and communities became visible (Stryker, 2008). When the movement started, trans\* identities were not accepted by LGB individuals as they were not seen as a part of the community. It is important to recognize that the concepts of gender and expression existed years before the movement. However, with the further understanding and acceptance of trans\* individuals, trans\* individuals have been adopted by the LGB community (Vitull, 2010).

One of the most notable activism events was the Stonewall riots. On June 28th, 1969, police officers raided the Stonewall Inn as they were a predominantly gay bar located on Christopher Street in New York City (Matzner, 2015). During the raid, police officers would target the GSD community members who did not conform to gender norms (Matzner, 2015). That night the Stonewall Inn was charged with the illegal sale of

alcohol (Matzner, 2015). Eventually, a crowd had formed outside the bar, where they began pelting the police officers with coins as a sign of protest, as the coins were a representation of the payoffs gay bars had to make to the police to be able to operate (Matzner, 2015). The police officers were then forced to take refuge in Stonewall. During the riots, a group of drag queens started singing, “We are the Stonewall girls/ We wear our hair in curls/ We wear no underwear/ We show our pubic hair/ We wear our dungarees/ Above our nelly Knees” to taunt the officers (Matzner, 2015, p. 2). That night led to multiple nights of rioting (Matzner, 2015). The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed a month after the riots, which led to the creation of organizations and communities focused around the GSD community (Matzner, 2015). Since 1970, marches have taken place on Stonewall’s anniversary in New York and worldwide (Matzner, 2015). The Stonewall Inn was recognized as a historical landmark in 1999. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stonewall was in 2019 (Matzner, 2015).

Phyllis Frye and Karen Kerin were some of the first individuals to advocate for trans\* rights within the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) during the 1994 Senate Hearings (Vitull, 2010). The first lobby event occurred with six activists in March of 1995 (Frye, 2000). During the 2007 debate on the ENDA bill, an inclusive statement about trans\* individuals was retracted; therefore, Frank Barney, a United States Representative and advocate, separated the bill into two different bills, one tackling LGB individuals and the other trans\* individuals (“A Civil Rights Law,” 2007). The bill addressing LGB individuals was passed in the house in 2007; however, it failed in the senate (Beemyn, 2014).

In the era of Barack Obama's presidency, advances of GSD rights, specifically students who do not identify within the gender norm, were emerging through the "Dear Colleague Letter on Trans\* Students." Within the "Dear Colleague Letter on Trans\* Students," the Obama Administration's Departments of Education and Justice created a policy that required schools to use chosen names and pronouns aligning with student identities, accessible bathrooms, and banning gender-based harassment (Dear Colleague Letter on Trans\* Students, 2016). In 2017, the guidelines from "Dear Colleague Letter on Trans\* Students" protecting trans\* students were retracted by the Trump Administration (Kreighbaum, 2017). Sandre Battle, the Department of Education acting assistant secretary for civil rights, and T.E. Wheeler II, the acting assistant attorney general for civil rights at the Department of Justice, signed the "Dear Colleague" new guidelines letter released by the Trump administration, which retracted the guideline. The Trump administration retracted the guideline because the "guidance did not contain extensive legal analysis and did not undergo a formal public process before it was released" (Kreighbaum, 2017).

In June of 2020, the Trump Administration finalized a rule that redefined sex to biological sex within Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (Simmons-Duffin, 2020). The Obama Administration had created nondiscrimination protections, which explained: "that protections regarding "sex" encompass those based on gender, which is defined as "male, female, neither, nor a combination of male and female" (Simmons-Duffin, 2020, para. 6). This then leads to the protections in which trans\* individuals received under the Affordable Care Act against health care discriminations to be retracted due to the new definition of sex (Sanger-Katz & Weiland, 2020).

### *Court cases*

In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sex discrimination protects GSD workers from workplace harassment and discrimination (Liptak, 2020). Before the ruling, it was legal in over 25 states to fire an employee due to their GSD status (Liptak, 2020). The court decision was based on the court rulings of *Bostock v. Clayton County, GA*, and *Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda*, where Gerald Bostock and Donald Zarda were fired based on sexual orientation, and *R.G. & G.R Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commissions*, where Aimee Stephens was fired based on her gender (Liptak, 2020). This court decision enables members of the GSD community discriminated against based on their GSD identities to file lawsuits; however, there must be a significant amount of evidence to prove the discrimination.

### *Title IX*

Currently, under Title IX, all students have protections from discrimination, bullying, or harassment. Under the federal Equal Access Act, it was ruled that Gay-Straight Alliances or any organization focus on GSD youth at public schools must have equal access to resources, equal treatment, and freedom of expression (Fetner & Kush, 2008). These resources allow students who are a part of the GSD community to find a supportive community. In 2017, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit concluded that “the term “sex” in the regulations is ambiguous and deferred to what the court characterized as the “novel” interpretation advanced in the guidance” (Battles & Wheeler, p.1). Therefore, Title IX defines sex as an individual’s biological sex and not their gender. Currently, the Supreme Court has several petitions that address the meaning

of “sex” under Title VII (Cole & Back, 2018). The Supreme Court decision under Title VII can potentially affect the meaning of “sex” in Title IX due to their similarities (Cole & Back, 2018).

### **Trans\* Identity Development**

In current literature, it is debated that gender is either a social construct or a natural phenomenon. In Nicolazzo’s book *Trans\* in College: Trans\* Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion*, ze explores the concept of gender through the research of Riki Wilchins and Judith Butler. Wilchins’ research argues that gender is socially constructed, which is the common ideology on college campuses (Nicolazzo, 2016). The concept that gender is a social construct states that “gender is something one does rather than is” (Wilchins as cited by Nicolazzo, 2016, p.27). This concept allows individuals to control their own identities and expressions; however, it delimits the understanding of trans\* individuals and gender outside the norms (Nicolazzo, 2016).

Judith Butler (2006) describes gender performativity as the understanding of oneself, and the perceptions in which society sees oneself are interlinked in understanding one’s identity (as cited in Nicolazzo, 2016). Furthermore, Butler explains gender as society’s perceptions of an individual and self; thus, it is not one’s choice (Nicolazzo, 2016). Butler describes sex and gender as the same term as sex and gender is visible and not biological or psychological (Nicolazzo, 2016). Therefore, within Butler’s work, she refuses to define gender or sex as “a way to resist the ways definitions normalize and thereby delimit, possibilities for how one understands hir gender” (Nicolazzo, 2016, p.28). By not defining sex or gender, Butler allows for further

interruption into one's gender as she delinks "sexed bodies to certain gendered performance," allowing all genders to be recognized (Nicolazzo, 2016, p.29). In other words, "gender identity is an inward process, gender expression and gender roles are outward and visible to others" (Nagoshi as cited in Stachowiak & Gano, 2020, para.7).

As gender is understood as an inward process, one's gender is not definite. The understanding of gender development can be understood through gender theory and trans\* identity theory.

### *Gender*

Gender is defined as "a person's deep-seated, internal sense of who they are as a gendered being—specifically, the gender with which they identify themselves. All people have a gender identity" (Green & Maurer, 2017, p.54). Gender has a significant psychosocial impact on one's identities (Katz-Wilse et al., 2017), which are impacted by the personal, behavioral, and environmental components (Bussey & Bandura as cited in Patton et al., 2016). One's gender can be impacted by self-perception, hobbies, family, peers, environmental settings, etc., which are a part of the personal, behavioral, and environmental components (Patton et al., 2016). When one's gender aligns with sex, it is defined as cisgender. When gender does not align with their sex, it is defined as trans\* identity (Patton et al., 2016). Furthermore, gender "is conceptualized as an ongoing process that may change across the life span and as societal views about gender change" (Bussey, 2010, p.608 as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p.183)

Gender is a social construct based on individual knowledge and experiences within gender categories (Egan & Perry, 2001). Societal ideals of gender often lead children and adolescents to conform to social norms assigned to their gender group.

Those who experience their gender outside of the social norms often face discrimination (Catalano, 2015).

### ***Trans\* Identity Development***

Brent Bilodeau developed a model by adapting six identity processes proposed by Anthony D'Augelli in 1994 as a model for LGB development (Patton et al., 2016).

Bilodeau (2005) model proposes the following six steps:

1. Exiting a traditionally gendered identity: begins to identify as trans\*,
2. Developing a personal trans\* identity: begins to accept one's personal gender and conquering internalized transphobia,
3. Developing a trans\* social identity: begins to establish a support group of individual who cares and support the individual,
4. Becoming a trans\* offspring: begins to coming out to family members and establishing new relationships with those that have been affected,
5. Developing a trans\* intimacy status: begins to develop intimate relationships,
6. Entering a trans\* community begins partaking in social justice activist regarding trans\* issues. (p.26 as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p.191)

It is important to note that the concept of transition is versatile and does not always refer to a medical transition. Trans\* individuals may use non-binary and queer identities. They may also choose not to participate in gender-affirming surgeries. Lastly, in recent years researchers have begun studying the experiences and identifying trans\* youth to further their understanding of trans\* identity (Katz-Wise, 2017).

