

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

Graduate Studies

“I don’t want to be here”: PERCEPTIONS OF PERSISTENCE AMONG LGBTQ+
STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

A Chapter Style Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education

Christopher J. Jorgenson

College of Arts, Social Sciences, & Humanities
Student Affairs Administration

May, 2020

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By Christopher J. Jorgenson

We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership.

The candidate completed the oral defense of the dissertation.

Jörg Vianden, Ed.D.
Dissertation Committee Chairperson

Date

Adele Lozano, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Date

Joshua R. Brown, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Date

Dissertation accepted

Meredith Thomsen, Ph.D.
Director of Graduate Studies

Date

ABSTRACT

Jorgenson, C.J. “I don’t want to be here”: Perceptions of persistence among lgbtq+ students of color at predominantly white institutions of higher education. Ed.D. in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership, May 2020, 186pp. (J, Vianden)

LGBTQ+ college students of color—living at the nexus of race, sexuality, and gender—are at risk of higher rates of attrition, exacerbated by institutions whose student enrollment is predominantly White. This study used qualitative methods to explore and better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color at predominantly White institutions, in order to determine barriers to persistence and effective strategies for institutional education, advocacy, and support.

Findings suggest students whose identities encompass intersectional marginality experience disproportionate discrimination, bigotry, and exclusion—individually and institutionally. Predominant Whiteness is both intrusive and reflective of campus environments designed for and maintained by White supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy. LGBTQ+ college students of color, absent from the majority of strategic enrollment processes in higher education, often regard their campuses as indifferent, apathetic, and wholly unwilling to affect substantive change.

The study concludes with several recommendations. Predominantly White institutions of higher education must engage more deeply with culturally responsive educational training and engagement that focuses on power and its inequitable distribution and exercise. Faculty and staff representation across the institution should reflect the identities of the students they serve; PWIs must actively recruit and work to retain faculty and staff who are themselves LGBTQ+ people of color.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would be remiss without first acknowledging the students whose presence in this study made it not only possible, but enjoyable in ways I could not have anticipated. Any concerns about participant resistance were not only unfounded; they were immediately dispelled. I found each student eager to share and grateful to be asked about their experiences—concerned more that their contributions met my expectations for the dissertation than for their own sense of privacy and potential re-traumatization. The students’ unabashed willingness to help shed light on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color permeated our every conversation and came to encapsulate the energy and commitment each student has to ensure a better campus for students subsequently entering higher education. Theirs was an energy and commitment forged in a crucible of anger, pain, frustration, and fortitude. It is my hope that readers will be left not with an impression of LGBTQ+ students of color as passive victims of higher education. Such a takeaway would be misguided. LGBTQ+ students of color, despite numerous obstacles—personal, familial, cultural, and institutional—are defiantly resilient, staking their claim in an institution whose history and present, by design, exclude them at every turn. May this dissertation offer a glimpse into their rich lives and strength of will to succeed.

That they would spend time from their jam-packed personal and professional calendars to serve as my dissertation committee speaks to the level of care and support I have consistently felt throughout my time in this program. Dr. Jörg Vianden, Dr. Adele Lozano, and Dr. Josh Brown have consistently lent their significant bodies of experience and constructive critique to this work. I am most appreciative. To my dissertation chair,

Dr. Jörg Vianden, a special thank you! Though my love of hyphens and long, complicated sentences remains intact, I've a newfound appreciation for the benefits of brevity. Thank you for your honesty, guidance, and humor!

I have imagined various ways to thank my friends and family for supporting me in this endeavor. It is they who should receive a degree for weathering my periodic anxieties, crises of confidence, and overall stretched thinness. To Josh and Kallie: I simply could not have reached this milestone without your daily humor and friendship. You pushed me, supported me, and encouraged me at every turn. I appreciate your patience and tolerant love. To Josh, specifically, I valued your every critique and suggestion, and am honored to know someone who values potential over ephemeral sensitivity. You are a brilliant academic, and this dissertation is better for it. To Tim, my best non-euphemistic friend of 26 years, thank you for enduring my ubiquitous absence, as well as the piles of unfolded laundry colonizing our apartment throughout the last three years. That you have been with me through a lifetime of watershed moments—this one included—is a testament to your support, patience, humor, and willingness to be there for me. As always, thank you, and I love you much.

To my family, who may never understand why I “did this to myself,” but who supported me nonetheless: I am struck by these acknowledgments in a study whose focus highlighted barriers of indifference, bigotry, discrimination, and isolation. I am lucky enough to have been raised in a family whose love has continually been made manifest through concern, earnest curiosity, inclusion, and love. I love you and am forever grateful for your support and unconditional love. You never treated me any less, when I came out to you at 19 years old, and have since encouraged my every endeavor. That has always

made me strive for more. I love you more than words, a fortuitous fact that pleases me greatly, as I am exhausted from writing. A million thank yous.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Students of color are accessing higher education in increasing numbers, despite graduating at disproportionately lower rates than their White peers (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Likewise, LGBTQ+ students, while increasingly visible in higher education, continue to experience substantial barriers to graduation (Renn & Reason, 2013). LGBTQ+ college students of color in predominantly White institutions occupy a critical nexus of race, sexuality, and gender, but their experiences in higher education remain largely unstudied (Misawa, 2007; Nakabayashi, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

While the ultimate goal of a post-secondary education remains graduation, persisting to that achievement disproportionately favors some students over others. Students of color persist at inequitable rates and experience racism in the form of isolation, discrimination, invalidation, and oppression (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013). Research suggests the same inequity exists for LGBTQ+ students, who routinely suffer rejection, bigotry, and invisibility within the academy (Kavanaugh, 2016; Quaye & Harper, 2015). At this critical nexus of race, gender, and sexuality, LGBTQ+ students of color experience a compounded marginality that has yet to be sufficiently studied. As a result, LGBTQ+ students of color remain a vulnerable student group, their barriers to persistence numerous.

The last few decades have seen a surge of studies seeking to explore and understand the lived experiences of students of color in institutions of higher education (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; McElderry & Rivera, 2017; Misawa, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013). Fewer studies explore how LGBTQ+ students perceive college and navigate the higher education landscape (Kavanagh, 2016; McLaughlin, 2017; Quaye & Harper, 2015). Even fewer studies explore LGBTQ+ students of color attending predominantly White institutions (PWI), one of the numerous identity intersections reflecting the 21st century college student.

Given the compounded marginality of LGBTQ+ students of color, it stands to reason that barriers to persistence in higher education for this student population are equally compounded. The paucity of quantitative or qualitative studies focusing on LGBTQ+ students of color in PWIs, however, leaves such reasoning without a substantive basis in empirical research.

Defining Persistence

In its comprehensive report on student persistence and goal attainment, the Education Testing Service (2013) winnowed down the variety of reasons students voluntarily or involuntarily stay in school, among them (a) attrition, (b) dismissal, (c) dropout, (d) mortality, (e) persistence, (f) retention, (g) stopout, and (h) withdrawal. While each of these elements sheds light on a complex issue and is deserving of study, persistence is generally more student-centered, offering important potential for understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color (Education Testing Service, 2013). Without research whose focus is LGBTQ+ students of color in

PWIs, higher education professionals are ill-equipped to assess their lived experiences and whether those experiences factor into their persistence to graduation.

There are several approaches to and definitions of persistence as a measurable student outcome in higher education (Adelman, 1999; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1997, 1998, 2002). Consequently, higher education engages with persistence in myriad ways, focusing on college students' continued enrollment and progress toward degree completion. The lens through which higher education views persistence must change, however, as the 21st century college student (marginalized students in particular) routinely attends more than one university before persisting to graduation (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; McCormack, 2003). Moreover, "Policy makers at the federal level are considering policy options associated with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that includes linking institutional eligibility for federal student financial aid programs to institutional graduation rates" (Titus, 2004, p. 674). Despite the ongoing transformation of higher education's engagement and assessment of persistence, as well as its increasingly prominent role in matters of federal funding, how it is currently understood remains a key method by which to gauge the student experience.

Positionality

My positionality in this study is as multifaceted as it is potentially controversial. Indeed, I remain at the outset of this study keenly aware of my own identities as a White, cisgender, gay man and how those identities may individually or collectively impact this research. The role of quantitative researcher—of storyteller—confers power and agency over others' lived experiences. Might something be lost in my data collection, analysis,

and induction that might otherwise be deemed critical by those whose identities more closely align with my chosen student population? Might I unknowingly colonize and subsume insights and critiques within my own ideological biases? Such possibilities are not without precedent, as studies whose foci have been gender, sexuality, and race have been tumultuous, unethical, and often harmful to participants (Levy, 2013). Further complicating my researcher role is the straddled insider–outsider status that defines my positionality as LGBTQ+ but White.

Substantial privilege is conferred upon those who tell others’ stories. The nature of this qualitative study required me to not only engage in the process of interpreting others’ lived experiences; it also required me to ensure that such lived experiences were not misrepresented, altered or refracted through my own positionality. In this study, I endeavored to continually engage my own identities—personal and professional—approaching my participants’ lived experiences with as much ethical pragmatism as compassion. My positionality took into account the totality of the students I interviewed, such that their whole selves were represented in their lived experiences. My assigned sex, gender identity and expression, race, sexuality—and any additional identities—were continually considered both during the process of data collection and data induction.

As a gay, cisgender male, my representation in the LGBTQ+ acronym affords me a certain modicum of in-group status. It is important to note, however, that mere membership in an acronym does not preclude or mollify the complexities of intergroup politics and histories. Communal representation does not, by mere proximity, foster community. In other words, though I may be represented by the “G” in LGBTQ+, my lived experiences should be treated thusly: as *my* lived experiences. Dwyer and Buckle

(2009) contextualized the complexity of the insider advantage, in that it automatically confers upon the researcher trust and openness with participants, while also affording greater access. They cautioned that, “insider status may negatively affect the research if participants assume researchers understand their experiences and leave out more detailed explanations. Similarly, insider researchers may make assumptions about participants based on personal experiences and fail to ask important questions” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). The participants in this study were treated autonomously, separate and apart from any assumed commonalities resulting from their categorization as LGBTQ+. Additionally, in order to avoid imposing (implicitly or otherwise) my Whiteness and its experiential frameworks onto LGBTQ+ students of color, I was continually mindful of my positionality and privileged identities, so as to prevent any inductive superimposition (Groenewald, 2004). Employing triangulation (e.g., member-checks) aided me in this process.

Research Design

What follows is a critical, phenomenological qualitative study. The research will take place at predominantly White institutions of higher education in Wisconsin and Minnesota. I have chosen a qualitative approach, because qualitative research seeks to understand participants’ lived experiences as they experience them, while offering the greatest possibility of affecting change in peoples’ lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Conversely, quantitative data tends to be rather difficult (if not impossible) to procure, as the majority of institutions of higher education in the United States do not track sexual orientation data among students (Renn & Reason, 2013). Qualitative data, however, provides rich and nuanced insight into the experiences

of queer students, providing an important entry point into efforts to advocate for institutional change. Such change will address the persistence of LGBTQ+ students of color, the ultimate focus of this qualitative study.

Definitions

Examining the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students in higher education necessitates defining terms. When researching this community of disparate identities (of which I am a part), one is bombarded with acronyms of fluctuating length, pluses and asterisks, impassioned activists, cogent and spirited debates, and relatively little consistency. The “queering and constantly evolving nature of terminology” related to sexual orientation and gender identity make studying them a difficult task, and any attempts to do so should be considered an opportunity to “help situate the complex intricacies, intentions, and limitations that may inform how students identify” (Jourian, 2015, p. 11). Rather than form value judgments of others’ choices of identification, I have instead offered definitions for the terms I have chosen in this study. It is important to recognize that others’ choices may differ. Educators and practitioners in higher education hoping to learn more about and advocate for sexual and gender-minoritized people must commit themselves to ever-evolving identity terminology and complex conversations without pat resolutions.

The Politics of Defining

The act of defining terms is not to be taken lightly. In fact, academic, philosophical, and ethical battles rage over the merits and possible pitfalls of “naming” and the requisite identity politics that often follow. Stone (2010) observed that such boundary disputes have and continue to rage, particularly following the corporatization of

the queer movement (e.g., the commercialization of Pride celebrations). Moreover, “Activists have long argued about whether the movement should be more radical, less mainstream, more focused on multi-issue politics, queerer, or less homonormative” (Stone, 2010, p. 465). While I offer my own list of identities, as evidenced by the LGBTQ+ acronym I chose to use for this study, some researchers and LGBTQ+ people would offer divergent options and definitions. Still others would eschew categorization altogether, insisting that, “It is not the nature of a cause or a subject position but the human condition itself that makes sorting people out along any single dimension illogical and just a political impossibility” (Stevens, 2004, p. 223). Furthermore, a critical assessment of the identities and definitions in any acronym requires a recognition of the impact of Euro-Western colonization and the myriad ways in which identity formation and classification are impacted by this historical lens and cultural context (Jourian, 2015). A conversation without resolution, it is nevertheless crucial to stand still long enough to conduct this study.

The LGBTQ+ Acronym

LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (and/or questioning). The addition of the plus is a linguistic marker that performs much like “etcetera,” an acknowledgment that the chosen letters are unrepresentative of the full breadth of existing identities. Invoking any iteration of the LGBTQ+ acronym risks alienating certain identities, as no single collection of letters can represent the panoply of diverse sexualities and genders that exist (Jourian, 2015). As much as it is important for this study to define terms, it is equally important to acknowledge that such terms can be temporally ephemeral, dynamically evolving in response to various contexts as well as

individual and communal usage (Jourian, 2015). Spencer and Patterson (2017) explicated the perils of uncritically invoking the LGBTQ+ acronym, highlighting its usage in higher education as a cover for lackluster institutional social justice efforts:

[LGBTQ+] moniker-style politics limits solidarity to a single-issue focus on combatting homophobia and (sometimes) transphobia. This colorblind vision of solidarity not only obscures the connection between queer and trans politics and racial justice but also works to entrench queer and trans politics in Whiteness even further. (p. 301)

While LGBTQ+ at times represents identities specifically truncated to these exact letters, no such delimitation will be applied to this study. The linguistic ellipsis that is the plus-sign is meant to convey this open-endedness, with the understanding that vigilance for the co-optation of LGBTQ+ politics by White, cis-heterosexism must always play a role in institutional advocacy efforts.

QPOC/QTPOC. I have chosen to forego using Queer People of Color (QPOC) and Queer Trans People of Color (QTPOC) to exclusively define participants in this study. While it is important to note that QPOC and QTPOC represent a merged racial, sexual, and gender identification whose creation intentionally distinguished itself from previous acronyms, I have found in my work as director of a sexuality and gender-based resource center at a PWI that the word *queer* remains a polarizing one. In order to be as inclusive as possible, and in an effort to reduce reluctance to participate in this study, I have chosen to use LGBTQ+ as a means of mitigating that polarity. This choice in no way interrogates or invalidates the importance of QPOC and QTPOC as viable

alternatives to identification; in fact, both acronyms make numerous appearances in this study.

Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is a life-long immutable identity characteristic that encapsulates lust, attraction, and desire (Moser, 2016). While lesbian, gay, and bisexual refer exclusively to sexual orientation, it is important to note that there exist in contemporary usage numerous additional sexual orientations and attendant terms. Representation (or lack thereof) in my study's chosen acronym of LGBTQ+ has no bearing on the validity of others' identities and terminology. Potential participants whose sexual orientation differs from the monosexual identities represented in the LGBTQ+ acronym will not be excluded from this study. Indeed, they are implied by the plus sign at the acronym's end. Such sexual orientations include, but are not limited to, pansexual, omnisexual, hemisexual, demisexual, ambisexual, polysexual, and asexual. Sexual orientation does not imply and is not the result of any particular gender identity. While a full explication of each identity listed above is not needed, I feel it prudent to define a selection of the lesser known identities, so as to better understand the study participants.

Demisexual. A term used to describe someone whose sexual orientation exists on the spectrum between sexual and asexual. According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN, 2020), demisexuality connotes an individual who does not develop sexual attraction toward someone in the absence of an emotional connection. While often discounted as merely a preference, or an "admirable choice rather than an innate orientation, [d]emisexuals are not choosing to abstain; they simply lack sexual attraction until a close, emotional, relationship is formed" (AVEN, 2020).

Pansexual. Someone for whom sexual attraction is not determined by assigned sex or gender identity (AVEN, 2020). As the director of a resource center whose mission focuses on gender and sexuality, pansexuality is often described by my students as sexual attraction toward the person, regardless of their identities.

Panromantic. Often confused with pansexuality, panromantics can develop romantic connections regardless of assigned sex or gender identity (AVEN, 2020). Unlike pansexuality, panromantics may or may not develop a sexual attraction toward those with whom they develop romantic feelings.

Gender Identity. Gender is often conflated and used interchangeably with assigned sex, a mistake that adds to substantial and lasting confusion both in and out of higher education. Adding to the complexity of this misunderstanding is the crucial distinction between gender identity and gender expression. Jourian (2015) parsed out the difference:

A person's own self-conception of gender is referred to as one's gender identity, whereas the performance and enactment of gender is referred to as one's gender expression. Words that describe gender identity include woman, man, genderqueer, transgender, agender, and endless others, whereas terms such as masculine, androgynous, feminine, and many more describe gender expression. Some descriptors such as butch, femme, transfeminine, and masculine-of-center may refer to one's gender identity or gender expression or a melding of both. Within social institutions and cultures that reify essentialist and binary understandings of gender, such as U.S. higher education institutions, those assigned as males at birth are expected to be masculine men and those assigned

females at birth are expected to be feminine women. Fluidity and alternatives are rarely acknowledged or affirmed. (p. 14)

Indeed, it is the dynamic fluctuation and fluidity of gender identity and expression that further complicates higher education's attempts to quantify enrollment numbers for the LGBTQ+ community.

Cisgender, transgender, queer, non-binary, and fa'afatama. When discussing gender identity, it is important to note that the sheer variety of non-binary gender identities often complicates institutional identification strategies, with some institutions avoiding non-binary identification altogether (Broussard, Warner, & Pope, 2018). Universities have found, however, that expanded categories for gender identity and sexual orientation provide guidance for special programs, resources, and community-building amongst LGBTQ+ students, resulting in more positive psychological and academic outcomes (Broussard, 2018).

Cisgender. There are two critical terms with which one must engage when examining gender identity: cisgender and transgender. One must also recognize that while only certain letters in the LGBTQ+ acronym connote sexual orientation, each letter in the acronym implies a certain gender identity—either cisgender or transgender. The *cis-* prefix means *on the same side of*. For those who identify as cisgender (or cis), their gender identity aligns with the gender assigned at birth. The *trans-* prefix means *across from*. For those who identify as transgender (or trans), their gender identity does not align with the gender assigned at birth.

Transgender. The word *transgender* emerged in the 1960s, its usage commonplace by the early 1990s while rising to prominent usage within the United

States' medical establishment (Jourian, 2015). Transgender can be used to connote an individual identity or a collective group of identities. I am invoking *transgender* as an umbrella term in this study, encompassing a diverse array of non-binary gender identities, among them (but not limited to) gender non-conforming, genderqueer, and gender fluid. Again, far more gender identities exist in contemporary usage that are unrepresented in the above acronym and outside the scope of the single word *transgender*. Those gender identities are no less relevant.

Queer. The term queer in the context of this study is invoked somewhat interchangeably, used to denote both sexual orientation and gender identity. Queerness and its social, sexual, geo-political, economic, racial, ethnic, colonial, cross-cultural, and trans/national implications, however, is as far from a simplistic sexual-gender split as one can get. Glick (2003) adroitly encapsulated this highly charged word as functioning as a “denaturalizing [discourse], deconstructing power relations by asserting the incoherence and contingency of identity categories and cultural regimes of the normal” (p. 123). In other words, queer can be used as a noun *or* verb, an active process as much as it is a marker of identity, standing in stark contrast to dichotomous, binary classification.

Non-binary. While often subsumed within the transgender umbrella term, current studies suggest that approximately one third of transgender individuals identify specifically as non-binary (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Non-binary gender identities eschew numerous binary dichotomies—male/female, man/woman, boy/girl, femme/butch—representing a fluidity of gender identity, development, and expression.

Fa’afatama. Joyetter Luamanu (2017) wrote in the *Samoa Observer* about a recent fa’afatama Talanoa (inclusive and transparent dialogue) at the Palolo Deep Marine

Reserve in Samoa. Fa'afatama, or trans men, are rarely afforded the opportunity to gather, often reluctant to openly greet one another and build relations in public as is commonly the case with fa'afafine (trans women) (Luamanu, 2017). Offering a space for fa'afatama, while honoring their cultural inclinations, presented some challenges; however, talanoa organizers felt it critical to provide an opportunity for fa'afatama to share their triumphs and challenges across Polynesian culture (Luamanu, 2017). Fa'afatama contend with numerous obstacles, including the pressures of culture and religion, familial expectations, and lack of access to counseling and support services (Luamanu, 2017). They nevertheless continue to carve out and define their place in LGBTQ+ culture more broadly, establishing critical community supports throughout Polynesia (Luamanu, 2017).

The Assumptions of Whiteness in Higher Education

Whiteness studies are relatively new to race scholarship, emerging in the 1990s and surging to prominence in academic circles (Leonardo, 2009). Contemporary Whiteness studies continue to critically situate White identity in ways that challenge higher education and White people more generally. Leonardo (2009) explained that:

With whiteness studies, whiteness and white people come to the center in an unprecedented and unforeseen way. This is different than the centering that whiteness is usually afforded in Eurocentric curricula and writing...In whiteness studies, *whiteness becomes the center of critique and transformation* [author's emphasis]. It represents the much-neglected anxiety around race that whiteness scholars, many of whom are white, are now beginning to recognize...The debate between white abolition and reconstruction is a fertile educational ground. (p. 91)

It remains outside the scope of this study to delve deeply into the rich and burgeoning scholarship of Whiteness studies. Yet, the premise that LGBTQ+ students of color experience Whiteness with consistency and predictability—apart from geography and where Whiteness is dominant—is meant to critically situate Whiteness in higher education in ways that are conducive to transformational change. It is an assumption with which this study will contend.

The Midwest Disconnection

Though participants in this study are positioned at institutions of higher education (IHE) in the Midwest, I have chosen to exclude that aspect of their positionality in the forthcoming analysis. This approach is not meant to deny common threads of experience unique to a particular geographic boundary. Rather, my goal is to intentionally interrogate the presumption of the Midwest as somehow more or less problematic for LGBTQ+ students of color in higher education, particularly when those students attend predominantly White institutions. In an effort to move away from the Midwest as a static, contained location—wherein which the student experience is predictable—I contend that, within PWIs, LGBTQ+ students of color experience higher education in ways that transgress geography. In other words, “Rather than reinforce the idea of the Midwest as a core that essentializes and naturalizes American cultural and ideological formations, [I am suggesting the value of opening] up possibilities for dispelling and unraveling the idea of the heartland” as the primary locus of Whiteness and all that it entails (Manalansan, Nadeau, Rodríguez, & Somerville, 2014, p. 1). Ultimately, then, the lived experiences of the students in this qualitative study can be analyzed and applied to PWIs

throughout the United States, if not universally, then with such commonalities in mind and without the delimitation of viewing said experiences as solely Midwestern.

At the very least, the Midwest is often read as inhabited by “the average person” (read: White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class), and narratives that contest such interpretations are seldom attributed to identities that deviate from those entrenched expectations (Manalansan et al., 2014). Moreover, since the 2016 presidential election and 2018 Midterm elections—where White voters overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump’s racist, xenophobic, transphobic, anti-immigrant, nationalist brand of Republicanism—the need for colleges and universities to seriously address Whiteness, independent of its location, is crucial to their students’ success (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Rationale and Significance

The genesis of this study comes both from my own experiences in higher education serving as an advocate for LGBTQ+ students of color, as well as empirical research that suggests my experiences are symptomatic of a generalizable issue. Given the decreasing number of high school graduates, continued public divestment in higher education, and the increasing diversity of college students, studies that seek to better understand college students’ experiences on campus are crucial to institutional success (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013).

There are several potential implications for researching LGBTQ+ students of color at predominantly White institutions. First, it is critical for predominantly White institutions to better understand the ways in which they serve as repositories of and surrogates for White supremacy. Institutional, individual, implicit, and explicit racism continue to impact students of color in higher education, and critical engagement with

this student population and their campus experiences is necessary to affect institutional change. Second, institutions of higher education must ensure that campus infrastructure and resources reflect the particularities of LGBTQ+ students of color. The intersections of race, gender, and sexuality can present challenges to institutional advocacy, and the mere 229 colleges nationwide that have LGBTQ+ resource centers are ill-equipped to contend with these complexities (Windmeyer, 2017). The present study will shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color, such that institutions of higher education can ensure those experiences are not hindrances to persistence. Ultimately, once institutions of higher education have a better understanding of the barriers to persistence for LGBTQ+ students of color, they can formulate recruitment and retention strategies, so as to improve competitiveness amidst the post-secondary education market.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical phenomenological qualitative study is to better understand perceptions of persistence among LGBTQ+ students of color in predominantly White institutions of higher education. The overarching goal is to inform PWIs—no matter their geographic location—how best to advocate for and address persistence of this student population. The following research questions guide this study:

- 1) From the perspective of LGBTQ+ students of color, in what ways do their predominantly White institutions affect their persistence?
- 2) How do LGBTQ+ students of color describe/perceive the campus climate at their predominantly White institutions?

3) How do LGBTQ+ students of color perceive barriers to their persistence at their predominantly White institutions?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Higher education continues to adjust to a changing national demographic, and the 21st century college student reflects that change. Researchers remain focused on the myriad ways institutions of higher education both successfully and inadequately serve various student populations. A substantial amount of literature examines student persistence in higher education (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 1998). Myriad studies seek to understand the complexities of an ever-changing national citizenry, the dynamics of higher education amidst such change, and the increasingly diverse 21st century college student (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013). The last few decades have seen a surge of studies seeking to examine the lived experiences of students of color within institutions of higher education (Cabrera et al., 2016; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; McElderry & Rivera, 2017; Misawa, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2015). However, fewer studies explore how LGBTQ+ students perceive college and navigate the higher education landscape (Cegler, 2012; Kavanagh, 2016; McLaughlin, 2017; Renn, 2010). Even fewer studies explore LGBTQ+ students of color, one of the numerous identity intersections reflecting the 21st century college student.

