Exploring the Experiences of LGBTQ Undergraduate Social Work Students and their Perceived Sense of Belonging at a Public University

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APPROVAL PAGE

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ABSTRACT

Many studies show the importance of positive belonging for college students. What is not as well explored is sense of belonging within specific majors and marginalized groups. This study provides an overview of how LBTQ undergraduate social work students rate and perceive their belonging at a public university using a mixed method design with descriptive statistics and a phenomenological qualitative process. They study analyzed the data through the lens of Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Theory and Strayhorn's (2019) Framework for Belonging to explicate the findings and translate them into opportunities for enhancement of the implicit and explicit curriculum. Participants shared their definition of belonging and the need to feel affirmed and welcomed. Largely, there was interest from participants to increase LGBTQ content and visibility through curriculum adjustments, campus offerings, and affirming policies. The study concludes with a discussion of identified themes and implications for practice.

Key words: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), sense of belonging, social work students, mental wellness, persistence, engagement, college students, microaggressions, minority stress

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants who openly shared their stories with me, and without which, this would not be possible. I am humbled by your trust in me. To all the LGBTQ+ students out there, please know there are people waiting and wanting to know you and support you.

I dedicate this to my spouse, MK. Without your love, support, and constant dedication to our family, I would never have accomplished this. You are my steady ground. And to my daughter, Finley, who inspires me to be a better version of myself every day and who will no doubt be a positive, loving force of change in the world. Love you both to the moon and back.

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To my past and current social work students: You are the future of our profession and have inspired me immensely. Keep making positive change!

To my family and friends: I am so happy to be able to spend quality time together again! Thank you for your support and love throughout this journey!

To my loves, MK and Finley: You are everything. Thank you for your constant encouragement to keep going and all the love that helped me get me there. Excited for what is next for all of us!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the concerns facing higher education systems is belonging for college students. Low sense of belonging in college students can lead to a multitude of factors including declining mental wellness, academic concerns, disruptive behavior in class or practicum, and reduced graduation rates (Holley et al., 2022). Belonging or mattering is innate in nature and is a core human need that if satisfied, can produce positive outcomes such as increased mental wellness, higher retention rates, and higher academic achievement (Allen et al., 2021; Sotardi et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). If belonging is not satisfied, it can be detrimental, increasing the likelihood of disruption of the attainment of the degree, higher depression and anxiety rates, and overall poor health and wellness outcomes (Peoples et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Social work programs are charged with educating students to become social justice advocates and increase qualified social workers into the workforce. Part of these social justice efforts is to increase representation of social workers from marginalized communities. Understanding belonging for LGBTQ social work students is important for the success of increasing LGBTQ social workers in the workforce. Research indicates LGBTQ students have a perceived lower sense of belonging than their non-LGBTQ peers (Blackmon et al., 2020; BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Parker 2021; Sotardi et al., 2021).

Students are faced with systemic barriers to education related to food insecurity, commuting issues, financial constraints, homelessness, varying family dynamics, and multiple job commitments leading to mental health and wellness concerns (Kotera et al., 2018). The growing list of burdens that students carry can be exacerbated by the type of intense work with which social workers engage. Many social work students entering the profession have a

significantly higher incidence of adverse childhood experiences (Thomas, 2016) lending them to an increased vulnerability to stressors. As mental wellness declines in students, it can manifest in ways that directly affect their performance in coursework and practicum and can inhibit their success in the major (Museus et al., 2017). More than a third of social work students report depression or depressive symptoms (Kotera et al., 2018, p. 352). Students struggling with mental health concerns may have increased difficulty with academic performance and stress management resulting in a decrease in sense of belonging.

Prevalence of the Problem

Lower sense of belonging could be a contributing factor to stalling graduation rates. In 2020, the overall graduation rates within six years at four-year institutions was approximately 64%, only up 6% from 2004 (NCES, 2022, p. 3). The percentage is lower for American Indian and Alaskan Native (39%), Black (40%), and Hispanic (54%) students (NCES, 2019, p. 1). Lower graduation rates cause distal social issues including lower lifetime earnings, decreased commitment to civic engagement, and higher unemployment rates (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2019). According to a study conducted by the Association of American Universities (AAU) approximately 17% of undergraduate and graduate students identified as LGBQA and 1.7% as transgender (AAU, 2020). Another study noted that 17.1% of LGBTQ undergraduate students surveyed reported dropping out of college and 32.4% of LGBTQ participants reported considering dropping out compared to 23.6% of the non-LGBTQ participants (O'Neill et al., 2022, p.12).

Having continued microaggressions can contribute to lower mental health and decreased sense of belonging. LGBTQ students report higher incidences of microaggressions in higher education than their non-LGBTQ counterparts contributing to lower sense of belonging and an

increase in mental health concerns (Akapnitis et al., 2023; Budge et al, 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Coleman et al., Crane et al., 2020). Further, the U.S. Transgender Survey (2016) found that 24% of respondents who were out or perceived as out in college reported being verbally, physically, or sexually harassed (p.11), with 16% of those who were harassed leaving college (James et al., 2016, p.136). Of LGBTQ respondents in four-year institutions and graduate school, 32.6% reported experiencing bullying compared to 18.9% of non-LGBTQ people (O'Neill et al., 2022, p.3).

LGBTQ students have a higher likelihood of experiencing suicidal ideation making them vulnerable to the pressures of higher education. Of transgender respondents, 48% stated that they seriously thought about suicide in the last year compared to 4% of the general U.S. population (James et al., 2016, p.112). LGBTQ participants were four times more likely to report poor mental health in graduate school compared to their non-LGBTQ peers (O'Neill et al., 2022, p.29). With 32.6% of participants stating they picked a college farther away to get away from family (O'Neill et al., 2022, p.14), it may be important for LGBTQ students to find social connection, sense of belonging, and community at their institutions.

The need for supportive services for students with mental health concerns is not new but has increased over the last decade. Lipson et al. (2022) found that from 2013 to 2021 symptoms of depression in college students grew by 134.6%, symptoms of anxiety grew by 109.5%, and those reporting suicidal ideation grew by 64%. The CSWE Pulse Survey was a study conducted by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) that surveyed social work programs to better understand the shifting landscape of social work programs (Bradshaw, 2021). The Pulse results noted that of programs surveyed, 64.6% of social work programs reported that their students were experiencing more mental health challenges; no programs reported fewer mental health

challenges (Bradshaw, 2021). Understanding the diverse needs of LGBTQ social work students is key to supporting sense of belonging and successful degree completion, and critical to diversifying the workforce and reducing the professional social work shortage.

Political Discourse

Political discourse over LGBTQ rights is centered on social dynamics leading to debates on social justice issues such as adoption rights, gender affirming care, healthcare access, job and housing protections, and marriage equality. There had been progress made in the last decade toward increased LGBTQ rights, most notably, with the landmark case of Obergefell v. Hodges where the Supreme Court declared that all states must recognize same-sex marriage for LGBTQ people (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). Recently, there has been an increased shift in the stripping away of rights of LGBTQ individuals along with an increase in hate crimes (Luneau, 2023). Currently, as of March 14th, 2025 there are 527 anti-LGBTQ bills being tracked by the American Civil Liberties Union that have been introduced in the United States (ACLU, 2024). From 2021 to 2022, the FBI reported that hate crimes based on gender identity rose 32.9% and those based on sexual orientation were up 13.8% (FBI, 2023) showing the need for increased awareness and protection of LGBTQ people.

The increase in negative rhetoric and anti-LGBTQ policies could have an impact on LGBTQ college student belonging. The Trevor Project (Nath et al., 2024) found that 90% of youth reported their well-being was negatively impacted by political discourse. Further, Thompson et al., (2021) found that LGBTQ Students in college are less likely to report instances of harassment on college campuses than their non-LGBTQ counterparts. Weise et al. (2023) found that students in their study explained they are so used to being treated with

dismissive, heteronormative practices that they did not think their abuse was "bad enough" to warrant a report.

There are many additional issues that occur with anti-LGBTQ legislation like this that can affect whether LGBTQ people feel they belong in college. Discriminatory laws can cause health inequities for LGBTQ people causing them to avoid seeking help for medical and behavioral health services due to fear of being treated poorly or refused service (Pomeranz, 2018). In 2023, 32 states had protections in place for housing and 34 states for employment for LGBTQ people (HRC Foundation, 2024, p.32) displaying the need for advocacy for further protections.

Views from Professional Organizations

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has a history of oppressive practices toward LGBTQ people and had categorized homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973 (APA, 1973). The APA issued an apology for the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ people in 2019 and condemned the use of conversion therapy while making strides toward inclusive practices (APA, 2019). The National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics (COE) notes that it is essential for social workers to advocate for equity, take action as social justice advocates, and eliminate discrimination (NASW, 2021). NASW has a National Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer+ Issues (NCLGBTQ+) that was originally developed as a task force in 1976. It was made an authorized committee in 1979 and updated to include additional terms in 1996 and 2005 (NASW, n. d.). The goal of the committee is to further the cause of social justice, and assist in developing LGBTQ+ affirming policies, procedures, and programs (NASW, n.d.). The NASW has advocated by signing open letters in support of full inclusion of transgender and LGBTQI+ youth, measures to reduce economic hardship of LGBTQ people, and

the importance of data collection for LGBTQ communities (NASW, 2022). In some states, members of NASW chapters have testified against anti-LGBTQ legislation (NASW, 2023).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) publicly condemned anti-LGBTQ legislation and has cautioned against the ramifications for social work programs within states with enacted legislation (CSWE, 2022). CSWE houses many councils including the Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (CSOGIE) which fosters the development of inclusive curriculum, encouraging the growth of faculty knowledge in this area (CSWE, 2023). CSOGIE has several publications that help to inform adjustments for more inclusive implicit and explicit curriculum for social work programs centering LGBTQ topics and voices. Craig et al. (2016) and Austin et al. (2016) discuss guidelines for inclusive and affirmative practices through a sponsorship from CSWE that outlines steps that can be taken to become more inclusive and interrupt negative discourse. The social work profession has established standards to demonstrate their competence and ability to affirm LGBTQ people through the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), and this includes increasing inclusive practices for LGBTQ social work students.