## **The Experiences of Trans\* Individuals**

Although trans\* individuals' visibility has risen, trans\* students are often faced with many challenges. Trans\* individuals are the minority within the GSD community; therefore, other experiences do not always compare or relate to theirs (Goldberg, 2018). As trans\* is an umbrella term for various genders, it is important to recognize that not all trans\* students' experiences are comparable. Within this section, the researcher will discuss the experience found in the literature that trans\* students have faced.

### ***Oppression***

Trans\* individuals are often faced with different forms of oppression. Hardiman and Jackson (2007) defined oppression as “an interlocking multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups and... consists of three levels: (a) individual, (b) institutional, and (c) social/cultural” (as cited in Nicolazzo, 2016, p.32). It is important to recognize that trans\* individuals may hold other forms of oppression, such as being a person of color, low social-economic class, etc. Understanding how all identities a person holds are interlinked is important as all those identities present their own challenges or privileges through intersectionality. Trans\* individuals are often faced with a lack of legal protection, poverty, stigma, harassment, discrimination, violence, lack of healthcare coverage, and identity documents (Human Rights Campaign). Currently, discrimination against cisgender individuals is protected under the Civil Rights Act; however, there is no federal legal law protecting trans\* individuals against discrimination (Human Rights Campaign). The rates at which trans\* individuals face poverty are significantly higher than their sexually diverse peers, especially those of color (Human Rights Campaign). Historically, there has been a stigma

in which trans\* individuals have been seen as mentally ill. This stigma has led to retaliation against individuals who identify as trans\*. Furthermore, this stigma has impacted their ability to access needs for their survival (Human Rights Campaign). Trans\* individuals have been fired due to being trans\*. Fear of harassment has led to trans\* individuals' inability to vote. According to the Human Rights Campaign:

Over a majority (54%) of trans people have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, 47% have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime, and nearly one in ten were physically assaulted between 2014 and 2015. This type of violence can be fatal. At least 27 trans\* and gender non-conforming people have been violently killed in 2020 thus far, the same number of fatalities observed in 2019. (para. 9).

Furthermore, trans\* individuals often face challenges obtaining healthcare coverage and receiving proper care from health care professionals (Human Rights Campaign). Lastly, trans\* individuals face challenges obtaining documentation with correct gender markers as it requires a multitude of documents if the state allows it (Human Rights Campaign).

### ***Mental Health***

Within the college setting, college students who are trans\* have been abused and harassed mentally, physically, and sexually during their time as a student (James et al., 2016 as cited in Goldberg, 2018, p.2). Within the National Trans\* Discrimination Survey (NTDS), it was found that trans\* individuals have faced adverse treatment, including misgendering and microaggressions from peers, staff, and faculty (Grant et al., 2010). Trans\* students are often victims of bias-related incidents at universities. Therefore trans\* students often feel obligated to conform out of fear of violence and harassment.

Trans\* students experience high rates of rejection from family members, which affects trans\* student's mental health and success (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007).

Rejection is when family members do not accept their student's identities. Grossman and D'Augelli's (2007) study found that 45% of trans\* youth have considered suicide. As 26% of those individuals had a history of life-threatening behavior, 67% stated that their attempts were related to their gender (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). This behavior has been found in relation to the participants identifying as trans\* and lack of family and parent support (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007).

### *Campus Climate*

Trans\* students often face higher levels of harassment, discrimination, and oppression on college campuses than their cisgender peers, as many campuses lack policies, resources, and practices to protect them (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020).

Transphobia is often seen on college campuses, particularly in the classroom and residence halls. Trans\* students are often pressured to conform to the gender norm to pass, so they do not have to disclose their gender (Nicolazzo, 2016). Furthermore, trans\* students often felt pressure and obligated to teach others about their community.

Nicolazzo (2016) shares his experience when "the Interim Chief Diversity Officer on campus thanked the queer students for being on campus because we "teach people about difference" (p.107). This is one of many experiences minority individuals have faced.

These experiences often lead to exhaustion among trans\* individuals (Nicolazzo, 2016) as they must defend themselves and who they are daily when it is not their responsibility to educate individuals. Although, trans\* students have had positive experiences and found support through faculty, staff, and campus groups.

**Classroom Climate.** Within Nicolazzo's (2016) ethnographic study, his participants disclosed several times in which professors outed them in the classroom and dismissed their pronouns and names. Nicolazzo's (2016) study also mentioned incidents where the professor and peers participated in homophobic language and actions in the classroom. Furthermore, schools that do not provide students the opportunity to change their name within the system provide the threat of outing the student, particularly in online classes where students can see the roster and names of participants in the class (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020). Therefore, trans\* students often face the decision of whether to come out to a class. Trans\* students have been noted to changing majors and classes and leaving institutions due to the classroom climate experiences. In Nicolazzo's (2016) study, participants were drawn to environments where they could freely express their identities and where students and professors showed understanding and the willingness to learn and grow.

**Housing.** As many colleges require students to live on their first year, trans\* students are faced with the challenge of being assigned a residential space according to their biological sex (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020). This requirement can impact trans\* students' experience as they fear for their safety if they do not conform to gender norms (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020). Trans\* students have faced challenges with bathrooms and roommates while living in the residence halls as people feel "uncomfortable" being around the individual (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020). Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith (2019) had a trans\* individual express to them that:

Most of our university dorms are split by sex, so I was forced to live for three years on the half of the building that related to the sex on my ID rather than how I

identify. It made me very uncomfortable, and considering how I present it, I'm not sure anyone else was comfortable with it either. (p.26)

These negative experiences often lead to trans\* students moving and living off-campus in an environment in which they are supported (Nicolazzo, 2016).

**Bathrooms.** Trans\* students have experienced a lack of support and guidance when using the bathroom associated with their gender. They frequently faced harassment and sexual assault in bathrooms and locker rooms (Bilodeau, 2007). According to Finger's (2010) findings, accessible bathrooms were among the common concerns of trans\* individuals as safety is a significant concern. Furthermore, trans\* students are often denied the ability to use the bathroom corresponding which their gender (Seelman, 2014b). Trans\* students often face difficulties finding restrooms that align with their gender and where they feel safe.

**Sense of Belonging.** As trans\* students are part of a marginalized group, they have a more challenging time transitioning and connecting to the university community (Dugan et al., 2012). Therefore, trans\* students have a lower rate of belonging than their peers (Dugan et al., 2012; Goldberg, 2018). Trans\* students often seek out organizations, faculty, and staff that support and accept their identities. Trans\* sense of belonging is stronger at colleges that promote inclusivity and provided resources and policies for trans\* students to be successful.

**Involvement.** Historically institutions have lacked GSD organizations (Goldberg, 2018). Trans\* students associated with GSD organizations do not always feel the same amount of support as their sexually diverse peers (Goldberg, 2018). In response to different life experiences and identities, trans\* students seek out trans-specific groups and

organizations (Goldberg, 2018). Trans\* students also find support through media outlets, as they can provide a social networking component and provided them information and answers to their questions and concerns (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

Many trans\* students are committed to advocating for rights utilizing politics. Compared to the general student population, trans\* students are twice as likely to get involved in politics. They believe it is essential to change the political structure (Stolzenberg & Hughes as cited in Goldberg, 2018). Trans\* students are more likely to advocate for various equal rights and social change movements than their peers (Goldberg, 2018).

Regarding involvement in Greek Life, there are currently ten social fraternities and sororities whose national offices have released inclusive statements regarding trans\* individuals (Rowan, 2017). These inclusive statements express the acceptance of all genders. There are specifically GSD-related social fraternities and sororities whose interests reflect those of the GSD community.

### **University Response**

As the number of trans\* students increases, the need for resources that support trans\* individuals is critically important. University responses and roles play a significant impact on trans\* student success and retention.

### ***Campus Climate***

Students spend the vast majority of their time at an institution on campus. Professors play a significant role in the environment produced within the classroom. Studies have shown professors refusing to use and change documents utilizing trans\* students' chosen names and pronouns, which creates discomfort for those affected

(Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Within Goldberg et al. (2019) research, a trans\* student said, “Needing to explain your name and pronouns to every new professor, and dreading knowing that they’ll probably read your birth name out loud to the class, is extremely stressful and miserable and embarrassing” (pg.23). Chosen name and pronoun policy, where professors will only know the students by their chosen names, create a welcoming environment for trans\* students (Beemyn & Brauer, 2003).

Institutions have published inclusive statements to create an environment that is welcoming for trans\* individuals. Furthermore, institutions have established GSD organizations, trans-specific organizations and have created safe places for trans\* individuals to express their experiences and advocate for their needs (Goldberg, 2018). Creating a welcoming environment where students can connect to the university enables students to establish a sense of belonging and become successful at that institution (Dugan et al., 2012).

### ***Ally Training Programs***

Ally training programs allow those who wish to learn about the GSD community and become allies a safe space to do so through the training program. An ally is defined as “a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population” (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 195). Within an ally training program, the visibility of GSD students has increased, and campus climate improvements have been seen on college campuses (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008). These programs highlight GSD individuals’ experiences as they are different from those who are heterosexual and cisgender. Woodford et al. (2014) described the following

curriculum outcomes based around ally training programs: “understanding LGBT concepts and developing awareness of biases, understanding LGBT issues and recognizing discrimination and heterosexual privilege, becoming support persons to LGBT individuals, and becoming advocates to create LGBT-affirming campuses” (p.318). Utilizing these curriculum outcomes had led to the successful establishment of Ally Training Programs.