To focus on the critical intersection of racial/ethnic minorities and sexual/gender minorities in predominantly White institutions (PWI), I have organized this literature

review using the image of a funnel as a structural tool. I begin broadly in the first section, situating contemporary experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color in higher education amidst a tumultuous political environment reminiscent of similar historical civil rights battles (i.e., women's suffrage, Black Civil Rights). Gradually narrowing focus in the subsequent sections, I explore the lived experiences of students of color and LGBTQ+ students (respectively) in higher education. In the concluding section, I highlight the paucity of literature examining the intersection of race/ethnicity and sexuality/gender, the absence of which throws into sharp relief the gap of information about this critical nexus of student identity and the ways in which it informs LGBTQ+ students of colors' perceptions of and persistence in higher education.

A Tale of Two Polities: Higher Education and Contemporary American Politics

During the twentieth century, the relationship between higher education and the American government underwent two dramatic metamorphoses. Until the 1960s, political leaders and university officials “forged a powerful partnership that transformed the country's plural system of colleges and universities into a repository of expertise, a locus for administrative coordination in the federal government, and a mediator of democratic citizenship” (Loss, 2012, p. 1). The ascendancy of conservative politics in the 1980s, ushered in by the tumultuous civil rights battles of the 1960s, soured this powerful partnership. Battle lines were drawn between the state's conception of democratic citizenship that considered higher education as a reward for national service and minority students' demands that higher education represent a rights-based, identity-group political order (Loss, 2012). This tug-of-war between liberal and conservative conceptualizations

of higher education and its purpose within the broader national interest has bled into the twenty-first century.

There and Back Again

At first glance, the transformation of the relationship between the American government and higher education from stalwart partners to ideological opposites can seem jarring. In fact, this volatile relationship is representative of a historically recurring theme (Loss, 2012). Though recent attempts by conservative media and politicians to ideologically neutralize higher education (Applebaum, 2009; Linville, 2013; Mariani & Hewitt, 2008) are themselves fundamentally ideological (and highly political), such attempts are hardly shocking. Public higher education continues to be a lightning rod of societal debate and contention, often caught in the crossfire, “between citizens and the state, completely beholden to neither party but expected and committed to serve both” (Loss, 2012, p. 3). Whether the chasm between conservative and liberal educational philosophies narrows or widens within any given timeframe, few arenas are as susceptible to the effects of mercurial politics than higher education (Bess & Dee, 2007). Amidst this landscape, students in higher education are the most affected (students with intersecting, marginalized identities even more so) and are left negotiating a political minefield.

As social identities, race, gender, and sexuality are rife with potential political sticking points. The students embodying these identity categories are politicized before they even enter institutions of higher education (IHE) and are further politicized once they do (Hotchkins, 2017). Narratives of exclusion, invalidation, isolation, and cultural aggression are commonplace in the literature, with very little reprieve offered to college

students after they transition into higher education (Johnson, Reyes, & Smith, 2009; Hotchkins, 2017; McElderry & Rivera, 2017).

Students' lived experiences within higher education are both governed by and a reflection of the current political climate. A microcosm of culture at-large, colleges and universities have been founded on oppressive systems (Macfarlane, 2012). White supremacy, sexism, cissexism, classism, and heteronormativity have all contributed to the negative and exclusionary legacy of higher education and continue to affect the lived experiences of contemporary college students (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Walter, 2005). In addition, substantial shifts in the national political climate, exacerbated by the Trump presidency, have hit marginalized students the hardest, laying bare the inability of IHE to contend with their own stake in perpetuating systemic oppression and those students most affected by it (Castrellón, Reyna Rivarola, & López, 2017). It would be a mistake, however, to contextualize political climate as erratic and without a discernible pattern. Political divisiveness and the climate it creates rarely springs forth from the ether; rather, it is the historically predictable result of power and its exercise at the individual, local, state, and federal levels. Ideological fluctuations (however extreme), and the backlash accompanying them, are well documented.

Amidst a Backlash

Backlash in response to cultural change is a global phenomenon with measurable, recurring historical patterns (Faludi, 1991; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). It is amidst such a backlash LGBTQ+ students of color find themselves negotiating higher education and an increasingly polarized American politics. Since the 2016 presidential election, campuses throughout the United States have seen a

sharp rise in hate crimes and bias incidents, and the targets of such crimes and incidents are disproportionately students of color and LGBTQ+ students (Reichman, 2018).

Trump's presidency has worked to viciously squelch nuanced discussions of race and sexuality (among other identities), instead fueling White, cisheterosexist supremacy (Samayoa & Nicolazzo, 2017; Logan, Lightfoot, & Contreras, 2017; Reichman, 2018).

Moreover, in his first presidential term, Trump has worked to appoint openly anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-civil rights cabinet-level officials and judges, influencing elections from small municipalities to the Supreme Court of the United States (Price, 2018).

My own university, a predominantly White institution (PWI), twice hosted the Trump campaign directly preceding the election. Trump's incendiary rhetoric has had a notable impact, and, as evidenced by other PWIs throughout the United States who also hosted Trump's campaign, has exacerbated campus hostility, including a rise in White students' racist attitudes and behaviors (Logan et al., 2017). The effect of Trump's presidency on LGBTQ+ students of color within PWIs, however, is a direct reflection not only of Trump (he is hardly unique) but of the well-established schism between the aforementioned polities—the American government and higher education—and the citizenry comprising both conservative and liberal philosophies of education.

Just as marginalized students demanded change in the 1960s, today's marginalized voices and their experiences often drive contemporary change. With change comes cultural backlash, and students of color have been struggling within PWIs for the last fifty years, enduring increasingly threatening campus climates hindering their academic, social, and cultural development (Hotchkins, 2017). Some have characterized the events of the last decade “a resurgence of a modern day Civil Rights Era,” fueled in

part by the Black Lives Matter social movement (remarkably similar to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the 1960s), the #MeToo movement, and the successful push for marriage equality (Hotchkins, 2017; Logan et al., 2017; McElderry & Rivera, 2017). The presence of advocacy related to sexual assault and sexual orientation—alongside race—suggests a more nuanced approach to civil rights than has historically occurred, conceptualizing a more intersectional push for change.

Examining the 21st century college student experience requires an acknowledgment and application of intersectionality, in that one is faced with simultaneously examining race, as well as any number of additional identity categories (e.g., sexuality, gender, religion, class, and ability). The 21st century college student is far more diverse than has historically been the case, with the percentage of college students of color increasing each year (Renn & Reason, 2015). Moreover, and despite a lack of accurate numbers due to an absence of institutional identification, research also suggests that LGBTQ+ students are accessing higher education in greater (and more visible) numbers (Cegler, 2012; McLaughlin, 2017; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Rankin & Garvey, 2015). Taken in context, then, Trump’s presidency can be read as representative of another backlash in a long line of virulent responses to social and cultural change in society.

Since taking office in 2016, the Trump administration has launched a near constant assault on the LGBTQ+ community, and “marginalized communities now find themselves in a state of constant terror” (Castrellón et al., 2017, p. 936; Gardner, 2017). Not only have LGBTQ+ people’s very existence been continuous fodder in the arena of public debate, but Trump has revealed himself as the very embodiment of “white

supremacy, capitalism, racism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and more” (Castrellón et al., 2017, p. 936). Further, Trump’s divisive campaign and election have left little room for doubt that racism and racist nativism remain potent forces within the United States, its citizenry, and its politics (Castrellón et al., 2017; Reichman, 2018). Consequently, gathering firsthand information of the LGBTQ+ student of color’s experience within higher education has taken on greater import and urgency.

LGBTQ+ College Students of Color: A Critical Intersection

Institutions of higher education, themselves repositories of power and privilege, are subject to the ebb and flow of national political discourses. Attempts to circumvent or directly address these discourses are made manifest through campus climate. That is, “students’ perceptions of their experiences both in and out of the classroom” are reflective of institutions’ interactions with and responses to cultural and political approaches to equity, diversity, and inclusion (Woodard & Sims, 2000, p. 540). In order to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color in higher education, then, a more thorough examination of campus climate is necessary.

Campus Climate in Higher Education

A discussion of campus climate must begin with a definition, of which there are many. Though Woodard and Sims (2000) offer a narrow definition focused specifically on the student experience, Bauer (1998) defines campus climate more generally, as the malleable, relatively superficial aspect of an institutional environment. Bauer goes on to say that campus communities voicing discontent often target campus climate by way of institutional criticism (e.g., prevalence of bias incidents) and inclusivity strategies (e.g.,

systematized diversity inventories such as the Intercultural Development Inventory and Equity Scorecard) and that campus climate reflects a surface-level approach to affect change that belies the embedded realities of cultural attitudes, ideologies, and approaches to diversity (Bauer, 1998). Rankin and Reason (2008) contend that, while environment, climate, and culture are often misused, ill-defined, and mistakenly conflated, there is nevertheless, “a common, albeit implicit, understanding of campus climate [as] an immeasurable construct comprised of multiple items that attempt to assess the prevailing attitudes or standards...of a group, period, or place” (p. 263). Still others, like Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, and Milem (1998) compartmentalize campus climate into four distinct (if overlapping) components: institutional history, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate. Similarly, Peterson and Spencer (1998) categorically conceptualize campus climate into objective climate, perceived climate, and psychological “or felt” climate (p. 13).

Pinning down a single definition of campus climate is no easy task. There are as many definitions as there are attempts to define it. While Hart and Fellabaum (2008) make a convincing case for using the *first* two categories as identified by Peterson and Spencer (1998), this study (and for the same reason as Hart and Fellabaum) focuses on the *last* two categories: perceived climate and psychological or felt climate. Peterson and Spencer’s (1998) definition “is broader and thus captures perspectives on additional identities” (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008, p. 224), and LGBTQ+ college students of color experience university life from multiple perspectives and at the nexus of intersecting identities. Broad approaches to campus climate that consider various identities are more conducive to a study focusing on persistence.

College Students of Color in Higher Education

The aforementioned definitions of campus climate and persistence are key to understanding the lived experiences of students of color within a PWI. A campus's climate is a reflection of its overall culture, a culture Jayakumar and Museus (2012) assert is a reflection of historically entrenched Eurocentric ideologies and belief systems that undergird the expectations and behaviors of faculty, staff, and students on college campuses. This Eurocentrism belies the rich history of diversity in American society, and, at the same time, lays bare IHE's historically conservative culture (Karkouti, 2016). Students of color, though increasing in numbers, consistently report a lack of institutional diversity, thereby increasing barriers to persistence (McElderry & Rivera, 2017).

The lack of diversity in higher education, much like backlashes to cultural change, should not come as a surprise. Karkouti (2016) explains that, "PWI's have a history of exclusionary practices and limited access opportunities for minority students, meaning that White students constitute the majority of their student bodies" (p. 65). Even so, an influx of traditionally underrepresented students has continued to diversify post-secondary education, and like those before them, minority students continue to share their lived experiences (often at great cost) to demand accountability and change (Karkouti, 2016). Amongst these students are college students of color.

The history of higher education is rife with examples of intentional exclusion of students of color from its classrooms (Karkouti, 2016). White supremacy, by way of institutionalized racism, has championed White superiority, preventing students of color access to social mobility through education (Karkouti, 2016). Examples abound of legislative attempts (many successful) to cast people of color as undeserving of what

higher education has to offer or bereft of the agency required to succeed within it (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). It would be a grave mistake to relegate such truths to “history,” as, in many regards, those attitudes and resultant experiences are alive and well in contemporary higher education.

When asked to describe their experiences in higher education, White students and students of color share widely disparate points of view, largely informed by higher education’s racist past and inability (or unwillingness) to contend with it. Rankin and Reason (2005) examined the racial dissonance amongst students’ experiences:

Students of color [are] more apt to indicate the climate [is] racist, hostile, disrespectful, and less accepting of minority groups. White students, on the other hand, [indicate] that campus climate [is] nonracist, friendly, and respectful. White students [are] more likely than students of color to rate institutional responses to the racial climate favorably and to believe the racial climate on campus [is] improving. (p. 57)

Exacerbated by the 2016 presidential election results, divergent campus experiences that hinge on race continue to widen. As the prevalence of alt-right ideologies continues to frame White people as the “true victims” of concerted attempts to mitigate White privilege in the academy and on campuses nationwide, the “racist and xenophobic post-election climate makes the work [of addressing Whiteness and supporting students of color] more difficult, but also makes it all the more necessary” (Cabrera et al., 2013, p. 14). This “awareness gap,” between White students and students of color, is but one example of a potential barrier to persistence.

The representation of faculty of color in higher education and their attendant experience is another potential roadblock to persistence for students of color. The hiring and subsequent promotion of faculty of color continues to lag behind their White counterparts, despite ample evidence of the numerous benefits marginalized students stand to gain from their campus presence (Davies, 2016; Johnson et al., 2009; Karkouti, 2016; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). As a result (and representative of the much larger issue of visibility), faculty of color constitute 17% of total full-time faculty in the United States, and they continue to be affected by discriminatory recruitment, hiring, and evaluative practices; disproportionate rates of achieving tenure; and, institutional departure (Johnson et al., 2009; Karkouti, 2016). Coupled with the “awareness gap” between White students and students of color, the absence of faculty of color and their difficult experiences in the academy contribute to a hostile and inhospitable campus climate. Ultimately, research suggests that campus climate and culture are crucial components to persistence, that the support of multicultural policies and programs goes generally unsupported by White faculty, and that nuanced institutional support for diversity helps to avoid negative experiences (Rankin & Reason, 2005). While the “awareness gap” and underrepresentation of faculty of color are but two examples, they represent systemic inequities in higher education negatively affecting the persistence of students of color.

Research indicates that the challenges faced by students of color are substantial, whether the dissonance of experience separating them from their White peers, an inability to access communities of color, fielding the daily instances of racism (subtle and overt), or institutional apathy (Blaisdell, 2005; Hotchkins, 2017; Leonardo, 2009; Museus,

Sariñana, & Ryan, 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Many students of color experience higher education as hostile, their work devalued or dismissed (Logan et al., 2017). Acts of bias are seldom addressed, and if they are, the response is protracted or so vague as to be useless; consequently, students of color feel as though their input is often asked for but seldom listened to, leading them to suffer from racial battle fatigue (Hotchkins, 2017). In the classroom, students of color are exposed to implicit bias and tokenism, tinged with protestations of “colorblindness” amongst White faculty and classmates (Blaisdell, 2005; Leonardo, 2009). There is an increasingly overt refusal to accept that racism exists and that “if [people of color] would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘just get along’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 1). Thus far, higher education has failed to systemically contend with students of color and their experiences, instead choosing to focus on individual bias incidents as somehow unrepresentative of the campus community at large (Dancy, Edwards, & Davis, 2018). Dancy and colleagues (2018) continued:

By theorizing a system of organization, as opposed to a limited focus on the practice of individuals, we acknowledge the robustness of enslavement and freedom; a robustness that can practice epistemic murder of [communities of color] while supporting celebrations of multiculturalism. (p. 177)

In other words, the act of distancing a campus community from the actions of its individual members allows that campus community to decry discriminatory acts of bias rooted in White supremacy while simultaneously reifying the systemic inequity that makes such acts commonplace.

LGBTQ+ College Students in Higher Education

While ample research acknowledges the myriad difficulties LGBTQ+ students have historically faced on college campuses, the numbers of LGBTQ+ students in higher education is difficult to ascertain, beyond generalities (Reason & Rankin, 2006). The majority of IHE still do not identify this student community in the admissions process (Cegler, 2012); that is, they do not assess how individual students identify along the spectrum of gender identity or sexual orientation. However, it is generally accepted within the academy that their numbers have substantially increased (Misawa, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013). Quaye and Harper (2015) added to the discussion, acknowledging that available research often catalogues the myriad barriers LGBTQ+ students face in higher education, without going so far as to critically examine the role IHEs play in the “educational practices and conditions that promote [LGBTQ+ students’] development, sense of belonging, and respectability on college campuses” (p. 121). As a result, there is a general awareness that attention needs to be paid to the LGBTQ+ student experience, and yet many institutions of higher education still lack the capacity or desire to formally identify said students.

While LGBTQ+ identities are largely absent within higher education national datasets and institutional admission forms, absence does not always reflect ill intent. As was mentioned earlier, student identities and their development remain fertile ground for political warring. To be LGBTQ+ is to be caught in the crossfire of culture, religion, the law, and normative societal mores and strictures. The act of identifying the LGBTQ+ community has the potential to harm “queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students,” outing them to parents/families, thrusting them into the public realm (Rankin & Garvey,

2015, p. 75). IHE are charged with making the decision to identify LGBTQ+ students, thus ensuring intentional outreach, services, and resources. IHE can also choose to sidestep such identification, leaving it to chance that LGBTQ+ students will locate said support. Indecision and lack of action, however, are increasingly difficult. Ratcheting up the need to take a stance one way or the other, in 2016-2017, The Common Application (2016) began including a transgender option on the student profile page, after much consultation with universities throughout the United States. When the transgender option became available, 812 institutions—both public and private—were affected by the addition, precipitating a notable shift in the admissions process nationwide, and universities were left scrambling to strategize next steps (The Common Application, 2016). Though sexual orientation remains absent from The Common Application, IHE are gradually adding it to pre-enrollment forms (Campus Pride Index, 2018).

Despite the increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ students in higher education—the identification conundrum aside—their campus experiences are often negative (Quaye & Harper, 2015). LGBTQ+ students often report unfair treatment by professors, anti-LGBTQ+ bias (overt and otherwise) amongst classmates, lack of family support, and an absence of emotional support from friends (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). LGBTQ+ students endure far higher levels of harassment, and they “fear for their physical safety, conceal their sexual orientation to avoid intimidation, and feel that discussing their [identities] to those in power may lead to negative consequences” (Reason & Rankin, 2006, p. 4). Much like students of color, LGBTQ+ students encounter numerous barriers to persistence. Moreover, existing research is primarily deficit based,

casting both groups as passive victims, as opposed to key change-agents within the complex landscape of higher education.

LGBTQ+ College Students of Color in Higher Education

Racial diversity within the queer community is egregiously unrepresented in popular culture, as the majority of queer representation and advocacy is overwhelmingly White (Huang, 2017). While the bulk of contemporary studies concerning the traditionally underrepresented student experience focuses separately on minoritized race and/or ethnicity and minoritized sexuality and/or gender, seldom are they concurrently examined within higher education research (Misawa, 2011). Collins and Taborda-Whitt (2017) elaborated:

The landscape of life as a queer person is often radically different for individuals who also identify as racial and/or ethnic minorities. Queer people are frequently benchmarked against accepted sexually-normative or gender-normative traits and/or behaviors, a process referred to as heteronormativity. But QPOC are also benchmarked against whiteness [sic] and evaluated within systems that privilege perceived white phenotypes, customs, religious traditions, familial structures, and even ‘white-sounding’ names. The pervasiveness of heteronormativity and white supremacy in most societal institutions makes understanding its emphasized nature in certain contexts even more essential. (p. 1)

Additional research asserts that the prevalence of White supremacy and heteronormativity in contemporary IHE demands that more attention be paid to this critical identity juncture (Collins & Taborda-Whitt, 2017; McLaughlin, 2017; Sutter & Perrin, 2016).

Further exacerbating the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ people of color is the shifting national political climate that increasingly prioritizes religious freedom over basic citizen rights (Collins & Taborda-Whitt, 2017). The push for laws protecting religious freedom is a veritable straw man, as such laws already exist protecting religious freedom; religious freedom, in this sense, is a foil for ideologies intent on circumventing the rights of LGBTQ+ people, under the guise of constitutionally protected religious exercise (Hamilton, 2015). As the United States continues to politically polarize, it stands to reason that LGBTQ+ students of color will feel increasingly trapped between the winds of national politics and higher education's attempts to straddle students' needs with the demands of state legislatures.

There is consensus amongst higher education researchers of the gap that exists when assessing the visibility of LGBTQ+ students of color. Ferguson and Miville (2017), as well as Gess and Horn (2018), contended that LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff of color are largely absent from, or buried in, scholarly discourse, theory, and research. Sleeter and Carmona (2017) examined the all too common monocultural pedagogical approaches to curricular development that neither considers multicultural lived experiences nor adapts to diverse student populations. Nakabayashi (2016) asserted that queer racism (i.e., racism in and amongst the typically White-focused LGBTQ+ advocacy on college campuses) remains a largely untapped area of research, despite its prevalence amongst queer communities of color. Clark's (2005) qualitative study that included several interviews of queer students of color yielded that LGBTQ+ students of color often feel less visible in higher education and are less likely to receive identity affirmation. Given that LGBTQ+ students of color represent approximately 22% of same-

sex relationships in the United States (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011), a more concerted effort to understand their lived experiences (within and without higher education) is crucial. Further, while separate attempts have been made to gain insight into students' experience regarding minoritized races, sexualities, and genders, the myriad and complex ways in which those identities intersect remain a relatively unexplored area of qualitative and quantitative focus (Balsam et al., 2011).

The ramifications of holding multiple marginalized identities can be substantially complex, and the barriers to persistence can exceed those experienced by students marginalized by a single identity category. Despite the stratification of oppressions, neither is more valuable or worthy of addressing than the other. Students who identify as non-White, non-heterosexual, and transgender/gender non-conforming (or any combination thereof) “may be at particular risk for decreased mental health and suicidality, [and] the intersectional identities of sexual/gender minority and minority race/ethnicity have been linked to greater susceptibility to psychological consequences of discrimination” (Sutter & Perrin, 2016, p. 99). As such, this qualitative study hopes to fill a crucial gap in higher education research, in the hopes of gaining additional insight into LGBTQ+ students of color, such that a much-needed contribution can be offered to their recruitment and, ultimately, persistence.

Theoretical Framework

As much as it is important to amplify the voices and center the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color in this study, it is equally important to position and contextualize their experiences within a critical theoretical framework. Intersectionality provides the entry point and this section ends with an examination of Queer of Color

(QOC) theoretical critique as an amalgamation of intersectionality, feminist, and queer theory.

Intersectionality

A legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined and subsequently explicated the term “intersectionality” in order to “contrast the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences” (p. 139). The genesis of Crenshaw’s formative work sought to examine and differentiate Black women’s experiences from traditional discourses about race and gender which are routinely disaggregated in critical analyses; further, Crenshaw posited that the juncture of race and gender holds valuable insight into the totality of Black women’s experiences (Williams, 1994). While the idea of intersectionality existed long before Crenshaw coined the term, intersectionality as Crenshaw presented it struck a nerve with theoreticians and academics. Cho (2013) adroitly encapsulates intersectionality’s rise to prominence:

Intersectionality was widely adopted in the social sciences and humanities as an indispensable analytical tool with which one might study and examine the ways in which structures of power interact to produce disparate conditions of social inequality that affect groups and individuals differently. Recognizing that both power and identity are complex and interrelated, intersectionality offers a systemic and structural analysis of both, while recognizing the variability, fluidity, and contingency of specific manifestations of subordination. (p. 385)

Intersectionality, despite its popularity, was not without its detractors. Critical theorists have since both interrogated and built upon Crenshaw’s work.

The theoretical concept of intersectionality remains a popular and at times divisive topic in the discourse of theoreticians and academics. Twenty-four years ago, Sommers (1994) wrote that intersectionality in and of itself is not a problem; rather, the ways in which it has transformed and become far more aggressive is cause for concern. It confers prestige upon those with the most identities, engaging in what has been called “the oppression Olympics” (Sommers, 1994). For some, Sommers’ sentiments did not go far enough. Nash (2016) wrote that, “nearly everything about the theory is in dispute, including its histories and origins, its methodologies, its efficacy, its politics, its relationship to identity and identity politics, its central metaphor, [and] its juridical orientations” (p. 118). Synthesizing the most prevalent critiques of Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Carbado (2013) acknowledged Sommers and Nash and presented a list of standard critiques:

1. Intersectionality is only or largely about Black women, or only about race and gender.
2. Intersectionality is an identitarian framework.
3. Intersectionality is a static theory that does not capture the dynamic and contingent process of identity formation.
4. Intersectionality is overly invested in subjects.
5. Intersectionality has traveled as far as it can go, or there is nothing more the theory can teach us. (p. 812)

Crenshaw continues to assert that the term she coined almost three decades ago has resulted in social progress and is undeserving of the derision and ire it has, in some circles, continued to receive (Bartlett, 2017). It is safe to say that an individual

examination of identities fails to contend with the cumulative effects of those identities on the person who possesses them. While some theoreticians and academics purposely read intersectionality as bound by Crenshaw's central exploration of Black women's experiences, thus consigning such an exploration only to gender and race, Carbado (2013) urges a more expansive approach that considers numerous social categories, civil rights problems, and legal doctrines. Using Carbado's approach, intersectionality provides a valuable point of egress, from which to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color by simultaneously considering the impact of race, sexuality, and gender.

I have chosen to use intersectionality in its contemporary iteration, demanding a close analysis of *all* overlapping identities. Somewhat ironically, this approach to intersectionality predates Crenshaw's contribution to the theoretical concept, as evidenced by the Combahee River Collective, a feminist group comprised of queer women of color who first assembled in 1974. According to their official statement, "[We] are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." (p. 264). Indeed, though brought to prominence by Crenshaw's work, the concept of intersectionality has long existed. Accordingly, and for the purposes of this qualitative study:

Intersectionality can be understood as a shifting, changing concept that is flexible enough to encompass both the large-scale historically constructed and hierarchical power systems that organize our social life, and the micro-level politics of

interpersonal interactions...[Intersectionality] views outsider-within and border aspects of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, dis/ability, family configuration and other dimensions of difference as interlocking inequalities and, therefore...requires a commitment to re-thinking and re-shaping concepts and theories that have treated these systems as discrete. (Clark, Sapon-Shevin, Brimhall-Vargas, McGhie, & Nieto, 2017, p. 92)

Intersectionality in this qualitative study, then, represents an amalgam of both historical and contemporary understandings of the theoretical concept. To address and simultaneously avoid accusations of intersectionality as a “neo-Marxist academic craze,” this study’s theoretical approach endeavors to *enact* intersectionality (Arana, 2017). Enact, in this sense, connotes an intentional operationalization of intersectionality that interrogates institutional power. This approach stands in stark contrast to the relegation of intersectionality as an expropriation by White neo-liberals as merely cataloguing identities.

Queer of Color Critique

The theoretical framework for my qualitative study will build upon the intersectionality just discussed, utilizing Queer of Color (QOC) critique to address the incompleteness in the individual approaches of feminist theory and queer theory. Given the confusion and contestations surrounding the word/idea of *queer*, it is important to revisit the term in greater detail. Greteman (2014) offers a dynamic example:

Queer slips and slides between the meanings and the decision, the commitment to queer across identities. It is tricky. It is the jester at the ball. It is less concerned with staying put and more interested in moving collectively toward that which has

not been, but might be somewhere there or here most likely over the rainbow. It is relational, less interested in knowing or being right, and more concerned with relating in ways that are less normative, hopefully less violent, perhaps less harmful. (p. 420)

Queer, in this context, is destabilizing, somewhat mercurial in that it refuses to satisfy entrenched ways of knowing and being.