LGBTQ Competence in Social Work

In social work, competence is defined as "the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes to practice situations in a culturally responsive, purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" (CSWE, 2022, p. 7). Several studies reviewed whether social work students felt competent to serve LGBTQ clients (Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2016) leading to the conclusion that LGBTQ content is lacking in social work education and contributing to deficient competence to practice with LGBTQ clients. For example, Austin et al. (2016) found

that of those surveyed, mostly from public institutions, 43% of transgender social work students experienced transphobia in their social work program and 60% experienced conflict in practicum regarding their identity (p. 302). Further, the students in this study consistently felt that transgender issues were missing from content and that the burden to educate their peers or faculty was on them as the transgender social work student (Austin et al., 2016).

Craig et al. (2017) found through a qualitative study on intersectionality and professional identity for LGBTQ social work students that students felt there was little discussion on how to be an out LGBTQ social worker and minimal discussion about LGBTQ client interaction. Both undergraduate and graduate students felt there was not enough LGBTQ content across courses and they had the burden of educating their peers (Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2016). Unsupportive classroom climate and lack of mentoring were challenges LGBTQ social work students reported (Craig et al., 2016).

Additional studies found that a program's readiness and competence to teach LGBTQ content is a determining factor for how prepared social work students feel to serve LGBTQ populations (McCarty-Caplan, 2018, 2022). The connection of professional identity integration and affirming content in curriculum have been identified as contributors to positive belonging for LGBTQ social work students (Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2016). The findings of these studies suggest that when students' identities are reflected in the curriculum content, they will have higher perceived sense of belonging through affirming practices, and their ability to be successful social workers will be more prominent.

Relevance to Social Work Education

Social work programs are accredited by CSWE, which states the goal of accreditation is to "ensure quality education and preparation of social workers" and for social workers to embody

the values and ethics in practice (CSWE, n.d.). To do this, the CSWE Educational Policies and

Accreditation Standards (EPAS) outlines what is required of the implicit and explicit curriculum

within social work programs. The explicit curriculum refers to the educational and professional

practice standards, such as practicum and course requirements, that are required to become

competent in the field of practice (CSWE, 2022). The implicit curriculum refers to the other

elements important to student success such as advising, retention, admissions procedures, student

development, and resource allocation. Implicit curriculum, including student involvement and

the culture and environment are seen to be as important as coursework and professional training

(CSWE, 2022). Within implicit curriculum, positive sense of belonging is an important factor to

retention efforts, motivation, and professional identity development (Agllias et al., 2016;

Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012).

       The CSWE EPAS (2022) necessitates that social work educators commit to practices

related to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) and the decolonization of program

content. Numerous studies found that the underrepresentation of diverse students in social work

contributes to the inequities of practice (Beadlescomb, 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2019;

Sotardi et al., 2021). Further, social work programs are less diverse than the general population

and are challenged by CSWE EPAS to work toward inclusivity in supports and programs offered

(Beadlescomb, 2019, Blackmon et al., 2020; Lipson et al., 2022, Museus et al., 2017; Patterson

Silver Wolf et al., 2019; Sotardi et al., 2021). It is hoped that as social work education becomes

more equity minded and inclusive, the pathways to support a more diverse student population

resulting in an increase in sense of belonging will become explicit and positively affect

persistence and graduation rates (Beadlescomb, 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2019).

Definition of Relevant Terms

Acronyms for the LGBTQ community have varied throughout the years to become more inclusive of diverse identities. Most researchers utilize only those identities that have participated in the study. For this research study, relevant terms utilized in the study and literature review are indicated below. This researcher uses "LGBTQ" for this study to embody all queer identities including those not represented in the acronym, for example, those identifying as asexual or two-spirit. Rather than adding a plus sign at the end, "Q" is being utilized as a term to encompass additional identities not covered in the acronym.

Of note in several studies is how intersectionality plays a role in identity (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Crane et al., 2022). Intersectionality can be described as the ways in which identities connect and can be influenced by identifiers such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or professional identity (Cardenas-Soto, 2023). Cardenas-Soto (2023) found that how individuals experience intersectionality is unique to their interconnected identities and engagement in systems of power or social constructs.

All terms below were modified from Human Rights Campaign Glossary of Terms (2023) and GLAAD's Media Reference Guide (n.d.), unless otherwise cited.

Ally: An adjective used to describe a straight and/or cisgender person who supports and advocates for LGBTQ people.

Asexual: An adjective used to describe a person who does not experience sexual attraction.

Bisexual, Bi, Bi+: An adjective used to describe a person who is attracted physically, romantically, and/or emotionally to people of more than one gender.

Cisgender: An adjective used to describe people who are not transgender. A cisgender person is a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Closeted: Describes a person who is not open about their sexual orientation.

Gay: An adjective use to described people whose enduring physical, romantic, and/ or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex.

Gender binary: A system in which gender is constructed into two strict categories of male or female.

Gender dysphoria: Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify.

Gender-expansive: A person with a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the binary gender system.

Gender Expression: External manifestations of gender, expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, voice, and/or behavior.

Gender Identity: A person's internal, deeply held knowledge of their own gender.

Genderqueer: Genderqueer people typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as "genderqueer" may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.

Heterosexual: An adjective used to describe a person whose enduring physical, romantic, and/ or emotional attraction is to people of a sex different than their own. Also: straight.

Homophobia: Prejudice or hatred toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer people, expressed in speech or actions.

Intersex: An adjective used to describe a person with one or more innate sex characteristics, including genitals, internal reproductive organs, and chromosomes, that fall outside of traditional conceptions of male or female bodies.

Lesbian: A woman whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women.

LGBTQ: Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. LGBT and LGBTQ+ are also used, with the + added in recognition of all non-straight, non-cisgender identities.

Nonbinary: Nonbinary is an adjective used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of man and woman.

Out: A person who self-identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and/or transgender in their personal, public, and/or professional lives.

Outing: The act of publicly revealing another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent.

Pansexual: An adjective used to describe a person who has the capacity to form enduring physical, romantic, and/ or emotional attractions to any person, regardless of gender identity.

Queer: An adjective used by some people, particularly younger people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual.

Questioning: An adjective used by some people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Sexual Orientation: The scientific term for a person's enduring physical, romantic and/ or emotional attraction to another person. Sexual orientations can include heterosexual (straight), lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, and other orientations.

Transgender: An adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. People who are transgender may also use other terms, in addition to transgender, to describe their gender more specifically.

Transgender Man: A man who was assigned female at birth may use this term to describe himself.

Transgender Woman: A woman who was assigned male at birth may use this term to describe herself.

Transition: Transition is the process a person undertakes to bring their gender expression and/or their body into alignment with their gender identity. It is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time and the exact steps involved in transition will vary from person to person. **Social transition**: Telling family, friends, and co-workers, using a different name, using different pronouns, dressing differently, starting or stopping wearing make-up and jewelry, etc. **Legal transition**: Changing your name and/or sex marker on documents like a driver's license, passport, Social Security record, bank accounts, etc. **Medical transition:** Hormone replacement therapy and/or one or more surgical procedures.

Two-Spirit: Refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity (Re:Searching for LGBTQ2S+ Health, n.d.).

Defining Sense of Belonging

Due to its subjective nature, sense of belonging can be defined in myriad ways. There is a biological component to belonging that is innate in nature, however most the of literature refers to social belonging, specifically in schools (Allen et al., 2021). One of the common definitions cited in education belongs to Goodenow and Grady (1993) with the definition of "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 81). Allen et al. (2021) described sense of belonging as "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (p.88) noting that it is a human need that can be a predictor of outcomes. Students in a study by Agllias et al. (2016) noted that belonging for them was feeling cared for by a group of individuals and faculty with similar professional goals and values. Students wanted to feel their experience was normalized (Agllias et al., 2016).

Vincent Tinto (1975) contributed one of the most frequently cited models in sense of belonging research based on his retention and integration theories. The model and theories closely tie sense of belonging to retention and persistence by indicating that in order for students to be successful, by his definition of retained, they must leave their familial ties and integrate by participating in academic and social constructs fully at their institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's seminal work was based on the expansion from the research of Spady (1970). Spady (1970) posited that more social interactions were the determining factors of college dropout, whereas

Tinto (1975) discussed the influence of faculty and academic integration as key to whether a student is successful.

Tinto's theory has been criticized for its inability to translate to marginalized groups citing a lack of understanding of how those familial ties can create a foundation for social success (Metz, 2002). There have also been criticisms that it could only be utilized with traditional age college students and that it was dependent on active student engagement (Metz, 2002), however, Tinto has acknowledged the shortcomings of their original work and addressed them through additional research. In the revised theories and later research, he described sense of belonging as "a generalized sense of membership that stems from students' perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them" (Tinto 2012, 66). He went on to describe that every interaction matters and that a single negative interaction, such as a microaggression, can create a devastating effect that can alter sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017).

Strayhorn (2019) also described sense of belonging in a multitude of ways culminating in the idea that sense of belonging is "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (p. 28). He described college student sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (pp. 28-29). Strayhorn posited that belonging is a fundamental need that must be satisfied for higher level learning and social engagement to occur (Strayhorn, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, sense of belonging will be framed as LGBTQ social work students' perceived sense of connection and mattering to peers, faculty, campus community, and

social networks and how this affects their overall experience utilizing Strayhorn's definition of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

<div align="center">**Theoretical Frameworks**</div>

The theoretical frameworks applied to better understand belonging for LGBTQ college students are Strayhorn's Framework for Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003). These theories and their constructs were chosen for their ability to best explain the variables that LGBTQ social work students face when it comes to belonging in college.