### ***Chosen Names and Pronouns Policies***

As many institutions require professors to obtain attendance, an individual’s dead name or incorrect pronouns are often used. A dead name is a trans\* individuals name given at birth which they used before transition, also known as birth name (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). Few institutions have adopted policies in which students may submit their chosen names and pronouns, and the institution will honor them. Those who offer these options do not advertise them well to the population who would use them (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). Seelman (2014a) found that those who are trans\* would like to see a broader range of gender options on forms, name, and pronoun change within campus records and software systems and a more straightforward process. An individual being able to change their gender marker will allow them to stay in housing with the gender consistent with their identity. These policies increase the chance that an individual’s chosen name and pronouns being used correctly in class. Using chosen names and pronouns leads to a lower chance of outing a trans\* individual (Beemyn as cited in Finger, 2010, p.41). Exposing a trans\* individual can lead to psychological and emotional distress and cause them to be at risk for harassment (Finger, 2010). Allowing students to

use chosen names and pronouns creates a sense of welcoming and acceptance to trans\* students.

### ***Gender and Sexual Diversity Centers***

GSD centers began to appear around the 1980s, increasing in prominence in the 1990s (Sanlo, 2000). New centers are established every year, with directors from other centers assisting institutions (National Consortium as cited in Sanlo, 2000). These centers came forth after a task force examined the campus climate (Sanlo, 2000). GSD centers' purpose has transformed and developed since they were first established (Beemyn, 2003). At the beginning of the centers' history, the directors lacked knowledge of how to aid students from the GSD community. There was often a lack of resources, knowledge, and education being provided from the centers. As the acceptance of GSD individuals has grown, the community's visibility within higher education has increased. GSD Centers are commonly known to be directed by those identified within the GSD community (Beemyn, 2003). Schools with a diversity center that encompasses all minorities are often run by one who identifies as a minority (Beemyn, 2003). These centers have created a safe place for minorities to come and be their true selves; however there is not one unified way to run a center and most centers run differently to best serve the specific needs of their populations

### ***Facilities Practices***

As the population of trans\* students on college campuses are increasing, inclusive facilities are becoming a need. Inclusive facilities include room assignments according to an individual's gender identity and gender-neutral bathrooms. Historically institutions

have typically reflected two sexes, male and female, within their practices (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014), which excludes trans\* students.

**Housing.** Housing assignments are assigned by sex rather than the gender one identifies as. Higher education systems such as the Boards of Governors of the University of North Carolina have banned the North Carolina System from offering housing where students living in suites or apartments may room with the opposite sex (The University of North Carolina System). These bans create difficulties for universities to produce inclusive housing and placement for students that identify as trans\*.

Some institutions allow individuals to change their gender marker with both the school and housing systems, allowing students to room with their gender. Some institutions have options for individuals who identify as trans\* to request gender-neutral housing. However, there must be another person that students would want to live with in the same environment (Goldberg, 2018, pg.4-5). Gender-inclusive housing policies are broad as the components vary, such as those of the opposite sex. A form of gender-inclusive housing, which is seen today, is apartment-style housing where each roommate has a bedroom with a locking door (Krum et al., 2013).

**Bathrooms.** Bathrooms have historically been represented by two sexes, which excludes trans\* individuals (Seelman, 2014a, 2014b). Restrooms confined to two sexes excluded other genders and created a lack of inclusivity and visibility for trans\* students (Seelman, 2014a). Lastly, gender-neutral bathrooms are not prevalent and challenging to find on a college campus (Seelman, 2014a).

As the population of trans\* students increase, the need for inclusive housing and restrooms is increasing. Institutions with policies that allow trans\* individuals to be

assigned to a space according to their gender have many requirements that are not always easily met (Goldberg, 2018). Gender-neutral restrooms are not a standard option at most institutions. Trans\* students find it challenging to develop a sense of belonging and connection to the institution when their basic needs are not met (Dugan et al., 2012).

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The theory of campus ecology will guide this study. The following section elaborates on the critical points of the literature that affect trans\* students' success.

#### ***Campus Ecology***

A key factor within student development is the effect of campus ecology, which encompasses human ecology and developmental ecology (Banning & Kaiser, 1974). Human ecology is “the study of human population groups in relation to their environment” (p.2) while, developmental ecology is the study between the students and environments (Banning & Kaiser, 2017). A student’s success within a college environment is focused on inclusion, safety, involvement, and community building (Fischer, 2015). Pervin’s (1967) Transaction Approach, a phenomenological oriented theory, states that “that behavior can best be understood in terms of the interactions of transactions between the individual and the environment” (as cited in Banning, 1978, p.13). Furthermore, Pervin (1968) explains that “for each individual, there are interpersonal and non-interpersonal environments that tend to match or to fit the individual’s perception of himself” (as cited in Banning, 1978, p.13). Pervin hypothesized that students perform higher when they can connect to their environment through their personality characteristics (Banning, 1978). During orientation, on-campus visits, and the first week of school, faculty and staff must create a welcoming

environment that all students may partake in equally. Opportunities are given to students to make connections with resources, faculty, and peers around campus around their interests, values, and experiences to help create a developmental and networking opportunity (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Creating a welcoming campus environment is the first step in creating an inclusive campus, which begins when students step on campus. Institutions' websites and outreach efforts also impact an individual view of the campus. Institutions are challenged with creating both physical and emotionally safe environments for their students. Even with all the campus safety measurements in place, institutions cannot stop all campus incidents, which is why everyday student interaction is essential (Strange & Banning, 2001). When students build relationships, they are taking the fear of the unknown away and creating safety indicators. Safety indicators are indicators in which a student knows their safety is protected (Fischer, 2015). When institutions support different interests, values, and experiences, students are more likely to feel safe and be involved on campus (Strange & Banning, 2001). When students are engaged on campus, they contribute to the campus ecology; therefore, they create a relationship between the student and the institution (Fischer, 2015). When building a community, multiple factors are considered: symbols, traditions, and culture, which embraces diversity within race, ethnicity, beliefs, sexual orientation, gender, and culture (Strang & Banning 2001). Students are successful when their inclusion, safety, involvement, and community needs are met. When institutions consider the diversity of their population, they can provide accommodations and resources that their students need.

**Summary**

The history of trans\* individuals provides a look into how they are still fighting for fundamental human rights, bringing concern and stress to community members. Trans\* students often face multiple forms of oppression in life and on college campuses. They often face campus climates which has a negative response to their identities. Data collected through campus climate surveys indicate that trans\* individuals do not feel safe on college campuses. Providing facilities that these individuals can use safely is one step in improving the campus climate. Institutions being able to provide resources and instituting policies that support trans\* students are a step toward ensuring trans\* student success. The next chapter will discuss methods in data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This research study was conducted through a qualitative lens to evaluate trans\* students' perspectives of climate and how campus resources impact their academic success. Specifically, this study was created to determine what impact climate has on trans\* student success. The description of the participants and the research site will be provided in this chapter. Methods for gathering and analyzing data are also discussed.

#### **Design of the Study**

This study used a qualitative approach utilizing individual interviews on evaluating climate through the perceptions of students who identify as trans\*. Krefting (1991) described qualitative research as research that focuses on the individual's experiences and perspective surrounding an occurrence. A qualitative study was chosen for this study as the study's focus is on the experience which climate have on trans\* student success. The individual interviews allowed participants to describe their own experience of being Trans\* at the research site, their experience of climate and how they define success in their own terms utilizing open-ended questions. Individual interviews were selected for this study due to their uniqueness in gathering in-depth information. Individual interviews allowed participants to speak to their own experiences allowing for a greater understanding of how climate have impacted their success.

#### **Participants**

Participants for this study were four students who identify as trans\* and have attended the university for at least two semesters at the time of data collection. The participants will be selected based on their identities and length of attendance, as the

participants will have an established relationship with the research site. Participants were purposively selected as they were chosen based on their gender and length of attendance. The researcher created flyers, social media posts and attended Pride meetings at the research site to identify participants. By participating in Pride meetings, the researcher gained rapport with students who attended the meetings. Furthermore, the flyers allowed individuals who identify as trans\* to privately disclose their identities and choose whether they would like to participate. Participants were contacted via email.

In an effort to better understand the participants, a brief biographical description is offered for each participant. Clyde is a second-year music education major. Clyde is agender, asexual, Jewish, aromatic and uses the pronouns they/them. Logan is a second-year journalism major. Logan is a transgender male, bisexual, and uses the pronouns he/him. A.C. Gray is a fourth-year English major. A.C Gray identified as nonbinary during the time of the interview; however, they were still in the process of figuring out their gender identity during the completion of this study. They use she/they pronouns and also identify as disabled. Cy is a third-year English major. Cy is nonbinary, a lesbian, atheist, and uses the pronouns they/them.