Queer theory “emerged on the scene to [further] subvert, titillate, deconstruct, and well, ‘queer’ things in literature, philosophy, history, politics, and education” (Greteman, 2014, p. 420). For higher education, this is a potentially dissonant concept, owing to its foundational roots in dominant systems. However, the importance of queer theory cannot be understated by those seeking nuanced understandings of sexuality. Numerous students begin exploring, identifying (however fluidly), and conceptualizing their sexualities within the context of higher education, uniquely positioning colleges and universities with elevated influence throughout such processes (Msibi, 2013). As a result, scholars and practitioners have increasingly called for the use of queer theory in examining higher education and student affairs (Rankin & Garvey, 2015).

Traditionally queer theoretical applications, while an important addition to the conceptualization of higher education, and certainly useful in examining the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color, continue to be criticized for their theoretical incompleteness regarding issues of race (Nakabayashi, 2016). Not only are many prevailing theories about sexuality and gender predicated upon Whiteness, but LGBTQ+ students of color are often left to strategically choose which of their identities to acknowledge at any given time (Huang, 2017). Furthermore, the ubiquitous presence

of queer victimization tropes within queer theories have usurped any intentional discussion of resiliency and agency (Brokenbrough, 2015). Too often, queer people are positioned as powerless, as passive victims of bullying, discrimination, bigotry, and systemic exclusion or erasure.

Much has been written about feminist theories' contributions to the examination of multiple oppressions (Anthias, 2002; Hurtado, 2010; Narayan & Harding, 2000). Specifically, women of color feminisms in the United States have, “[charted] a politics of difference that acknowledges the multiple and intersecting subjectivities of women of color, and that explores shifting strategies of resistance that respond to multiple and intersecting systems of oppression” (Brokenbrough, 2015, p. 30). There exists an uneasy history, however, between feminism and Women’s Studies programs, specifically with regard to trans scholarship. Lynda Johnston (2019) wrote of this “vexed relationship with both feminist and queer theory due, in part, to some feminists’ attitudes towards trans-identified people” (p. 13), a history whose reach extends into the present. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) maintain a consistent, organized anti-trans politics. Together, then, the amalgamation of queer and feminist theoretical concepts will both “name and [contextualize] the marginalization of QOC difference, [while differentiating] strategies of resistance to account for the shifting exigencies of the lives of queers of color,” and all while accounting for troubling historical precedents (Brokenbrough, 2015, p. 30). As such, I will borrow from feminist and queer theories, in an effort to bolster what is a queer of color framework.

Queer of color theoretical applications meld both queer and feminist theories, deliberately focusing them through a lens that centrally positions folx of color. The

intentional positioning of LGBTQ+ students of color mitigates the long history of discourses of sexuality and race that have maintained the dominance of heteronormativity and White supremacy (Denton, 2016). Queer of color critiques are important manifestations of active resistance from LGBTQ+ students of color whose humaneness and agency have never been fully acknowledged or realized within narratives whose intentions were supposed to do just that. Tompkins (2015) beautifully defined both the historical antecedents, as well as the exciting possibilities, of queer of color critique:

All of these histories undergird and feed the logic, literature, and body of thought that has come to be known as queer of color critique, and they are expressed in theater, poetry, political manifestos, novels, anthologies, dance, performance, and also at the everyday level of the gesture—the snap, the twist, the turn, the strut, the jack, the twerk, the twirl of the fancy dance, the lift of a skirt, the one-two step of the *merengue*, the switch of a hip and the cock of an eyebrow, the twitch of the lip, and the languid wave—that forms the world-making strategies of people of color in the Americas. To engage with queer of color life in the Americas is to be humbled and dazzled by its richness and its courage; to be fully present to it is to be moved affectively and politically by what might be unleashed if we move closer to its utopic possibilities. (p. 176)

Summary

This literature review began with a broad conversation contextualizing the turbulent, intertwined histories of the American government and higher education, two polities whose ideologies continually fluctuate. I positioned the volatile state of American politics post-2016 election amidst that history of continuous change and re-negotiation,

casting minoritized students as change agents amidst virulent, consistently attendant cultural backlash. Though institutions of higher education have made some strides in the last several decades, higher education in general continues to wrestle with its Eurocentric past and perpetuation of cisheterosexual White supremacy. It is against this backdrop that LGBTQ+ college students of color attempt to negotiate their persistence in higher education.

Students of color continue to struggle with visibility and representation in the academy. Administrators regularly seek out students of color, asking them to share their experiences. Students often agree, and, at great personal risk, routinely relive their traumas in the hopes that doing so will affect institutional change that seldom materializes. LGBTQ+ students are caught in the institutional conundrum of whether or not to identify students' gender identities and sexual orientations. LGBTQ+ students experience disproportionate anxiety and depression, and IHE lack resources to adequately address their needs. LGBTQ+ college students of color represent a critical identity intersection, whereby the most vulnerable are brought together. Higher education has not invested nearly enough resources into this population, as numerous barriers still exist that potentially prevent their persistence to graduation.

Using a critical theoretical framework, intersectionality, feminist, and queer theory come together in Queer of Color (QOC) critique, an approach to understanding the lives of LGBTQ+ students of color that centralizes their voices. Simultaneously, this critical approach closely examines the roles IHE play in perpetuating oppressive systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

In this chapter, I provide rationale for my use of a critical, phenomenological qualitative research approach. I separately define the critical paradigm, phenomenological philosophy, and qualitative research approach, so as to contextualize my rationale. I then explain my research design, sampling strategies and participants, and data collection procedures. After explaining my data analysis procedures, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, the role of the researcher, and limitations and delimitations of the study.

Methodological Approach

I chose a critical, phenomenological qualitative research approach. Qualitative research focuses on uncovering, exploring, and attaining nuanced insights from the perspectives of study participants, while offering the greatest possibility of affecting change in peoples' lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). While quantitative research uses numbers as data, qualitative research uses words to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). A qualitative research approach—particularly critical phenomenology—is appropriate for my study, because I aim to better understand how LGBTQ+ students of color experience predominantly White institutions of higher education as well as how those experiences contribute to their persistence.

As a philosophy, phenomenology arguably undergirds the entirety of qualitative research, in that it seeks to understand people from their own positionalities, “studying peoples’ experiences as they are lived every day, viewing these experiences as conscious, and arriving at a description of the essence of these experiences” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 253). The phenomenon in question—the focus of the present study—is the persistence of LGBTQ+ college students of color in a predominantly White institution. A phenomenological approach seeks to explore this phenomenon, uncovering commonalities amongst the lived experiences and statements of LGBTQ+ students of color within predominantly White institutions, to then critically assess the essence(s) of their lived experiences.

While some argue that all phenomenology is critical, contemporary phenomenological work has “focused on the intersubjective nature of the world and the relations of power through which that intersubjectivity forms, and much of this work has engaged issues of social justice, of racial inequality, of gender and sexuality, of incarceration” (Salamon, 2018, p. 17). Some have gone so far as to further parse out “queer phenomenology” as critical phenomenology that skews orientations beyond that which is straight, cis, or White, allowing us to “see” that the world inhabited by LGBTQ+ college students of color is different, its horizons altered (Salamon, 2018). Critical phenomenology, then, engages intersectional queerness in its most disruptive form, actively interrogating oppressive systems while helping to interpret the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color in ways that decentralize the White, cisheterosexist narratives that inform their campus climates. A study whose chosen demographic

requires critical examination of entrenched systemic power is served well by such a methodological approach.

As noted in my beginning positionality statement, I continue to engage my own politics of location, so as to avoid inductive superimposition that would result in a palimpsestic analysis of my study participants' lived experiences. To that end, I employed reflexive bracketing, described by Gearing (2004) as the intentional, influential reduction of one's own lived experience on the phenomenon under investigation. Reflexive bracketing, "makes transparent, overt, and apparent the researcher's personal values, background, and cultural suppositions [,demanding the researcher develop] a thoughtful, conscious self-awareness" (Gearing, 2004, p. 17). A consistent and ongoing examination of my own identities and lived experiences helped bracket out any derivative suppositions during data collection and analysis.

The critical theoretical paradigm informing this phenomenological qualitative research study speaks to its ultimate goal of elucidating the ways in which LGBTQ+ college students of color navigate predominantly White institutions of higher education that sustain and reproduce hierarchical systemic oppression based on White supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy. Critical qualitative research "raises questions about how power relations advance the interests of one group while oppressing those of other groups, and about the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Endemic to this critical theoretical paradigm is an exploration of the myriad strategies minoritized students employ in response to institutional power imbalances, systemic racism, genderism, and homophobia. Qualitative research, as explained in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2008), allows for such an

exploration, uncovering a variety of individual and group responses to “structures and processes of dominance,” including, “agency, resistance, voice, and various forms of advocacy” (p. 3). Ultimately, then, the results of this study will be used to critique, interrogate, and transform predominantly White institutions, and the various ways in which they influence the persistence of LGBTQ+ students of color.

Research Sites

I chose a sample of predominantly White institutions of higher education in the Midwest, primarily in Wisconsin and Minnesota. No institution of higher education was precluded on the basis of its categorization as public or private. Rather, I delimited my site samples based on access to LGBTQ+ college students of color who were willing to participate. Each of the institutions in this study—with the exception of Central State University—had a White chancellor. I consulted institutional research data for each of the four PWIs whose students were represented in this study, and none of them presented data pertaining to LGBTQ+ faculty employment. All of them presented data pertaining to faculty of color. Lakeland University reported the highest percentage of faculty of color, at 29% (perhaps unsurprising, as Lakeland University is the only institution located in the heart of a major metropolitan area). Riverside University reported 19% faculty of color, Central State reported 17% faculty of color, and Upper Polytechnic University reported 9% faculty of color. Counseling Services, an oft-unrealized locus of potential support for the students in this study were, without exception, predominantly White.

I relied on personal and professional contacts, as well as social media and email, to gain access to prospective participants whose respective institutions are detailed here:

Table 1. Predominantly White Institution Research Site Information

University	Type & Location	Fall 2019 Enrollment	% White	Campus Pride Index Rating
Central State University	Public; Small Town (10,000-25,000)	12,000	82%	4/5 Stars
Upper Polytechnic University	Public; Small Town (10,000-25,000)	8,000	86%	3.5/5 Stars
Riverside University	Public; Small City (25,000-100,000)	11,000	89%	3.5/5 Stars
Lakeland University	Public; Large Urban City (500,000+)	51,000	60%	4.5/5 Stars

Institutional pseudonyms were chosen to further protect participant confidentiality; they were fabricated at random.

Central State University

Central State University is a PWI in a small Midwestern town. The institution has a full-time LGBT Coordinator who manages their LGBTQ+ center, student intern staff, and related programming. Central State’s aggregate 4-Star Campus Pride index score indicates the lowest ratings (3-Stars or fewer) in the areas of LGBTQ Counseling & Health, LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention Efforts, and LGBTQ Policy Inclusion.

Upper Polytechnic University

A PWI situated in a small industrial Midwestern town, Upper Polytechnic University has an aggregate Campus Pride Index Score of 3.5-Stars, with low ratings in the areas of LGBTQ Support & Inclusion, LGBTQ Campus Safety, and LGBTQ

Recruitment & Retention Efforts. A polytechnic institution, UPU focuses its academic mission on vocational and/or technical subjects (e.g., electrician, radiologist, mechanic).

Riverside University

Situated on the banks of the nation's largest river, Riverside University is the Whitest PWI in this study, coming in at 89% White. Its aggregate Campus Pride Index ranking is 3.5-Stars, its lowest ranked subsections including LGBTQ Policy Inclusion, LGBTQ Housing & Residence Life, LGBTQ Counseling & Health, and LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention Efforts. Riverside houses a pride center with a full-time director, as well as several additional student employees.

Lakeland University

The largest institution in this study, Lakeland University is a PWI nestled in the heart of a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. An aggregate Campus Pride Index ranking of 4.5 Stars, Lakeland University has no subsections ranked lower than 4-Stars. Areas of improvement, however, are listed as LGBTQ Campus Safety, LGBTQ Policy Inclusion, and LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention Efforts. A Research 1 institution, Lakeland University has the largest campus footprint, and, while a PWI, it has at 21% the largest percentage of students of color.

Campus Pride Index

The Campus Pride Index is operated by Campus Pride, the nation's leading non-profit organization whose mission is LGBTQ+ inclusion and advocacy within higher education. According to the Campus Pride Index website, "Since 2007, the Campus Pride Index has been the premier LGBTQ national benchmarking tool for colleges and universities to create safer, more inclusive campus communities" (Campus Pride Index,

2020). The index itself is a comprehensive 36-page rubric containing individually scored subsections: LGBTQ Policy Inclusion, LGBTQ Support & Institutional Commitment, LGBTQ Academic Life, LGBTQ Student Life, LGBTQ Housing & Residence Life, LGBTQ Campus Safety, LGTBTA Counseling & Health, and LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention Efforts. Each subsection is scored on a scale of 1-5 Stars, and the individual scores are then aggregated to yield the final Campus Pride Index ranking. Each star symbolizes a substantial amount of work on the part of the institution, and rankings are reassessed and progress accounted for annually.

Sampling and Participants

My sampling strategy used purposeful sampling approaches. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described purposeful sampling as “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and must therefore select a sample from which most can be learned” (p. 96). To achieve such a sample, I employed criterion-based sampling, in that all participants were domestic LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly White institutions of higher education in the United States. Criterion-based sampling stipulates that participant samples and their respective sites should be chosen based on critical relevance to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the already limited number of visible students fulfilling the attributes of any LGBTQ+ students of color population, and so as not to prohibitively narrow the participant sample, I chose to forego any additional qualifying attributes.

As director of the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center at a predominantly White institution of higher education in the Midwest, I have direct access to LGBTQ+ college students of color. As the GSRC director, I have a personal and professional stake in the

lived experiences of my students, and my professional capacity may affect their willingness to convey lived experiences critical of the institution and office (Taylor et al., 2016). Consequently, I chose to implement convenience sampling not by using students with whom I have a pre-existing relationship at my home institution; rather, I sought out participants from the system of schools amongst which my home institution is a part, as well as qualifying schools in the neighboring state. Convenience sampling is defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as the procurement of a sample “based on time, money, location [or] availability of respondents” (p. 98). Focusing on college students from sister institutions, as well as neighboring institutions, will decrease substantially the possibility of information-poor interviews, defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as interviews whose content is somehow compromised during the data collection process (e.g., relationships between interviewers and subjects).

Taylor et al. (2016) stipulated that, at the beginning of a research study, the researcher need not know the exact number of participants; rather, the scope and size of those studied takes shape toward the study’s conclusion. I conducted three separate, in-depth individual interviews with seven LGBTQ+ college students of color at four discrete PWIs, commensurate with typical qualitative research guidelines (Taylor et al., 2016). The pool of students who met the criteria of this study was limited. In cases where race is institutionally visible or identified during the admissions process, gender identity and sexual orientation may not be known (for reasons examined in the study itself). This shallow participant pool posed significant challenges to other forms of data collection. I relied on colleagues (themselves LGBTQ+ resource center directors) to help facilitate student introductions and interest.

I chose in-depth personal interviews as my method of data collection. Critical phenomenology intentionally and openly interrogates social stratification, power, and inequity within the context of transformational change (Wells, MacLeod, & Frank, 2012); therefore, face-to-face conversation, without the fear of judgment or institutional reprisal, required that I interview the students separately and one-on-one. Creswell and Creswell (2018) observed that, given the strong philosophical and psychological foundations of phenomenological qualitative research, interviews are ideal. Interviews allow researchers to shed light on the experiences of individuals about a phenomenon collectively shared amongst study participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher, in turn, inducts and distills the interviews into an essence or essences communally shared by interviewees. The methods by which interviews are conducted are crucial to the success of the research.

I conducted three in-person interviews for each participant, spread out over a period of approximately two months. Seidman (2006) explains the three-interview approach as ideal, cautioning that, “Interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an interviewee whom they have never met tread on thin contextual ice” (p. 17). Seidman (2006) goes on to explain the merits of the three-interview approach, in that:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 17)

Each of the three interviews contained a set of interview questions focusing on the various experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color at PWIs. The three interview categories were (a) community and identity development, (b) campus climate, and (c) campus resources and support.

Taylor et al. (2016) defined in-depth qualitative interviewing as “face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words” (p. 102). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined three types of interviews: highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. While most studies utilize a combination of all three interview types, my study relied heavily on a semi-structured approach; the interviews were guided by a set list of interview questions, but I decided their wording and asking order during the interviews depending on participant responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured approach facilitated my responsiveness as a researcher, allowing me to remain reflexive to each interviewee’s emerging worldview and any resultant unexpected insights and new ideas or information.

As there are several approaches to interviewer/interviewee interactions and expectations, it is important to note that I aspired to Roulston’s (2010) “romantic” conception of interviewing that draws from feminist research, in that I consistently engaged in critical self-reflection and analysis, making “no claim to being objective [and] generat[ing] the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing” (p. 217). Roulston’s (2010) romantic concept of interviewing differs from other interviewing approaches, in that it confers upon the interviewer the ability to develop both rapport and an empathic connection to the interviewee, and it is through the development of said

rapport the interviewer elucidates accurate understanding of the interviewee's lived experiences and points-of-view regarding the research topic (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, & Manning, 2016).

Interview Questions

I wanted to ensure that the interviews were not perceived as exploitative; rather, I wanted the interviewees to feel heard and their experiences validated (as evidenced by non-verbal cues and strategic probing). The audio from each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai transcription software. I refrained from writing or notetaking of any sort during the interview (manually or via computer). Given the often-sensitive nature of the respondents' answers, it was important to remain entirely engaged, to convey empathy and support (Taylor et al., 2016).

Each participant completed three interviews, each with its own set of questions. The interview foci and accompanying question sample sets are as follows:

1. Community and Identity Development
 - When did you first begin to realize you were LGBTQ+?
 - How did you think your family would react to your LGBTQ+ identity? How did they?
 - In what way/s do you think being an LGBTQ+ person of color is different than being LGBTQ+ and White?
 - In what way/s do you feel un/welcomed in LGBTQ+ spaces?
 - What were your concerns about attending college as an LGBTQ+ person of color?

- How do you navigate your identities depending on the space you're in? Do you navigate various roles differently?

2. Campus Climate

- A high school senior is considering your university as an option. They, too, are an LGBTQ+ student of color. They've looked through all the campus marketing materials (brochures, fliers, admissions website, etc.). They pull you aside and ask, "What's it really like here?" What would you say?
- Tell me about a time you considered transferring or dropping out of your university.
- In what ways have you experienced racism on your campus?
- In what ways have you experienced anti-LGBTQ+ hate/bias on your campus?
- If you could prioritize three action steps for your university that would improve campus climate for LGBTQ+ college students of color, what would they be? Please explain.

3. Campus Resources & Support

- Who do you turn to for support on your campus and why?
- How did you find a supportive community on campus?
- What keeps you coming back each semester to your campus?
- In what ways have you felt supported in your path to graduation?
- You are a recent graduate of your institution. A friend asks you to describe your time there. How do you respond?

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) characterized effective questions as those free from jargon, judgment, and convolutedness; questions should be clearly understood and sensitive to the positionality of interviewees (as much as such knowledge can be anticipated). The interview questions were not statically delivered and remained sensitive to the direction of interviewee responses. From the above sample sets, there is a mixture of opinions/values-oriented questions and hypotheticals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Throughout the duration of the interviews, each of the questions was followed up with probes, as appropriate. There are several types of probes—from silent to classification and elaboration—but, each is designed to evince more nuanced detail from interview participants (Given, 2008). Strategic probes allowed me to keep the interviews on track, while allowing for more nuanced, perhaps unexpected, insights (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

Data Analysis

Taylor et al. (2016) explained that in-depth interviewing attempts to “give readers the feeling of walking in the informants’ shoes—understanding their inner experiences and seeing things from their point of view” (p. 162). Data analysis should facilitate and complement such an approach. Notably, many successful qualitative researchers find data analysis the most difficult aspect of the process; making sense of hours of interpretable data can be daunting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) elaborated:

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data...consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. Data analysis is a complex

procedure that involved moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation. (p. 202)

In anticipation of this challenge, I followed Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) advice to *simultaneously* collect and analyze emergent data from my collection of interviews. I did so using a priori and then open, emergent, and finally axial coding to separate data into retrievable pieces reflective of the data content and then used group coding into categories responsive to the purpose of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2009). Said categories were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

It was important during data analysis that my approach tell the story I anticipated would emerge from the study data; as such, I used end-use strategizing (University of California-Davis, n.d.) that complemented the study's critical phenomenological approach. The conceptual dyad of critical phenomenology seeks to enlighten readers of the complex and often difficult lived experiences that negatively affect retention of LGBTQ+ college students of color in a PWI, doing so in a way that explores the presence and exercise of systemic power and privilege. That said experiences *are* complex and often difficult was never a focus of inquiry, as evidenced by a substantial amount of preexisting literature.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I developed a list of a priori codes, some of which included "Feeling Unrepresented," "Code Switching," "Anger at Institution," and "Racism Is Ignored." These a priori codes were informed by my work as a student affairs professional in a PWI who routinely works with students from marginalized groups.

After conducting and transcribing both interviews verbatim, I engaged in open coding (Creswell, 2014), whereby I added several emergent codes to the aforementioned a priori codes. This combined list of a priori and emergent codes represented my First Cycle (Saldaña, 2008).

I used a color-based system to differentiate and organize a priori, emergent, and final codes (yellow/a priori; green/emergent; blue/final). Importantly, not every code was gleaned from what was verbalized; much was inducted from what was not said. Silences, pronounced hesitations, nervous smiles/laughs, physical shifting and posturing: all are readable, documentable, and play a crucial role throughout the induction process. The final codes were a product of axial coding, which constituted the final stage of coding for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial coding (or analytical coding) functions as a crucial aspect of the induction process of data analysis, as it moves beyond mere description into an interpretation of the emergent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The a priori and emergent themes from the First Cycle were, during the Second Cycle, re-categorized and subsumed into broader themes that spoke to the interviewees' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

It is important when conducting field research to include additional observational components, as a means to better contextualize and corroborate participants' experiences, contributions, and settings (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition to facilitating in-person interviews, I used triangulation of document observations of the institutions themselves. In other words, I assessed the visibility of campus resources catering to LGBTQ+ students of color, including the presence or absence of affinity resource centers

specifically for LGBTQ+ students and/or students of color. I searched the Campus Pride Index for institutional representation. Where institutions were present in the Campus Pride Index, I documented LGBTQ+ inclusivity ratings and drew comparisons between interviewees' responses. Remaining flexible throughout the research process is crucial. As Taylor et al. (2016) are quick to point out, "As we learn about a setting and how participants view their experiences, we can make decisions regarding additional data to collect on the basis of what we have already learned" (p. 8). I also repeatedly consulted each research site's Institutional Research webpages, drawing heavily from accessible factbook data. The triangulation methods above are not exhaustive, and I entertained additional methods as the research unfolded.

In addition to triangulation, and to ensure research data gathered from the in-depth interviews was accurately representative of the interviewees, I circled back to each participant for member checks, once data analysis was complete. Member checks are somewhat controversial in qualitative research, as they are "located in the highly contested terrain between voice and discourse, or between interpretive and theoretical validity" (Given, 2008, p. 2). Researchers risk misinterpreting participants' voices, whether by faulty induction or, as explored earlier, the imposition of researcher positionality. My strategy reflects an intentional approach to a study that seeks information from marginalized students whose respective institutions can seem hostile and dismissive of critique and whose voices are often muted or altogether absent from higher education's systemic discourse. Ultimately, while I planned some triangulation and interviewee induction protocols, I approached the research with a fair amount of openness to possibilities I had yet to consider.

Ethical Considerations and Role of the Researcher

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized that, “Although policies, guidelines, and codes of ethics have been developed by the federal government, institutions, and professional associations, actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher’s own values and ethics” (p. 261). The authors also noted that the trustworthiness and ethical credibility of a researcher demand a holistic commitment to participants’ well-being as much as their potential value to the conducted research study. A trustworthy, ethical researcher avoids exploitative tactics that cull information at the expense of the participants. As someone who is both a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and whose professional life is dedicated to the intersectional advocacy of LGBTQ+ college students, the well-being of my study participants was of the utmost concern. I was acutely aware of the complexities of (in)visibility and marginalization of LGBTQ+ college students of color in predominantly White institutions of higher education. My participants remained anonymous, and pseudonyms were used in place of their names. Additionally, I ensured participant institutions were given pseudonyms, as the shallow nature of the likely participant pool had the potential of exposing participant identities.

Given my own positionality as a gay, cisgender male, I shared in-group status as an LGBTQ+ researcher, insofar as sexual orientation is concerned. However, in order to avoid imposing (implicitly or otherwise) my Whiteness and its experiential frameworks onto LGBTQ+ college students of color, I was continually mindful of my positionality and privileged identities and worked to prevent any inductive superimposition

(Groenewald, 2004). The same can be said of my cisgender identity and accompanying framework when analyzing data from transgender students.

Limitations and Delimitations

The participant pool for this study was delimited as a reflection of its demographic limitations. Given the intersectional nature of their marginalization, LGBTQ+ college students of color represent a small contingency in predominantly White institutions of higher education. As such, the perimeter of my delimitations was a direct reflection of the paucity of participants from which I had to choose. Therefore, participants need only have been domestic LGBTQ+ college students of color at a predominantly White institution of higher education. No other identity characteristics delimited their potential involvement in this study.

As alluded to above, the most salient limitation of this study was access to LGBTQ+ students of color in the institutions I hoped to include. I initially used personal and professional contacts; thereafter, I employed network and snowball sampling to procure friends and/or acquaintances of participants who might also be relevant to the study. During data collection and analysis, I was mindful of my own biases, so as not to misinterpret the words and experiences of my participants. That said, there exists an inherent limitation in the interpretation of others' lived experiences when inducting said experiences through one's own lens (Taylor et al., 2016). Compounding the limitations of this study are the variety and inconsistent usage of identity terminology, as well as the danger of tokenizing the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color based on the responses of this study's participants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter includes an introduction to study participants. I include brief vignettes hoping to capture some essence of each student's personality, as well as emergent themes arising from the collected data. Each participant's brief profile contains demographic information, as well as insights gleaned throughout the interview process. No thematic temporal chronology is offered; however, themes are organized in such a way as to categorize and distill the essence of participants' lived experiences as LGBTQ+ students navigating predominantly White institutions in higher education.