Strayhorn's Model of Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn's framework for sense of belonging is modeled after the works of Tinto's (1993) attrition theory and Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs (as cited in Strayhorn, 2019) but his theory goes on to explain more in depth how this translates to connection in college students. Strayhorn's (2019) model consists of 7 core elements of sense of belonging including: 1) it is a universal basic human need, 2) a fundamental motive to drive behavior, 3) the context, time, and factors determine the importance of belonging, 4) it relates to mattering, 5) it is influenced by personal, individual identities, 6) it leads to positive outcomes of success, and 7) it must be satisfied as conditions change (pp. 29-40).

Although every aspect of the model is useful to understanding and explicating belonging for college students, the aspects utilized for this study of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students are that belonging is a basic human need that relates to mattering and is influenced by individual personal identities (Strayhorn, 2019). Just as the innate needs such as physiological needs and safety are required to be met to achieve higher level needs, so is belonging or

mattering. The need to belong must be sufficiently met before knowledge and understanding occur (Strayhorn, 2019).

Strayhorn theorized the need to belong is innate for all humans, but that the need is increased for marginalized students and much of his research has been focused on students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) of diverse ethnicities and LGBTQ students (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) found in one study of gay men of color that not only did students participate in various seeking behaviors to find belonging, but when their perceived belonging was increased, they felt a stronger connection and motivation to persist in their education along with overall improved well-being. Understanding sense of belonging through Strayhorn's model will allow the qualitative process of receiving individual student experiences to be framed to provide implications for implicit curriculum.

Strayhorn (2019) posited that although the research on college student sense of belonging is vast, much of what is known is somewhat conflated due to the pliable nature of sense of belonging. He noted researchers "equate what students do with what institutions do" and have confused what "students do with what they need and feel" which is not always conducive to understanding sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 24). Strayhorn recognized a gap in sense of belonging research that does not always take into account the specifics of an institutional environment and how those shape belonging for students (Strayhorn, 2019). Tinto (1975) agreed the only way to truly understand circumstance is to conduct smaller studies in one institution. Strayhorn's model is beneficial to understanding this study as it will help to close a gap by utilizing a sample of LGBTQ students within a specific institution and major (social work) allowing for a more defined understanding of how sense of belonging is attained and conditioned within the group.

The three components of the seven of Strayhorn's (2019) theory that will help to explicate the findings of this study are 1) it is a universal basic human need, 4) it relates to mattering, 5) it is influenced by personal, individual identities (pp. 29-39). Strayhorn discussed sense of belonging as a basic human need and driver of behaviors (Strayhorn, 2019). Within human behavior, Strayhorn hypothesized that there are latent and expressed needs. Latent needs refer to those that are in the subconscious and individuals may be unaware they exist but are very much needed while expressed needs are those that are conscious and present (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) applies the foundation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1962) to illuminate the extreme importance of belonging for college students by recognizing that the mission of most institutions is for students to reach higher level knowledge and self-actualization which cannot be met until basic needs are met. See Figure 1.
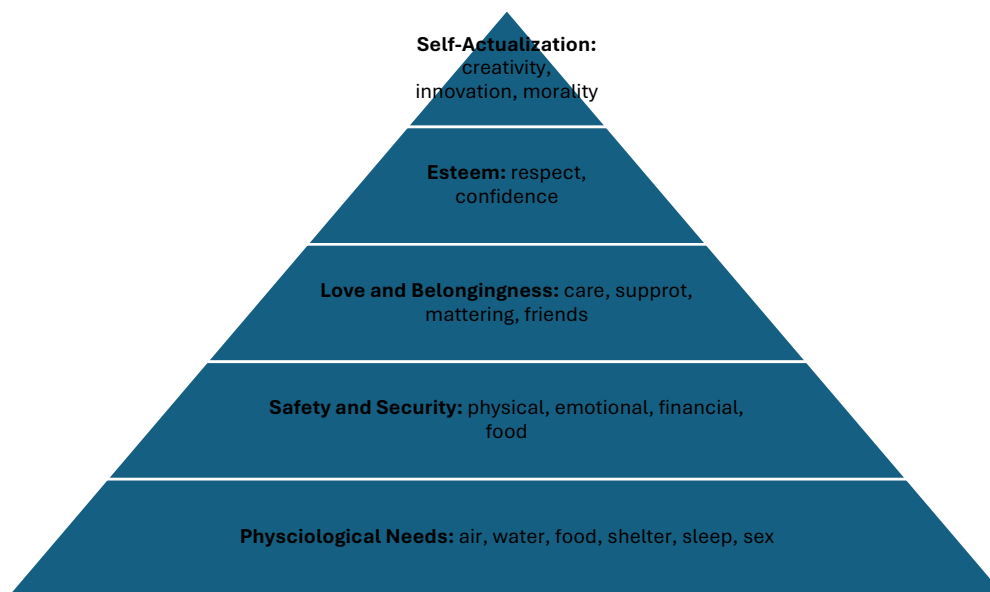
Figure 1 Strayhorn's basic human needs hierarchy, based on insights from Maslow (1954; as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 31).

Strayhorn (2019) depicted sense of belonging as a "consequence of mattering" (p.36) and draws from Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) five dimensions of mattering. Essentially, it is

theorized individuals feel they matter by receiving positive attention, feeling important, depended on, and appreciated, and seeing themselves mirrored in their close relationships (Strayhorn, 2019). This refers to the feeling that others genuinely care about their outcome and that people reflect individually the ideas of the group. For LGBTQ students, seeing themselves reflected in their faculty and peers can increase their belonging and their motivation to succeed (Strayhorn, 2019). For social work students, having a professional identity rooted in the values and ethics of the profession can help them feel more connected to the content (Agllias et al., 2016) and seeing themselves reflected in the content may increase belonging and strengthen professional identity for LGBTQ social work students (Byers et al., 2020).

The final concept of Strayhorn's model related to this study is that social identities intersect and contribute to sense of belonging. LGBTQ students are at some type of intersecting identity because they are LGBTQ and any other identifying characteristic or description. For example, they may have identities of queer, Black, and a social worker. LGBTQ students not only are trying to "fit" in queer spaces, but also the spaces that help shape their other intersecting identities (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, sense of belonging for college students is not only about finding a group that feels fitting but experiencing authentic acceptance as one's true self (Strayhorn, 2019).

Strayhorn (2022) also discussed cultural navigators in the realm of student success initiatives. The term cultural navigator refers to the need for those on campus who understand the complex culture of higher education (i.e. faculty, staff, seasoned peers) to educate those who are entering the space for the first time and understand that they also have value and capabilities to share (Strayhorn, 2022). He notes that too many institutions focus on the student needing to get involved and take on the responsibility of belonging. He explained that this model assumes all

students have access to the resources necessary to engage in this idea of active belonging (Strayhorn, 2022).

Strayhorn's (2019) model may explicate the scaffolding of belonging for LGBTQ students that allows them to access a higher level of understanding of concepts and accrue the capacity necessary to create a professional identity (Craig et al., 2016). Understanding that sense of belonging is a basic need that must be met, should help to inform changes to curriculum and processes to promote equitable access to resources and content.

Minority Stress Theory

Sense of belonging for LGBTQ social work students also can be explored through the lens of Meyer's Minority Stress Model (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). The foundation of Myer's theory is based on a combination of numerous sociological and psychological theories, most notably those of Durkeim's study of normlessness as a cause of suicide (1951), Tajfel and Turner's intergroup theory (1979), and Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory (1984). Durkheim (1951) posited that a sense of anomie or normlessness and alienation can lead to suicide or suicidal thoughts because basic social needs are not met. Tajfel and Turner (1979) discussed social identity theory and how group categorization determines the way individuals feel about self and the group. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) discussed how a divergence between the individual experience and the experience with the environment can cause social stress.

Meyer recognized the problematic nature of initial research on mental wellness in LGBTQ people. Homosexuality was in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1973 when it was removed after advocacy from an LGBTQ affirmative group of clinicians (American Psychiatric Association, 1973). Initial researchers were hypothesizing that LGB people had increased mental health concerns because they were LGB,

while extant literature shows that LGB people experienced higher prevalence of mental health concerns because of their interactions with their environment, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination causing compounding stress (Meyer, 2003).

Although Meyer introduced the model for LGB people, it has since been expanded to include gender diversity and the role that non-affirming stressors play for gender diverse people (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Minority stress rests on the premise that general stress is exacerbated by stress related to prejudice and stigma (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) proposed that there are distal and proximal stress processes for LGBTQ people. Distal stressors are more objective and relate to those that are impacted from the environment or policies that affect LGBTQ people such as acute life events, discrimination or microaggressions, violence, or even events that are expected to be positive but are ruined due to stigma or prejudice (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer, 2003). Proximal stressors are more subjective or internalized and come from the process where individuals learn to reject themselves, internalize stigma, or hide their identity from others (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer, 2003).