### **Research Site**

The research site is a mid-size, four-year, public institution of higher education located in the Midwest. The institution has an approximate population of 7,600 students with 4,300 undergraduate students, 1,600 graduate students, and 1,700 dual-credit high school students. There are approximately 39.5% of male undergraduate students and 60.5% of female undergraduate students. The institution does not currently provide information on students that may have a different gender. The research site offers 60

majors and 85 minors. The research site contains various student resources such as the Academic Advising Center, Career Services, Counseling Clinic, Center for Gender and Sexual Diversity, etc.

### **Data Collection**

Individual interviews were used to collect data. Participants were chosen based on the established criteria for the study. An initial email went out to students who have reached out to the researcher interested in participating in the study (Appendix A). A qualtrics survey was utilized to gather consent from participants before participating in the interviews as they occurred over Zoom. Individual interviews were expected to take approximately 60 minutes to complete. A PDF version of the consent form (Appendix B) was integrated into the survey. The researcher emailed the participants a PDF version of the consent form; therefore, the participants could revisit the form if needed. The researcher explained how the individual interview would be conducted before beginning the interview. The individual interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes to complete. The individual interviews occurred over zoom, where it was video recorded to ensure adequate data collection. The participants were encouraged to speak about their experiences at the research site. During the individual interviews, the participants were asked to identify on-campus resources that impact their success.

The individual interviews took place in the fall semester of 2020. The participants' names and identities were kept confidential. Participants were reassured of confidentiality at the beginning and end of individual interviews. The researcher used pseudonym names which participants will have the opportunity to choose during data

analysis and presentation of data collected. Finally, the participants were informed about how the data will be utilized.

### **Instrument**

This study utilized demographic and open-ended questions as types of instruments. The instruments for this study include pre-determined interview questions.

#### ***Initial Survey Instrument***

Demographic and open-end questions were utilized during the individual interviews to gather information to help understand the participants. The demographic questions allowed the researcher to determine whether the participant qualifies to participate in the study. This study's main instrument included pre-determined open-ended interview questions, which provided a narrative of the participants' experience at the research institution. The individual interview questions (Appendix C) were written to gather information about participants' history, personal experiences, and academic experiences.

The open-ended questions approach was selected as a way to explore the student's perspectives. The participants were given time to answer each question with the option of not providing an answer. The researcher could explore and collect information about the participants' personal experiences by asking open-ended questions while conducting individual interviews. Open-ended questions allow the researcher to collect a diverse set of answers; however, they produce a large gap of missing data (Raja et al., 2003). Open-ended questions are based on the participants' experience limiting researcher bias (Reja et al., 2003).

### ***The Researcher as an Instrument***

The researcher in qualitative research drives the study being conducted. The researcher creates research-specific questions rather than using pre-established sources, enabling them to become an instrument through the data they collect from their study (Chenail, 2011). The researcher's bias can be presented as a challenge while completing the research (Chenail, 2011). Researcher bias can present when the researcher is unprepared or conducting unfit interviews (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). Researcher bias can also be present when a researcher enters the study with an ideology of the exact outcome, affecting the accuracy of the results. The research must take proper precautions to ensure their personal bias does not impact the data.

I have recognized my own biases that can alter the interpretation of the data collected. I have friends who identify as trans\* whose experiences with climate negatively impacted them. It is essential that individuals who identify as trans\* can access resources that support them as students. As I do not personally identify as trans\*, the trans\* community is an important population to me as I have close friends who identify as trans\*. As I am aware of my personal bias, the individual interviews occurred over Zoom and were recorded to have an honest dialog. This allowed me to access the individual interviews, which I utilized within my data analysis. I consulted with my thesis advisor about my findings and data analysis. Consulting my thesis advisor helped me attempt consensus (Chenail, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

Once the individuals' interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the data into a Word document saved to a private password-protected OneDrive account. All

data were qualitatively analyzed using the constant comparative method. Coding was completed using the constant comparative method, and the researcher was able to identify concepts and analysis simultaneously (Kolb, 2012). Grounded theory, derived from personal experience composed of data, can develop using the constant comparative method utilizing a theoretical perspective (Kolb, 2012). Data points were examined to discover what effect climate have on trans\* students' personal and academic success. Common themes were identified and analyzed about the research questions. The researcher utilized template sheets to track statements related to a common theme (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This allowed the researcher to identify common themes among the participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The researcher identified the themes by analyzing the individual interview transcripts to determine which responses are commonly emerging. After the coding was completed, the researcher verified the common themes identified during the individual interviews. Results from each interview were compared and contrasted to identify similarities and differences.

### **Treatment of Data**

The consent form was collected virtually utilizing a qualtrics survey, an online survey platform. The individual interviews were conducted over a private Zoom to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonym names were utilized to protect the identity of the participants and to ensure confidentiality. All recordings and videos were stored on a password-protected drive for up to three years, which will then be permanently deleted from the drive.

**Summary**

In this chapter, information regarding the methodological framework was presented. The target population was identified through an explanation of the requirements required to participate in the study. Lastly, a detailed explanation of the collection, treatment, and analysis of the data was provided. Chapter four will present the data collection and analysis of the data.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results and Findings

This chapter aims to examine the impact of climate on trans\* student academic and personal success. After conducting and analyzing interviews, the researcher identified four major themes: identity and validation, academic climate, climate outside the classroom, and resources and services. The findings are presented by theme. Participants were asked a series of questions related to their experience at the research site and how it has impacted their academic and personal success.

#### **Identity and Validation**

During the individual interviews, participants were encouraged to talk about their stories. Participants discussed their experience of coming out and their transition to college. They also mentioned how they find support from their peers.

#### ***Coming Out***

Overall, three out of the four participants in this study were out on campus. Cy was the only participant who was out to their family. The participants were selective when coming out to family and people in the surrounding area. Clyde shared that they come from a “very far-right family” and that the emotional risk and trauma of coming out to their family is not worth the risk. They further mentioned the emotional toll that comes with coming out as you don’t ever come out once, but you repetitively come out, and “you’re not just saying I am this, this is what it is.”

Logan discussed how he discovered he was trans\* when he was 12 years old; however, he is not out to his family. He described coming to college as a relief as “people here don’t really care. They don’t have opinions about that”. In Logan’s first couple

months at the research site, he was only out to the Pride organization. He then came out to his friends outside of the Pride organization around the end of his first semester. He mentioned that his friends did not care, but they did have many questions that he answered for them. A few of Logan's professors know of his gender as he interacts with them heavily. Both Clyde and Logan mentioned that they do not disclose their gender when taking online classes as they do not interact with those students or professors in person.

A.C. Gray discussed how they started identifying as bisexual when they were in 8th grade and starting 9th grade. They mentioned that they did not have a term for it but knew they felt the same about both women and men. They did not disclose their sexuality until their senior year of high school because they pushed it aside and did not want to deal with it at that time. The reason they came out their senior year was that they knew they were leaving for the university, and "if shit goes south, I don't have to see them again." During their sophomore year of college, they felt empowered as a "queer person" and came out to their family and peers. They then go on to mention their experience, discovering their gender. A.C. Gray is currently discovering their gender identity. They mentioned that they have not quite felt like a girl entirely since they were a freshman in college. Although at that time, they put it off as

I've always been kind of a tomboy and I'm like a radical feminist. Like I just don't like gender norms that are put on me. Like I just don't like those kind of things like it's not that I'm like trans\*/ nonbinary, it's just that I don't enjoy having gender norms like placed upon me just because of my gender. And then kind of like through the self-reflection of quarantine and like being able to just kind of lay it

all out there. Um, I realized that no, like I'm kind of like gender-fluid nonbinary, like something like that? And because like gender and gender expression are kind of like a spectrum. So and I think that I kind of fall in a lot of places on that spectrum.

A.C. Gray then discussed that accepting their gender has been the most challenging thing about their college career. They explained how it took them a while to process their sexuality and that they are in that current phase with their gender. They also shared how it is still hard regardless of having “all of the resources and tools and like techniques of accepting myself from when I came out as Bi”.

Cy also recently discovered their gender. They came out as non-binary in the fall of 2019 and started going by they/ them pronouns in the spring of 2020. They described the transition of pronouns as a positive experience with their professors. They began by going by their chosen name in the fall of 2020. They saw more slip-ups with their name change, but professors always corrected themselves right away. They further explained that their family is “a little iffy” with it as they have known them for 21 years as she/her, but they try.

Each participant had a different experience with the coming out process; however, they all have seen positive interactions on campus regarding their gender.

### ***Support from Peers***

Most of the participants found the most significant support from their friends. Cy mentioned they “get support from my friends who are often like struggling the same way that I am, so it's good to have people who like know what you're going through.”

Logan is least aware of his gender when “I’m by myself or if I’m with like my really close friends who are like totally over that like it’s not even like a thought anymore with them because they just know like they don’t care.” Logan’s current friend group is comprised of all “straight” individuals. He explained that they are very understanding and ask clarifying questions. He further went on to say, “They are definitely a support group in that, even if they don’t get it, they’re supportive. But it’s very different”. A.C. Gray found support from “Pride and my friends who are in Pride” but also people in the community that they “know I can be out too and be accepted it and, and um, not have to worry about.” Clyde explained that gender impacts their friendships and who they chose to talk with. Clyde described finding

The greatest support from those who are also marginalized in this way... But when you’re with people who are also marginalized and have this lack of power in every facet of American Society. It’s very easy to be able to come to a common ground as long as you’re able to set your own prejudices aside. The support that we all look for and all need is support from those in power and those who aren’t marginalized.