Participants

This section provides an introduction and overview of each of the seven participants. Though each participant met the selection criteria—domestic LGBTQ+ college student of color currently attending a predominantly White institution in the United States—the group in its entirety represented diverse races, ethnicities, gender identities and expressions, sexualities, and attendant lived experiences. Table 2 shows the demographics of each student participant. Participants were given an opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, in order to preserve culturally appropriate and respectful representation. What follows are brief profiles introducing each of the seven participants, including pronouns in use at the time this research was conducted.

Fololina Salausa (they/them)

Fololina, a student at Riverside University, commanded their space in the room, answering each interview question with a directness laced with bitter experiences. The only participant to choose a pseudonym for both first and last names, Fololina did so to honor their familial lineage. A proud Sāmoan, Fololina vacillated between two dissonant realities. They were raised in a medium-sized Midwestern city in Wisconsin, attended a Catholic parochial school (itself predominantly White), and their upbringing was steeped in Western, White, cis-heteronormative culture. Fololina's more salient identities, however, were as a bisexual, demisexual, fa'afatama (trans man) family chief of a Polynesian island community. As family chief, Fololina represents their family in village meetings, makes cultural decisions, participates in disciplinary actions between warring families, and weighs in on political disputes. Fololina stepped away from the Catholic church after high school, a decision precipitated by their church's anti-LGBTQ+ ideology. Fololina's time at Riverside University has been spent exploring their queer and racial identities and the myriad ways each has been stifled or erased by imperialism, colonialism, and White supremacy. Throughout each of the three interviews, Fololina's love of their Polynesian culture was matched only by their desire to ensure that young people need not suffer as Fololina has, instead providing them ample opportunity—pedagogically and personally—to celebrate their identities.

Table 2. Student Participant Demographic Information

Participant Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	First Generation Student?
Ambrosia	Black	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	YES
Kou	Japanese & White	Gender Fluid	Pansexual; Queer	NO
Benjamin	Black & White	Trans Man	Pansexual; Queer	NO
Fololina	Sāmoan & White	Fa'afatama; Transgender; Non-Binary	Bisexual; Demisexual	NO
Mirana	Cuban & White	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	YES
Andi	Latinx	Non-Binary	Demisexual	YES
Maverick	Latinx & White	Non-Binary; Agender; Gender Fluid	Pansexual; Demisexual; Panromantic	NO

Benjamin (he/his)

Benjamin, a student at Upper Polytechnic University, led each conversation with a well-worn sigh common among college students with numerous demands on their time. Nevertheless, he repeatedly voiced his gratitude at being asked to participate in this study. Holding nothing back, he likened the interview process to therapy, finding catharsis in sharing his experiences as a biracial trans man who identifies as Black. In middle school, Benjamin came out as bisexual and then gay, feeling part of the LGBTQ+ community for the first time. His family was supportive, despite some initial confusion and homophobia (largely informed by the family’s religious beliefs). Though Benjamin remembered wrestling with his gender identity as early as five years old, he continued to grapple with the idea of being transgender (a term he discovered on Tumblr when he was

in high school). A short time later, still in high school, Benjamin attempted suicide, after which he made the decision to embrace his identities fully and openly. His parents—by that time divorced—had a much more difficult time accepting the revelation that Benjamin was transgender. Benjamin grew even more distant from his father, ceasing visits altogether. Benjamin’s mother likened his transitioning to “the death of her child,” a highly traumatic moment impacting Benjamin’s subsequent substance abuse and suicidality. Benjamin moved in with his uncle (also gay) who continues to support him financially throughout his time in college. Despite the financial support, Benjamin’s uncle identifies as LGBTQ+ and White, and his Whiteness is referenced several times during our interviews as an irreconcilable difference.

Mirana (she/her)

A student at Riverside University, Mirana’s broad smile and quick laughter became hallmarks of our time together. On the brink of graduating, Mirana had much to say about her college experiences. Her answers were succinct and punctuated by humor, oftentimes laugh-talking the ends of sentences. Mirana was raised in a large family with many siblings. When prompted for an actual number, she answered with, “Less than 20, but more than 10, I think, the last time I counted.” Mirana came of age in a small, rural Midwestern town and was deeply closeted prior to her admittance to Riverside University. Her family, acutely homophobic, were nevertheless racially diverse: Mirana is half Cuban and White, her older siblings are half Mexican, her younger siblings are Native American and African American, and her stepdad is Native American. Proudly bisexual, Mirana continued to unpack her family’s internalized anti-LGBTQ+ points of view, hoping over time to broaden their understanding of gender and sexuality.

Ambrosia (she/her)

I was immediately struck by Ambrosia's cadence. Not a socialized uptalking (where everything sounds like a question), so much as a slight upward slide at the end of each spoken sentence. Her speech pattern was complemented by a decidedly good-natured approach to each interview, a positivity that would thematically characterize our time together. Ambrosia identified as a Black, cisgender, lesbian woman. Though she remembered feeling different in elementary school, it was not until high school that Ambrosia began to fully understand her sexual orientation, finally acquiring the language to articulate what she felt. Raised a Jehovah's Witness, Ambrosia's journey reflected that of many LGBTQ+ people, in that she left the church at or around the time she came out publicly about her sexual orientation. Soon after admittance to Central State University, Ambrosia was initiated into Zeta Sigma Chi Multicultural Sorority Incorporated, an oft-cited source of support for her throughout her time in higher education. Ambrosia works in her campus's pride center, contributing to campus climate improvement by providing peer support, as well as educating the campus on issues of power and oppression.

Kou (they/them)

Soft-spoken and serious, Kou often arrived at interviews with their hands stained various colors. A graphic design student and soon-to-be alum of Upper Polytechnic University, they approached each of our conversations with an eagerness to improve the experiences of current students and those yet to be admitted. Kou emigrated from Japan to the United States when they were six years old, with her parents and brother. Their dad White, and their mom "full Japanese," Kou often straddled two cultures, attempting to maintain some connection to Japan (and her mother), while feeling the inexorable pull of

American culture. Kou was quick to say, “You know, I’ve also still never met a Japanese person who is queer. Other than TV...So, that’s one of the things that really motivates me, for sure.” That motivation informed Kou’s extensive engagement at Upper Polytechnic University’s pride center; they were employed as the education coordinator, focusing much of their efforts on intersectional queerness. Kou’s gender fluidity and queerness continue to be filtered through both White and Japanese lenses, and they continue to explore their multiracial identities as a half-Japanese, half-White person and the effect those identities have on their queerness and pansexuality.

Maverick (she/her and they/them)

A blue blanket with pineapples on it, gifted from a close friend. This is how I remember each interview with Maverick. Slung over their arm, the blanket was as omnipresent as Maverick’s openness and rapid vacillation between humor and seriousness. In one moment, they would be laughing, voice loud and unabashed, only to quickly dip to a soft seriousness to answer the heart of the question. A student at Riverside University, Maverick is half-White and Latinx, raised by a mostly-White family. Not until they entered higher education did Maverick explore their multiracial identity in earnest, delving deeply into their Puerto Rican and Ecuadorean racial histories. They continued to examine the impact of those histories as a non-binary, pan-demi-sexual, panromantic. They are a gifted creative and found that their art spoke for them when words could not. Even so, Maverick participated in numerous protests and advocacy work at Riverside University. A recent fibromyalgia diagnosis had Maverick considering the ramifications of disability on queerness and intersectionality. They often

highlighted the myriad ways disability is discounted or avoided altogether, both in and beyond higher education.

Andi (they/them)

Born of immigrant parents—their mother from Mexico and their father from El Salvador—Andi was quick to emphasize the pressure of traversing uncharted paths, both educationally and when navigating the intricacies of race, sexuality, and gender. Non-binary and demisexual, Andi carved out a space for themselves amongst friends and classmates at Lakeland University; nevertheless, they held a deep respect for their parents’ journey to the United States. Andi was the only participant in this study to have attended a prior institution out of state—also a PWI, but in a much more rural setting than Lakeland University—before transferring back home to live with their parents until graduation. Andi pointed directly to a campus visit by the Trump presidential campaign as the impetus for her transfer. While they harbored no naiveté insofar as the propensity for university campuses to host political campaigns, they were profoundly upset at the university’s halfhearted effort to protect marginalized students from constituent vitriol. After Trump’s visit, Andi never felt safe again on campus. Andi did find comfort and safety in their academic department at Lakeland University, referencing it often throughout the interviews. They displayed a keen interest in examining theirs and others’ identities in ways that interrogate systemic oppression and power.

THEMES

Several themes arose from participant interviews that corroborated my own assumptions, informed by my work in higher education as the director of a Gender and Sexuality Resource Center at a mid-sized predominantly White institution. Conversely, I

did not anticipate participants whose identities were as diverse as they were multilayered. They yielded a uniqueness of voice that contributed a richness to the findings. The emergent themes did not follow a temporal order. While they all represent the essence of my participants' experiences, the themes begin conceptually broad, eventually narrowing to specific institutional experiences. The order of themes is as follows: a) "White supremacy bleeds through everything": Intrusive Whiteness; (b) "It's dangerous": Intersectional Discrimination and Compromised Safety; (c) Passing Privilege: Race, Sexuality, and Gender; (d) Unintentional Educating; Unintentional Education; (e) "I'm doing it for them": Intrinsic Responsibility for Future Generations; (f) "I don't feel valued at all": Institutional Apathy; (g) "I am here": Queer Invisibility and Strategic Institutional Enrollment; and, (h) "I feel trapped": Perceptions of Wishful Attrition. I describe each theme in detail using the participants' own language, by direct quotations or conversations with me as the researcher. I use my own writing, often briefly explaining or restating the participants' experiences, to tie together participant stories, revealing the essence of living as a queer college student of color at a PWI.

As is critical for phenomenology, each of the themes will remain centered on the essence of participants' experience. Essence, as a philosophical idea, can be understood as "the reality of things" as experienced and expressed by sometimes competing social interests; in other words, the essence of one person's experience may either corroborate or conflict with another's (Noonan, 2008, p. 269). Cumulatively, the themes will provide phenomenological data with which to distill the essence of experience of LGBTQ+ college students of color at predominantly White institutions of higher education, thereby addressing this study's main research questions: how PWIs affect the persistence of

LGBTQ+ college students of color, how LGBTQ+ college students of color perceive their campus climates, and what barriers exist that effect the persistence of LGBTQ+ college students of color.

“White supremacy bleeds through everything.”: Intrusive Whiteness

As perhaps the most consistent theme, and without exception, all student participants expressed the tendency for Whiteness to compromise their sense of identity, inclusion, ability to locate and cultivate community, and to dominate all aspects of higher education. At the very least, Whiteness universally evinced frustration. On an institutional level, the participants shared how experiences at their respective campuses are marred by Whiteness in its many manifestations. Fololina succinctly encapsulated this shared experience:

White supremacy...bleeds through everything...Everyone has to conform to it, or you won't graduate, you will drop out, like all of these types of things. The university's built on White people succeeding and not making accommodations for disabled people to get through, for people of color to get through, [for] trans people to get through, without literally dying.

For some students, Whiteness dominated key campus resources, overpowering their experiences in higher education. Mirana described Riverside University as a repository of Whiteness, an imbalance disproportionality affecting institutional priorities and representation of marginalized students:

It's just a very, very White atmosphere...I think that White voices are just very centered on this campus in general...People of color who are LGBTQ+ are either not present and not represented, or not represented at the same level...or put on

the same pedestal, if that makes sense. Yeah. At least, I think that's what I have seen personally.

In a separate interview, Benjamin spoke of a White-dominant professoriate, deriding Upper Polytechnic University's inability or unwillingness to diversify faculty and auxiliary student support services:

It's really important...that we have, you know, a center that supports POC individuals, but [that's] like, run by POC individuals...POC individuals who are hired to support other POC individuals. Like, one of the things that irritates me is...there are not enough faculty members that are, you know, represented and, like, POC. It doesn't seem like they're actively recruiting POC faculty members, which is one of the most important things...As a POC person, if you see another POC, like, faculty, you're more likely to succeed in that class than seeing a White faculty. It's just, like, facts.

My participants universally recognized Whiteness on their campuses and in its various manifestations; though, some were quick to point out that White people are not often cognizant of their own Whiteness and its accompanying privileges. Ambrosia spoke to this awareness gap, highlighting White students' obliviousness to the experiences of their marginalized classmates:

[At a] PWI, the majority of students aren't in tune to what's happening with the rest of campus. Everybody's pretty much in their own little world...So, then, it's hard to get support from the rest of campus or for the rest of campus to understand that this isn't the safest place for [marginalized] students on this campus.

Fololina shared their frustrations with White LGBTQ+ students who are either ignorant of or unwilling to address their White privilege:

[White LGBTQ+ students] don't talk about their privileges. The only thing they talk about is their oppression. They talk about being called faggot all the time. They talk about, like, "Oh, me being homosexual is, like, the worst thing in the entire world." And, I'm just like, "Well, what about your Whiteness?" And, then they shut down. As queer people of color, like, there's never a place for us.

Fololina vented resentment, their experiences as an LGBTQ+ person of color always prioritized second to their White LGBTQ+ classmates. The many attempts Fololina made to provide additional context to Whiteness and the privilege it afforded White LGBTQ+ people were met with blank stares, derision, or outright rejection. Such dissonance within the LGBTQ+ community often left Fololina feeling disenfranchised and angry.

Moreover, Fololina's anger presaged what would become one of the dominant hallmarks of intrusive whiteness: a lack of space specifically created for LGBTQ+ college students of color.

“No Space for Us”: White Colonization of Queer Spaces

The unique lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color—who occupy the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality—compounded barriers to persistence by multiplying, and thus exacerbating, issues of concern. On a micro (or individual) level, students shared the ways in which their White LGBTQ+ classmates perpetuated horizontal oppression, occurring when marginalized people internalize and then reinforce dominant systems of discrimination and oppression (Wijeysinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997). White LGBTQ+ students effectively colonized campus pride centers, institutional

spaces meant to provide support and advocacy for *all* LGBTQ+ students, thereby driving out LGBTQ+ students of color.

Fololina spoke about there “never being a place for us,” a sentiment Andi shared in a separate interview. Andi spoke often of their discomfort in spaces dominated by White LGBTQ+ students, the gulf of lived experiences simply too wide to bridge. Stemming from isolation and a history of experiencing microaggressions, Andi’s unease was ameliorated only when they were able to share a space with classmates who were LGBTQ+ and people of color:

If I’m in a space...an LGBTQ space, where I’m the only person of color, I immediately feel very unwelcomed. [When someone says something racist,] I feel like I then have to...tell them, like, hey, that’s racist. And then, if they try to question that, like, I immediately feel unsafe. I feel like I can’t be there anymore...And I know we’re in a system where there’s a lot of White folx in the system, but, like, with [people of color,] we can talk to each other about all sorts of things. So, that’s when I know I’ll feel safe...I can tell a White person what I’m going through and not have them fully understand what I’m saying, because they just don’t have...that full grasp of what another racial community is going through.

Andi illustrated the power of connection and community when afforded spaces within which like-identified people congregate. While Andi was open to other representations of race, they were adamant that Whiteness was a non-starter for them, its mere presence irrevocably preempting any possibility of comfort. They found themselves too often the teacher, attempting to bridge, and therefore rectify, White classmates’ lack of knowledge

by revisiting their own traumas as a person of color in a predominantly White space. The exchanges were often one-sided and not worth the emotional labor.

Kou corroborated Andi's experiences with White LGBTQ+ students, and, in the process, invoked Ambrosia's insistence of a White awareness gap:

You know, a lot of people, like, White LGBT individuals, always make it seem like, you know, race and being LGBT is, like, the same thing, which it's not. It's completely different...with different problems and [issues of] safety...As much as we're trying to address more of this intersectionality...there's just so many LGBT individuals who don't understand this concept...It's definitely harder to be [QPOC or QTPOC] than White LGBT.

Kou criticized their campus pride center, a space developed by Upper Polytechnic University specifically for LGBTQ+ students. By virtue of the campus demographics, the pride space was almost always filled exclusively with White LGBTQ+ students. The intrusion of Whiteness into a space supposedly created for all LGBTQ+ students quickly became hostile toward LGBTQ+ students of color:

There was, like, a lot of drama...a lot of actual racism stuff that I [heard] from...QTPOC individuals...Like, I never went...[because]...it's, like, really a bunch of White people...So, I think, because of how White it was, and...[because] some people had bad experiences[, it was] inaccessible to a lot of people.

The hostility LGBTQ+ students of color faced in Upper Polytechnic University's pride center prompted Kou to take action:

I'm the one who started...the QTPOC group here. So, that's how I feel I contributed to my community making a place for QTPOC and POC to talk about specific things about their identity, or just, you know, Whiteness on campus...I think, you know, it makes me feel more safe [sic] than, like, a place that doesn't have any of that.

Kou's experience was similar to that of my other participants, in that they often spoke of having to create a space for LGBTQ+ students of color outside of institutionally recognized LGBTQ+ spaces.

Ambrosia, much like Andi and Kou, highlighted the need for spaces that recognize both race and queerness simultaneously, thereby undergirding the value of spaces that don't require LGBTQ+ students of color to subsume their racial identities or censor themselves amongst their White LGBTQ+ peers:

If you're in a space just for people of color, then in that moment, you're just a person of color. If you're in a queer space, then you're just a queer person...But, you very rarely can be both. I think having a space set aside just for QPOC people...just for us...would allow us to really, just, be ourselves and...just be more authentic.

Ambrosia illustrated the liminality LGBTQ+ students of color often feel, straddled between experiential worlds. She emphasized how deeply unfulfilling and exhausting it is for LGBTQ+ students of color to edit their identities for the sake of conformity. The ability for LGBTQ+ students of color to find spaces offering a reprieve from the predominant Whiteness saturating their institutions was limited or non-existent.

Benjamin, like Ambrosia, wished for institutional space that recognized the unique, intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color from those of their White LGBTQ+ classmates:

I think there should be a specific resource center for LGBTQ people of color... because of the fact that individuals in that community have such a different time than [White] queer students...So, I think that having a specific resource center for queer students of color...would probably be the most beneficial.

Benjamin insisted that institutions shoulder the burden of creating space for LGBTQ+ students of color. He was highly critical of unpaid student labor (emotional and otherwise) compensating for a lack of institutional prioritization.

Fololina also cited intrusive Whiteness and the colonization of institutional space as the primary reason they avoided their campus pride center, “There are no people of color in that space...[T]hat space is so White. I’m not going into it.” Fololina’s anger over the lack of intersectional support services and spaces at Riverside University fueled a sense of hopelessness, hopelessness informed by the inability to find comfort and community in either the campus pride center or multicultural student center. They expressed irritation at the lack of spaces on campus where LGBTQ+ students of color can have all of their identities simultaneously acknowledged and supported:

I’m misgendered, like, in every single one of these spaces...Black Student Union...Latina, Asian, and Native American groups...my pronouns are not respected. And like, I’ve been getting a lot of, like, people, like, cutting me out of their lives, because I’m not coming. And like, the only reason I don’t come in is because you don’t respect my pronouns. And then some people have said, “Why

don't you just go to the LGBTQ+ center?" And, I'm just, like, do you know how White that space is?

Ambrosia imagined an intersectional space on her campus where she, too, would feel safe and supported as an LGBTQ+ person of color, each of her identities recognized. She notably turned a critical eye to the LGBTQ+ community itself, emphasizing the value of interrogating Whiteness within an acronym whose collection of letters is so often conceived as a monolith:

I think it helps overall [to have an intersectional space on campus]...as you kind of navigate your own growth and identity. If you have a space where you feel comfortable enough, where you're not having to hide parts of yourself, then I think it makes it a lot easier to do that growth and exploring...[And,] if there's something going on in the, like, White queer community, now I have a space where I can vocalize that, vent about that, and then possibly do something to maybe offset what's going on.

My participants unanimously hoped for intersectional spaces honoring the totality of their identities, an unrealized hope at each participant's institution. LGBTQ+ students of color were left to create their own space on campus, often without institutional support or recognition.

“It's dangerous”: Intersectional Discrimination and Compromised Safety

Perhaps the least surprising insight to emerge from participant interviews was the volume and variety of incidents of discrimination experienced daily by the participants. In my work as director of a student resource center, students' realities (on and off campus) are part and parcel of our office mission: intersectional queer advocacy.

LGBTQ+ college students of color are targeted more often because of their intersecting marginalized identities. Each of my participants recounted an array of experiences with hate and bias on their campuses, emphasizing how each experience further compromised their sense of safety. Andi contextualized their experience as fundamentally different from White LGBTQ+ classmates, a difference with potential for danger:

QPOC is completely different than if someone is White and LGBTQ...I just think being a person of color who is also LGBTQ...I feel like it's more dangerous...So, you have systems of power working against you for not only your race, but also then your sexuality or gender identity or gender expression. So, like, those two intersect; those two systems of power really hit harder...than being White and LGBTQ...Because, if you're White and LGBTQ generally, at least in my experiences as someone who's a person of color and LGBTQ, they still have their Whiteness to sort of protect them...QPOC people, they don't have that.

Andi often spoke of intersectionality in terms of safety and danger. They expressed extreme discomfort attending a predominantly White institution and viewed Whiteness as a shield, a defensive element not afforded LGBTQ+ people of color. The absence of Whiteness left LGBTQ+ students of color open to racism, as well as sexuality-based and gender-based discrimination.

Mirana felt similarly to Andi, highlighting the “extra step” LGBTQ+ people of color must take, in order to exist openly and thrive, often amidst environments wherein discrimination is commonplace:

Um, I think it's just that extra step, basically, and that extra thing that I need to unpack or that I need to feel like I need to, like, expose...if that makes sense.

Because, when I walk into a room...I'm very obviously not a White person. And so, that's something that I can't hide or that I can't, like, choose to disclose...[As for] my sexuality...it's that added step of like, this is another thing that you have to deal with people potentially attacking you over. Whereas, I think, when you're White and LGBTQ+, you have a little bit more of a choice in...the things that you can choose to ignore, I think, as well as the problematic side of the LGBT community. I think there are certain aspects of, like, racism [in the] LGBT community that you can ignore a little easier when you're White.

Mirana focused her answers on the idea of choice and one's in/ability to disclose aspects of identity that may or may not be "readable" in certain contexts. Like Andi, Mirana was concerned with emotional and physical safety, worrying of potential attacks from unaccepting people (both known and unknown), on campus and in the community.

Maverick's experiences as an LGBTQ+ person of color at a PWI echoed Andi's and Mirana's experiences. Maverick recognized their unique identity intersections of race, gender, and sexuality and felt that their institution failed to prioritize their identities separately, compounding said failure for students with multiple marginalities:

Honestly, well here, it's not even a priority to, like, support either queer or POC students. So, if you bring those together? It's even less of a priority. You feel me? So, on a campus where something is not a priority, it's not ingrained into the students' minds any way to specifically help.

When I wondered aloud to Maverick about the idea of students helping, Maverick further contextualized their answer:

If you're not White...Whiteness on this campus makes it a little dangerous to speak out directly...which is a little scary, you know...because, there are definitely people saying, "I hate this bitch," you know, and stuff like that.

Maverick spoke from the place of someone who regularly engaged in campus activism and protest. Their intersectionality was an added weight, a locus of race, sexuality, and gender that offered a much broader target for hate and bias.

A few students initially shared either passive discrimination or secondhand experiences, stories of classmates who found themselves on the receiving end of racism and/or anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. Ambrosia recounted a classmate's truly repugnant experience being on the receiving end of White classmates' racism:

Yeah, so...this is terrible...but, um...[this person was] an African American woman. They hung out with a lot of, like, men on their floor...White straight men...And one of them had mentioned that, like, for Halloween she should be a slave, and they're going to walk...her through campus...She reports it...and, like, nothing was ever done about it. Nothing...From that point on, it just felt very unsafe. So, she just ended up transferring.

Ambrosia expressed the impact of racism on all students of color. Though the incident above happened to a classmate, Ambrosia felt very unnerved by it. She recounted the anxiety, fear, anger, and outrage that rippled through communities of color (Black students, in particular) after news of the incident spread.

Mirana echoed Ambrosia's sense of communal anxiety, fear, and anger. When she detailed racist and transphobic incidents that occurred on Riverside University's campus, she spoke as though the incidents happened to her directly:

Shortly after the Trump election, someone scratched the N-word into a Black student's door screen. That student ended up leaving campus...Shortly after that, there was a student [who] got verbally harassed on a bus for speaking Spanish over the phone, and someone was like, "Did you hear that Trump got elected? You can't speak Spanish here. Go back to where you came from." And people have attacked [personal pronouns] on doors by writing...stupid stuff.

Mirana was outwardly angry when talking about this incident. Hers was an exhaustion born from having to recount and relive discriminatory experiences that happened too often on and off campus. A few questions later, Mirana thought of some additional incidents:

Um, I have had, like, other friends come to me saying that they've been deadnamed in classrooms before and the professors won't stop. Or, like, professors consistently misgender students. It's a lot of that.

Deadnaming is the act of addressing a trans person by their birth name, instead of their preferred name. It is often associated with extreme discomfort and trauma.

Maverick winced when recalling a well-publicized racist act in the community within which Riverside University sits, describing the toll discrimination can take on students when numerous identities are simultaneously targeted:

Yo, listen. Oh, there's some racist pricks over here...Somebody graffitied somebody else's garage "go back to the desert" or "go back to where you came from, desert N-word"...What else...just daily. Daily things...Like, microaggressions happen every time I step into, like, a different classroom. People don't realize it. And, [the microaggressions] may not be for me. [They]

may be for other people, who are visibly people of color, but it still hurts me...God, I'm trying to think of specifics, LGBTQ-wise. People always make fun of pronouns. Bro, I don't understand...I'll overhear conversations. Some people will post on their social media...And, like some of my ally friends even, like, they don't know better with certain things, and they'll slip up. And, it's just a lot sometimes.

Andi visibly bridled when describing a transphobic banner placed on an oft-walked student pathway:

So, there was a little panel incident that was over on the bridge...It was something that was very, very, very offensive. And, I know it was offensive. It was very, very offensive to trans people.

When asked to clarify, Andi explained that the bridge in question was a walkway flanked by marketing space, covered by advertisements and student organization program information. I did not probe for specific details regarding the offensive language, because Andi was visibly uncomfortable when recounting the incident. They emphasized that the perpetuation of hate and bias (on and off campus) affected them deeply and caused them to feel less safe on their campus and in their community.