Meyer (2003) developed a model (Figure 2) to explain the minority stress pathway that was closely modeled after Dohrenwend's stress model (1998b, 2000; as cited in Meyer, 2003). The model identifies environmental factors contributing to stress (box a), how they overlap with identity as minority status (box b), how they are compounded by identity (box e) and general stressors (box c) combined with distal (box d) and proximal stressors (box f) and how this can lead to either positive or negative health outcomes (box i). Individuals who experience support and affirmation due to their identities may have positive outcomes due to positive community and individual supports (box h).
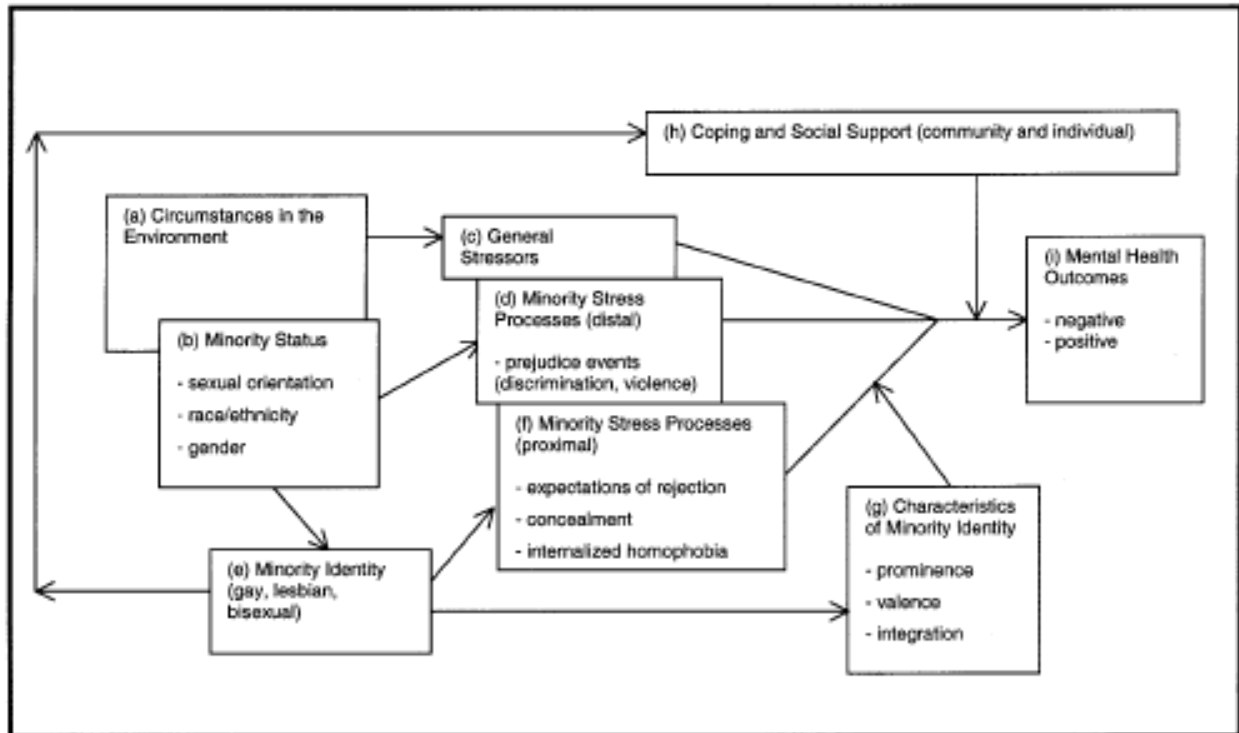
Figure 2 Minority stress process as referenced in Meyer's Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003)

An example of a possible pathway related to this study could be explicated as follows: a transgender college student experiences microaggressions (box d) in class related to their status and identity (boxes b and e) causing them to miss several classes (box c) falling behind in work. This experience increases their depression and lowers their sense of belonging (box i) resulting in them dropping out of higher education. The belonging of LGBTQ college students is tied to their positive experience of affirmation and acceptance from peers and community.

Minority Stress Theory has been applied to mental health and physiological outcomes, policy reform, and as a stress model for interventions aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination for LGBTQ people (Frost & Meyer, 2023). One of the critiques of the theory is that it operates from a deficit model and does not fully consider the resilience of LGBTQ people and the potential positive outcomes of identity (Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014). Meyer cautioned the push for positive psychology paradigms as he believes the focus is then too much on the

individual and not what institutions can do to support the success of LGBTQ people (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

One of the more recent compelling critiques of the minority stress model is from Diamond and Alley (2022) which postulates that it is not minority stress that creates the shift, but lack of social safety. Social safety relates to "social connection, social inclusion, social protection, social recognition, and social acceptance" and is important to understanding the disparities in stress-related health conditions among groups (Diamond & Alley, 2022, p. 5). Diamond and Alley (2022) suggest the idea of social safety be incorporated into the minority stress model. The theory posits that LGBTQ people are constantly seeking input from the environment on whether a situation will be safe for them, and this continued need to self-assess and react causes increased stress or the expected threat of stress (Diamond & Alley, 2022).

Meyer's theory has been utilized by researchers to explore belonging as a protective factor for LGBTQ college students (Alessi et al., 2017; Budge et al., 2019). Students who had a higher feeling of connection and sense of belonging experienced lower prevalence of minority stress responses (Budge et al., 2019). Alessi et al. (2017) found that first year college students experienced stressors based on their identities including microaggressions and concerns of safety and belonging and reported that worrying about these stressors took away from their studies. The Minority Stress Model will be crucial to understanding the stressors that LGBTQ social work students experience and how they impact belonging (Meyer, 2003).

In summary, Strayhorn's Framework for Belonging (2019) and Meyer's Minority Stress model (2003) complement one another while also considering different factors of belonging. Both understand there is a need for belonging to access higher level learning and needs and that institutions and systems have a component of responsibility for positive sense of belonging

(Meyer, 2003; Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) provides a model for understanding why belonging is important and what assists students in feeling they belong. Meyer (2003) articulates how additional stressors can impact LGBTQ people specifically and how this can affect belonging. Together, the theories may explicate the needs of LGBTQ social work students to inform modifications to explicit and implicit curriculum and course climate enhancements.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

There is ample literature on sense of belonging for college students, primarily at the undergraduate level (Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Graham et al., 2022). Most of the research focuses on general sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2022). As social justice advocates, social workers face myriad issues relating to marginalized identities. One subgroup in need of additional research attention is LGBTQ undergraduate social work students (Breaux et al., 2023; Craig et al., 2017). The topics explored were sense of belonging in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (LGBTQ) social work students with search terms including *sense of belonging, higher education, sense of connection, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) college students, faculty connection, mentorship, microaggressions, persistence, retention, and social work students*. Databases searched included JStor, ERIC, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost, APA PsycInfo, Google Scholar, and Taylor and Francis. The following synthesizes common themes throughout the literature on belonging and how it relates to mental wellness, campus climate, and persistence and retention for LGBTQ college students.

Research related to sense of belonging in college students has demonstrated that a positive sense of belonging correlates to higher persistence rates and stronger mental well-being (Beadlescomb, 2019; Blackmon et al., 2020; BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Crane et al., 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Parker, 2021; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2019; Sotardi et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). Many students have a desire to feel less alone and experience authentic support throughout their college experience. LGBTQ students may have strained relationships with their families due to non-affirming family or societal views (Katz-Wise et al., 2016), making them rely more heavily on their time in college to find belonging and identify chosen "kinship" families to sustain them (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020).

The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) require that schools of social work provide opportunities for student belonging and resources that will assist them in the journey toward graduation (CSWE, 2022). The need for supportive services for social work students has grown (Bradshaw, 2021). An increase in mental health concerns for all students points to the need for collective engagement in identifying the core elements that predict a positive sense of belonging in LGBTQ social work students who may be at greater risk.

Sense of Belonging

A positive sense of belonging is a subjective feeling of connection to others or groups that is necessary for higher level learning to occur (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging has been found to be a strong predictor of positive well-being for students (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Most early sense of belonging research in higher education consisted of reviewing belonging as an indicator for retention data (Goodenow, 1993; Tinto, 2012). Belonging has since also been linked to positive mental well-being, social engagement, and community engagement (Allen et al., 2021; Crane et al., 2022). Because sense of belonging is multi-dimensional and often subjective, it is important to look at in relation to other factors such as engagement, environmental factors (climate), mental wellness, and persistence and retention.

Engagement

Engagement with students in a higher education setting can consist of multiple interactions that influence or impact an experience. For this study, the three main themes in the literature pertaining to engagement were peer relationships, faculty connection, and first-year engagement.

Importance of Peer Relationships. A consistent theme in the literature is that students' sense of belonging is increased when they recognize that their experience may not be unique and that other college students are also experiencing similar feelings (Agllias et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2021; Beadlescomb, 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021). The commonality of shared experiences assists students in feeling less isolated and therefore more connected to others. Peer mentoring groups within a discipline or groups with shared interest can lead to positive experiences for students (Agllias et al., 2016; Beadlescomb, 2019; Crowe, 2021; Museus et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021).

When asked to describe what belonging felt like, undergraduate non-binary students most often described feeling understood by their friends or peers as a positive experience and that they counteracted the lack of belonging in physical spaces with the feeling of belonging with people (Dolan, 2023). Understanding the need for connection with peers can lead to offering better programming for forming those connections that may result in more intentional living arrangements, peer mentorship, and allyship training (Gates, 2023).

Although social work is a profession focused on human connection, research suggests heteronormative ideas continue to infiltrate student experiences and belonging (Wagaman et al., 2021). LGBTQ students have expressed being subjected to microaggressions and hostility from peers in social work causing them to fear being out or uncertain when it is safe to be out (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Messinger et al., 2020). Students often felt they had to explain their identity or educate their peers on LGBTQ issues (Goldberg et al. 2019; Mollet et al., 2021) causing them to perceive school climate more negatively than their non-LGBTQ counterparts (Budge et al., 2019). As with most students, LGBTQ social work students often seek a sense of community within their programs and felt building those relationships with other out students

increased their sense of belonging (Wagaman et al., 2021). The research identifies a connection to positive sense of belonging and positive peer relationships.

Connection to Faculty and Mentorship. One of the themes that emerged in the literature as a contributing factor to a higher sense of belonging is caring and approachable faculty support (Agllias et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2021; Beadlescomb, 2019; Museus et al., 2017; O'Keefe, 2013; Peoples et al., 2022). Students who have a strong connection with at least one key person at a university have been found to have a stronger feeling of connectedness and higher likelihood of persisting to the following semester (Agllias et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2021; Beadlescomb, 2019; Museus et al., 2017; O'Keefe, 2013; Peoples et al., 2022). Agllias et al. (2016) found that students appreciated faculty who were able to facilitate relationships between students and genuinely wanted to connect with them to determine how they are doing overall.

LGBTQ students value knowing whether there are out faculty on campus, and they are most interested in a faculty mentor, rather than an experienced peer or community member, that is LGBTQ to promote positive well-being and acclimation to campus or programs (Sarna et al, 2021). The barrier to this may be the percentage of out individuals in academia as Dentato et al. (2014) found that the majority of BASW and MSW LGBTQ students in their study did not know of any out administrators or staff. A similar study focusing on queer and transgender students living on campus found students felt it was important to have faculty that have similar identities (Simpfenderfer et al., 2020).