Clyde mentioned they need support from those in power to support their call to action. An example they gave was the call to action for gender-inclusive housing. Clyde explained they needed support from the housing department, even the university president, “to help turn around stuff and help us actually improve things.”

### **Academic Climate**

During the interviews, participants mention various experiences and practices that had positive and negative impacts on their experiences.

### *Experience*

All participants discussed the impact that professors have had on their experience in the classroom. They also all identified the library as a helpful resource when it came to their academic success. Clyde and Logan discussed the positive impact of their majors on their experiences. Clyde went even further and discussed how the curriculum had impacted their academic experience.

**Professors.** Overall, professors have had positive and negative impacts on trans\* student academic and personal success. A.C. Gray talks about professors who are known to be accepting of the community. They continue to mention that these were the professors they were comfortable to come out to, as they have not come out to many professors as they are still figuring out their gender. They came out to those professors as an aid to help them figure out their gender identity. Cy mentioned how they were very nervous at first to come out to their professor; however, they were very accepting. Professors used Cy's chosen pronouns and name, and if they slipped up, they corrected themselves. Cy had taken many classes with a different professor who encouraged their classes to share their pronouns and names. This has created a welcoming environment and positive experience for Cy to be themselves in the classroom.

Clyde said that "there's only one particular teacher who I don't think it's worth to purposely call out right now, who I can say is intentionally antagonistic." Logan explained that he had "one professor who claimed to be an advocate and ally to the LGBT plus community, who was very misinformed on LGBT issues and wouldn't listen to me, and that was a huge problem for me last year." Logan goes on to tell the following story:

She had us do essays about ourselves and about our identities. So I was like, OK, I'll like I'll talk about being LGBT, and I hadn't decided whether to say I was trans\* or just to say that I was bisexual. Apparently thought about it, and then, she would have these little like one-on-one sessions whenever we had a big essay coming up to like talk about what your plan was. Um, so she asked me, and I said I'd be talking about my sexuality, and she immediately assumed that I was a lesbian and just like ran with it, and I was like, whoa, no one said that. First, hold on and her like first reaction to that because I was like I was like hold on no; she was like 'oh so you don't know your question'. It was like no. Not that either. And she still just kept going, and I was like. What is going on, Ma'am? And her reaction to thinking that I was a lesbian was to go. Oh, 'do you want to take women's and gender study classes?' Which is really funny, but like not good.

Logan also gave an example of professors who would invite GSD students to sit on a panel for their class, yet the professor's information was incorrect. He continued on to tell the following story about sitting on a panel for a class:

He had information on there that like wasn't right. Um, and he was still like conflating terms like transgender and crossdresser, which it's like everybody knows that that's not the same thing now. Um, so I just think generally because these are the people that are teaching students. They kind of need to have a better idea of what's going on.

A.C. Gray mentions that “other trans people that they have corrected teachers again and again and again and they're still using their deadnames and misgendering them using the wrong pronouns all of the time” and further explains that trans\* students “don't feel

accepted on campus because of the teachers.” Depending on the professor’s interaction with the students, they have had positive and negative impacts. Students utilized professors who they know are accepting and understanding.

Participants discussed the library's impacts, their major, and the curriculum have had on their experience. Every participant mentioned the library as an academic resources. The participants highlighted the importance of the academic databases provided by the library. They also mentioned the library as a useful place for studying. This discovery was expected as this is a shared experiences which trans\* student have with their cisgender peers. Clyde described the art department as one of the most inclusive and accepting departments on campus and the department to have the highest population of GSD people. Logan also mentioned that journalism majors tend to be “pretty liberal.” Lastly, Clyde described the music department curriculum as not being as inclusive despite being an inclusive environment. They described the curriculum to be heavily focused on white cis-gender men. They further discussed how they are a general education music major, yet they “only study classical music.” They further mentioned their experience in the choir and singing love songs that only reference heterosexual relationships. They have not seen nor studied inclusive curriculum within the music they study and practice.

### ***Practices***

Throughout the interview process, participants mentioned various practices that have either enabled or hindered their experience in the classroom. Participants go on to speak about pronoun and name usage, language, and gendering.

**Language.** Inclusive language is always evolving. Clyde gave the following example of the current evolution of language “Such as saying what is your gender identity? Are you a non-cisgender person? It's OK to just say trans\*?”. Clyde continued to mention that using words such as identify and preferred makes it sound like a choice, and it's not necessarily what people are going to recognize. A.C. Gray mention they

Typically try to use things like GSD instead of like the LGBTQ acronym, because then there are letters that get left out. And if you include all of the letters, it's like a mile long, so I just try and use GSD which stands for gender and sexual diversity because it's inclusive.

A.C. Gray also described using GSD as being short and to the point. A.C Gray also touched on the usage of the word preferred and stated

The pronouns that I use are my pronouns. They're not my preferred pronouns, they are my pronouns, and the name that I go by is not my preferred name. It is my name. You don't go around calling cisgender people their preferred name. If they go by a nickname, that's not something that you say that you just call them that, and that's what they go by.

Throughout the appendix research material the word preferred was utilize until this discovery was made. The researcher quickly changed their language usage when asking research question ensuring to exclude the word prefer.

**Pronoun and Name Usage.** Many participants talked about the lack of pronoun and name usage by professors, although many mentioned the positive impact of asking for pronouns and names had on their experience. A.C. Gray went on to talk about a positive experience which they experienced with a professor. This professor “asks for

pronouns, uses correct pronouns, and doesn't single out students that may appear trans\*.”

A.C. Gray mentioned that they believe this form should be used campus wide. They further mentioned that even the little things like including your pronouns in your email signature could have a positive effect. Clyde had a professor who does not use correct names and pronouns, which they think is not worth correcting. Cy discussed their positive experiences when transitioning to using they/ them pronouns and their chosen name. They mentioned that their professors were really good about it, even the ones they had before. There were minor slip-ups, and they would correct themselves right away. They had the same experience when they started going by their chosen name, but there were more slip-ups, but the professors would correct themselves right away. A.C. Gray mentioned that “if you misgendered someone and they correct you, you should just try.” They explained that you should “go out of your way to make sure that you do that because that's something that they told you in confidence.”

***Gendering.*** Cis-gender individuals have a habit of unnecessarily gendering items such as clothing and toys. Clyde described the impact of unnecessary gendering as follows:

It's nice to just be able to go around and not put an emphasis on gender, but unfortunately, whenever you go into spaces with a lot of cis people, there ends up to be a lot of unnecessary gendering. So, I seek out to be a lot more with trans\* people because we often have much less of an emphasis on gender in every facet of lives. Like we don't color-code based on gender, we don't get certain toys for people based on their gender.

Clyde further talked about their experience with gendering within the choir:

Yeah, in these, there's a lot of issue with labeling everyone with a low voice, OK guys, do, this and then whenever you go to the Altos and Sopranos it's OK, girls do this this unnecessary cultural gendering of every single facet. Again, why you'd seek out more trans\* people to be around, even in music? Because there's just this unnecessary gendering which can provide so many issues because we have several other trans\* people in the choirs and all of them will kinda, you can if you watch them during choirs, whatever that director says. OK, guys, sing this; you can just see every single trans\* kid's head turned slightly.

### **Climate Outside of the Classroom**

Overall, the participants felt a positive level of comfort on campus; however, they have a low comfort level back home and off-campus. Logan described the Charleston community as “having bad vibes.” He goes on to explain that he “don't ever use like a male name with people I always introduce myself as cisgender female whatever. Just because I don't know and I find them, find the community to be a lot more risky than campus”. Logan explained that he is most aware of his gender when around new people and deciding whether to come out at that moment.

A.C Gray also mentioned that they are most aware of their gender when they are around people they know will disagree. They further explained that back home is when they have the most issues. They are from a small town that does not have many “out trans\* people.” They state that “the out trans\* people that they face a lot of like backlash and like a lot of really just awful things and I'm scared of that.” They experienced dysphoria back home because they cannot present themselves because they will receive comments about their appearances.

Cy says that they are not comfortable in the local community surrounding the research site. When Cy goes to the local Walmart, they go with their roommate for security, “knowing nothing will happen” to them. They explained that on campus is where they feel the most comfortable as they receive “the least slip-ups and like I can feel more confident in that I'm like presenting and being perceived the way that I want to be.”

The students on campus were described as accepting and willing to learn. Logan goes on to say, “I mean, it's like any like higher education like most people are educated enough to not be discriminatory.” Cy goes on to say that they feel safe on campus, although they occasionally “come across somebody who isn't maybe the most tolerant,” yet they recognize that will happen everywhere. Cy also stated that “Everybody is super welcoming and accepting like it's very comfortable on campus and in the classroom.”

