

Sense of Belonging on Campus: LGBTQ

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BACKGROUND

Current research examines the mental health needs of the LGBTQ population, but little is available on LGBTQ college students. Based on findings of adult and youth LGBTQ studies, these individuals experience higher levels of stress which likely carries over into the college years (Dunbar et al., 2017). Unique social stressors such as stigma, discrimination, a lack of belongingness, and risk to sexual/intimate partner violence are attributed to this increased risk of mental health issues (Dunbar et al., 2017, Klein et al., 2021). Furthering the widening gap in mental health disparity for LGBTQ college students is the observation that this population exhibits a higher need for mental health treatment while simultaneously experiencing higher barriers to receiving treatment (Dunbar et al., 2017). Stigma is often perpetuated through heterosexist social experiences that involve microaggressions such as through comments like “that’s so gay” and “no homo” which imply that being LGBTQ status is less good or favorable than being heterosexual/cisgender (Crane et al., 2020).

Microaggressions are often subtle but still have a heavy impact on the health and wellness of LGBTQ individuals. Discrimination in the form of hate crimes is an example of overt aggression and has been more predominantly studied. Microaggressions in the form of disrespect is sometimes unintentional and occur more subtly, and as research is finding, occurs more often as well. Research has found a link between LGBTQ college students experiencing microaggressions and poor mental health outcomes (Wingert et al., 2018). Additionally, evidence shows that exposure to microaggressions does not just impact the mental wellness of LGBTQ college students, but it is also associated with an increase in drug and alcohol misuse as well as increased smoking rates (Wingert et al., 2018, Yligia, 2018). Hostile heterosexist environments created by micro-aggressions and discrimination contribute to LGBTQ retention rates and significantly impact the mental well-being of this population (Crane et al., 2020).

In a nationally representative sample published by Access to Higher Education Survey, it was found that LGBTQ college students face higher instances of bullying (both online and in person), sexual harassment and sexual assault (Williams Institute, 2022). Where almost 20% of LGBTQ students experience in-person bullying/harassment compared to about 5% of straight students, over 12% of LGBTQ experience microaggressions in the form of indirect bullying compared to about 5% of straight students and 17% of LGBTQ are sexually harassed compared to almost 6% of straight students. Additionally, nearly 12% of LGBTQ higher education students are sexually assaulted compared to 2% of their straight colleagues (Williams Institute, 2022).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore and examine differences in lived campus experiences and perceptions by sexual orientation.