Incidents of hate/bias had far reaching implications, affecting the community, not just the targeted individual. The level of intensity with which the student participants recounted passive and secondhand hate and bias did not vary from hate and bias directed at them personally. Most hate and bias incidents, however, were not passive or secondhand. Fololina recounted several instances where they were the target of hate by classmates, faculty, and staff:

I have one class that I fill out a hate/bias [reporting form] for every single class. And, that teacher told me that trans people can't be good parents. Yeah. And, I was like, alright, I guess I can't be a good parent. I'm going to go cry now...More heteronormative, cisgender bullshit that I don't understand...So, I haven't been able to be out in that class.

Fololina's anger failed to belie the impact of their professor's comments. Fololina was openly hurt, deflated, and struggling to understand why they must endure such harmful rhetoric in the classroom. Moreover, Fololina's consistent engagement with Riverside University's hate/bias reporting form did little to assuage their discomfort, mentioning the reporting process with dismissiveness and irritation. In the same interview, when answering a different question, Fololina mentioned another instance of trans-exclusionary behavior by a [different] professor:

And, there was one; I got into a huge argument with her. But, in the middle of class, um...we had to get into two groups. And, she's like, I want all the girls together and all the boys together. And, there was a person next to me who also identifies as trans. And, I was like, what are we gonna?...[*raises hands in frustration*]...And, I was like, I guess I'm just gonna come with all of these fellow ladies. Gross.

Again, Fololina displayed visible resentment about having to choose between outing themselves in the classroom or joining the activity with their classmates.

Benjamin became visibly agitated recounting an instance where he, a Black trans man, was racially profiled by a White LGBTQ+ student, which turned out to be a defining moment for Benjamin:

I was wearing a red sweatshirt and a red jacket and a red hat, and there was an individual on the...[Gay Straight Alliance]...who told me that I looked like a gang member, which to me was really fucking shitty. Because, I was like, “Wow, that’s, like, racial profiling.”...And then everyone else...[threw] gang signs at me, and, like, several individuals there were trying to, like, make the gang signs and everything. And, like, to me, that was really...a slap in the face.

Benjamin spoke of this incident as a betrayal, unexpectedly fielding hurtful, discriminatory words and actions by White members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Benjamin also shared common microaggressions he experienced on campus:

On racial identity: “What are you? Where are you from?” [*pause*] “You look really good for a trans individual”...That’s really gross. Um, “I would date you, but you’re trans”...I’ve definitely been called a tranny before and faggot before. And, I’ve been called other slurs.

Mirana sighed heavily when I asked her about her experiences with on-campus hate and bias. At first, she focused on non-binary exclusion in the classroom:

There’s a lot of, like, “ladies and gentlemen” with professors, and nothing that’s really been addressed with that...[Also,] pronouns in classes are non-existent, and I have gotten stared at for sharing [mine]...The trauma that comes from sitting in [the] classroom just...[*trails off*]...[QPOC/QTPOC] are deadnamed in classrooms...and the professors won’t stop...Professors consistently misgender students...It’s a lot of that.

Compounding the exclusionary language in the classroom, Mirana was critical of professors who failed to address harmful language:

Students [are] not getting shut down in class for saying a lot of ignorant shit...Outwardly racist or homophobic ideas [are not addressed] in a way that's an obvious correction...[even when] what they said was, like, point blank fucked up...It should be changed.

She lamented the inaccessibility of gender-inclusive housing options on campus, “If you’re a person that identifies as non-binary or trans and...also has a disability, are you going to have to choose between being able to actually access your dorm or being comfortable where you’re living?” Listening to Mirana list off the incidents above, it became clear that she evinced equal degrees of distress, whether or not she had been the direct target of hate/bias. She was as angry for her friends—many of them LGBTQ+ students of color—as she was for herself.

Maverick pointed out that their classmates often attempted to distance themselves from casual racism, “A lot of people are like, ‘I’m not racist. I have a Black friend. I have a Hispanic friend.’” Maverick also shared their experiences with tokenization. This burden of representation weighed heavily on Maverick, as they were often quick to qualify their own experiences as unrepresentative of all multiracial students, “A lot of time...oh my God...they want you to speak for your entire group, for your community. And, I’m like, ‘bro, there’s so many of us...I’m one person, and this is what I experienced.’” Maverick then echoed Ambrosia’s sentiments that bias and hate targeted at one member of the community affects the entire community, “Have you ever been so afraid for your black and brown friends that, like, you’ve checked in with them to see when they’ve gotten home?...I hurt so much with them.” Ultimately, and throughout all three interviews, participants recounted many acts of discrimination, bigotry, and hate

they experienced on their respective campuses. The volume and variety of incidents, accompanied by institutional apathy (itself a separate theme), all but ensured a perception of campus climates as hostile as they were exclusionary.

Passing Privilege: Race, Sexuality, and Gender

Passing privilege—one’s ability to strategically choose, at any given time, which of their identities is visible or readable to others—was universally salient amongst my participants. Choosing whether to pass confers privilege on the one doing the passing, as it symbolizes an ability to blend into the dominant population, thereby affording oneself the choice to disclose or withhold identity in any given space. While passing privilege is most often recognized in conversations about race and ethnicity, Maverick stressed that, “Passing...transgresses gender, race, and sexuality.”

Passing Privilege: Race and Ethnicity

Though not by design, all but two of my participants were multiracial. While I anticipated passing privilege to play a role in their experiences at PWIs, I was not expecting the sheer saturation of strategic passing that imbued each participant’s story. A common theme appearing throughout each interview, the awareness of and in/ability to pass manifested in a variety of ways.

Kou emigrated from Japan to the United States when they were six years old. Until they arrived at Upper Polytechnic University, Kou thought they were White passing. In fact, from as far back as they can remember, Kou’s mother always reinforced their self-perception as White:

So up until I came to college, I thought I looked White, because my mom’s full Japanese and...she would always say, “No, you look White, like, you don’t look

Japanese,” and that’s why this this and that. “You don’t look like my kid, I swear”...I thought I was White passing for a very, very long time.

Kou’s college friends—themselves LGBTQ+ people of color—were quick to point out that Kou was, indeed, visibly multiracial. This revelatory information precipitated for Kou a new way of seeing themselves:

Literally until last year, I talked about it, and my QTPOC friends be like, “You don’t look White. Like, you obviously look like something; you don’t look, like, White.” So that’s like a whole different chapter that opened up for me, because I’m like, wait, so people can see it?

Kou was stunned when they discovered others perceived them as multiracial. The Whiteness Kou assumed others saw offered safety and anonymity; whereas, their “newly” visible multiracial identity shocked them into an alternate paradigm, one with which they were unfamiliar.

Maverick, like Kou, grew up thinking they were White. From the outset, Maverick explored life at Riverside University as a multiracial person, albeit a multiracial person who is perceived by most as White. The decision to reveal or withhold their multiracial identity, then, became a conscious choice for Maverick. Raised in a large city by a largely White family, Maverick spent their time at Riverside University reconnecting with identities theretofore unacknowledged:

Okay, I’m just gonna put this out there, because it’s also part of my identity journey. I wasn’t able to do a lot of racial work, because...I was in a big city, and I was raised by a White family. I essentially grew up thinking I was White. You know, like, I always knew I was Latina, and I knew that I was Puerto Rican, but it

didn't mean anything to me...And, I think it adds so much of a layer, especially depending on where you're coming from. I know for me, I was in a community that had privilege...But, I just enjoyed life. You know, I didn't think about it, because I never had to. Yeah, so I'm very privileged that way.

Maverick approached the ability to pass with an appreciation for the experiences of those who were unable, as well as a recognition that passing transgresses various identities:

I've been, like, obsessed with the word passing, [because] passing transgresses gender, race, and sexuality...It's, like, very dependent on the people you're around and how informed they are and/or how nosy they are. Yeah. Which is wild in my opinion. And for, like, me being a cis-passing and White-passing, and fucking straight-passing person...It's odd to say the least...I catch myself kind of like being comfortable, when I know other people who have my identities who aren't passing can't be comfortable...[I feel a] sense of urgency for other people...[pause]...who are my people, ya know?

Maverick did not explain their White-passing in terms of guilt. They were not ashamed of it. They did, however, display a keen sense of responsibility toward those without the ability to pass as White, a commitment to operationalizing their own White-passing privilege in ways that address inequitable experiences.

Benjamin, biracial yet strongly Black-identified, and unlike Maverick and Kou, knew he was not White passing; though, his Blackness was often mistaken for other races/ethnicities, resulting in a particularly frustrating pattern for Benjamin. When discussing one's in/ability to pass as White, Benjamin pointed out the difficulty he encountered finding community as a multiracial LGBTQ+ person, because the people of

color he knew were White-passing and unwilling to give up that racial camouflage.

Benjamin recounted his time in high school, prior to his admission to Upper Polytechnic University:

I never had any real support system from any people at that school. Essentially, there was one LGB person of color, but they were White-passing...They weren't out about their POC identity. So, they'd, like, they talked to me about it, but they weren't out...she didn't even identify as being in the community. Prior to college, I never had an LGBT person of color that I could confide in.

Benjamin spoke with a discernible heaviness about the loneliness he experienced before entering college, and about his desire to reach out and find connection with other multiracial queer people. Any potential for creating and nurturing community amongst White-passing people of color was often usurped by the safety afforded by their passing Whiteness. Though he understood White passing as a survival strategy, Benjamin's sense of isolation and desire for community went unmet until college.

Maverick offered insight into the reluctance some White-passing students of color experienced when provided the choice to relinquish their cloak of Whiteness:

There's a pressure to stay quiet, and to continue your studies...if you're not White...Makes it a little dangerous to speak out directly. Because a lot of people are easily identifiable, because they are people of color, visible people of color...which is a little scary.

It was not Maverick's inability to locate LGBTQ+ people of color that proved difficult at Riverside University; rather, it was their inability to establish communal bonds as a

White-passing person with people whose visible non-White race and/or ethnicity yielded unique experiences with which Maverick was entirely unfamiliar:

There's, like, levels of stigma within each community that I cannot speak to [as a] White passing [person]...I know that, because I've had conversations with these folks...they can divulge these things, and they can sometimes have the conversation. But, then when they go home, it's completely different.

Maverick's empathetic approach to community and belonging, particularly regarding their own identities, guided them across various communal landscapes. They continually emphasized the importance of listening, as well as operationalizing their privilege in productive ways.

Passing Privilege: Sexuality and Gender

As mentioned, all participants expressed an awareness of White-passing. There was, however, no clear consensus of experience across all White-passing participants; a few were unable to engage that survival strategy at all. The students did, however, express universal deployment of passing privilege regarding sexuality and gender—before, during, and after initially coming out to family and friends. Operationalizing one's passing privilege is, in many circumstances, a question of safety and survival, often inextricably tied to some aspect of coming out or revealing one's identities.

The following are excerpts from various participants' awareness of intentionally and strategically negotiating passing privilege with regard to sexuality and gender:

Andi: When I came out with my gender...I was super down with, like, they/them [pronouns], and I still am. But now...in college...I prefer she/her. Only if it is someone I do not know. But, once I get to know them, I ask them, like, hey I use

they/them...please use those. If [I'm] talking to someone who doesn't know me personally, she/her is fine...I don't want this person, whoever it is who doesn't know me, to make these, like, radical assumptions of me until they know me...sitting down talking with them, like, hey, this is what I've gone through, and this is why I feel the way I do, essentially.

Andi expressed visible discomfort at the idea of strangers making judgments about Andi's identities. Andi was sensitive and leery and cautiously approached new relationships before at all opening up. Andi was reflexively suspect, a result of negative interactions with those unable or unwilling to understand them.

Unlike Andi, Mirana was both femme-presenting and cisgender, so the she/her pronouns she used did not compromise a sense of safety. When visiting family, however, Mirana leaned into her straight-passing privilege to protect herself from difficult family interactions arising from her bisexuality:

I do have kinda, like, straight-passing privilege...I think, most of the time when I'm at school...And when I'm at home, I'm strictly a person of color. My LGBTQ+ [identity] doesn't come out very frequently. But, when I'm in places with people that I know, know and support me...[pause]...I think it depends on the level of security and how safe that I'm feeling...There are times when I'm in LGBTQ+ spaces, and I don't want to talk about race, because that's the rest of my existence. And so, I'll lean a little bit more heavily into, like, [that] bisexual identity...So, it really just depends on the space, I think, and the people, on which one I lean more into.

Mirana's sense of identity fracture exemplifies double-consciousness, an experiential reality for individuals with intersecting identities who often feel divided-up and never unified.

Like Mirana, Fololina drew a sharp distinction between their ability to pass as straight and the acute awareness they felt as a visible person of color walking into predominantly White spaces:

[I] don't have to be out in a lot of spaces...People still think I'm straight. And I'm just, like, "Haha, you have no idea who I am"...And so, like, I can definitely hide that side of myself...Like, the person that I called my twin, like, didn't even know I was gay until I came out to them...It was always a choice for me to not disclose that.

Fololina then contrasted their ability to pass as straight with their inability to pass as White:

I talk a lot to, like, my White-passing friends and they're just, like, "It's pretty easy to be a person of color, cause, like, [we] can infiltrate into conversations and then exploit it and just be, like, fuck all of you." [I] can't say that...I am hyperaware [of my race] every time I walk into a classroom.

Ambrosia succinctly encapsulated the shared experiences of all the participants, highlighting a significant experiential difference between White and White-passing LGBTQ+ people and their QPOC/QTPOC peers:

You can't hide or try to tone down your race at all; that's the first thing people are going to see. So, I think, oftentimes, queer people of color, that's the first thing

we're going to be more aware of. Versus White queers. The queerness will be, like, probably their first thing that's noticed...if it is noticed at all.

Ultimately, each student expressed both an appreciation for and resentment of passing privilege across race and ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. Whether wielding these privileges to avoid endemic community issues (e.g., racism, homophobia, and transphobia), or as a means of self-preservation and safety, passing remained a salient theme of the participants' experience—in and out of higher education.

Unintentional Educating; Unintentional Education

While education most often connotes critically developed curricula and co-curricula proffered to students by an institution (vis-à-vis faculty and staff), it (and the act of educating) can be a far more dynamic experience. My participants' institutions often charged marginalized students with educating campus communities about their own identities, thereby exploiting students' unpaid emotional labor, while leaving open the possibility of re-traumatization. Moreover, my participants described an “unintentional curricula,” the result of navigating hostile campuses.

“I'm tired of being the teacher”: Exploitation and Unpaid Emotional Labor

My participants often reported feeling separate and unequal, keenly aware that what was expected of them was not expected of peers without marginalized identities. Their rebuke of intrusive Whiteness and calls for intersectional spaces were rooted in the desire to feel “seen,” in the sense that campus students, faculty, and staff would better understand intersectionality and its experiential outcomes. Unfortunately, they did not expect to have to do the teaching themselves.

Maverick lamented the absence of compulsory education at Riverside University whose content foci highlighted intersectionality and the lived experiences of marginalized people on and off campus. Maverick conceded that, while Riverside University did have mandatory general education requirements (including diverse curricula), students were afforded too much choice. Once enrolled students realized that course content challenged dominant identities and systemic power and oppression, Maverick said, “A lot of people will drop as soon as they figure out what it is...They try to leave.” Marginalized students are left to fill in that gap. When Maverick spoke, it was as if they wanted to dispel the notion that intersectional experiences can be fully understood as basic addition (e.g., oppression + oppression = more oppression). Though it may *seem* obvious within higher education that intersecting marginality yields unique lived experiences, Maverick insisted this uniqueness is often either overlooked entirely or institutionally downplayed, absent from interdisciplinary curricula.

Fololina spoke more directly to Riverside University students’ lack of intersectional awareness, expressing palpable exasperation at having to continually explain and translate their identities, a task Fololina felt should be undertaken by the institution:

It’s just so difficult to be a person of color. And, to be a queer person on top of that... Um, yeah, and that lack of education just, like, gets to me a lot.

Cause...I’m the only trans person in my cohort. I’m the only person of color in my cohort. Like, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that. And, I don’t know why I have to continue to educate people on literally everything...It just really makes me angry.

Fololina was often tense during the interviews. In many of our exchanges, they would throw their arms up in futility, wondering aloud how unfair and unjust it was that their identities were not recognized and honored by their institution and classmates.

Benjamin mirrored Fololina's fatigue and frustration. Having to teach others about his identities, compounded by his constant self-advocacy, left him feeling unappreciated and exhausted:

[We also] need more education on a university level, so that it's not queer people of color constantly doing the work for other queer people of color, because it can be really draining. And then, if you're doing the work for everyone else...who's helping *you* out?

Benjamin's annoyance at having to educate the campus community about his various, intersecting identities was common amongst all participants. They felt their respective institutions should be expending the intellectual and emotional labor of educating their campuses, rather than relying on the most marginalized students to fill in the awareness gap.

“I've definitely had to learn”: Surviving Inhospitable Environments

Participants pointed out that, while they have fortified their own resiliency, social justice activism, and community development and advocacy throughout their time in higher education, they have not always done so in concert with their respective institutions. Rather, they grew inured to inhospitable campus climates, learning from systemic inequity. Kou contextualized their education as more than simply a degree-seeking enterprise:

There's so many different experiences. You know, I have learned to know that when you come to college, it's not really about, like, earning a degree or studying what you want to study. I mean, part of it is...And there's a lot of bad stuff and a lot of good stuff...Experience, whether it's good or bad, means a lot to you in the future...I saw this bad thing happen...I see it again, like, I know probably...what's going to happen...You know, this has happened before.

Benjamin was far less pragmatic. He pointedly critiqued Upper Polytechnic University. Rather than summate his education in terms of future prosperity and (as he phrased it) "stereotypical" terms, he pointedly regarded his unintentional education as the result of a lack of institutional foresight and intentionality:

I guess, if I'm going to be honest...I've experienced so much here. It helps me realize what the real world's gonna be like...The discrimination I faced, the systemic oppression that I've faced...all that shit that I've faced, I guess helps me, so I know what to expect in the real world...and job positions throughout the rest of my life. Because...you know, I faced it...I've experienced so much shit. I feel like it's, like, "Oh yeah, we're just preparing you for all the shit that you're gonna have to face"...It's not like they intentionally try...Through their inaction...[I] got a thick skin from all the shit you have to do.

Rather than characterizing education and persistence in terms of a bright future, Benjamin saw his negative experiences at Upper Polytechnic University as an unintentional education bracing him for a world unaccepting and unaccommodating of LGBTQ+ people of color. Maverick, too, spoke of resiliency not in terms of an intentional byproduct of a rigorous higher education experience, but as the effects of

consistent discrimination and institutional indifference. They also spoke of a learned sense of activism and self-advocacy, “[It’s] made me grow really thick skin, to learn how to pick my battles...It’s taught me how to, like...maneuver within homophobic spaces, transphobic spaces, xenophobic [spaces]. All of that has taught me that not everybody’s gonna listen.”

Mirana explained how her time in higher education has unintentionally taught her to find and build community, as well as thrive in the face of indifference:

I think [college has] prepared me in the fact that I know I’m going to have to, kind of, find my own community and build my own community, outside of the institution...which is kind of twisted in a way, I feel...As well as getting used to the fact that people don’t really care about things that don’t involve them. I think this university has given me a lot of practice with that. As well as trying to make people care. Because, people like the administration and other students on our campus choose to ignore a lot of the issues that marginalized students face...So, just building that sense of community through the bullshit that we’ve had to face.

Though she was raised in a predominantly White community and attended a predominantly White high school, Ambrosia recognized the unintentional education she received at Central State University. Throughout her time in higher education, and amidst a predominantly White campus, Ambrosia learned to strategically navigate Whiteness in ways she had not yet been able to, both within Central State University and beyond:

Definitely working with other people from various different cultures and backgrounds, as well as how to better interact with White people...I’ve been to a PWI my whole life, but I tried to downplay my minority status as much as

possible, so I could kinda just coast through. But, at [Central State University], I'm like, well, I don't want to keep doing that. So, I definitely have had to learn how to kind of navigate these spaces...who to talk to, if I'm having an issue, and who was actually going to be a supporter and who's just...going to brush it off to the side...I have to work a little bit harder just to stay a lot calmer...to keep from, you know...playing into the stereotypes. So, I've definitely had to learn, I think...to just be a lot more careful with my words, be almost careful with how I present. And, I think that's going to help in society, because it's still how, you know, society is...People are a lot more, I don't want to say sensitive, but defensive. Yeah, defensive. Yeah, people can get real defensive real quick and especially majority students...There's, like, multiple barriers, hurdles I have to jump over.

Mirana spoke of developing a skill to find and curate community, in spite of Riverside University. The majority of my participants learned to cultivate community where it was never institutionally provided or supported. While connecting students to community remains conducive to student persistence, remaining a top priority in higher education, LGBTQ+ college students of color are often left to seek community without institutional direction or support (Renn & Reason, 2013; Quaye & Harper, 2105). Notably, my participants learned to locate and develop community by operationalizing their trauma, seeking out classmates with shared experiences. In fact, sharing campus trauma was a common community-building tactic:

Mirana: We have a pretty tight-knit community of LGBTQ+ students of color on this campus. I think it's a lot of, almost, trauma bonding, though. Because, we're

forced to have a close-knit community in order to look out for each other on this campus.

When I asked Mirana why she felt LGBTQ+ students of color needed to look out for each other, she elaborated, “It’s kind of the idea that we are cash signs, and we are able to be used for positive publicity. But, when it comes down to actually taking care of us, they don’t seem to give a shit.” Kou spoke about a specific classroom incident symbolizing the power of shared trauma and community:

Oh, yeah. [Trauma bonding is,] like, one thing I was going to bring up...One time, when the class was split up in boys and girls...there was another individual [and] the two of us kind of looked at each other like this is really rough...It’s nice to know that I’m not the only one, like, thinking [how] I think.

Having to find and curate a community of support takes its toll on any student, let alone students whose marginality leaves them with fewer visible resources and institutional networks. Benjamin spoke of this added pressure:

The community that I have that supported me, I have actively gone out [to] seek and actively created...Every single, like, support system that I have on campus I initiated. It was never created for me...I think it’s kind of shitty...The only thing that makes a safe space for queer people of color is when queer people of color create [one]...We’re putting in the work to do that. And so we’re, I guess we’re creating a space that’s safe for ourselves.

Chris: It sounds like you would rather just show up and “be,” as opposed to worrying about curating the space?

Benjamin: Exactly. Because, we have to create those spaces, which makes it less safe.

Maverick pointed to a lack of targeted outreach that forced marginalized students to learn how to fend for themselves. As a new student, and now a third-year student, Maverick noticed a problematic pattern whereby the campus resources designed specifically for marginalized students were not marketed to the students who needed them, forcing said students to strike out on their own and with no direction, “[Marginalized] students kind of have to, like, flail like fish on land, before they find a footing...Students are pushed away, you know, off-centered, forgotten, left behind.” Maverick cautioned that this “sink or swim” approach taught the unintentional lesson that institutions do not care for LGBTQ+ students of color, setting up antagonistic relationships between said students and their respective institutions.

Ambrosia offered a different perspective, having pledged a sorority early on in her college career. At first, it appeared Ambrosia’s experience at Central State University diverged from the other participants:

Ambrosia: [Finding community] came from my sorority, because I joined so early...that I kind of was just absorbed into everything...I’m not the only QTPOC person within the org, which is nice.

Chris: Was the messaging for the sorority inclusive of [LGBTQ+ students of color]? Was it inclusive messaging that made you want to go there?

Ambrosia: Um, I would say a lot of it was in the personal interactions that I’ve had with them. Yeah...My queerness was never really brought up when I initially started meeting them. It wasn’t until I, like, decided to...like, think about joining

that I brought it up... You know, queerness is a big part of my identity. How is this going to be received?

As Ambrosia continued to talk about her positive experiences with the sorority—a significant locus of support for her—she changed direction when recalling a transgender member who transitioned, in direct violation of the sorority’s national membership charter:

It was actually nice, because nationally we do have a brother, because he transitioned, um, I think right after he joined the organization. So, now he’s, like, our brother...and they’re all really excited...Um, now that I’m actually in the org, I see a little bit more behind the scenes of what actually happened, because, like, the way Greek Life is when it comes to, like, male and female and how you need to be categorized...It’s very weird...For us to keep our non-profit status, um, we have to only accept people who are female and female-identified. So, then, it kind of brings up now that, like genderqueer [and] non-binary [are] a lot more common...we’re trying to figure out, okay, how does that work?...yeah, it’s really interesting.

Ambrosia’s sorority exemplifies both the changing nature of higher education student demographics, as well as the inability of even well-established and institutionally housed and supported community organizations from serving their students. Rather than learning to embrace the totality of their identities, LGBTQ+ students of color often find themselves negotiating restrictive, exclusionary policies and community membership guidelines. Instead of thriving within higher education, they learn to survive. While survival is certainly a valuable skillset, it is hardly the goal of higher education.

“I’m doing it for them”: Intrinsic Responsibility for Future Generations

Despite the complexities of double-consciousness and the pitfalls of navigating their respective PWIs, another unifying theme between all participants revealed an intrinsic sense of responsibility to address issues of campus climate. Participants did not want to improve the campus experience just for themselves (indeed, many recognized an inability to affect change with a rapidity that would benefit them) but for LGBTQ+ students of color subsequently entering higher education. Each participant, in various ways, intimated a sense of duty, an intrinsically informed weight of responsibility to ensure the barriers to persistence they have encountered are removed for future students whose identities reflect their own. Benjamin and Kou separately credited this intrinsic sense of responsibility with their involvement at Upper Polytechnic University:

Benjamin: As I started getting really involved, that was my one goal...I want students to stop feeling like they need to suffer to get through their college experience. Because everyone talks about, like, college, like...“Oh, this was, like, the best time of my life...and like...I’ve had a lot of good experiences.” But, as a whole, this has been, like, super not a good time...Holistically, this has been one of the worst experiences that I’ve ever had...So, for me...my whole entire goal has been to help change that systematic stuff so that other people aren’t feeling this way.

Kou: That’s why I started working here. In general, my whole big thing was, I don’t want people to feel the way I felt—in the sense of figuring stuff out or being alone in it. So, that’s why I want to make things better for people...And, that’s what I want to do is to, like, educate people so that people can treat people

better... Which really sucks, because I do work a lot... I did have a couple moments of, like, "Why am I doing this?... I don't know why I'm trying to, like, make things better for people"... But, like, in the end... it's about, just, humanity and human rights... So, that was, like, a big thing that I came to [in] the end, which makes me feel better, because you're fighting for something that's bigger.