First Year Engagement. First year engagement and relationships built around shared values and an understanding of core commonalties proved to be a predictor of positive sense of belonging for social work students (Allen et al., 2021; Agllias et al., 2016; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). The transition from high school to university might be overwhelming as sense of

belonging changes as students become more independent from previous supports (Strayhorn, 2019). First year engagement and sense of belonging intervention research focuses on providing opportunities early, typically in the first semester (Alessi et al., 2017). Groups that focus on commonalities such as culture, race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or a particular subject matter can increase sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Beadlescomb, 2019; Museus et al., 2017). Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2021) found that even a one-time intervention that consisted of a video discussing common themes that first-year students experience, followed by an open discussion about individual experiences, increased second semester persistence rates by 17.4 percent over the control group (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021, p. 516).

First year engagement for LGBTQ students has the potential to impact belonging (Sotardi et al., 2021). Developing meaningful relationships with peers and decreasing microaggressions can be a protective factor for LGBTQ students; decreasing their feelings of isolation and increasing their chance of success and persistence (Crane et al., 2022). First year LGBTQ students noted that having authentic relationships where they could be themselves, access to resources such as LGBTQ organizations or gay straight alliances (GSAs) and having LGBTQ positive campus messaging starting with orientation led to higher sense of belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

It is important for first year social work students to learn about their professional identity and how it correlates to their personal identities and aligns with social work values and ethics (Craig et al., 2017). An introductory undergraduate social work course in Australia incorporated allyship training over a four-week period and taught about LGBTIQ+ language, allyship, inclusion, and affirming resources (Gates, 2023). Gates (2023) found that students were more engaged and seemed to rely on each other more throughout the course and the attrition rate

lessened over the two years by approximately two percent (p. 571). Having introductory social work courses begin discussing LGBTQ topics early and often could set the tone for a welcoming climate for LGBTQ students.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors within colleges and universities might impact students in a multitude of ways. For the purpose of this study, the environmental factors explored in the literature were campus climate, course environment, and LGBTQ course content.

Campus Climate. Campus climate can be conceptualized in myriad ways. Anecdotally, for the purpose of this study, it can be referenced as the dynamic of interactions between students, faculty, and staff and how welcome, safe, supported, and valued they feel. Students who feel connected to the campus, faculty, staff, and peers will have a higher sense of belonging, stronger connection, and more positive social relationships overall (Allen et al., 2021; Ogden & Rogerson, 2021).

A positive perception of campus climate correlates to higher sense of belonging for LGBTQ students (Parker, 2021). Mollet et al. (2021) investigated queer college students' experiences living on campus through a longitudinal, qualitative study of 12 queer college students. Students shared their experiences highlighting that opportunities for socializing for queer students, availability of support beyond immediate short-term triage, educating staff and students, and implementing new inclusive policies could be beneficial for student sense of belonging and engagement.

Campus climate can vary across institutions according to major, club, or center dynamics, but knowing out peers or faculty has shown to indicate a positive correlation to campus climate (Garvey et al., 2023). Institutions that foster peer and faculty interactions that are affirming and

have institutional messaging that is inclusive may increase belonging for LGBTQ students (Duran et al., 2020; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Contos et al. (2023) found that LGBQ students identified their support network as friends first, faculty second, family third; citing the importance of faculty support at a rate double that of their heterosexual peers (Contos et al., 2023, p. 39). The importance of academic support for LGBTQ students is evident and important to belonging. Overall, increasing sense of belonging and decreasing microaggressions and isolation on campus for marginalized groups can be a protective factor for LGBTQ students (Duran et al., 2020; Eschmann et al., 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Mollet et al., 2021; Peoples et al., 2022).

Course Environment. Course environment is an important factor to consider in higher education as students may not only rely on courses for content but also faculty and peer connection. Ogden & Rogerson (2021) incorporated positive psychology techniques such as belonging and connection, mindfulness, gratefulness, and humor into their course content for a one semester mental health course. They found that students in the experimental group benefited with higher levels of hopefulness, overall health, and increased meaning, while loneliness decreased throughout the semester (Ogden & Rogerson, 2021).

Often, LGBTQ students are subjected to heteronormative narratives throughout their college experience causing them to feel othered in a manner that is sometimes interpreted as emotionally or physically unsafe (Cohen et al., 2023; Wagaman et al., 2021). For transgender individuals, transphobic messaging contributed to a negative sense of campus climate, which increased stress for students over time (Goldberg et al., 2019). Copp & Koehler (2017) explored the attitudes of undergraduate students and found that they held negative attitudes toward LGBT people, with feelings about transgender people being more negative overall. This could translate

to the need for training programs for students that specifically relate to gender diversity to help students better understand the gender spectrum (Austin et al., 2016; Kia et al., 2023).

Interrupting stigma, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and harmful dialogue was found to be one of the burdens that LGBTQ students recognized as theirs to address in their social work courses (Wagaman et al., 2021). Navigating heteronormative and cisnormative environments with lacking supports can be consuming of LGBTQ students' time and energy (Goldberg et al., 2019). Wagaman et al. (2021) found in their qualitative study of students in BASW, MSW, or PhD programs that students often felt it was their responsibility to interrupt anti-LGBTQ discourse or set boundaries around social work values and ethics when non-LGBTQ students would support views from an anti-LGBTQ+ perspective.

Students in multiple studies expressed concern that peers often cited personal or religious beliefs when voicing anti-LGBTQ views and felt there needed to be more intervention to stop this, just as there would be if they were referring to race or ethnicity (Bernard et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2017; Wagaman et al., 2021). One of the critical components of the CSWE EPAS is to teach from an anti-oppressive lens (CSWE, 2022). To do this, it will be important for social work faculty to feel competent in interrupting anti-LGBTQ discussions and framing the social justice issues that marginalized students face so that students feel more comfortable in class environments (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Dentato et al., 2016).

LGBTQ Course Content. *H*aving visibility and LGBTQ content in courses was seen as essential for forming the mutual respect and allyship necessary for students to feel safe (Bernard et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2016; Wagaman et al., 202). LGBTQ students may look for clues that an instructor values LGBTQ identities by looking for references in discussion, the course content, or materials suggested for further reading (Byers et al., 2020). Museus et al. (2017)

discussed the importance of cultural responsiveness and connection for positive sense of belonging, finding that a culturally engaged campus can improve sense of belonging over time.

Craig et al. (2017) surveyed 1,018 BASW and MSW students across the United States and Canada. They found three themes from students related to lack of effort to discuss LGBTQ professional identity, lack of curriculum on LGBTQ content, and unaffirming LGBTQ school climates (Craig et al., 2017). Students felt that they were not well prepared for navigating being out LGBTQ social workers or to work with LGBTQ clients (Craig et al., 2017). Many students felt there was not enough LGBTQ content across the courses and only offered in electives (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2017; Gates, 2023). In summary, having additional LGBTQ content in classrooms along with more out LGBTQ faculty and staff may increase belonging for social work students.

Mental Wellness

College student mental health and well-being remains a concern for educators (Bourdon et al., 2021). According to the Healthy Minds Study (2021), 22% of students in higher education experienced depression, 34% experienced anxiety, and 13% had suicidal ideation in the past year (Healthy Minds Network, 2021, p. 3). Suicidal ideation was found to be higher in those identifying as sexual or gender minoritized students (Rosenthal et al., 2023). The American College Health Association's (2022) National College Health Assessment (ACHANCHA III) found that over 50% of college students completing the Kessler 6 Non-Specific Psychological Distress Score felt moderate psychological distress. They also found that of those surveyed, 2.8% of men, 2.1 % of women, and 7% of transgender/gender diverse individuals attempted suicide over the last year (American College Health Assessment, 2022, pp. 14-16).

LGBTQ students have an increased risk for depression and anxiety compared to their non-LGBTQ peers (Bourdon et al., 2021; Jones-White et al., 2022; Rosenthal et al., 2023; Wilson & Liss, 2020). Bourdon et al. (2021) conducted a study to compare the rates of service utilization among LGB+ college students. They found that LGB+ students were "105% more like to receive treatment for anxiety, 206% more likely to receive treatment for depression and 194% more likely to seek counseling services" than their straight counterparts (Bourdon et al., 2021, p. 753). Among a study of doctoral students in the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences, "41% reported moderate to severe anxiety and 39% had moderate to severe depression" and students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual had a statistically significant higher likelihood of experiencing depression and anxiety (Jones-White et al., 2022, p. 2433). Rosenthal et al. (2023) found that "sexual and gender minorities had 300% increased odds of suicidal ideation" compared to cisgender straight identifying males (p. 43).

Sotardi et al. (2021) compared LGBTQ students to non-LGBTQ students and found that all first-year students in their study had perceptions of belonging and social adjustment that were linked to achievement motivation, well-being, and academic performance, however LGBTQ students scored lower than their non-LGBTQ counterparts in all areas of belonging measured. LGBTQ students often have increased difficulty navigating peer connection correlating to a lower sense of belonging than their straight counterparts (Blackmon et al., 2020; BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Parker 2021; Sotardi et al., 2021). The findings demonstrate that campus programs may be falling short on providing protective factors for LGBTQ students and speaks to the need for expanding understanding of what increases mental wellness and belonging for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students expressed a need for access to counseling staff or centers that understand their unique needs as they experience increased mental health concerns and increased

suicidal ideation compared to their non-LGBTQ peers (Bourdon et al., 2021; Jones-White et al., 2022; Rosenthal et al., 2023; Wilson & Liss, 2020). College campuses are an ideal place for LGBTQ students to grow in their connections and feel safe to explore identity.

Adverse Childhood Experiences. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are described as traumatic or potentially traumatic events that can have future implications for health or mental health (Craig et al., 2020) Individuals in the social work profession often can be impacted from past experiences or trauma (Collins, 2006; Holley et al., 2022; Ogden & Rogerson, 2021) contributing to complex stress as they progress through course content and practicum. MSW students in one study reported their rate of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to be 79% of those surveyed, with 42% experiencing at least 4 or more ACEs (Thomas, 2016, p. 243).