A.C Gray mentioned the research site “as a whole could do for some inclusivity.” They go on to mention that

[Research site] as a whole could do for some more inclusivity, and by no means do I think the [research site] is perfect, um but a lot of the resources are run by students and faculty who really care about people, and they really care about like individuals and like us students, who use them. So, I, um, I think [research site] as a whole in like the administration, a little lackluster on the inclusivity side, but like, otherwise, I think like most of the staff, pretty great like, pretty at least willing to try.

The campus community has created a space where the participants feel comfortable presenting their gender. However, the surrounding community, administration, and some

professors have created space where trans\* students are not comfortable. Participants discussed the institution's response to concerns related to students of minorities.

A.C Gray and Logan discussed the research site response to marginalized students. In the fall of 2020, the research site installed the “We Are [research site acronym]” flagpole. A.C. Gray discussed the struggle students faced trying to have the Black Lives Matter Flag flown on campus, which lead to the installation of the “We Are [research site acronym]” flagpole. According to A.C Gray, the student's request was denied multiple times. They go on to mention the impact that saying no had:

Um, like last year, when they were having this big issue with the Black Lives Matter flag, it was not that big a deal. They did not need to make it that big of a deal, and they told those students no twice. And it did not have to be like that. And it was all show for the local community, who was having an uproar about it. When you have a very large population of black students on campus and they are being killed in the streets, maybe not here in the local community, but like nationally in America, and ...you don't come out and say that Black Lives Matter. You're saying that your black students don't matter. Your silence on that tells them everything that they need to know.

They discussed the compromise that created the “We Are [research site acronym]” flagpole yet explained that they still don’t understand why they could not have just raised the flag on the pre-existing flagpole.

Logan discussed reporting incidents on campus, which he said:

I do think that a lot of times, people don't like speak up and report issues they've had because they feel that it won't be dealt with well by the administration. And that doesn't

have to do just with like LGBT stuff. That's like for people of color, too; they don't always get the response that they are looking for.

Logan then gave the “We Are [research site acronym]” flag pole as an example:

It also wasn't really backed up with like any, like dedication to be more helpful to marginalized students. It was just sort of like, hey, we know you're here, and that was it. So I, I just think there's a general feeling on campus that like, there isn't a huge problem, but if you do have a problem, it's just going to go ignored.

Participants recognized the different responses the research site has made to be more inclusive; however, it is not enough, and there is much that still needs to be improved. An improvement that Clyde mentioned was inclusivity when it came to forms and paperwork.

Clyde explained that during their interview, they are most aware of their gender identity when completing forms and paperwork. During the interview with Clyde, they told a story of a time when they completed a survey for the psychology department:

And like in in one question, I had one that came up with what is your gender identity had male-female, and it had nonbinary. And then it even had another option where you could type in your own, and then the very next question is what is your biological sex? It's like, oh, OK, so here's the make-believe question. And here's the question that you're going to actually use whenever. It's your research. OK, I see how it is. So I'm most aware of that during these forms and stuff because they are so overwhelmingly written by cis people that whenever you read them, it either comes off as they don't give a single amount of attention to the fact that there are people that are not just guy girl. Or they do give attention in the

most condescending way possible. And also, there's stuff like using the phrase preferred pronouns instead of just pronouns like if you're asking preferred, that implies that, oh, we might use other pronouns for you. But what are the ones that you want? And that definitely ticks a lot of people off within the trans\*

community that there always is this implication that in these forms were asked for what we prefer, but not necessarily what we're going to get.

Forms and paperwork often mislabel the difference between sex and gender. Male and female refer to one's sex that is often misused as identifiers for gender. Terms that refer to gender are women, men, trans\*, agender, etc. Lastly, not all forms and paperwork included inclusive terms for individuals whose gender is outside the binary.

### **Resources and Services**

The participants mentioned multiple resources and services that have impacted their experiences. Throughout this theme, the resource, and services, including their impact on the participants, will be discussed.

#### ***Gender and Sexuality Diversity Center***

During the interviews, two participants mentioned the on-campus Gender and Sexuality Diversity Center (GSD Center). Logan discussed that “there have been issues with the location of it, and right now it's as accessible as it's been in a long time.”

Currently, the GSD Center is located in the basement of a residence hall at the research site. The only signage for the center is in the building's back entrance of the building pointing to the center's direction. Logan goes on to say that “nobody knows it's there.”

### *Pride*

Pride is a student-led organization at the research site which purpose is to “work for the rights of the community to express their sexual and/or romantic orientation, as well as their gender identity freely and openly and to draw the community closer through education to denounce heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other oppressions” (Student Organizations). Many participants mentioned finding support from Pride. Logan mentioned that Pride was the first group of individuals that he came out to. Logan described not being that close with the people in Pride, but he attends the meetings because of Pride's positive and understanding atmosphere. A.C. Gray mentioned how Pride creates an accepting environment in which they can be out too.

### *Housing*

When this data was collected, the research site did not have gender-inclusive housing. However, shortly after data collection, the research site announced that they would have gender-inclusive housing for the 2021-2022 school year. A.C. Gray mentioned the research sites neighboring institutions have gender-inclusive housing, yet the research site did not. They further discussed how their interpretation of the reasoning in which the research site not having gender inclusive as “ [unnamed] residence hall is enough, and they don’t want to be targeting specific like they don’t want to make a target of these students.” Due to the housing being assigned by sex, Clyde mentioned that they “know so many trans\* people here that are stuck on their biological sex housing.” Clyde further mentioned that Clyde’s personal goal “is to have one floor of one dorm building dedicated to trans\* nonbinary queer students of whatever variety, but in general, I think that's something that should be standard.”

### ***Health and Counseling Services***

The research site health and counseling services were identified as a positive resource for the participants. However, at the time of data collection, Clyde avoids using counseling services because they have severe phone anxiety. Counseling services were virtual during the time this research was conducted because of COVID-19. Cy went on to speak about the services which the health and counseling services can provide to trans\* students. Health Services provided referrals to providers and help the students learn how to administer the hormones to themselves until the confidence is there to self-administer. They also provided medical counseling to students who requested it.

### ***On-Campus Jobs***

Three of the participants held on-campus jobs, which has positively impacted their experience on the research site's campus. Logan held two positions at the research site. He worked for the school's newspaper and as a desk assistant for one of the residence halls. Working at the desk has given him allotted time to complete his homework. Logan mentioned that he has learned more working for the newspaper than in any of his journalism classes. He described it as a collaborative internship. He said, "like the best part of my college experience has been working there." Cy also held two positions at the research site. Cy was a tutor and a night assistant. Cy mentioned that being a tutor has helped their studies. Cy further mentioned how their night assistant supervisors had been good with their pronouns. These on-campus positions have created environments that allowed them to work on their studies while working in an accepting environment.

### *Religious Organizations*

The research site is surrounded by multiple religious organizations who are partnered with the research site as campus ministries. Clyde found it

Rather annoying that churches and other religious organizations are allowed to constantly be advertising through routes of communication such as me getting my email, my school email was given out to campus churches. I think that that is a nasty conflict of interest.

These organizations contacted students through their provided school email. These emails were sent to all students who are not given the option to opt-in or out of receiving these emails. Clyde discussed how this organization has harassed them “for being Jewish and for being queer.” One of the local pastors has mentioned his disapproval of the GSD community publicly to students. These organizations have had negative impacts on trans\* students' experiences. However, it is important to recognize that there is a local religious organization that does support GSD students.

Overall, the participants are satisfied with the state of climate. A.C. Gray mentions that they are also satisfied with the resources on campus, although more inclusivity is needed.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion and Recommendations

This study was conducted to understand the impact of climate on trans\* student academic and personal success. Previous research on this topic found that inclusive practices, resources, and services significantly impact trans\* student personal and academic success. This chapter will discuss the study results and how the results are connected to previous research and theoretical framework. Lastly, implications for higher education and recommendations for further research related to this topic will be discussed.

#### **Discussion**

This discussion is guided by the three research questions: (1) how do trans\* students describe their level of comfort within their identities, (2) how do trans\* students describe their academic performance, and (3) how do trans\* students utilize on-campus resources to be academically successful. The research questions will be supported by the following themes identified in chapter four: identity and validation, academic climate, climate outside the classroom, and resources and services.

#### ***Research question 1***

How do trans\* students describe their level of comfort within their identities?

Trans\* students' level of comfort within their identities changed based on the setting. Trans\* students' level of comfort within their identities were found in the following themes: identity and validation, academic climate, and climate outside the classroom. Trans\* students identified campus in general as an area of comfort where they could move through the Bilodeau trans\* identify model (2005). Participants were seen

moving through the first three stages, from coming out and identifying as trans\*, accepting their personal gender, and establishing support groups of individuals who care and support them. Areas of discomfort for the trans\* student were off-campus locations, including their home environments and non-inclusive settings. Three of the four students faced challenges with the fourth step of the model, "becoming a trans\* offspring," as they are not comfortable coming out to family members (Bilodeau, 2005).