Maverick felt a sense of obligation to other marginalized students, highlighting the toll such advocacy can take when balancing their own marginalized identities with advocacy for others—all with a full-time academic course load:

I know there's a lot of work that I don't necessarily have to do, but I feel inclined to do, you know?... And, granted, it's a lot of emotional labor... When you first get into it, like, you burn out real quick, because you don't know how to, like, take care of yourself... especially people who have multiple marginalized identities. They feel like they have to speak on all of them all the time. Or sometimes they feel shut down, because nobody's talking about that identity.

Mirana shared both Benjamin's and Maverick's sense of responsibility to future students, explaining that she sees their faces in her younger siblings. When asked whether she felt duty-bound to advocate for future students, Mirana explained:

Oh, yeah. A hundred percent. A hundred percent. I've said before that I come from a really big family, and anytime my mom sends me photos of my siblings or anytime I go home, all I think about is, like... I'm doing it for them. I'm doing it for the kids like them. I'm doing it for the kids I went to school with that were like, "Well, I'm not going to go to college, because nobody expects me to do anything anyway." And, I am here to not only prove everyone [who] told me that

I couldn't get to this point wrong—because I'm driven by spite—but, also to change the system, so that hopefully the next incoming class doesn't have to deal with as much as I did.

Fololina echoed Mirana's intrinsic charge; though, they spoke more of the vacuum left by institutional inaction reflective of an educational system built upon White supremacy—a landscape LGBTQ+ students of color often feel compelled to deplatform and decolonize for other LGBTQ+ students of color. Fololina spoke of a recent effort they organized with a group of classmates to address issues salient to Indigenous students:

We're basically going to yell at the Board of Education to be like, "You fucked up." There are so many things that have happened in [this state]...and, like, I kind of hope that I'm going to bring, like, the Indigenous side of it...I don't want to hear about, like, how White people discovered, like, all these sorts of things...I want to learn about, like, how people are...impacted by the 400 treaties that have been broken.

Fololina continued, their tone completely changing. Once angry and forceful, Fololina's voice softened, their face earnest and sincere. They spoke of a desire to change education for people like them—of all ages—preventing future students from experiencing pain and frustration:

Graduating for me means that I can get kids out of whatever they're in...I know it's super cliché...but, like, [school can be] an escape, and, like, coming to school can be a good thing...I want to make a classroom and have the skillset to, like, make a classroom so my students can come in and not have to think about [their

identities] unless they want to...I just, I don't want what happened to me to happen to anybody else.

Whether in terms of their younger siblings (Mirana), future classrooms (Fololina), or incoming college students (Benjamin, Kou, and Maverick), the participants earnestly insisted that their efforts effectively change the often-negative experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color.

“I don't feel valued at all”: Institutional Apathy

Each of the seven interviewees felt that their institutions did not care about them. They shared myriad ways they felt disregarded, forgotten, or passed-over for more “important” campus issues. This institutional apathy was often the impetus for my participants' intrinsic responsibility to change higher education for future generations of LGBTQ+ students of color. Further contributing to these perceptions of institutional apathy, the centers of institutional support to whom many of the participants turned on their campuses were often underfunded. Maverick illustrated this institutional apathy at Riverside University and its effects on them and their classmates (many of them LGBTQ+ students of color):

Maverick: [Our centers of support] are especially underfunded, ignored, always having to fight for, you know, their office...Makes me feel like we're in the same boat...which is really interesting...[It] makes me so incredibly angry, because these people are actually putting their heart and soul into, you know, trying to lower or remedy some of these disasters.

Chris: How does your campus show that it values you as a student and a member of the campus community?

Maverick: [*cocks their head*] I don't know that they really do...Never. And then, once you pay, they're gonna forget your name. They don't give a shit.

A few of my participants mentioned their institutions treating them as sources of income, their well-being merely an afterthought. Though in my experience a relatively common sentiment among students of all identities, my participants' feelings of fiscal exploitation were pronounced and compounded by the addition of their multiple marginalization.

Benjamin, too, was quick to reject the notion that his campus supported or valued him as a student, echoing much of what Maverick said. He drew a sharp distinction between higher education as an academic enterprise versus a purveyor of personal development and success:

Benjamin: Um, I don't feel supported in my path to graduation...Because, academically, I am succeeding, and I have the academic support that I need. But, academia is only one small portion of the university experience...which I don't think a lot of people get...Yes, my academia is...important, but as a low-income trans student, I have to think about, like...just the overall experiences of discrimination and prejudice on campus...I have limited resources for that.

Chris: How does your campus show that it values you as a student and a member of the campus community?

Benjamin: (no hesitation whatsoever) It doesn't...I don't feel any value by the administration. I don't feel any value by a lot of the staff members...I feel valued by my faculty members, but not because of the fact that I'm, you know, a queer trans person of color making strides on campus; it's because I have good grades and I'm active in class...I don't feel like my university [*values*] QPOC.

Benjamin's words were laced with a bitterness common amongst my participants when they were asked whether they felt valued by their institutions. Their sense of betrayal was palpable during the interviews.

Mirana highlighted Riverside University's apathy by way of its disingenuous interactions with LGBTQ+ students of color. She contended that Riverside University paid attention to LGBTQ+ students of color only when doing so benefited the institution's image:

I don't think I've ever really felt support from this administration. I think that when they do talk about issues that students of color face, that LGBTQ+ students face...they only mention it to cover their own asses. They say it, because it looks good. They say it, because they can say that they said something...It's literally just to save face.

Mirana also highlighted Riverside University's apathy by way of its propensity to prioritize and fund traditional campus expenditures, excluding programs, facilities, and support services for the most marginalized:

They would rather pay more to redo, like, an entire hall for the business program, or redo the football team, than putting their money into resources for marginalized students, or making sure that our campus is even fully accessible. So, things like that. And, so I don't, I don't feel supported by the administration at all. And I don't think a lot of students with marginalized identities feel supported.

When I asked Mirana if she felt valued by Riverside University, she immediately responded:

[laughter] I feel like I'm not very valued as a student. I feel like when I am valued as a student, it's almost, like, for brownie points. Like, it's almost, like, a tokenizing way. And, I feel like I see that with a lot of my other friends...As a marginalized student, and as an activist on campus, I don't feel valued at all, especially in terms of trying to change things.

Ambrosia acknowledged an awareness of some campus efforts to represent diverse lives and identities; though, she displayed caution when heaping too much praise on the institution, "Oh, I would say I think campus tries to show that[, but] I don't think it's been very blatant...Yeah, obviously campus tries. I personally, I think it could be a little bit better." When I pressed her further, Ambrosia echoed Mirana's claims of institutional disingenuousness, receiving campus messaging as perfunctory and not reflective of an actual desire to celebrate its diverse campus community, "I just feel like it's...kind of like...it's being done because it needs to be done. So it looks good...Sometimes it feels like it's not all that genuine."

Andi spoke of institutional apathy in terms of invisibility. They also shared other participants' frustration that the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color were not at all prioritized. As an LGBTQ+ student of color at Lakeland University, Andi often felt pushed aside for campus programs more traditionally celebrated within higher education:

With this being such a large campus...the only way that lots of people get recognition is...if you do something that's, like, super...grand, and like, you know, out of the realm of...what is, like, standard...You know, like sports groups, like, they get recognized very often...especially if they win...they're, like, doing something that's grand and great and beyond, and it feels like [we're] not to get

that level of grandness...[and when] you approach the university and say, hey, look at this thing we did...will you acknowledge it?...The university just won't do that.

Andi continued, directly addressing Lakeland University's failure to value and celebrate LGBTQ+ students of color, instead focusing on students' victimization as targets of campus hate/bias incidents:

I don't think I've gotten [or] really felt any...support from, like, the administration...[They] only addresses certain issues...It's never, like, a moment of, like, uplifting. It's always when it's, like, somber moments...That's the only time I ever feel like campus administration does something...when it's something really awful...Damage control...Like, I rarely feel like campus does anything to celebrate...students of color and LGBT students, like, as an intersection.

Andi's characterization of "damage control" mirrored other participants' assertions that their respective PWIs were only concerned about reputation, apathetically favoring reactive responses to hate and bias, instead of empathetically proactive, intersectional student education and advocacy.

When I asked them if they felt valued as a student, Fololina let loose the acerbic laughter I came to know during our time together. They offered several examples highlighting their campus's disregard for them and their identities as an Indigenous LGBTQ+ student of color:

Fololina: [I'm] unsupported by faculty every single time I am misgendered or deadnamed, because it happens in every single one of my classes...I hate that I have to re-traumatize myself so that I actually get credit for class...it's

exhausting, honestly...[And], administration's just really smacked me in the face over and over and over again.

Chris: How does your campus show that it values you as a student and member of the campus community:

Fololina: I don't see value in what they do to me... We're such a small population... They're not coming from the perspective of us. They don't ask us what we need. They don't do any of that... Like, we're just asking for more. We're asking for people to listen to us. We're asking for more resources. We're asking for them to actually give a shit about us graduating.

Each participant described institutional apathy manifested in various ways throughout their campuses—from classrooms, counseling centers, institutional facilities and support services, to events and programming. Students were left believing that the small size of their community rendered their lived experiences inconsequential to campus administrators, faculty, and other students.

“I am here”: Queer Invisibility and Strategic Institutional Enrollment

The relative absence of institutional knowledge focusing on LGBTQ+ students of color popped up several times throughout interviews. My participants were aware that their respective PWIs did not collect quantitative data on LGBTQ+ students, leaving professionals in higher education (and the students themselves) without critical data regarding recruitment, retention, and persistence efforts. Cis-heteronormative policies, practices, and infrastructure were left largely uncontested, perpetuating LGBTQ+ invisibility and reifying structures of power and exclusion. Students illustrated notable ambivalence concerning LGBTQ+ identification during admissions and enrollment. They

stressed the importance of visibility, of their respective institutions knowing who and how many LGBTQ+ students were on campus. However, the in/ability of an institution of higher education to safeguard student anonymity—even if said safeguards cannot *completely* guarantee safety—was of paramount concern.

Some students were cautious to jump headlong into identifying LGBTQ+ students during the enrollment process, without careful safety considerations. Maverick showed concern for unintentionally outing students to their unsupportive parents, classmates, or future employers:

So, [including LGBTQ+ students in the strategic enrollment process] could be very hurtful; it could be very harmful. But, it can also help a lot...It's a delicate issue...Yes, it is good, because you see yourself represented...so, that's beautiful...[But,] like, whether or not to disclose it [to] a parent...[or] guardians, what to write in your transcripts, how to address people in class...Some people will use that against me, which is terrible.

Mirana felt it critical for an institution to know who and how many LGBTQ+ students are on campus, if only to hold itself accountable for supporting this student population, as well as any subsets, such as LGBTQ+ students of color. Like Maverick, however, she displayed some hesitation about possible discrimination resulting from revealing students' identities:

I feel like I'm kind of on the fence about it. Because, I think that identifying LGBTQ+ students of color is a good idea, because you would actually be able to get them resources. And, I think that, in the eyes of the university, they wouldn't be able to brush off the community as easily as they do. We would be able to just

kind of pull it up, like, okay...this is how many students you have that identify as this...You can no longer say that this isn't something important. So, like, get your shit together. And, I think that would be a good idea...knowing the representation is there, like, as an LGBTQ+ student. [Pauses] I fear that stuff like that could lead to discrimination and things like that. Just, like, all those negative aspects that come with revealing part of your identity. But, yeah, I think that's where I stand.

Fololina worried about students whose barriers to higher education were already substantial, further complicating said barriers by potentially outing them to their parents/guardians. Despite Fololina's concern, they listed several positive outcomes of institutional LGBTQ+ identification:

I don't think it's a good idea in the act of, like, outing themselves, because I know a lot of students who come from, like, lower socioeconomic status homes and from, like, underprivileged communities. They have to fill out [applications] with somebody else. And, like, if those people don't know...they are, like, queer...they're not safe to do that...That's a safety issue. [Long pause] I think the benefit of it is to know the large amount...[of people]...in general [who] are identifying as queer...With, like, mental health issues, with suicide, and all that stuff. So, like, if you know you have X amount of people on your campus that identify as queer or in the LGBTQ+ community, you can already start to make programming, you can start to...have different policies in place to give people supports, because, as a queer person, I don't get a whole lot of support. It's like, I wish I did.

Fololina's wish for additional LGBTQ+ student support highlighted both the need for such support in higher education, as well as the prioritization of LGBTQ+ student needs when measured against potential disadvantages of LGBTQ+ student identification.

Benjamin focused solely on the benefits of LGBTQ+ identification within strategic enrollment processes. He listed campus resources and programming as potential benefactors, often tied to institutional funding requests and budgetary recommendations:

Well, I think it's a good idea for resources...[That] information should be utilized to see how many LGBTQIA individuals are there, because I know that there's way more than the university says there is. And then, when they see the large amount of LGBTQIA individuals...I feel like that is a way for us to push to get more funding to do more programs and to be able to actually advance...because, I don't think that we get enough money or funding or programming. But, if we had those statistics or numbers to back us up, then maybe we would. But, right now, we don't have any data to back us up...So, it's just kind of keeping us in this, like, siloed space of not getting in, which is why I can't, I can't think of any negative benefit.

Benjamin emphasized institutional accountability to students as the driving force behind the inclusion of LGBTQ+ student data in strategic enrollment; without that data, he saw LGBTQ+ student of color as never-realized members of a campus community, forever disconnected and underserved.

Ambrosia, too, recognized the potential for LGBTQ+ identification to impact institutional resources and support for LGBTQ+ students of color, suggesting that well-

funded institutional support for LGBTQ+ students of color would serve as a powerful marketing and recruitment tool:

I think it is a good idea, because...that signifies...the campus is going to...at least know that, like, I am here. And, now maybe there's more resources I could look for...there are things I could get involved with...So, like, to me, that signifies [this school] is probably a lot more aware of gender identity, sexual orientation, and how that might impact their students or impact their students' experience on their campus.

Like Ambrosia, Kou spoke of institutional reputation and the potential impact of LGBTQ+ identification. Kou emphasized the importance of identification toward retention efforts and students' ability to locate community—if only to know that they were not alone on campus:

I think it's important, because there is not much [*sic*] studies of LGBT people in higher education...It sucks, because I feel people are hesitant to ask about something so personal like that...relationship stuff, and self-identifying stuff, and the admissions thing...but, I think they should, because it helps the retention rate...[That's] the biggest thing with colleges that people need to pay attention to...[and] I don't think there's LGBT retention...they just have it for POC people...But, I'm also very out, and very, like, an outspoken person...And, so we always have to think about people who are closeted...[but,] I always wonder, like, how many of us there really is. But, if [Upper Polytechnic University] realizes that there's so many LGBT people on their campus, and, like, how much they

need to keep that, because that's a good reputation to have...It would be awesome.

Kou was the only student to highlight the importance of visibility for LGBTQ+ students who were already out. They wanted to be seen. They wanted to be counted. Kou acknowledged other participants' concerns, but they did not see them as insurmountable.

Andi was the only participant who erred on the side of not identifying LGBTQ+ students within the strategic enrollment process. They felt any process compromising student privacy and safety was not worth the potential benefits:

I want to say it's not a good idea. The reason being is...you just don't know who's going to end up with that information...And, as much as there always is, like, this...statement of privacy, I just still don't know who's going to get that information and what they're going to do with it...I feel like knowledge is sacred...especially, like, people who are QTPOC, because, then, that's heightened visibility and a heightened sense of, like, look, this person is different. Um, so, like, in my mind, I don't think it's a smart idea. It's not a good idea. But, I also understand why people would choose to put that information down...I feel like, in the end, what matters is safety, and, if a campus still can't provide safety to those students, then what's the point?

While certainly a complicated issue, the majority of participants were inclined to approve of institutional identification of LGBTQ+ students, and, by default, LGBTQ+ students of color. Andi remained the only voice of dissent; though, their dissention hinged on issues of safety, a sticking point for all participants. They recognized that, without any working knowledge of LGBTQ+ student enrollment numbers, institutions

can actively ignore that student population, resulting in reduced funding for support services and programs.

“I feel trapped”: Perceptions of Wishful Attrition

This last theme highlights the cumulative impact of navigating the intersections as an LGBTQ+ college student of color at a predominantly White institution. Without exception, all study participants expressed wishful attrition—the desire to stop out of school if not for intractable circumstances. That all seven students would have left their respective institutions prior to graduation, despite acknowledging how meaningful degree attainment was for them and their families, shone a spotlight on the perilousness of their persistence in higher education.

Benjamin spoke of Upper Polytechnic University in carnivorous terms, while also providing reasons he would have left, had circumstances allowed him to do so:

The university just takes people...and eats them up, and, like, takes away all of their mental...capacity to actually function at a university. So, as a whole, I feel like I have done the majority of pushing myself through college with coping mechanisms...because, like, shit...you gotta find something to do to manage.

Benjamin spit out the words, his visible ire jockeying with pride at having survived against the odds. He was palpably resentful at having to fend for himself within an institution that publicly prided itself on student services and support. Benjamin continued, insisting he would have stopped out of Upper Polytechnic University had he been able:

There's a lot of times where I've considered transferring or dropping out...What is the point of staying at an institution that does not support me?...You want me to

be completely honest with you? The only reason why I didn't leave this campus was because when I started having some other really, really bad issues, I was already too far in. I had already gotten two years under my belt, and I was like, I don't want to...have to transfer credits and go another way.

When asked what prevented him from stopping out, Benjamin shrugged his shoulders, using the word "trapped" as a way to signify his predicament: he was too far in to stop out, and doing so would have been cost prohibitive. He was focused on graduating as quickly as possible and getting out.

Kou, like Benjamin, also invoked the word "trapped," when explaining why they felt stopping out was not an option, despite their desire to do so:

I felt very, very, like, depressed...[and]...very trapped, you know? At that point, I was in the middle of my program...I can't [drop out]...it's a waste of money. Sadly, I have to worry about that to go somewhere else...I don't want to give away my major or my dream...but, it was just so hard, because everyone's talking about how they don't want to be here. And everyone's [QPOC/QTPOC]...I don't want to be here. It's really hard.

Kou's admission that they did not want to be at Upper Polytechnic University was communicated with palpable effort; their face showed signs of sadness and regret. Their passion for graphic design tethered them to the university.

Mirana described how she felt as the only visible person of color in many campus spaces, a feeling of isolation that was exacerbated by her marginalized sexuality. She often thought about leaving Riverside University:

I've definitely considered dropping out on multiple times...I was in a sorority with 70 people, and I was one of three people of color, and one of them had already dropped out...And, I just felt completely isolated...I am one of the only, or one of very few, people of color in literally every space I occupy...And so, all of that and just not knowing, kind of, how I fit in or where I was supposed to fit in. Not really having a support system at all...[or] friends that understood what I was going through...with my racial identity or with my sexuality...[Feeling] like I don't deserve to be here, as well as constant imposter syndrome, really just made me want to be done with all of it...I've been like, I'm just done. I'm going to drop out. I'm over it. Along with, just, seeing the university's...lack of a response to a lot of the things that are going on on campus.

Mirana often felt the need to prove to everyone around her—family, friends, classmates, and faculty—that she belonged in higher education. Each success and perceived failure had heightened meaning for her. The added pressure, coupled with the lack of institutional support, was visible in her face and body language.

Fololina also spoke of isolation, a virtual absence of classmates who shared their critical race/gender/sexuality identity intersection. Fololina's had a list of reasons they wanted to stop out of Riverside University, among them daily invalidation in and out of the classroom:

Man, when *don't* I want to transfer out of this institution?...Because, like, it's just so difficult to be a person of color. And, to be a queer person on top of that. The internalized homophobia within your own community and other, like, communities of color.

By way of example, Fololina described an incident in the classroom where her identities were dismissed entirely, after which they left the classroom in tears:

I went outside. I cried my eyes out. I [called] people and was like, I need to get the fuck out of here. Like, these people are horrible to me. They're not respecting my pronouns...I was grossed out. I was pissed. I came back, and then I filled out a hate/bias report. And, yeah, nothing really happened from that.

Though Fololina was clearly irate while recounting the above classroom incidents, they delivered the words as if beseeching others to recognize their pain. Escape from Riverside University was clearly not a flippant desire for Fololina; it represented what seemed the only viable option. That they could not leave embittered them even more.

Maverick deployed sardonic humor when asked if they had ever considered stopping out of Riverside University. They laughed, telling me that LGBTQ+ students of color had a running joke, "Oh, we have this joke. We're like, I'm dropping out. I'm leaving. Especially when something [bad] happens." Maverick went on to describe how LGBTQ+ students of color navigated multiple barriers to persistence, often leading to stopping out or swirling:

Here's the thing...I think a lot of the [reasons] we're dropping out, specifically with LGBTQ+ people of color, is that we didn't get, like...scholarships[,or] we didn't get, like, help through all [our] sadness, or through the crisis center. Like, we would probably drop, because granted, this is a public institution; however, it doesn't mean it comes cheap...I definitely feel like there's a big gap between [LGBTQ+ students of color] and non-[LGBTQ+ students of color.]

Andi was the only one of the participants who had already stopped out of one institution to enroll in Lakeland University. Their decision was in large part due to the same sorts of experiences shared by the other study participants. The definitive moment arose, however, when their previous institution (also a PWI) hosted then presidential candidate Donald Trump on campus. Andi felt their institution neglected entirely the feelings and needs of marginalized students, opting instead to cower under the First Amendment:

The reason I did eventually transfer?...When Trump came to campus...That was the first time I really can say I was like...I [need] to move...I need to get out...The university [was] like, well, we cannot not let him come. I was like, yes, yes you can. You just choose not to, because you want to appeal to the other [White cis-het students]...You don't care about the safety of your other students who are more under threat, more threatened by him...I was like, I cannot stay here. This is going to be something that happens again...I am terrified.

Andi displayed an awareness of the importance of protecting free speech, but they insisted that PWIs work more deliberately to challenge hate speech that masquerades as free speech, ultimately siding with the physical and emotional safety of LGBTQ+ students of color.

Ambrosia was the only participant in this study who never seriously considered stopping out; however, she was aware of several LGBTQ+ students of color who had withdrawn or transferred:

I never really considered transferring or dropping out. Um, mainly because it never got bad enough for me personally to be, like, I need to leave. Um, I know people who have, for them, they got bad enough.

Chris: What did that look like for them? What was bad enough?

Ambrosia: On campus there are a lot of [hate/bias incidents]...In the dorm, students are always writing, like, the N-word on people's whiteboards and stuff. And, like, that happens all the time. Um, and people writing, like, other slurs—both racial and gender-charged slurs...And, [White] students are saying that they felt unsafe, because they thought that the African American students would, like, attack them...There was an incident where a friend of mine actually was beat up in the women's bathroom...because the people in there felt that, like, she didn't belong in there...I know there's more, but [*trails off*]...

Though Ambrosia never wanted to attend Central State University (a point she made quickly in our first interview), she did not feel her negative experiences had precipitated a preemptive departure. She did, however, acknowledge the continuing impact of others' experiences of hate and bias on her sense of belonging and safety, a perception shared by all study participants.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter addresses the three main research questions of this study, contextualizing the findings in Chapter Four with the published literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The three main research questions are as follows:

- 1) From the perspective of LGBTQ+ students of color, in what ways does their predominantly White institution affect their persistence?
- 2) How do LGBTQ+ students of color describe/perceive the campus climate at their predominantly White institution?
- 3) How do LGBTQ+ students of color describe the barriers to persistence at their predominantly White institution?

This chapter is organized in the same numerical order as the research questions listed above. The discussion further distills this study's findings, so as to reveal the experiential essence of LGBTQ+ college students of color at predominantly White institutions of higher education, namely intrusive Whiteness, invisibility and hypervisibility, as well as the consistent declaration of I don't want to be here. As such, the discussion is structured with the following headings: a) Inescapable Whiteness; (b) Invisibility and Hypervisibility; and (c) Barriers to Persistence. To refocus the conversation in a way that highlights LGBTQ+ students of colors' resiliency and agency, I conclude this chapter with an emphasis on participants' resiliency, as well as a few personal thoughts as a student affairs professional in higher education.

Inescapable Whiteness: PWIs and LGBTQ+ College Students of Color

A key component of intersectionality requires an examination of power. It is not merely a passive cataloging of identities; it is a critical exploration of the various manifestations of power attendant to each of those identities (Carbado, 2013; Clark et al., 2017; Combahee River Collective, 1974; Crenshaw, 1989). Social identities in higher education are often highly politicized as repositories of inequitable power distribution, and students whose identities intersect at the nexus of race, sexuality, and gender disproportionately exist at the heart of that politicization (Hotchkins, 2017). As presented in Chapter Four, each study participant decried intrusive Whiteness, the tendency for Whiteness to negate, supersede, or overpower the needs of LGBTQ+ college students of color. While my participants were passionate advocates for each of their respective identities, experiencing those identities in various ways across their respective campuses, their inability to escape Whiteness overshadowed their time in higher education. The predominance of institutional Whiteness resulted in the cultural backlash, sense of exclusion, and limited access to opportunity characteristic of PWIs (Karkouti, 2016).

Like each of the seven participants, Benjamin spoke heatedly about the ways in which White students' voices and concerns were afforded institutional precedence, "[Upper Polytechnic University] values White voices more than we value POC voices, which is really unfortunate...White individuals always get first choice...POC...aren't listened to, because everyone's White." While the effects of intrusive Whiteness were largely in line with current research, the effects of Whiteness within queer communities is understudied in the academy (Nakabayashi, 2016), lending particular importance to my participants' interactions with their White LGBTQ+ peers.

White Blindness and the Awareness Gap

Rankin and Reason (2005) highlighted the wildly disparate assessments of campus experience between White students and their classmates of color, crediting higher education's racist past and inability (or unwillingness) to contend with White supremacy. My participants repeatedly referenced this White blindness, deeply frustrated that their White classmates could not see beyond that very Whiteness to consider the points of view of their classmates of color. Moreover, participants felt Trump's presidency had an intensifying effect on White students' inability or unwillingness to contend with their White blindness. The resulting ratcheted-up tension led to contentious interactions with my students and their White peers. These interactions were consistent with Cabrera et al.'s (2013) post-election research suggesting increasingly aggressive racism and xenophobia throughout the United States and within higher education. Andi, in particular, had already transferred universities because of their prior PWI's unwillingness to proactively prepare for Trump's two campus visits, as well as their subsequent half-hearted response to the concerns of students of color in the aftermath of said visits. Participants felt White students became emboldened post-election, far more argumentative and openly dismissive of POC's concerns and safety. My participants were exhausted from constant battles wherein during which they were called upon to explain and defend their identities as people of color, an experiential reality consistent amongst students of color in higher education. Their racial battle fatigue was further compounded by the addition of their marginalized genders and sexual orientations (Blaisdell, 2005; Hotchkins, 2017; Leonardo, 2009; Logan et al., 2013; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).