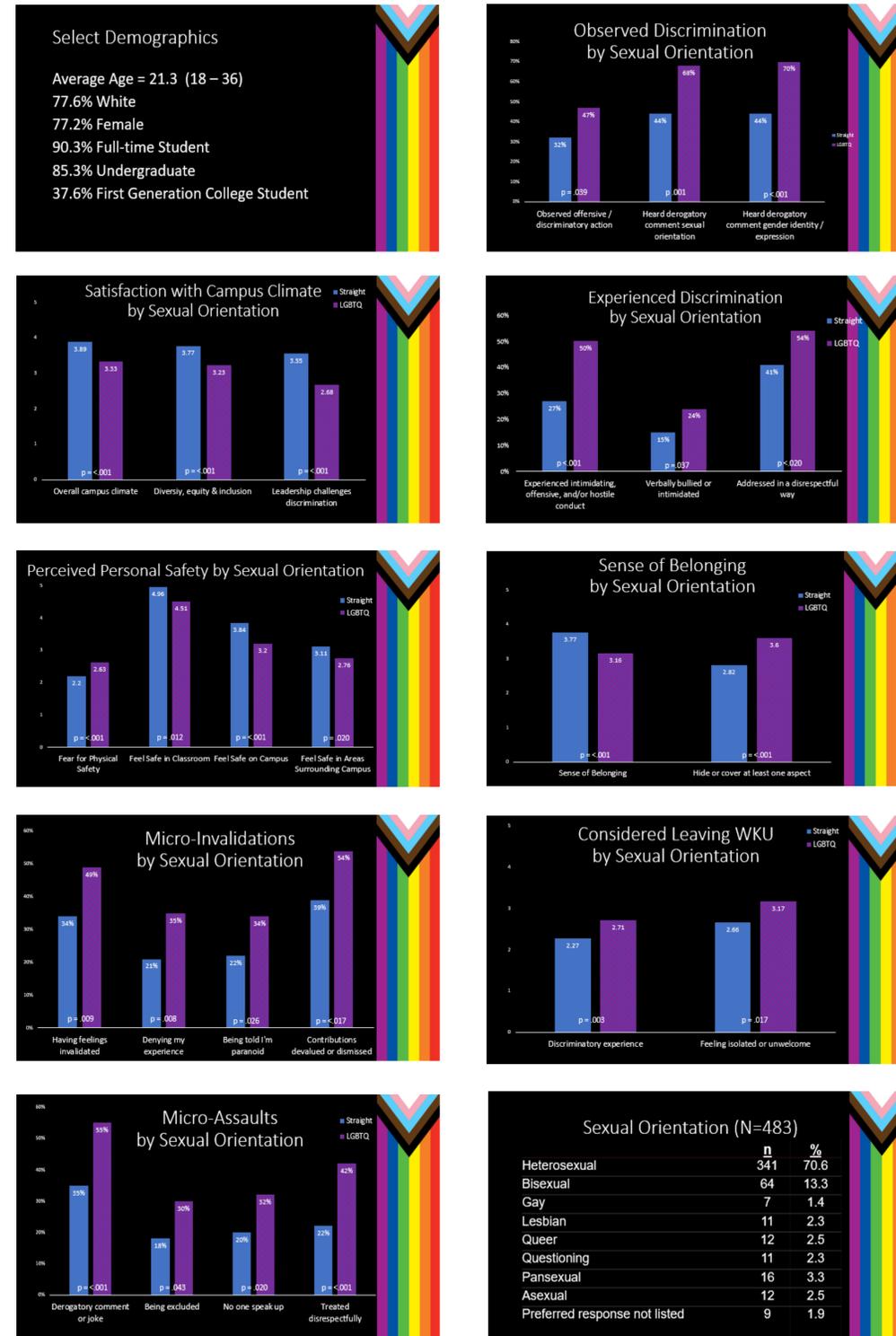
METHODS

In Spring 2021, a WKU Cultural Climate Survey was dispersed via email asking all students to participate to obtain a census. The survey was available online using Qualtrics. Data is analyzed using SPSS-28 using a 95% confidence level. Measures included satisfaction with campus perceived personal, micro-aggressions, micro-invalidations, micro-assaults, discrimination, and a sense of belonging.

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RESULTS



DISCUSSION

This research study adds to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ college student experiences regarding microaggressions, sense of belonging, and heterosexism culture on campus. Our analysis also indicated that significantly less WKU LGBTQ students knew the reporting procedures for acts of discrimination or harassment, where the mean score for agreement was 3.92 compared to a mean score of 4.27 for straight students. One possible explanation for this is because LGBTQ students agreed significantly less than straight students that WKU’s process for investigating acts of discrimination or harassment is effective, where the mean score for LGBTQ is 3.18 and 3.87 for straight. Addressing this lack of confidence is an opportunity for WKU to increase perceptions of a safe and inclusive campus environment for LGBTQ students.

It is paramount for public health and colleges to examine these critical factors to protect and reduce risk as long-term outcomes of academic performance disruption increase the gap in disparities for this vulnerable population (Backhaus et al., 2021). Additionally, lack of federal and state policies leaves universities with little guidance on implementing policy to increase inclusivity and reduce barriers to opportunity for LGBTQ students (Jaekel, 2021). Growing the body of literature and adding to data on this population will inform higher institutions on writing comprehensive policy to increase the equity and protect diversity on their campus.

Utilizing the life course perspective, we can examine how stigma and discrimination influences people over time. Where the higher barriers to education for LGBTQ alters the opportunities and life chances throughout the life course.

Limitations:

The items used to measure microaggression in this survey were not specific to LGBTQ. There are distinctive interpersonal interactions that pertain to this population. Phrases like “that’s so gay” and “no homo” are two such examples. Sense of belonging was also not specific to LGBTQ, for example measuring reported awareness of LGBTQ resources on campus could be a measurement of the level of integration and belongingness felt. Lastly, this cross-sectional study does not record a temporal sequence and as such cannot be utilized to infer causation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Current recommendations focus heavily on policy both institutionally and departmentally. Departments at WKU should be encouraged to develop their own LGBTQ nondiscrimination policies to further encourage an inclusive and safe environment for this population. These policies should be easily accessible, communicated to the whole campus, and utilized to show support from WKU to LGBTQ students, staff and faculty. Further collection and analysis of data should focus on intersectional issues of race, faith, and socioeconomic status to better understand the unique issues that affect the LGBTQ population on campus. Finally, creation of an LGBTQ taskforce is recommended to ensure continuation of these projects and could be an independent entity or merge with the Pride Center at WKU (Jaekel, 2021).

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