Participants found discomfort in the academic climate when faculty and staff used incorrect pronouns and names. However, they found comfort when faculty and staff actively asked for pronouns and names and used them correctly. Cy went on to talk about how they had taken many classes with a professor who showed they were actively trying, aligning with Nicolazzo's (2016) study, which found that participants were drawn to environments where they could freely express themselves.

Peers were described as accepting and willing to learn. Logan said, "I mean, it's like any like higher education like most people are educated enough not be discriminatory." Cy said that some people are not the "most tolerant," but they expected that attitude. In general, participants found the on-campus setting outside of the classroom comfortable, except for on-campus housing, as the research site did not offer gender-inclusive housing at the time of the study. As the research site assigns housing by sex, many participants described the experience of discomfort living in on-campus housing. Stachowiak & Gano (2020) described living on campus as fear for trans\* student, which was identified and confirmed in this study.

When looking at participants over all comfortability of their gender there was a range. A.C. was the less comfortable with their gender as they were still in the process of

discovering it. Luke was very comfortable with his gender as he discovered he was trans\* when he was 12, which he explained as “weirdly early”. Luke has become even more comfortable with his gender at college as “people here don’t really care”. Clyde described their gender as “hasn’t had that much of an effect on my life besides just comfort levels and who I’m choosing to be friends with and talk to”. Clyde is most comfortable with their gender when in inclusive and supportive environments. Cy recently discovered their gender and has become more comfortable with their identity recently as they have begun going by they/ them pronouns and by their chosen name.

***Research question 2***

How do trans\* students describe their academic performance? Clyde described academic success as

doing a good enough job to get a degree and then get a job with that degree that is successful to me and learning enough that I am able to help students and create a sense of enjoyment, interest, and efficacy in their abilities.

Clyde went on to describe suffering from "gifted student syndrome" and being a high-performing student. Clyde’s’ statement was also supported by Logan, who described his academic experiences as

I feel like if I don't have straight A's, then I'm just gonna like fail, which is obviously pretty dumb. So I've been trying to lower my standards, lower my standards for myself, but I'd say that if I have above a C in all of my classes, then I am happy. I'm just doing well if I'm passing, I'm happy.

Logan described himself as an "overachiever when it comes to school.” Cy also had a similar experience and described their academic experience as

I really want to get straight A's. I know that's not necessarily like a marker of me having like, learned, or like achieves enough as long as I get the points in, but I do like having a GPA that reflects that. And that's pretty much my main focus cause I'm not in a lot of clubs or anything like that, so that's basically where my energy goes.

Cy described their academics as "above average, but I view that as average." Lastly, A.C. Gray described their past academic performance as "pretty well" but current as "ehhh." A.C. Gray has a chronic pain disorder which has led to "a lot of doctor appointments." They have also been dealing with their mental health, and all of this at once has been "incredibly stressful," so right now, they are just trying "their best."

Goldberg describes trans\* students as having lower academic success and retention (2018), although within this study only one student had lower academic success compared to their peers. Within Pervin's transaction approach, he hypothesized that students perform higher when connecting to their environment through their personality characteristics. Clyde, Logan, and Cy, who are out on campus and had also built connections through their personality characteristics, performed well academically; therefore, having higher academic success. However, A.C. Gray who was discovering their gender during the time of the study did not have the same level of success as they had yet to build those connections. Furthermore, trans\* students often feel pressured to perform well academic and overall to present as the best of their population. Clyde went on to say "I need to be able to present the best face possible for all four of those identities to as many people as possible and exceed as much as I possibly can".

***Research question 3***

How do trans\* students utilize on-campus resources to be academically successful?

Students are more successful when their identities and values are supported by the institution. Students' success is built on the foundation of inclusion, safety, involvement, and community building (Fischer, 2015). In the findings student success is supported by the identity and validation, resources and services themes.

As the participants built relationships at the research site they began creating safety indicators. These safety indicators are created when institutions support the interest, values, and experiences of the students. The participants found their sense of belonging and began building indicators by finding support through Pride, on-campus jobs, and the GSD Center. All participants were active members of Pride at one point in their time at the research site. Pride was the first group of individuals to who Logan came out. Clyde identified Pride as an area where they find support. Clyde said "You find the greatest support from those who are also marginalized in this way". The GSD Center was identified as both an area and service that supports the participants in their identities. The GSD Center provided various services to students from a transformation closet, sex education and condoms, and local resources.

On-campus jobs provided students with the opportunity to serve the research site while gaining job experiences and the opportunity for academic growth. On-campus jobs provided students the opportunity to create developmental and networking opportunity by making connections with resources, faculty, and peers around their interest and experiences. On-campus job opportunities were sought out by participants because they

were able to express and be comfortable within their identities on-campus, which an off-campus environment would possibly not have been able to provide, and they reported receiving support from supervisors and co-workers. All the participants mentioned discomfort in expressing their identities off campus. Logan mentioned that he had learned more working at the newspaper than in any of his classes. Cy mentioned that working as a tutor had assisted them in their studies. Furthermore, working as a night assistant was favorable to Cy and A.C. Gray because they felt like their identities were accepted. These resources and services created opportunities for the students to develop holistically while providing an opportunity for growth in their academics. These resources and services helped the students find a sense of belonging as they supported the students' experiences.

As these participants engaged on campus, they helped build a relationship with the institution (Fishcer, 2015). The participants were able to find success where their inclusion, safety, involvement, and community needs were met. As this relationship between the participants and the research site continues to grow, the research site can provide accommodations, services and resources that the participants need. An example that was seen during the completion of this study was the addition of gender-inclusive housing for the 2021-2022 academic year.

### **Implications for Higher Education**

During the individual interviews, the participants provided suggestions that would positively impact their experiences. As the visibility of trans\* students continue to increase on college campuses, professionals need to reflect on how their practices impact students. This research will be beneficial to those serving students in all roles and can provide insight to the administration regarding policies and services. Professionals and

institutions must support students' interests, values, and experiences to help enhance success. Based on the suggestions given by the students, the following recommendations are offered:

- *Continuing education.* The GSD community is continuously evolving and changing. As changes occur, professionals must continue to educate themselves on these topics. Logan recommended that faculty and staff could benefit from further education. This recommendation came from an experience that Logan faced where a teacher was teaching outdated and incorrect information about the GSD community to their class. When staff and faculty are educated about minority populations, they can better serve those populations and educate others about the population. Trans\* students seek acceptance and understanding, which staff and faculty can provide through education and recognition.
- *Talk and listen to students.* During my conversation with Clyde, they shared a very powerful message

But when you are in a marginalized community, especially queer rights, with especially trans people, I mean, not to get all quantum, but you know the observation of an occurrence will always create a bias, a human bias with your experience. And honestly, when it comes to queer identity and when it comes to queer experiences, I don't believe that any amounts of psychological or sociological, or biological research will ever provide you as good of an experience as simply just talking to people. I think that I don't want to make it seem like I mean me and specific but, this stuff is never going to be adequately researched because not only is it up to

personal feelings and not feelings that are made by classical or operant or whatever conditioning. These are feelings that are always going to be misinterpreted by researchers who are not of that community. No matter how slightly and the fact of it is, we are marginalized. We are a minority, and the majority of researchers are always going to be people, not of our community looking in.

With that message, it is important to recognize the power of meaningful conversation. Speaking and listening to these students is one of the most vital forms of support that can be given. Providing these students a platform where they are supported in their efforts creates a space where they can be heard.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered by the researcher:

- *Correct utilization of pronouns.* The proper utilization of pronouns had a significant positive impact on trans\* students' experience. By using their pronouns correctly, staff and faculty validated the trans\* students' gender and experiences. A.C. Gray mentioned that "something as simple as like including your pronouns in your email signature" creates a welcoming setting for trans\* students. Another step that can be taken is including pronouns on name tags, stating your pronouns, and asking for pronouns. Although, when asking for pronouns, it is recommended to give the individual the option of sharing their pronouns. It is important to note that gender is a spectrum and that someone's gender may change at any time; therefore, it is encouraged to ask for one's pronouns continuously.

- *Inclusive language.* As the GSD community evolves, so does the language. When speaking to a group of individuals regardless of gender, it is recommended to use a general neutral term such as you all, y'all, everyone, humans, students, folks, etc. Using gender-neutral language creates a space for all genders to be recognized. Furthermore, it is recommended not to use personal titles associated with one's gender. If personal titles must be used, it is recommended to use Mx. It embraces all genders and does not exclude any gender. When asking about one's name and pronouns, it is crucial to recognize that person's name and pronouns, and “they are not preferred.” When asking about one's gender, it is more inclusive of asking for one's gender than asking for one's gender identity. Lastly, it is essential to understand the difference in language when it comes to sex and gender. Male, female, and intersex are sex terms, while women, men, agender, nonbinary, trans\*, etc., are gendered terms. Using these terms correctly provides the space for individuals to identify themselves correctly. It is also recommended to only ask for the classification that will be used.
- *Gender-inclusive facilities.* One of the most significant challenges trans\* students face on a college campus is access to gender-inclusive and safe facilities. Creating access to these facilities such as gender-neutral housing and restrooms allows students to feel safe and welcomed on campus. It is also recommended to place menstrual product dispensers in men’s restrooms to be inclusive of all genders.
- *Student health and education.* It is recommended that the institution offer HIV and aids training and inclusive sex education programs to all students. It is also

recommended the institution offer student health care plans that include trans\*-inclusive coverage.