In the participants' perceptions, White blindness was not constrained to students. Participants described their respective predominantly White institutions as disingenuous and indifferent to people of color. Incidents of hate and bias were either overlooked or institutionally downplayed. They recounted numerous instances of institutional apathy, whereby their concerns were either avoided entirely or insufficiently addressed by White campus administrators. Dancy et al. (2018) contended that higher education fails to systemically address campus racial bias and hate, instead choosing to focus on individuals and thus cast such incidents as unrepresentative of the campus community at large. Hotchkins (2017) highlighted slow or non-existent institutional responses to hate and bias across higher education. Blaisdell (2005) and Leonardo (2009) examined classroom bias, as well as the "colorblindness" so often espoused by would-be allies. My participants' experiences were in line with the research, their respective PWIs consistently responding to acts of bias and hate (if they responded at all) as unrepresentative of otherwise inclusive, welcoming campuses. Participants felt their institutions were far more interested in protecting the "this is not who we are" mirage than truly acknowledging and then addressing institutional systemic inequity and student marginalization. They felt that their majority White campus administrators, staff, and faculty failed students of color, often leaving them to fend for themselves. Any acts of institutional remorse or contrition were seen as attempts to save face with institutional stakeholders, pandering to majority White audiences at the expense of communities of color. White blindness prevented faculty and staff from truly listening to students of color, instead characterizing student calls for institutional accountability and change as overreactions. The saturation of my participants' PWI's by Whiteness was exacerbated

by the universal failure of those same institutions to adequately acknowledge and mitigate that Whiteness. That LGBTQ+ students of color could not find support and commiseration from campus LGBTQ+ centers further solidified their status as outsiders.

White blindness and horizontal oppression. While the participants repeatedly identified similarities between themselves and their White LGBTQ+ classmates across incidents of anti-LGBTQ+ hate and bias, they universally critiqued those same White LGBTQ+ classmates as largely oblivious about White privilege. LGBTQ+ college students of color contend not only with their LGBTQ+ identities but with the intrusive Whiteness against which their racial and ethnic identities are benchmarked, resulting in an institutional imperative to better understand this student experience (Collins & Taborda-Whitt, 2017; McLaughlin, 2017; Sutter & Perrin, 2016). Nevertheless, Nakabayashi (2016) asserted that queer racism (i.e., racism perpetrated by White LGBTQ+ students against their LGBTQ+ classmates of color) is an understudied area of research in higher education. This dissertation study directly addressed that experience.

Huang (2017) asserted that queer advocacy and representation in higher education is overwhelmingly White. Whiteness equals power, and the LGBTQ+ college students of color in this study experienced Whiteness and power in ways White LGBTQ+ college students did not. White LGBTQ+ students were as predisposed to White blindness as were their White cisgender, heterosexual peers. Several student participants shared frustrating accounts of White LGBTQ+ students failing to acknowledge, understand, or even notice the disparate campus experiences between themselves and their LGBTQ+ classmates of color. Participants' White LGBTQ+ classmates were often resistant and unwilling to receive critical feedback about racism. White LGBTQ+ students believed

their queerness somehow excused them from oppressing their LGBTQ+ classmates of color, despite protestations to the contrary from those same classmates.

White blindness is a hallmark of White supremacy, and any LGBTQ+ advocacy undertaken by a predominantly White institution risks catering largely to White LGBTQ+ students (Nakabayashi, 2017; Taborda-Whitt, 2017). While each of the PWIs in this study housed a campus pride center, participants were quick to point out that those centers were designed and centered around White LGBTQ+ students' experiences, culture, and needs. My participants either avoided their campus pride centers altogether or accessed them with trepidation and weariness, often targets of implicit and explicit racism from their White LGBTQ+ peers. They felt isolated from White LGBTQ+ communities and spaces, often having to expend the emotional labor required to seek out and foster communities on campus for themselves and other LGBTQ+ classmates of color.

Expending emotional labor has its consequences, especially for students with multiple marginalized identities. While the mental health and physical safety of White LGBTQ+ college students should remain a priority in higher education (mine is not a zero-sum approach), students with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., LGBTQ+ students of color) are at even greater risk for suicidality, depression, and anxiety (Sutter & Perrin, 2016). My participants were no exception. The racism they experienced on campus, particularly inside institutionally established queer spaces and from their White LGBTQ+ peers, negatively affected their personal and academic lives and contributed to feelings of hopelessness, ostracization, and wishful attrition (an acute desire to leave the institution if circumstances allowed). The sense of feeling trapped in their respective

PWIs was made worse by White blindness, in that campus spaces intended to offer a reprieve from near-constant racial microaggressions were instead colonized by Whiteness, further disconnecting them from community and institutional resources and services. Each participant felt isolated, excluded, not listened to, and undervalued at their predominantly White institutions, hallmarks of students with multiple marginalized identities in higher education (Johnson et al., 2009; Hotchkins, 2017; McElderry & Rivera, 2017). They also felt betrayed by their White LGBTQ+ classmates, any potential sense of community violated by Whiteness and its implicit and unabashed presence in spaces meant to provide safety for all queer students.

Institutional cis-het-White blindness. Faculty and staff of color remain underrepresented in higher education, their recruitment and persistence in the academy negatively impacted by predominant Whiteness (Davies, 2016; Johnson et al., 2009; Karkouti, 2016). The numbers of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff are unclear, as they are largely left out of most institutional diversity hiring strategies (Campbell, 2016). It would be a mistake to underestimate the value of institutional representation and its effect on institutional power. When asked to prioritize action steps for greater advocacy and support, my participants prioritized representation across their institutions. Maverick was, perhaps, the most direct, “Representation. Everywhere. Fucking Everywhere. School departments, counselors, admissions, in your fucking chancellor cabinet.” Fololina emphasized the representation Maverick insisted on, further explaining the importance of access to campus faculty, staff, and administrators who share experiences across identities, “When you see people with marginalized identities in power, like, everybody gets something out of it...Everybody’s going to benefit from it, whether it’s the baseline

of cultural competency, whether it's cultural humility, whether it's just getting to know someone who's different than you.”

As outlined in Chapter 3, each research site in this study employed a predominantly White workforce, a significant barrier for students of color seeking support from administrators, faculty, and staff possessing direct experience with racism. LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, and administrators were entirely absent from all available data. Each student in this study characterized their campuses as racist, hostile, disrespectful, and less accepting of people of color (or LGBTQ+ people), in line with Rankin and Reason's (2005) research on representation in the academy. Negative perceptions of campus climate were further solidified by a lack of spaces specifically targeting the needs of LGBTQ+ students of color.

A close examination of each participant's institution found no unique resource centers or visible support networks established to address the specific intersectional needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color. Instead, all of the institutions under study housed separate resource centers for students of color and LGBTQ+ students; however, each study participant lamented a lack of institutional support in terms of inadequate staffing and funding. Participants reported anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in resource centers created for students of color, and the omnipresence of Whiteness (and queer racism) was cited as a major deterrent to accessing LGBTQ+ resource centers. Participants were forced to choose which of their identities to honor at any particular moment, perpetually stretched between race, sexuality, and gender. This either/or approach not only runs counter to most institutions' public diversity missions and theories of student development; it actively harms the most vulnerable students on

campus. Ralston et al. (2017) cautioned that students' identity development is blunted when forced to choose a single identity upon which to focus. They feel compelled to then hierarchize critical aspects of themselves, instead of honoring and exploring their identities in sum. Not only does such an approach ignore the complexity of intersectionality, but it also reifies dominant conceptualizations of identity, thrusting additional barriers in the pathway of student self-realization and eventual persistence. Participants were left wondering which part of themselves to acknowledge in any given space, their nervousness and fear of choosing "incorrectly" overpowering any possibility of navigating their own authenticity.

Further compounding the lack of institutional support, no student organizations at any of the participants' universities existed catering specifically to the social and developmental needs of LGBTQ+ college students of color. Efforts to establish said student organizations were reported by participants; though, all expectations to do so were placed on the students themselves, an indication of institutions further abdicating their obligation to facilitate student identity development, community, and support. Furthermore, White LGBTQ+ students pushed back at the idea of separate student organizations for their LGBTQ+ classmates of color, again displaying an awareness gap of their own Whiteness, thus engendering resentment and anger among my participants.

Without exception, all participants in this study shared feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation when having to ignore critical aspects of their identities, in order to persist in their respective PWI. They grew visibly agitated when discussing Whiteness, heteronormativity, and the traditional gender binary, all of which are endemic to predominantly White institutions of higher education as confirmed by extant research

(Collins & Taborda-Whitt, 2017; Karkouti, 2016; McLaughlin, 2017; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sutter & Perrin, 2016). Increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation contribute to student attrition, thereby significantly impacting persistence to graduation (Blaisdell, 2005; Leonardo, 2009; Logan et al., 2017; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Each of my participants viewed graduation not as the pinnacle of their journey through higher education, but as an almost insurmountable goal more representative of their survival than their academic achievement.

Invisibility and Hypervisibility: Navigating Campus Climate as LGBTQ+ Students of Color

The participants in this study were highly critical of their campus climates. They felt both invisible and hypervisible at their respective PWIs, each participant in a constant state of vacillation between hidden and exposed (a dissonant dichotomy further explained later in this section). As discussed in Chapter Two, numerous definitions of campus climate exist. I use Peterson and Spencer's (1998) approach as, among the four categories they identify as definitive of campus climate, perceived climate and psychological (or felt) climate are uniquely situated to account for multiple intersecting identities. Moreover, my participants repeatedly contextualized their perceptions of campus climate in terms of how they felt, characterizing their PWIs as hostile, indifferent, and disingenuous, incapable of or unwilling to acknowledge the tremendous diversity and unique lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color.

The majority of higher education research focuses separately on the experiences of students of color and LGBTQ+ students (Blaisdell, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Hotchkins, 2017; Leonardo, 2009; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Reason & Rankin, 2006;

Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Tetreault et al., 2013). My participants represented the aggregate of those demographics, and their resultant experiences provide critical insight into perceptions of campus climate at PWIs. Peterson and Spencer (1998) focused on the psychological and felt impact of campus climate on students with multiple intersecting identities. How telling, then, that each participant, without hesitation, adamantly declared their PWIs ill-equipped to contend with students' intersectional experiences with discrimination, bigotry, violence (emotional and physical), and increasingly xenophobic political rhetoric. They perceived their respective institutions as administratively and pedagogically stuck, representative not of contemporary, intersectional sources of learning, but of old-fashioned, homogenous, White-centered ones. Participants perceived themselves as leading the charge for institutional accountability, campus administrators reluctantly (often obstructively) lagging. Participants' felt invisible, their intersectional authenticity unrecognized.

Participants' perceived invisibility was bolstered by institutional inaction and invalidation in the face of campus hostility. They felt unwelcome, excluded, and unsafe, repeated targets of racism, homophobia, transphobia, as well as a daily barrage of implicit and explicit microaggressions. The responses from their PWIs were either protracted to the point of uselessness, tepid beyond any measure of true accountability, or steeped in an outright refusal to accept the truth of their experiences as LGBTQ+ students of color. Intersectionality requires recognizing the sum total of individuals' identities, and when combined, LGBTQ+ college students of color represent one of the most vulnerable populations in higher education. The lack of institutional acknowledgment of, and response to, that vulnerability gave the impression to my participants that their PWIs did

not at all care for their safety or success, that persistence had more to do with fiscal goals than the success of student graduates, and that their visibility within the academy was unworthy of prioritization.

“What are you?” and the Hypervisibility of Difference

At the same time their institutions made them feel invisible and unimportant, participants felt concurrently hypervisible. Students with marginalized gender identities and sexualities often experience hypervisibility, as they are routinely asked to explain their bodies, gender identities and expressions, and sexual orientations in ways that are discernible to those whose dominant identities are traditionally interpretable and accepted (Ralston et al., 2017). Likewise, students of color are often asked to identify and define their racial backgrounds, lest they be subject to a litany of random guesses in others’ attempts to both label and then compartmentalize them. The students in this study, then, were regularly bombarded with the compounded gaze of racism, White supremacy, bigotry, and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination.

Ralston et al. (2017) highlighted the confusion and confliction of repeatedly having to answer the tacitly or overtly asked, “What are you?” (p. 23). Andi, like all participants, articulated the stress of others’ interpretations of their identities, “My [race,] sexuality and my gender [identity and expression] all play into how, like, the legal system looks at me, how society looks at me, how...my different cultural backgrounds look at me. All of those play a really big role into how people are going to interact with me, and [that] terrifies me, because I don’t know how people are going to interact with me.” Andi’s anxiety pervaded each interview, and it was an anxiety shared by all participants. The carousel of emotions each of them presented when speaking about having to

repeatedly explain their identities to classmates, faculty and staff, friends, and family ran the spectrum, from indignance and rage to melancholy and feelings of worthlessness. With each request to explain, define, or defend their identities, participants felt an indictment of their right to exist, skepticism masked by well-meaning inquiries and “harmless” curiosity. Participants were constantly reminded that their differences set them apart from the campus community at large, forever othered, pushed to the outside of institutional claims of campus unity and togetherness.

Passing privilege and the invisibility/hypervisibility of difference. Amidst a campus climate perceived as apathetic and potentially dangerous (emotionally and physically), the ability to choose which of their identities to publicly reveal presented unique challenges to the participants, and the in/ability to pass (i.e., remain invisible) transgressed race, gender, and sexual orientation. Ambrosia lamented the liminality she felt as an LGBTQ+ college student of color, caught between institutional spaces that honored some but not all of her identities. Hers was a liminality shared by all participants. They never felt wholly recognized, always forced to choose which of their identities to acknowledge in any given space.

The inability of institutions of higher education to holistically recognize and “see” the immense diversity that exists within communities of color was exacerbated by the addition of minoritized gender and sexualities. In their research, Ralston et al. (2017) examined the lives of students living “betwixt-and-between,” that is, students in higher education whose multiple marginalized identities leave them liminal—neither here nor there, hypervisible and invisible. Moreover, Ralston et al. (2017) posited that, despite professionals’ and institutions’ inability to discern or understand the complexity of

students with intersecting marginalized identities, the students themselves are acutely aware. Ralston et al. (2017) reported that students with overlapping marginalized identities express “the feeling of being hypervisible to some while at the same time being invisible to others...[going on to say that]...individuals who traverse multiple identities or live between identities often think about things others have the privilege to not think about” (p. 23). In various ways, participants experienced intentional and unintentional invisibility across race, gender, and sexual orientation. Mirana succinctly encapsulated this experience as, “Pick who you are where you are.” This unique experience amongst participants shed light on the pressure of those whose multiple marginalized identities force them to carefully navigate systems of domination and oppression.

The invisibility and hypervisibility of race. While intrusive Whiteness permeated each participant’s negative experiences at their respective PWIs, each student experienced and negotiated Whiteness differently. Ambrosia and Andi were monoracial, and while others’ occasional perception of them as racially ambiguous was a source of irritation, they did not in any way identify with Whiteness (nor were they perceived as such). For the five multiracial participants, Whiteness was part of their identities, and that Whiteness was neither parsed in the “two or more races” enrollment management option, nor was it always readable by others. Coupled with the virtual invisibility of multiracial students in higher education, the decision to either acknowledge or omit one’s Whiteness assumed greater import and risk (Museus et al., 2015).

If White-passing, participants had to elect to reveal their identity as a person of color, thereby opening them up to the racial prejudice and antipathy commonplace in higher education and exacerbated in PWIs (Museus et al., 2015). Similarly, and despite

occasionally experiencing exclusion from monoracial communities of color because of their Whiteness, *any* degree of non-Whiteness excluded multiracial students from their White peers—including White LGBTQ+ classmates. In fact, White students failed to discern multiracial students' unique racial identities, effectively lumping together all people of color as indiscernible from one another. In other words, the multiracial participants did not feel truly seen—by the institution, by White classmates, and by some monoracial communities of color. In many cases, the five multiracial participants had to make repeated (and sometimes spontaneous) judgment calls, strategizing their own safety in any given campus environment, a reflection of students' dynamic navigation of exclusive spaces wherein which their identities either conform to or threaten systemic power.

Though invisibility afforded a modicum of physical protection for White-passing participants, they nevertheless experienced the emotional impact of their monoracial peers' racial discrimination as their own. Maverick fully understood that their classmates of color experienced racism in ways that Maverick never would as a White-passing, multiracial person. This experiential contrast motivated Maverick's advocacy work, but the relative safety Whiteness afforded them seemed to conjure feelings of guilt for having taken advantage of its attendant privileges. Ralston et al. (2017) offered a word of caution for institutions unwilling to fully understand the impact of negotiating multiple marginalized identities, "For those who live betwixt-and-between, the constant internal dialogue surrounding how they are showing up in a space, and how they can make people who are not living in the borderlands feel more comfortable, can be exhausting" (p. 23). That sense of exhaustion permeated each interview across all participants. They were

worn out (emotionally and physically), tired of having to self-advocate in the absence of institutional advocacy and support.

The invisibility and hypervisibility of gender and sexual orientation. For all seven participants, their sexual orientations were invisible throughout the enrollment management process; likewise, non-binary gender identities were also institutionally invisible. That institutional invisibility precipitated the need for participants to declare their gender identities and sexual orientations in order to be seen, institutionally or interpersonally. Since the 2016 presidential election, rates of hate crimes and bias incidents on college campuses have seen a sharp increase, the bulk of said incidents targeting students of color and LGBTQ+ students (Reichman, 2018). Compromising their invisibility within a hostile climate left participants feeling scared, vulnerable, and anxious. Participants found themselves invoking cultural camouflage, choosing (often instinctually) where and to whom they revealed their LGBTQ+ identities. Because LGBTQ+ students in higher education report disproportionate discrimination and exclusion by professors, classmates, would-be allies, and family, my participants continually navigated a tremendous psychological burden, never truly knowing when their invisibility was helpful or harmful (Tetreault et al., 2013).

The resultant feelings of invisibility due to flawed strategic enrollment processes represented a passive invisibility, in that participants seldom attributed said processes to the willful actions of campus administrators, faculty, staff, or students. Conversely, the participants did not hesitate to charge the same group of campus stakeholders with willful disregard for the well-being and safety of LGBTQ+ students of color—made manifest by the operationalization of apathy and indifference. They felt uncared for. Worse, the

participants experienced acute cognitive dissonance, as the operationalized invisibility clashed with the hypervisible experiences of racism, bigotry, and discrimination.

Barriers to Persistence for LGBTQ+ Students of Color

The first two sections of Chapter Five focused specifically on the effects of White predominance on participants' experiences, as well as perceptions of their invisibility and hypervisibility relative to campus climate. I contend that barriers to persistence include everything up to this section; however, I will now focus on the barriers to persistence participants themselves perceived as critical to their success in higher education. A lack of specificity and representation with regard to the diversity amongst LGBTQ+ students of color, insufficient administrator, faculty, and staff representation, as well as a dearth of operationalized and inclusive curricula all ranked highest amongst participants as critical barriers to persistence.

It is virtually impossible to gauge with consistency or accuracy the persistence of any student group without the ability to identify those students upon admission to higher education. To put it bluntly, if you fail to recognize their admission, you will fail to notice their departure. I have found in my work as the director of a gender and sexuality student resource center that complex, multi-community student demographics are often monolithically strategized. In other words, when people of color are invoked in higher education, the myriad individual communities comprising "people of color" are not always addressed separately beyond well-known monthly observances like Black History Month. Likewise, the LGBTQ+ acronym is rarely parsed in order to assess the various needs of each individual letter/community. The holistic nature of strategic enrollment management requires intrusive methods to know students prior to, throughout, and

following their time in college (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). The participants in this study represent an intersectional student group whose vulnerability to systemic barriers demands an approach to enrollment management that identifies the tremendous diversity within LGBTQ+ communities of color, lest that diversity be perceived by those same students as a disadvantage.

The Mis/Representation of LGBTQ+ Students of Color

The participants in this study, specifically the totality of their intersectional identities, were systemically absent from the earliest stages of the strategic enrollment management process at their institutions, their specific identities never identified. During the recruitment, admissions, and enrollment processes, participants' races and ethnicities were included in numerous applications and student profile forms, typical in higher education (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013). The options from which the participants could choose, however, were insufficient. While the two monoracial participants were able to locate their specific racial identities among the provided lists of options, the five multiracial participants were forced to choose "two or more races," a category bereft of specificity. The multiracial students were saddened and frustrated that their respective races and ethnicities (and attendant cultures) did not register as institutionally important enough to warrant options reflective of their racial and ethnic diversity. For example, Mirana, both White and Cuban, shared her frustration at Riverside University's inability or unwillingness to provide sufficient recognition of her multiracial identity. She relayed one of her earliest experiences with institutional invisibility that took place during a conversation with a campus administrator while filling out her admissions application:

It was like, “Oh, are you Spanish?” And I was like, yes... “What kind of Hispanic?” ...and I was like, Cuban. And then they were like, “What else do you identify as?” And I’m like, well, I’m also White. And they were like, “Okay, pick one for our records, because we can only put one down.” ...And I was like, you almost had me for a second there. I believed you for a hot minute.

Mirana felt that her institution recognized the importance of asking about her multiracial identities, without going so far as to confirm that importance with the option to reflect those identities in campus records, thereby relegating her institution’s interest as disingenuous and merely symbolic. She felt patronized and institutionally placated, so as to stem any uncomfortable (and public) dissatisfaction that might potentially besmirch Riverside University’s image to stakeholders. Kou lamented their inability to identify and subsequently learn about multiracial students’ diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds at Upper Polytechnic University. Kou wanted to feel confident that their institution understood to be queer and Japanese was unique, and that to be queer and any other race yielded experiences not to be suffocated by overgeneralization. It was not solely Kou’s lack of representation that stood out; it was the collective absence of both their and their classmates’ identities that caused frustration. They instinctually pushed back against the monolithic approach to communities of color, insisting that value be placed on the diversity and intricacies of identity. In some ways, I felt Kou’s (and other participants’) rejection of racial homogeneity was a rebuke of their own Whiteness. Having lived, studied, and worked in PWIs, wherein which Whiteness so often colonized their physical spaces, they fought hard against the threat that Whiteness would also colonize their multiracial identities. Preserving and equitably honoring/celebrating every facet of their

identities took on an almost fervent energy. Similarly, Fololina was angry that they were not provided the option of institutionally recognizing their White and Samoan identities. They felt that Riverside University trivialized race and ethnicity as nothing more than compulsory recruitment datum, detached from significance and cultural import. Mirana's, Fololina's, and Kou's experiences reflected the other multiracial participants and was indicative of their general perception of higher education.

Higher education has examined the experiences of college students of color; however, those students are most often monoracial. Multiracial students are largely absent from extant research, the collective races and ethnicities of any given multiracial student glossed over with simplistic non-specificity (Museus et al., 2015). As students identifying as "two or more races" are among the fastest growing demographics in higher education (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015), the detrimental effects of not recognizing each of those races and ethnicities in the strategic enrollment management process must be considered.

Participants also singled out the consistent lack of funding for campus support systems directly charged with advocating for queer students and students of color as yet another example of institutional erasure. The services participants accessed spent so much time strategizing their own fiscal survival that nuanced programming and direct interpersonal support was either uncommon or impossible. This seemingly shared dearth of institutional support across participants' institutions exacerbated their institutional misrepresentation (i.e., enrollment management deficiencies and the complete absence of resources specifically for LGBTQ+ students of color). Ambrosia wondered aloud how her institution could gauge her persistence to graduation as an LGBTQ+ student of color,

without having recognized her LGBTQ+ identity and attendant lived experiences during her time at Central State University. Hers was a sardonic attitude, reminiscent of the entire participant cohort, a group of students judging harshly their respective institutions for ignoring what to the students is an obviously significant aspect of their identity and resulting college experience. Ultimately, each participant in their own way was crying out to be seen, beseeching their institutions to not only validate their presence on campus, but to do so with an intentionality and nuance befitting participants' rich and diverse identities.

Where Are LGBTQ+ Faculty and Staff of Color?

Each participant was able to identify faculty and staff who played a critical role in their continued survival and success. The presence of faculty and staff who shared the participants' own identities was particularly beneficial; though, access to LGBTQ+ faculty and staff of color was either non-existent or relegated to a few already overburdened individuals. A substantial amount of research continues to highlight the importance of faculty and staff support on college student development and persistence in higher education—support particularly critical for high-risk students (Schreiner et al., 2011). Further research points to a paucity of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff of color in higher education (Gess & Horn, 2018; Johnson et al., 2009; Karkouti, 2016; Robinson, 2018). When not engaging with faculty in the classroom, participants engaged consistently with staff across campus (e.g., advising, counseling, recreation, housing). Addressing barriers to persistence for LGBTQ+ students of color requires a critical look at the compositional diversity of university employees and the ways in which represented identities impact the students served.

The LGBTQ+ students of color in this study repeatedly highlighted the lack of LGBTQ+ faculty of color as a barrier to persistence, as faculty with at least one shared identity (person of color *or* LGBTQ+) consistently provided markedly better support and guidance than faculty without a shared identity. Moreover, students asserted that LGBTQ+ faculty of color could provide optimal support, as they understood the nuances of living at the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. While a continued effort has been made in higher education to recruit diverse faculty and staff, meeting this goal remains most elusive on college campuses (Aguilar & Johnson, 2017). LGBTQ+ representation among faculty in higher education remains as unquantified as LGBTQ+ students in higher education, and participants (without institutional assistance) were forced to seek out LGBTQ+ faculty, relying on word-of-mouth recommendations from classmates (Robinson, 2018). Faculty of color constitute a sparse 17% of total full-time faculty in the United States, with little information available about multiracial faculty (Johnson et al., 2009; Karkouti, 2016). The multiracial students felt far lonelier and isolated, disconnected from institutional lifelines so often provided by faculty whose identities reflect those of their students. Little to no research examines the impact of LGBTQ+ faculty of color on the persistence of students whose intersectional identities mirror their own. This study's participants laid bare the absence of such research, while highlighting the critical need for colleges and universities to engage the needs of their LGBTQ+ students of color via the hiring of faculty and staff who are, by virtue of their own identities and lived experiences, best able to serve and support that specific student population. Andi, like all seven participants, shared why LGBTQ+ faculty of color were so critical to the persistence of LGBTQ+ students of color:

I think a lot of times it's easy to relate to...your professor who has shared identities with you. It's a lot easier for you to, like, go to them to talk about things, compared to a professor that you don't have shared identities with...I feel like I can't, like, go and talk to them...I will find a professor [who] I believe will identify with my struggles more, because they share one or more of my identities.