Craig et al. (2020) completed a study with 3,508 LGBTQ youth ages 14-18 and found that 43% of those surveyed had four or more ACEs (p. 6) and that 88% had reported at least one ACE (p. 10). Feil et al. (2023) studied both cisgender and gender diverse adults and found that 28.6% of transgender and gender diverse adults reported four or more ACEs compared to 5.7% of their cisgender peers (p.4). They also found that the highest ACEs for transgender and gender diverse adults in their study was peer and parental emotional abuse (Feil et al., 2023). The findings suggest a need for trauma informed care for LGBTQ youth and adults and that college students may be navigating complicated family relationships (Feil et al., 2023; Craig et al., 2020).

Pandemic Related Stressors. In the beginning of March 2020, more than 300 universities made the decision to move to fully online delivery options due to the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 virus (Evans et al., 2021). Most institutions remained fully online through at least the spring semester of 2020 and the pandemic lasted longer than anticipated

(Lischer et al., 2022). Students were not only affected by isolation and a change in course delivery during this time, but also financially, medically, and emotionally (Blankstein et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021; Lischer et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Paceley et al., 2021). Approximately 30% to 40% of students were concerned about having their basic needs met (Blankstein et al., 2020, p. 14).

Undergraduate and graduate social work students (61%) reported feeling that they learned less as a result of the stressors they experienced during the pandemic (Evans et al., 2021, p. 774). Paceley et al. (2021) discussed the grief that social work students experienced with feeling as though they lost their connection, academic experience, and connection to clients. Students felt it was essential to have clear expectations with room for flexibility for students experiencing mental health concerns. Universities strived to do this while maintaining equitable treatment and academic rigor with a goal of providing the resources necessary to persist to graduation (Morris et al., 2022; Paceley et al., 2021).

Gonzales et al. (2023) found that of the LGBTQ students surveyed, approximately 40% reported unmet mental health needs (p.8) and concerns about their financial status (p. 13) while 38% were concerned about their personal safety (p. 11). Most students surveyed were between the ages of 18-24 and 44% said they were from unsupportive families (p.5). Approximately, one in four reported they felt that they had to go back to hiding their identity from family or friends during the pandemic (Gonzales et al., 2023, p. 8). It is clear from these studies that the pandemic added another layer of stressors for LGBTQ students.

Gatekeeping in Social Work Education. Gatekeeping is an important function in social work education and described as "a process by which individuals are either afforded or denied access to a formal social work education" (Osteen et al., 2023, p. 67). The Council on Social

Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (2022) discuss the need to evaluate whether students are prepared to enter the profession. Each accredited program must have clear policies outlining their protocol should any concerns with students in class, personal life, or practicum arise (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

Social work students, as members of a helping profession, often do not seek help for mental health concerns out of fear of being perceived as not suitable for practice (Kotera at al., 2019). Kotera et al. (2019) found that "self-criticism, unclear role identity, and lacking self-compassion" were predictors of mental health problems (p. 363). The practice of gatekeeping within the profession, while necessary, can lead to feelings of shame and inadequacies for students experiencing mental health concerns. This coupled with the increasing demands and oppression students face can cause students to avoid care or seeking help (Holley et al., 2022; Kotera et al., 2019).

On the other hand, professional development is considered one of the professional values in social work education (NASW, 2021). Students in a study conducted by Bernard et al. (2014), referenced the professional growth that social work students may accrue through their studies but believed that at some point students must assess and respond to personal bias or be counseled on whether this is a good fit for them within the profession. As best practice, it is recommended that schools of social work have ongoing discussions about how they will incorporate LGBTQ inclusive content across the curriculum and their process for accessing professional fit through gatekeeping methods should anti-LGBTQ practices or narratives be present (Craig et al., 2016).

LGBTQ Microaggressions. Sue et al. (2010) defined microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual

orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 5). Students who experience microaggressions in courses or on campus are at a higher likelihood for disruption of their college progression (Crane et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2018). If instructors do not disrupt the narratives of discrimination, marginalized students may be left feeling unsafe and invalid.

LGBTQ college students experience microaggressions consistently with students at intersections of one or more identities having even more difficulty (Akapnitis et al., 2023; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2020). While schools of social work have historically been considered leaders in social change and social justice, research has shown that LGBTQ students in schools of social work also experience a high frequency of microaggressions and minority stress (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Budge et al., 2020; Byers et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2011; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Messinger et al., 2020; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017; Turner et al., 2018). Experiencing consistent microaggressions can lead to disengagement and has been found to decrease sense of belonging in LGBTQ students (Blackmon et al., 2020; Budge et al., 2020).

Several studies show a gap between social work values and how education is perceived by LGBTQ students (Bernard et al., 2014; Messinger et al., 2020). Many LGBTQ social work students observed heteronormative language and faculty privileging straight identity in classroom content and practicum and felt that the instructors were not prepared to discuss LGBTQ content or mitigate microaggressions during classroom discourse (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Messinger et al., 2020).

Practicum in Social Work Education

Since social work is an applied profession, practicum is required for every Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) student and consists of an internship

where elements of educational instruction are incorporated into social work practice with individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities under the supervision of a professional social worker (CSWE, 2022). Each BSW student completes at least 400 hours and each MSW student completes at least 900 hours of service in their placement (CSWE, 2022). Students are typically matched with a site and in most cases can interview prior to accepting an internship position. The CSWE EPAS (2022) state that social workers should promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice in their practice and the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) is clear that social workers should not condone any form of discrimination.

Social work students struggle with knowing whether to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity in practicum environments (Messinger et al., 2020). Social work students want to see representation of diverse genders and sexualities in their instructors and practicum supervisors and non-discrimination policies that reflect gender identity and sexual orientation (Byers et al., 2020; Messinger et al., 2020). Messinger et al. (2020) found in their qualitative study that social work students frequently referenced an unsupportive agency atmosphere in practicum, contributing this to lacking competence in LGBTQ issues, hostile work environments, frequent microaggressions, and limited nondiscrimination policies. Feeling exposed to unsupportive environments and practicum opportunities could contribute to decreased sense of belonging for LGBTQ social work students.

Despite the social work profession being called to promote social justice and end oppressive practices, students commonly experienced misgendering and tokenization from faculty and practicum supervisors (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Messinger et al., 2020). Several students noted feeling uncomfortable due to conservative religious beliefs held by their faculty, practicum sites, or peers about LGBTQ issues that caused them to feel

unsafe engaging in dialogue (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Messinger et al., 2020). These types of class environments, faculty engagement, and practicum experiences created further marginalization and interfered with the students' ability to build community within their profession or receive adequate mentorship, leading to lower sense of belonging (Byers et al., 2020; Goldberg et al., 2019; Messinger et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2018).

Persistence and Retention

Persistence and retention rates remain a top priority for higher education institutions (Legg et al., 2020). In higher education, persistence rates are typically understood to mean students returning for the next semester at any institution, whereas retention commonly refers to returning to the same institution (Gardner, 2022). Some of the most common focus points in the retention literature are campus climate, policies and programs, mental health and well-being, and positivistic approaches such as connectedness (Beadlescomb, 2019; Crane et al., 2022; Denton, 2020; Legg et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021; Peoples et al., 2022).

It is known that decreased sense of belonging and higher mental health concerns can lead to a decline in retention or persistence rates (Beadlescomb, 2019; Museus et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021). However, the research and literature on LGBTQ retention or persistence is lacking (Garvey, 2020; Legg et al., 2020). Most colleges and universities do not collect data on LGBTQ identities on admission (Legg et al., 2020). One of the contributing factors to decreased retention for LGBTQ students is their feeling of safety on campus (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) found that sexual orientation was the motivating factor behind sixteen percent of hate crimes on college

campuses (p. 1), while 59.4% of transgender college students reported that they feared for their safety due to their gender identity or perceived sexual orientation (Cantor et al., 2019, p.25).

Students who experience microaggressions are at an increased risk of lower sense of belonging contributing to lower persistence rates (Blackmon et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2022). Students at intersections, those specifically identifying as BIPOC and LGBTQ, can experience increased oppression contributing to a decline in persistence rates (Coleman et al., 2020). Denton (2020) investigated retention through queer theory and posited that to understand and implement retention efforts from a queer perspective, individuals should look at deconstructing binaries, challenging the normative views, and dismantling oppressive practices. There is a need to gain a stronger qualitative understanding of persistence for LGBTQ social work students as there are multiple factors that may contribute to a disruption in their education.

Conclusion

Increasing sense of belonging and decreasing microaggressions and isolation for marginalized groups can be a protective factor for students experiencing mental health concerns (Eschmann et al., 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Mollet et al., 2021; Peoples et al., 2022). Increasing belonging for LGBTQ social work students and disrupting harmful narratives can have a significant impact on retention and persistence rates, perceived campus climate, and mental wellness (Bourdon et al., 2021; Byers et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2022; Jones-White et al., 2022; Messinger et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2023; Wilson & Liss, 2020). To facilitate change social work educators could view implicit and explicit curriculum through a queer lens which involves creating inclusive programming and curriculum, economic and racial justice initiatives, shifting cultural norms and values away from heteronormative ideals, recognizing the need for fluidity, and understanding the holistic sense of self (Crane et al., 2022; Denton, 2020; Legg et al., 2020).

There are gaps between social work values and ethics and how LGBTQ social work students perceive their classroom environment and sense of belonging (Bernard et al., 2014; Messinger et al., 2020). It is imperative to better understand the experience of LGBTQ social work students. Having a more holistic understanding of belonging through concepts such as perceived campus climate, retention, and mental wellness for LGBTQ social work students can have a profound impact. With this information, improvements to implicit and explicit curriculum, persistence efforts, and practicum policies can be implemented.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students and how this experience impacts sense of belonging. The hope is that the findings from the study will be used to inform implicit and explicit curriculum adjustments. This chapter will discuss the design, data collection, sample, and threats to validity for both quantitative and qualitative design measures.

Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

The researcher recognizes that as a white, cisgender, queer, female who is a first-generation college student, graduate student, and doctoral student, there are privileges held and power dynamics to consider. The researcher acknowledges that although being queer can create a sense of ease for LBGTQ participants allowing them to tell their story openly, the view of the researcher contains bias. The researcher utilized participants for the study who attend the program in which she works, which may have had impact on the response bias of the participants.

The researcher attempted to mitigate this bias through consultation, peer and participant debriefing, and triangulation. The researcher utilized students who were not known well to her from external contexts for the study. The researcher also relied on the assistant practicum coordinator to coordinate placements for any students who participated in the study. Understanding that the research is subjective, efforts to acknowledge bias about the content of the research or the study participants was made through the practice of personal and interpersonal reflexivity and memo writing.

Design

   The study was a non-experimental exploratory study to better understand the current experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students and how their experience relates to their perceived sense of belonging. The study's design was driven by the research questions listed below and incorporated a concurrent mixed method design study utilizing primary data. The research questions are as follows:

1. *How do LGBTQ undergraduate social work students rate their belonging at a public university?*

2. *What are the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

3. *What are the key factors that contribute to positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

   Demographic information was collected through online Qualtrics surveys. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews and utilized to capture the real-life experiences of LGBTQ social work students and how their experiences affected their belonging. Quantitative data provided a stronger understanding and validity of the phenomenon through online surveys utilizing a validated sense of belonging scale to assess whether there is a correlation to the scale scores and the qualitative data. An additional scale, the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students, developed by the researcher, was utilized to understand LGBTQ belonging (Strohman, 2024). A mixed method design study was used to mitigate threats to validity through triangulation and help to better understand the nuances of sense of belonging for LGBTQ social work students (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss how triangulation from multiple data sources and methods may corroborate evidence and increase validity to qualitative findings which helped to control for some of the validity threats such as respondent bias, researcher bias, and reactivity (Padgett, 2017). Gitlin & Czaja (2016) and Padgett (2017) also support the use of mixed method design to strengthen research and better understand a phenomenon.

Concurrent design is used to describe the method of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data and analyzing the data together to infer meaning (Gitlin & Czaja, 2016). Sequential design is a process where qualitative data is collected prior to quantitative data (Gitlin & Czaja, 2016). Concurrent design was preferred over sequential design as both the quantitative and qualitative measures assist in better understanding one phenomenon: belonging. In concurrent design, less emphasis is placed on how each data set affects another and instead is more focused on what they infer about the phenomenon when combined (Gitlin & Czaja, 2016). For this study, quantitative measures were collected prior to the qualitative interview taking place.

Quantitative Design

Quantitative data was collected for the correlational quantitative research component utilizing the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (Hoffman et al., 2002) and LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC) (Strohman, 2024). The data was collected using online surveys via Qualtrics Software, copyright © 2020. The four dimensions of the Revised Sense of Belonging scale take a deeper look at perceived peer support, perceived classroom comfort, perceived isolation, and perceived faculty support making this scale relevant to the study to determine current sense of belonging for LGBTQ social work students (Hoffman et al., 2002).

The five dimensions of the SBSC are peer connection, faculty connection, campus climate, LGBTQ visibility, and LGBTQ safety (Strohman, 2024). This scale adds to the data by specifically looking at belonging through a queer lens and addressing visibility and safety as additional components. Students were asked to consider the questions in the context of their social work program. Because the quantitative data helped to triangulate the qualitative data, the researcher chose to use a validated instrument to measure the construct of belonging along with one that was developed specifically for the study to enhance content and face validity (Gitlin & Czaja, 2016; Miller & Whicker, 1999).

Face validity refers to how effective the measure is at measuring the construct and can be somewhat subjective. Content validity is the extent to which a measure considers all the important issues to measure the construct (Padgett, 2017). Adding the LGBTQ SBSC assisted in increasing content and face validity by adding specific information about LGBTQ students that is sometimes lacking in traditional belonging scales. Details about data collection and sample is discussed later in this chapter.

Quantitative Internal Threats to Validity. Internal validity threats to this non-experimental design study included statistical validity threats namely related to the small size of the sample, researcher bias, historical events, and attrition (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The sample size of the study was small for quantitative measures. To mitigate the statistical validity threats, it was important to include the qualitative research in a mixed method design to enhance the rigor of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018)**.** To guard against self-report bias, clarity about confidentiality was in the informed consent and participation voluntary. Because the study was completed in a college program, there is always the potential for attrition to occur during the study where individuals drop out of the study or are no longer an active student. To minimize or

prevent attrition, the concurrent design was chosen, and the quantitative and qualitative data

collection occurred during the same semester over three months. All students remained active

social work students during the time of data collection. Historical events, or those that may have

impacted belonging for students outside of the social work program, were considered and

discussed when they surfaced.

   Quantitative External Validity Threats. External threats to validity relate to

generalizability, which refers to whether the results can be generalized to other populations

outside the study (Rothwell, 2005, as cited in Gitlin & Czaja, 2016). A cohort model is supported

by Tinto (1975), which is one of the theories forming the base of the study's theoretical

framework for belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and allows for a deeper understanding of the external

factors that are contributing to belonging. Therefore, this study utilized a cohort model by using

participants that were currently students in the BASW program at one university. A cohort model

does not allow results to be generalized to other populations. However, using a qualitative

component and comparing the results with that of extant literature on belonging assisted in

understanding how this research can be expanded and the recommendations used for

transferability outside of the study cohort (Padgett, 2017).

Research Question

1. *How do LGBTQ undergraduate social work students rate their belonging at a public*
   university?

  Hypothesis. Based on what is known from the literature, the hypothesis related to

quantitative measures is

1. LGBTQ social work students will score on the lower range of perceived sense of
   belonging.

Qualitative Design

A qualitative approach allowed for the researcher to better understand the unique experiences of participants and a phenomenon that is a subjective construct (Padgett, 2017; Strayhorn, 2019). Because the aim of the study was to determine how sense of belonging is impacted by the experiences of being an LGBTQ college student, a phenomenological qualitative research design was utilized (Padgett, 2017). This type of research design allowed for further understanding of the individual human experience which helped to explicate the social construct of sense of belonging and connection while developing an understanding of the collective experience (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Narrative design was considered for its ability to deeply understand the experiences of individuals but was too limiting for this study aimed at understanding belonging for LGBTQ social work students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample was homogeneous and within a specific program, therefore case study was also considered. However, a case study would have needed to rely not only on the student experiences but also those of faculty and staff within a specific timeframe (Padgett, 2017). The program was going through a large programmatic shift with the implementation of the new EPAS. The researcher felt it was necessary to obtain a baseline understanding of the current student experiences to provide insight into potential implicit and explicit curriculum adjustments which could then be further studied once changes are implemented. A phenomenological design was considered the best fit to provide a deeper understanding of a construct through the experience of individuals allowing the research to focus on the integration of the phenomenon and the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative Threats to Validity. Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is important for the rigor of the data (Padgett, 2017). To guard against researcher bias, Moustakas (1994, as cited

in Creswell & Poth, 2018) discusses transcendental phenomenology which focuses on "bracketing" preconceptions helping to mitigate bias. This researcher made efforts to bracket bias related to being a member of the LGBTQ community. In addition to the methods discussed previously, clarifying researcher bias was addressed through personal and interpersonal reflexivity through memo writing and transparency with a positionality statement. A peer reviewer was utilized to review the data for consistency and provide debriefing to guard against researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2017).

Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the need for at least two validation strategies to be incorporated into each qualitative study. As stated previously, corroborating evidence through triangulation in a mixed method design helped to solidify patterns related to themes in the research through both methodological and data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2017). Member checking was completed by asking two participants to review the transcript through a voluntary follow-up email (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2017). Individual responses were chosen over a focus group to protect the time and confidentiality of the participants. To further protect against bias and increase trustworthiness, the researcher used peer debriefing sessions with one peer who has extensive qualitative research experience. Utilizing peer debriefing is a way of confirming that the findings are "worthy, honest, and believable" (Spall, 1998, p. 280).

Because the methods of data collection are self-report, to mitigate against self-report bias, open-ended questions were used, and participants were provided an informed consent and assured of confidentiality methods. The researcher was clear about the use of the research and that only the researcher will have access to identifying information (Bergen & Labonte, 2020). As discussed previously, member checking and triangulation also have a positive effect on

reducing respondent bias (Padgett, 2017). To increase trustworthiness, the researcher reviewed the responses of the participants against the theoretical frameworks and the current literature on LGBTQ belonging, adding to the study's transferability (Padgett, 2017).

Research Questions

1. *What are the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*
2. *What are the key factors that contribute to positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

Setting

The study was conducted in a large suburban public university in the northeast with participants who were actively enrolled in the BASW program at the time of data collection. According to the enrollment numbers as of summer 2024, 284 students were enrolled in the BASW program. The school of social work is comprised of eleven full-time faculty members, three full-time staff members, and approximately five temporary part-time faculty members (TPTF or adjunct). The number of active adjunct faculty fluctuates each semester and is dependent on the course offerings.

Sample

The study explored the experiences of five undergraduate LBTQ social work students at one public university in the Northeast and how their experience relates to belonging. Because the study aimed to understand LGBTQ students specifically, purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling were utilized. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative phenomenological studies to examine one phenomenon and how it is experienced by a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling is the choice

to solicit participants who can most accurately answer the research questions, in this case, LGTBQ undergraduate social work students.

The study was a homogenous purposive sample (Padgett, 2017) to include only LGBTQ undergraduate students from one BASW program. Because the participants attended the program where the researcher worked, convenience and snowball sampling were also used to recruit the participants in an attempt to increase sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As noted, the study was a mixed-method design, and the quantitative component was utilized for triangulation of the data and to better understand how LGBTQ social work students participating in the qualitative research rate their belonging. Purposive, convenience sampling was also used for the quantitative component of the study. Demographic information was collected and used to determine whether the participants met the inclusion criteria for the study.