- *Require safe zone/ally training for all employees.* As all employees will be interacting with students and individuals from the GSD community, employees must be educated about the population. By educating employees, institutions can ensure that inclusive practices are occurring campus wide. Typically, at the end of these training programs, individuals are asked to sign ally agreement contracts that should not be required of the program participants unless they want to.
- *Inclusive forms/ paperwork.* As students are required to complete a plethora of forms and paperwork, it is recommended that inclusive practices be utilized throughout these forms. Are both sex and gender necessary? It is recommended only to ask questions that will be used and recognized throughout the process.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was conducted to contribute to research about trans\* students' experiences on college campuses by analyzing the experiences of four trans\* students at the research site. Although valuable information was found during the study, there are still gaps in the literature. The following are recommendations for further researcher about trans\* students experiences:

- *Duplicate the study at a different institution.* Different size institutions may have a different climate on campus and off campus. Larger institutions may also offer a larger pool of participants, which may lead to new themes. Also, by duplicating the study, the potential of the transferability of themes and findings increases.

- *Conduct the study with a larger, more diverse pool of participants.* The participant pool used in this study only sheds a small light on the trans\* student population. Increasing the sample size with a more diverse poll will allow a fuller and more in-depth understanding of the trans\* students' experiences.
- *Conduct a longitudinal study.* A longitudinal study would allow the researcher to follow participants from their first year to when they graduate. As students' progress through college, their understanding and perspectives of climate change.
- *Conduct a study on the impact of gender-inclusive housing.* As gender-inclusive housing was identified as a fact of need by the participants in this study, it would be beneficial to study the impact this resource will have on their success.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that climate have on trans\* student academic and personal success at a mid-size institution located in the Midwest. As the visibility of trans\* students are on the rise, institutions have begun changing and adapting policies to become more inclusive; however, research on this population is limited. Trans\* students are the minority within the GSD community and face challenges that differ from their sexually diverse peers. This study formed an understanding of the impact that climate had while highlighting practices that inhibit and hindered trans\* student academic and personal success and experiences on trans\* student academic and personal success.

Trans\* students are more successful in environments that meet their needs, understand their experiences, and provide inclusive resources and facilities. Trans\* students face different forms of oppression and marginalization in the classroom and on

campus (Nicolazzo, 2016). Due to the abuse and harassment trans\* students face, trans\* students often face mental health challenges during their collegiate years (Grant et al., 2010). Additionally, trans\* students often face struggles finding housing and restrooms that align and accept their gender. Trans\* students often have difficulty transitioning and connecting to the university because they are a marginalized group (Dugan et al., 2012). They seek out organizations, faculty, and staff that accept their identities, which helps establish belonging. Overall, universities' responses, which are inclusive of the trans\* community, significantly impact their experience. Initiating programs and services such as ally training programs, chosen names, pronoun policies, GSD Centers, gender-neutral facilities, etc., creates a positive relationship between the institution and students.

Students who can connect to their institution through their personality characteristics are more likely to succeed in the collegiate environment (Banning, 1978). Student success is focused on inclusion, safety, involvement, and community building (Fischer, 2016). As students build relationships with resources, faculty/ staff, and peers that support their identities, they create safety indicators (Strange & Banning, 2001). As students interact with the institution, they build a relationship that contributes to the campus ecology (Fischer, 2015).

Four major themes were discovered in this study that impacted trans\* student success: identity and validation, academic climate, climate outside of the classroom, and resources and services. These themes were discovered as areas that had the most influence and impact on trans\* students' experiences. These themes within the participant experiences provided an understanding of the student's interactions with the research site (Fischer, 2015). Furthermore, they provided insight into the needs which these

populations need to be successful. Trans\* students face challenges that their cis-gendered peers do not experience, creating difficulty understanding trans\* students' experiences. Each participant talked about experiences that inhibited or hindered their academic and personal success.

When institutions include inclusive practices within their practices, they can positively impact trans\* student academic and personal success. Institutions should be continuously evaluating their impact on students through the lens of campus ecology. As the relationship between students and institutions is evolving, new, inclusive approaches and practices are needed. Trans\* students can succeed at institutions that actively support their identities and are willing to change and evolve as the GSD community evolves. The students in this study were able to create positive relationships with the institution due to select faculty/ staff practices allowing them to find a sense of belonging. These students were successful due to their dedication to succeed and willingness to build relationships with the institution. Lastly, it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to adapt and evolve to create environments where students, regardless of gender, can be successful.

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## APPENDIX A

### Email to Participants

Hello Student's Name,

My name is Cloe Bourdages and I am a second-year graduate student in the College Student Affairs Master's program at Eastern Illinois University. You are receiving this email because you have expressed interest in participating in the research study. As a part of the requirements for my degree I am conducting Master thesis research on the Impact of On-Campus on Trans\* Student Success. I am interested in interviewing four to five non-cisgender students who would like to talk about their experience at university in the area of success.

By participating in this study, you will be required to take part in an individual interview via zoom. Your participation in this study is voluntary and at any time you can withdraw without any penalty. Involvement in this research is confidential and your information will not be shared with anyone other than my thesis advisor.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study. It is my hope by conducting this study that I will be able to gain a better understanding of the impacts in which on-campus resources have on trans\* student success. If you have questions about this research you may contact myself or my thesis advisor, Dr. Heather Webb at [hkwebb@eiu.edu](mailto:hkwebb@eiu.edu).

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to my email ([cebourdages@eiu.edu](mailto:cebourdages@eiu.edu)). Participants will be selected on a need basis regarding the study. I thank you in advance for taking the time out to consider your participation.

Cloe Bourdages

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Consent Form**

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

##### **The Impact of On-Campus Resources on Trans\* Student Success**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Cloe Bourdages and Dr. Heather Webb from the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a person who identifies as trans\*.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate the impact that on-campus resources have on trans\* student success.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete an individual interview that contains demographic and open-end questions.
2. Answer several open-ended questions about your experience utilizing on-campus resources during a focus group.
3. Agree to the recording of the interview utilizing the zoom platform.

Your answers during the individual interview will be collected through a private zoom meeting between the other participants and myself.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the principle researcher who will have complete ownership of all information shared by the participants. Only pertinent findings of the research will be shared with the thesis committee members. Confidentiality will be asked of all members who participate as well as the researcher.

The researcher will be the only person who will have access to the video recording of the individual interviews. The individual interview will be transcribed, and the original video copy will be destroyed after the approval of the master's thesis by the committee members.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAW**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring this research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits of services to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORMTS**

As a volunteer, you agree to any potential discomfort when discussing personal views within the interview. The researcher will provide an open and safe forum, to the best of her ability. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are aware of the potential

for discomfort with sharing ideas and feelings about your personal experience utilizing on-campus resources.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY**

As a participant in this study, you will not directly benefit from participating in this study. However, the results of this study will provided valuable information to different Universities and Colleges On - Campus Resource to further improve their practices and resources provided to trans\* students. The intent of this study is to bring focus to on-campus resources practices that have a positive and negative effect on noncisgender student success.

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concern about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Phone: (217)-581-8576

Email: [eiuirb@eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject within a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant:

---

Signature of Participant:

---

Date Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ / 2020

## APPENDIX C

### Individual Interview Questions

Hello, first off I would like to thank you all for participating in this individual interview. My name is Cloe Bourdages, pronouns she/her/hers, and I am a graduate student in the College Student Affairs Program. This interview will be guided by pre-determined questions. Other questions may arise during the interview. This interview will be recorded through the zoom platform. Are there any question before we begin?

#### Demographic Questions

- What is your chosen name, age, pronouns, salient social identities, and gender?
- How many semesters, not including fall 2020, have you been a student at EIU?

#### Questions

- Can you tell me about yourself and the experiences that you have had about your identities?
- When do you feel most aware of your gender? When do you feel least aware of your gender?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you within your identities on campus? Off-campus? Back home?
- What is the greatest challenge you have faced in college-- academics, personal identity, or both?
- Where do you get support from? What does it look like? What kind of support do you need?
- How would you describe the climate on campus? In the classroom?
- Do you disclose your gender to other students and peers on campus? Faculty?

- How would you describe your current and past academic performance?
- What does academic success look like to you?
- Describe your strategies to achieve academic success.
- What campus resources have you utilized to enhance your academic performance? What appeals you to utilize those resources?
  - Are there any resources that you avoid using?
- On a scale of 1-10 how satisfied are you with campus resources and services that are provided to students? Explain why or why not.
- What changes would you like to see within on-campus resources?
- Is there anything else you would like to share at this time?
- What was the experience like for you participating in the focus group?

**APPENDIX D****Demographic Information**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Other</b>
Clyde	Agender	They/Them	Asexual	Jewish
Logan	Transgender Man	He/Him	Bisexual	
A.C. Gray	Non-binary	She/They	Bisexual	Disabled
Cy	Non-binary	They/Them	Lesbian	Atheist