Participants did not want to rely solely on faculty for campus support. They expressed with equal adamance that university staff reflect their identities and lived experiences, insisting that intersectional university staff would be far better situated to offer guidance and advocacy, thus improving persistence to graduation.

Participants insisted that staff, in conjunction with faculty, played a significant role in whether they would consistently access services and support. The caveat: staff whose intersectional identities mirrored participants were best situated to offer salient, informed feedback, advice, and guidance. Participants' instinctually gravitated to staff who look, sound, and live like them. Kanagala and Oliver (2020) offered a glimpse into participants' instincts, both highlighting the institutional disparities faced by LGBTQ+ students of color, while urging universities to invest in queer staff of color—key institutional agents uniquely prepared to shepherd QPOC through the academy to graduation. Benjamin, like most of the participants, drew a sharp distinction between faculty and staff support, relegating faculty support to all things academic and staff support to identity development and advocacy.

Mandatory Curriculum and Engagement

Participants suggested a mandatory, intersectionally diverse curriculum requirement as a means to address campus climate issues, thereby mitigating a substantial

barrier to persistence. A perceived lack of awareness and intentional, interdisciplinary curriculum surrounding issues of power and privilege rang true for each participant in this study, bolstering Ukpokodu's (2010) contention that university faculty continue to instruct monocultural curricula to increasingly multicultural students. Moreover, research points to a lack of queer of color competency in the classroom exacerbating the absence and invisibility of LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff of color (Gess & Horn, 2018; Miville, 2017; Nakabayashi, 2016). It is important to note, however, that three of the four institutions represented in this study have an existing state requirement for cultural diversity. Participants' observations intimated the insufficiency of this state requirement—unrealized potential where institutions are currently offering culturally diverse course requirements. Students' experiences suggest a curriculum offered in isolation, disconnected from its potential impact on campus climate issues. The perceived operationalization of cultural diversity via course content remained inert and unrealized.

Participants longed for a responsive curriculum, one matching in deliberative construction, delivery, and assessment the near-constant barrage of implicit and explicit marginalization characterizing their time in higher education. A responsive curriculum focuses on developing a culturally diverse knowledge base, “including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Brockenbrough (2016) takes the concept of culturally responsive curriculum even further, applying it to the specific complexities of queer youth of color (mainly in the K-12 context). Queering culturally responsive curriculum in this way, and deploying it in higher education, operationalizes

what participants were intimating. In essence, the learning *and* the doing. In short, participants clamored for a truly social justice-driven curriculum, a curriculum and pedagogical approach that is culturally relevant, responsive, and potentially transformative. Each participant, in their own way, sought institutional transformation, and excavating the possibilities in what Sleeter and Carmona (2017) called un-standardizing curriculum holds tremendous promise.

Maverick insisted that a socially just, responsive curriculum would at the very least address the need for faculty and staff in PWIs to critically examine the roles they play in reifying a White cisheterosexist environment, “You need to consider black and brown bodies when you’re doing your job, because they’re different...[Curriculum] is White-centered and...ignore[s] people...that are black and brown [and] queer.

Faculty and staff are passionate and driven toward realizing student success, and participants were reluctant to cast aspersions on the entirety of their institutions, lest they unfairly include the faculty and staff without whom they surely would have suffered more so than they had. One need not work long in higher education before witnessing the passion and commitment of faculty and staff in higher education. I make no presumption in this study that faculty and staff are uncaring or indifferent. I do, however, assert that there exists a profound disconnect between institutional intent and impact. Both within this study and in my everyday work life as the director of a student resource center, examples abound of students lamenting institutional apathy, indifference, and inaction. Instituting curriculum, without mandating said curriculum address power and its exercise within individuals and institutions, diffuses its potential impact on the most marginalized within higher education. Faculty and staff must be held accountable for the

operationalization of an institutional mission, such that students like those who participated in this study are not sharing campus experiences in direct contradiction to that mission. It became pointedly clear throughout this study that the participating LGBTQ+ students of color spent a disproportionate amount of time educating their campuses about the replication and exercise of oppression and power. Participants' PWIs should have shouldered that burden, as assuming the role of beneficent teacher adversely affects marginalized students' mental health and academic progress (Rankin & Reason, 2005). A culturally responsive curriculum offers opportunities for campus stakeholders to serve as change agents, engaging oft-avoided aspects of inequitable power distribution all but guaranteed by current campus diversity efforts: White fragility, antiracism, colonialism, neo-liberalism, Christiancentricism, and disenfranchised queer oppression (often disenfranchised within accepted and celebrated religious dogma) (Applebaum, 2017; Day, 2019; Kendi, 2019). That participants repeatedly re-traumatized themselves while filling in critical curricular gaps with unpaid emotional labor engendered bitter resentment.

Institutional Transparency and Responsiveness

Participants expressed a great deal of frustration at a perceived lack of institutional transparency and response to students who experienced hate and bias on campus. Campus bias reporting and response processes are a critical component to building trust between faculty, staff, and students, as is consistent communication between all parties. Jayakumar and Museus (2012), as well as Karkouti (2016), asserted that historically entrenched, socially conservative, Eurocentric ideologies have largely governed the in/action and behaviors of faculty, staff, and students on college campuses,

an assertion seemingly validated by participants' experiences. I asked each participant how their respective institution handled issues of bias and discrimination, and Mirana's succinct response sums up the collective sentiment:

We don't. Period. Um, I think our university administration has a really, really bad habit of being, like, 'Well, we can't talk about this right now. We can't give you any information about it right now.' But, then, later never comes. They're never able to talk about it...I think it is incredibly irresponsible and disrespectful to your students.

Without exception, all four research sites had some version of a hate/bias response team, and each has a dedicated page on the institutional website intimating a welcoming and inclusive campus environment for all students. Despite such reporting mechanisms and action-oriented campus teams, however, study participants reported a consistent lack of administrative cooperation and support (financial and programmatic). In fact, the participant interviews were saturated with indignance, anger, and incredulousness at the institutional apathy perceived as a daily occurrence on their respective campuses. The toxic combination of institutional hostility and apathy led to participants feeling devalued, dismissed, and unimportant—each a substantial barrier to persistence (Blaisdell, 2005; Hotchkins, 2017; Museus et al., 2015).

As chair of my campus Bias Incident Response Team, I repeatedly caught myself swallowing a "Yeah, but..." rejoinder to my study participants' perceptions of institutional transparency and response to bias/hate incidents. After all, incidents of hate/bias are almost always more complicated than they outwardly appear. I and my colleagues routinely wrestle with communication vs. confidentiality; First

Amendment/free speech vs. rhetorical violence; honoring the wishes of a student who has been a target of hate/bias vs. institutional responsibility to protect all students; what is ideal vs. what is realistically possible. This work is messy and imperfect. Three words stayed my reflexive “Yeah, but...” response: perception is reality. Participants’ perceptions of campus transparency and response point to institutional guardedness and failed attempts to recognize hate/bias-induced fear and anxieties, coupled with administrative side-stepping of students’ reasonable anger and outrage. At the very least, the PWIs in this study reflected the need to find a more student-centered balance between policy, process, and procedure—particularly with regard to navigating free speech. They must ensure the barriers to persistence of LGBTQ+ students of color feel institutionally prioritized, in lieu of reputationally inconvenient for politically nervous administration.

Debating free speech in higher education represents a political and ethical morass far beyond the purview of this study; however, the student perceptions of institutional transparency and response significantly contribute to student persistence, even more so for LGBTQ+ students of color, who, by virtue of their multiple intersecting identities, find themselves repeated targets of campus hate/bias (Cabrera et al., 2013; Karkouti, 2016; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013). If PWIs in higher education wish to address this significant barrier to the persistence of LGBTQ+ students of color, a new approach to hate/bias awareness and education and communication is required. An even more provocative opinion: all institutions of higher education need to consistently push against established definitions of free speech—definitions created by and for White, cisgender, heterosexual men, most often at the expense of marginalized people.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of this study, and the perceptions of LGBTQ+ students of color more broadly, cannot be overstated. Higher education continues to struggle amidst a complicated and competitive market (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Renn & Reason, 2013). Shifting national demographics, as well as an increasingly visible queer population, demand that institutions of higher education work more strategically to recruit, retain, and graduate LGBTQ+ students of color. While the following implications and recommendations arrive at the end of a study focusing on predominantly White institutions, it bears mentioning that the following should be considered for all institution types.

Campus Pride Index Action Committee

At the very least, every institution in the United States should take advantage of Campus Pride's Index (CPI). Uncommon in this work, it is a detailed, 30+-page rubric that provides robust action steps and checklists to ensure LGBTQ+ inclusivity and advocacy on campus. Campus Pride partners with the Trans Policy Clearinghouse, and each line-item in the CPI must be signed-off before an institution receives its score (between 1-5 stars). Because the Campus Pride Index is comprehensive in scope, it is best to appoint a committee to execute its many recommendations. In the event of administrative resistance (sometimes informed by external stakeholders), committee appointees should be institutionally positioned so as to be able to lobby, cajole, and sometimes forcefully make a case for LGBTQ+ students. The Index should be updated each year, until the Premier Campus designation is assigned and all 5-stars attained. I make this recommendation with full acknowledgment of the CPI's imperfection. No

approach will appease each and every campus stakeholder, and language will forever be debated and critiqued. However, for campuses looking for egress into campus-wide action on behalf of their LGBTQ+ students, the Campus Pride Index is an excellent first step.

Inclusive Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM)

LGBTQ+ students should be included at all levels of institutional recruitment, retention, and persistence efforts. Given the inconsistency of the LGBTQ+ acronym, institutions will be left to decide which iteration they will use (retaining flexibility for community and cultural shifts in identity formation and language). Divisions of student and academic affairs must include LGBTQ+ students in institutional strategic enrollment management (SEM) processes, customer resource management resources (CRM), and predictive analytics. LGBTQ+ students should be present on front-facing institutional data sets (i.e., Factbooks); however, student safety and privacy must be of paramount importance. Given the variability of institutional sizes and student demographics, queer students must be given the option to remove their names from public data. Robust communication strategies will accommodate common questions and concerns (e.g., *Why are you collecting this information?* and *What will you use this information for?*), and campus stakeholders should be well-versed in navigating conversations from and about queer students.

Along with queer-inclusive steps in enrollment management, institutions should replace non-descript phrases such as “two or more races” in all university processes (prior to and post-admission). Students should be able to identify themselves accurately, without the need to choose options that gloss over or ignore their identities. While

national data sets (e.g., NCES and IPEDS) will surely require greater lengths of time to institute the inclusion of queer students and more nuanced race and ethnicity options, individual institutions can and should begin immediately, all while insisting national data sets do the same.

Develop, Implement, and Assess a Mandatory Culturally Responsive Curriculum

While the scope of this study does not lend itself to a robust explication of socially just pedagogy and curricular operationalization, the very heart of social justice requires an interrogation and subsequent dismantling of dominant systems of knowing, learning, and teaching, such that inequitable systemic power is substantially disrupted and not merely replicated. Teaching students about diverse identities and cultures without also contextualizing the role dominant identities play in reifying and perpetuating oppressive environments for marginalized people results in symbolic commitments to diversity. Such an approach allows institutions to check off diversity as an institutional commitment (publicizing it enthusiastically), without ensuring the difficult and often uncomfortable work of operationalizing diversity to address power, inequity, and the various isms therein. Academic and student affairs must work together to develop mandatory, responsive, intersectional curricula focused on individual and institutional power, privilege, Whiteness, and the operationalization of social justice advocacy.

Assessment processes must be put in place to gauge curricular efficacy, and preliminary coursework must be completed by the end of students' first year on campus (e.g., coursework focusing on positionality, social identity frameworks, etc.). Moreover, infusing equity, diversity, and inclusion must not be treated as simply an auxiliary item adjacent to an institution's strategic plan, nor must it only be relegated to those with a

passion for it. Intersectionality and social justice must saturate all institutional processes, policies, and curricula, such that students encounter critical ideas early, often, and throughout their time in higher education. Faculty and staff should be evaluated on their engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion and provided ample professional development opportunities for further scholarship, research, and student collaboration.

Bias/Hate Response and Transparency

Bias incident response teams are a point of contention in higher education, with some institutions doubling down on their potential efficacy and others eschewing them altogether. In my experience, as chair of my institution's bias incident reporting team, they can be invaluable in terms of providing students support and resources immediately following acts of bias or hate. Further, they provide a direct opportunity to communicate to students any decided upon institutional action or process complications (i.e., free speech concerns). It is with my own professional experience in mind that I recommend institutional bias incident response teams, provided they are accompanied by an action-oriented hate/bias incident protocol. Moreover, efforts must ensure transparency of process and results, with recurring solicitation of student feedback (particularly students with marginalized identities). The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse serves as an excellent example, and they are generous with external parties hoping to build their own teams, often providing resources, protocol, and valuable time-tested professional advice. They have a robust Campus Climate Center that houses their Hate Response Team. Campus stakeholders are able to chat with members of the team, book virtual appointments, and schedule trainings. Anyone who has been a target of hate can submit an online form (with varying degrees of anonymity), and they receive immediate support

and assistance. Importantly, concurrent efforts are made to encourage proactive measures, such as teaching members of the campus community to be active bystanders and administrators to be informed and responsive. UW-La Crosse's approach has been so successful they have been able to hold an annual Hate/Bias Symposium attended by institutional representatives from throughout the United States. I highly recommend visiting their website.

Gender and Sexuality Resource Centers

Each and every institution of higher education (without exception) should house a resource center whose primary mission is the advocacy and support of students with marginalized sexual orientations, genders, and assigned sexes; resource centers must be fully funded and staffed. Ideally, resource centers should employ at least one full-time coordinator whose sole purpose is the support and advocacy of LGBTQ+ students of color. Moreover, resource centers should strategize deliberately and consistently with campus multicultural centers, such that issues of race (Whiteness, in particular), sexuality, and gender are equally addressed. Predominantly White institutions already housing queer resource centers should work toward ensuring their programmatic portfolio, services, and support staff are cognizant of Whiteness and its colonialist tendencies in queer spaces. Deliberate, intersectional training and programming should accompany culturally responsive education and professional development (e.g., anti-racism) with the sole purpose of interrogating and dismantling dominant and oppressive approaches to supervision, mentorship, internships, and volunteerism.

LGBTQ+ Faculty and Staff of Color: Recruitment and Retention

Faculty/Staff recruitment and retention efforts should target LGBTQ+ people of color, so as to intersectionally diversify campuses. Particular focus must be paid to the recruitment of LGBTQ+ staff of color in counseling centers, advising centers, and student health centers. It is critical that campuses acknowledge that hostile campus climates affect not only students, but also faculty and staff with marginalized identities, particularly those with intersectional marginality. Institutions must invest in individual and community support for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff of color, in order to curate an inclusive climate conducive to longevity and institutional buy-in. Where institutions are able, a unique position should be created whose sole charge is the support, advocacy, and professional development of queer faculty and staff (with an emphasis on intersectionality). Onboarding, student evaluations, and program/curricular assessment should likewise account for inequitable processes often institutionally imbedded and disproportionately skewed against LGBTQ+ faculty and staff of color.

Consistent and Sustained Student Input

No two campuses are the same. Likewise, students' expectations and needs vary. In order that any institutional action reflect the students such action seeks to affect, consistent and sustained opportunities must be built into all advocacy efforts (i.e., structural, programmatic, policy/procedural). LGBTQ+ students of color must feel seen and heard, their lived experiences central to campus efforts to improve their perceptions of inclusion, sense of value, and persistence. Institutional transparency is paramount, as is student feedback. The participants in this study symbolize the ability of students to be architects of their own survival and resiliency. Their insight and contributions to

institutional processes should be omnipresent, such that their voices and lived experiences form the basis upon which progress is fomented and action steps strategized and prioritized.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are several possibilities for further research. LGBTQ+ students of color (whether or not attending PWIs) remain woefully understudied. The more insight we gain as to their experiences in higher education, the better poised IHE will be to ensure their intentional recruitment, retention, and persistence. Because this study included two states located in the same geographic area of the United States, additional research is needed that transgresses regional boundaries. The vast depth and breadth of LGBTQ+ students of color throughout the United States should be accounted for when strategizing the future of higher education.

Beyond a general call for more research focusing on LGBTQ+ students of color, this study included several multiracial LGBTQ+ students. While this was an unexpected development, I was grateful for the opportunity to better understand how their lived experiences can be different from monoracial LGBTQ+ students of color. Future research should examine the great diversity among multiracial queer students, as each multiracial student represents a unique heritage and history across race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. The intersectional combinations are endless, and with them lay fertile ground for student affairs professionals to better cultivate an understanding of the students they serve. Student identity development theories could be created and/or modified to account for the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color. Moreover, such research could help

usher in a new approach to enrollment management that is inclusive and representative of a growing segment of the student population.

As mentioned in this study, LGBTQ+ people and people of color are often treated as monoliths, their collective experiences studied and assessed in aggregate. Such approaches do a disservice to the tremendous variety of identities and experiences that exist for each letter of the LGBTQ+ acronym (and its many iterations), as well as people of color who represent numerous races and ethnicities. For example, the experiences of a student who is bisexual and Japanese will most likely vary in important ways from a student who is Black and trans. Future research should disaggregate acronyms and collective nouns, such that more nuanced insight can be gleaned. The elimination of generalizations will allow for more targeted and intentional support and advocacy.

Study participants invoked colonization a handful of times during our interviews. The idea of Whiteness as a colonizing force at predominantly White institutions of higher education requires an examination of staffing and organizational communication, as much it conjures images of physical space. Research that focuses on the ways institutional stakeholders consciously and unconsciously colonize space would potentially yield critical insight into the perpetuation of White supremacy and its consistent silencing and usurpation of queer voices of color. Combining both colonialist and Queer of Color theoretical approaches might yield critical insight into the ways in which Whiteness often goes unexamined, particularly by those who benefit from it.

As universities slowly begin to include LGBTQ+ students in their institutional research data, research can be conducted that ascertains the efficacy of institutional attempts to foster positive and safe campus climates. Moreover, programmatic and

educational efforts could be assessed with greater accuracy, as LGBTQ+ student experiences are most often utilized anecdotally (for the reasons already discussed in this study). All campus climate surveys and subsequent research should include LGBTQ+ student data, such that strategic planning can reflect necessary mandates that address areas for improvement.

CONCLUSION

I wanted to end this dissertation discussing resiliency and responsibility, because, while my student participants acknowledged the tremendous amount of internal fortitude it took to survive their respective PWIs, they often did so without recognizing survival as operationalized resiliency. How best to end this discussion than with the words of the very students about whom this study hopes to learn? They can speak far better than I about their own resiliency, accomplishments, and future aspirations. I asked each study participant what persisting to graduation meant to them, and all but one (Andi) offered critical glimpses into their strength of spirit and will to persist. Benjamin was defiant, proud of his accomplishments and the immutability of his impending departure from Upper Polytechnic University as a college graduate:

Graduating...means to me that I have defeated the odds of what it means to be a trans person of color...I have succeeded in a PWI that has everything against me...It means, like, that I am doing something for myself...what other people haven't been able to do for me...I'm defeating the odds. I'm getting this education. I get to walk across...the stage...I don't feel like this university has supported me in any real way...I have been disadvantaged in every single way. But, I still get to get my degree, which is something you can't take away from me

Benjamin's agency and self-realization, forged during his time in higher education, came at too high a cost. However, I wanted to highlight not participants' victimization, but the agency and strength required of an LGBTQ+ college student of color to persist within a predominantly White institution of higher education. By returning each semester, claiming their space at institutions neither built nor sustained for them, tenaciously challenging institutional apathy and disingenuous diversity initiatives, LGBTQ+ college students of color subvert and undermine oppressive systems. That they are able to still develop as strong, confident LGBTQ+ students of color speaks to their grit and determination. Kou was able to see the tremendous weight of their own accomplishments and left higher education unwilling to jeopardize what was so hard fought:

You know, for me, it's gonna be a big deal...I really got through a lot. Like, I never thought I would be so out and so involved in, like, this community...I have had much growth in my personal space and identity...and the importance of my identities...I'm leaving being very sure of, like, who I am, my identity, what I stand for...how to fight and to try to make things better...I didn't think I would make it. I didn't think I would be so, like, protective of myself and my identity, protective of people who may feel like me. So, I learned a lot of things.

Focusing in this way reflects the transformational power of queer of color critique.

Tompkins (2015) asserted the transformational power of queer of color critique, in that it interrogates both normative and nonnormative identities in ways that transgress victimization tropes often ascribed to LGBTQ+ people of color. Instead, Tompkins (2015) attested to the "determined refusal of these many peoples to disappear but also to

their ongoing political objections to the systems under which they [labor,]” while asserting that, “queerness...of peoples of color emerges from the fire of modernity’s historical forges and has an energy to survive and create that is fiercely its own” (p. 175). Tompkins (2015) elaborated further, speaking to the cultivated resiliency in those whose layered marginality is accompanied by compounded obstacles:

Indeed, as the warrior-like term ‘fierce’ testifies, the aesthetics of queer of color life are tied to the daily work of creating and thriving in a phobic world, to the beauty, courage, and humor that emerge out of and as psychic and physical survival at the individual, familial, and community levels. (p. 175)

Fierce is not too hyperbolic a term to describe the students in this study, nor any of the LGBTQ+ college students of color with whom I have interacted throughout my career in student affairs. Theirs is a ferocious self-determination. They strategize their own persistence among a community of students who by all accounts should fail. Amidst the often-tumultuous journey of identity development, they find others who, like themselves, carve out space in White, cisheterosexist environments, staking their claim to a postsecondary education. LGBTQ+ college students of color traverse hostile landscapes, often negotiating families and friends whose religious ideologies cast aspersions on queerness. They navigate campus climates brimming with talk of diversity and inclusion, only to find themselves on the losing end of free speech and hesitant, often tone-deaf administrators. Yet, they persist. They survive, often despite and in spite of their academic institutions.

Despite each of the numerous barriers to persistence they faced, participants nevertheless fostered a deep yearning to help those coming after them. Theirs was always

a future-focused approach, determined that LGBTQ+ students (whether strangers or younger siblings) never experience those same barriers. Maverick looked to graduate school with the energy of a vendetta, eager to dismantle oppressive systems and serve as an advocate for the most marginalized:

Power. Like, minimizing it...I really want to go on to graduate school, and then I want to get my Ph.D., so I can be called doctor, because Dr. Maverick sounds cool as fuck. That's the goal. I will be the first doctor in my family. That's huge...It would mean people would listen to me. It would mean that I would just have more of a chance to direct the microphone to people who face these issues...I know my privileges, and I acknowledge [them,] and I'm going to use [them] for the greater good...I can do that constantly for other people so that they don't have to struggle. So they don't have to do the same shit that other people did, you know?...I want it better for black and brown queer kids. Because, shit, at the rate we're going, we're going to either need that or a revolution, and I'm kind of ready for both.

Ambrosia, too, looked toward future success in graduate school. Hers was a strength fueled by family, and she worked hard to make sure her younger sisters saw themselves as powerful, capable, and strong:

Graduating kind of sets the tone for, you know, my family members...my younger sisters. One is in college herself. The other one is still in high school...It puts me in a place to be, like, a better role model and a better leader for other students of color, especially for queer students of color...It really just puts me in a better place to give back to the community...I think it just sets an example that,

like, we can become more than what society says we are; that I can do more than was just expected of me. I can above that if I want to...[Graduating] college allows me to make that next step to go to graduate school, so I can give back and do even more...and really set up more inclusive areas...for queer students of color. Yeah.

When asked what graduation meant to them, Fololina dropped their guard and immediately began talking about their family and the young people she interacted with as a student teacher. Fololina's journey through higher education was perhaps the most tumultuous, but their fiery spirit never failed to appear when discussing their own persistence to graduation. Fololina spoke protectively of young marginalized kids, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to stand guard against young people's feelings of self-doubt, worthlessness, and isolation. Fololina was determined that their future students avoid what Fololina had endured:

It means a lot of things, I guess. It means that I survived...When [I was] 16 [I] didn't think [I'd] make it...Right now, I'm 22. I've been hospitalized. I've been on medication...I have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder...I've been called a faggot. I've been called the N-word. I have been demeaned, belittled, berated...This entire campus literally beat me down and just, like, pummeled me, and I'm on the ground, just, like, a little puddle...All these things that happened, and, like, I'm still here. And, I'm still trying to get my education...Graduating for me means that I can get kids out of whatever they're in, being an educator...Coming to school can be a good thing, and, like, I want to make a classroom...[where] my students can come in and...if there's shit happening at

home, I want them to come to my classroom and just be like, well, [it's] a good day...If they're not having a good day...they feel comfortable enough to tell me...I just, I don't want what happened to me to happen to anyone else...I just want to provide that for them, because they deserve it. Children deserve everything.

Lastly, Mirana looked forward to a career in higher education, where she could affect the sort of meaningful, far-reaching change she and students like her yearned and cried out for:

Wow, this one's heavy...I think for me graduating college means a lot. It means that I did it...I've had a lot of instances where either I didn't think I could, or people have told me flat out that I couldn't do it or that I wouldn't do it...I think about...what it means for the people that come after me. I can look back at, like, my siblings and say, "Yeah, I did it. So, you can, too." I can look at the incoming first-years that are queer people of color and say, "Look. Like, yeah, it sucks...We tried to make it better. But, also, we got through it, and you can, too..."Someday, like, I'm going to have those letters after my last name...I'm going to be able to say, like, "I am a faculty member...I was in your shoes, too..."[and] give that same kind of representation and that same kind of comfort that comes from, "Okay, I know that you're part of this community, and I know that you actually get what I'm talking about. And you're not just going to brush over some of the most important things that are a part of my life, kind of thing." So, to me, I think that's what graduating means to me.

It is far too easy as a student affairs administrator of a student resource center at a predominantly White institution to lose sight of our mission: student success. Whether strategizing budgetary concerns, negotiating a volatile political environment (both on campus and throughout the United States), or repeatedly defending the very presence of a queer resource center for those seemingly unwilling to acknowledge their critical institutional importance, emotional and physical exhaustion can overshadow everything else. Throughout this study, I have been reminded of the very reasons I found higher education to be so alluring and fulfilling: the incredible students with whom I am privileged to work each day. The participants in this study, though not my own students, represented the spirit of what higher education aspires to produce: engaged, thoughtful, altruistic, critical global citizens. Their success—up to and including persistence—is intimately intertwined with the future of postsecondary education.

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