There are differing findings of what a sample size should be for a qualitative phenomenological study, with some studies being as small as one and others completed on a much larger scale (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2017). However, homogenous samples can be successful with smaller numbers focusing on depth rather than breadth (Padgett, 2017). For this study, a sample size of 5 participants was used. The sample size was small specifically as it relates to the quantitative component (Gitlin & Czaja, 2016) which will be later discussed in data analysis and limitations. Although purposive sampling already implies that there are specific recruitment criteria, it was important to establish inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants.

Inclusion Criteria

Invitations to participate in the study were sent to students currently enrolled in the undergraduate BASW program at one university via email. The study data was collected in the fall 2024 semester only. The following were the criteria for inclusion in the study:

- Social work students over the age of 18 actively enrolled at the identified institution at the time of the recruitment (fall, 2024).

- Enrolled in the BASW program.

- Self-identify as LGBTQ.

- Agree to voluntarily complete the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (2002) and the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (Strohman, 2024).

- Voluntarily agree to participate in at least one qualitative in-depth interview about belonging.

Exclusion Criteria

The following describes the criteria of those who will be excluded as study participants:

- Students under the age of 18.

- Students attending any other institution other than the identified institution.

- Students enrolled in a primary major other than social work.

- Non-LGBTQ students.

- Graduate students.

Ten students completed the initial survey. One was removed for incomplete data, leaving nine students. The researcher emailed each of the nine students to offer an opportunity to participate in the qualitative interviews. Of those nine, five participated in the interview portion of the study, leaving a full study sample size of five (n=5).

Data Collection

First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and received by the researcher through the university along with a letter of support from the Chair of the School of

Social Work and the Dean of the college. See Appendix A for the letter of support and IRB approval documents. The researcher had access to the students as a staff member and faculty at the university. The researcher sent an email to the BASW listserv of students currently enrolled in the program. The email contained a call for participants with inclusion criteria and basic information about the study. In the email was a link to the informed consent, which was collected through Qualtrics software, copyright © 2020 with signatures required. Each participant was asked to consent to complete the quantitative and qualitative components of the study.

Immediately after the informed consent, was a request for demographic information to include questions related to age, program, year in program, program modality, race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Following the demographic page, participants completed the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (2002) and the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC) (Strohman, 2024). Once the scales were completed, the participant received an automated message through Qualtrics that stated "Your response has been recorded. If you meet the inclusion criteria, the researcher will follow up with a request to schedule a recorded interview. Thank you for your participation in the survey!" Refer to Appendix B for a copy of the recruitment email.

After one month of minimal participation, the researcher submitted an addendum to IRB requesting recruitment protocols in addition to email through the BASW listserv, which was approved. The new recruitment methods included snowball sampling allowing others to recommend people to the study, providing an overview and link/QR code during presentations in class or events, flyers, and via communication from other faculty/staff. The recruitment tools provided inclusion criteria with a link or QR code embedded in the materials that linked to the Qualtrics informed consent, demographic information, and belonging scales. The researcher

attended three classes where an overview and flyer were provided to all students and posted

flyers on the social work floor of the university. Two social work faculty members advertised the

flyers in their asynchronous courses and to students they knew who identified as LGBTQ.

Quantitative Data Collection

The Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (2003) and the LGBTQ Safety and

Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC) (Strohman, 2024) were utilized to obtain a

baseline of belonging for the participants and triangulate the qualitative data. Students were

asked to complete the scale after consenting to participate in the study. Hoffman's (2002) revised

scale is based off Tinto's theoretical framework of attrition theory (Hoffman et al., 2003). The

scale was chosen as it correlates to Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of belonging, one

of the frameworks for this dissertation, of which Tinto was also a base theory. The SBSC

(Strohman, 2024) was developed by the researcher to obtain more nuanced information about

belonging specifically for LGBTQ students. The scale was developed using the theoretical

framework and literature review of this study incorporating Strayhorn's (2019) belonging

framework and Minority Stress theory (Meyer, 2003). Details about how the scales were

developed are below.

Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale. The phenomenon or latent variable

measured on the scale is sense of belonging for college students. The scale utilizes 26 emergent

variables under four themes consisting of perceived peer support, perceived classroom comfort,

perceived isolation, and perceived faculty support (Hoffman et al., 2002). The motivation for the

scale was to better understand belonging to enhance retention programs. The atheoretical

constructs measured were age, gender, race, residency status, year in school, and classroom

environment. The participants choose between "1 completely untrue, 2 mostly untrue, 3 equally

true and untrue, 4 mostly true, and 5 completely true" (Hoffman et al., 2002). The factors are summed, and the mean calculated. With the exception of the *perceived isolation* subscale which was not reversed scored, higher scores would suggest a higher perceived sense of belonging for participants on the Likert scale. Lower scores on the *perceived isolation* subscale would indicate lower feelings of isolation. There are no weights, and no questions are reversed scored.

To validate the scale, Hoffman et al. (2002) used focus groups to identify content validity and asked students qualitative questions. They held 12 non-learning community and 12 learning community focus groups during the final two weeks of a mini 6-week semester that lasted 60 minutes. They asked questions related to "peer relationships, experiences with faculty, participation in campus activities, changes and challenges faced since the start of the semester, stressors in the collegiate environment, satisfaction with the University, and intentions to persist" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 233) and used manual axial coding for the analysis.

Themes emerged and an original 85 item scale (50 items for student/peer relationships and 35 items for student/faculty relationships) was given as a pre-test to students in the introductory psychology courses. Of the 448 responses, 205 were analyzed for construct validity. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the dimensions needed to measure sense of belonging and reduce the number of scales needed to effectively measure the dimensions (Hoffman et al., 2002). Hoffman et al. (2002) used principal components factor analysis and removed items that were redundant or did not meet their factor loading requirements. The five dimensions were identified as "Perceived Peer Support, Perceived Faculty Support/Comfort, Perceived Classroom Comfort, Perceived Isolation, and Empathetic Faculty Understanding" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 248). The Cronbach's alpha of the student/peer scales was 0.91 for the entire scale and for the faculty/student relationships scale 0.90 (Hoffman et al.,

2002, pp. 239-243). The revised scale combined "perceived faculty support/comfort" and "empathetic faculty" into "perceived faculty support" to have four dimensions rather than five (Hoffman et al., 2002). Because the scale uses a five-point Likert, the benchmark that was utilized for this study was a score of three (neutral) or higher on the overall scale and subscales to indicate higher levels of belonging. Refer to Appendix C for the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (2002).

Scale Development: LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC). Research questions were used to create a quantitative measure to gather data from LGBTQ college students using the literature review (outlined in Chapter 2) to create a blueprint and a focus group. After a scale draft was created, cognitive interviews were completed with experts on the topic and a pilot study completed. The pilot survey included demographic questions, an unordered closed-ended item that attempted to answer most important aspects of belonging for LGBTQ students, and a constructed response question aimed to better understand how LGBTQ students define belonging. The steps for developing the scale are outlined below. The researcher developed this scale with the goal of obtaining a better understanding of how LGBTQ students perceive their belonging and safety. The SBSC collects data through 17 statements comprised of 5 domains including faculty connection, peer connection, campus climate (affirming spaces), LGBTQ visibility, and LGBTQ safety (measured in terms of minority stress and microaggressions).

Focus Group. During the initial phase of the development of the scale, this researcher conducted a focus group over Zoom with 4 LGBTQ people who were currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, graduate or undergraduate programs. Two identified as lesbian women in, or recently in, graduate school, one identified as a bisexual woman in graduate school, and

one identified as fluid and genderqueer and a recent graduate of undergraduate school. The age range was mid-twenties to mid-forties. Discussion questions included composed questions with probes and open dialogue. The questions for discussion and consideration included:

- How would you briefly describe your experiences as an LGBTQ college student using a few sentences or words to describe it?

- What types of policies, organizations, or resources for LGBTQ students were you aware of on campus or in your programs?

   o How do you think being aware or not aware impacted your experience?

- What were or are some of your challenges as an LGBTQ college student?

- Can anyone describe a specific negative experience on campus or in a classroom?

- How would you describe your peer connections in college?

   o How were these connections facilitated?

- How important was faculty connection to you?

   o What are the attributes that made it easier to connect with faculty?

- What types of LGBTQ content was visible or discussed in your courses, syllabi, etc.?

- What types of microaggressions or safety concerns did you experience on campus in your classroom, if at all?

- Can anyone provide a specific example of a positive experience that you experienced on campus or in a classroom related to being an LGTBQ student?

- Thinking about all these experiences, how did your experience impact your overall sense of belonging?

Key Findings of the Focus Group. It was clear by the participants' responses that there was an undertone of gauging safety or a feeling of loneliness at times. A few participants said they

were lonely until they found others or that it was hard to meet or know other out peers. Others mentioned feeling guarded until they saw affirming messaging or peers talking about their partners or pronouns.

An important discussion that occurred throughout was about affirming messaging. Participants discussed knowing about some resources on campus, but not many, and shared that most of the time they felt these spaces weren't "meant" for them. What they did say was that seeing symbols such as pride flags, LGBTQ centers or clubs, and the existence of programs such as rainbow graduations was affirming. Participants shared that knowing accepting and welcoming faculty and peers was important.

Half of the participants communicated that they did not know of any out faculty in their programs, but that it may have helped them to come out sooner had they seen a successful out mentor. Others noted that knowing of out faculty helped them to feel safer expressing themselves. All participants shared faculty connection wasn't as important to them as peer connection, but they felt safer with welcoming faculty who allowed them to express themselves freely without judgement and held the class to the same standard.

LGBTQ content was addressed the least by participants and when asked they noted they had very little content related to LGBTQ issues included in their courses. Of those that did have some content, they stated it was discussed along with queer theory or in required general education courses in undergraduate programs such as sociology courses. Participants did mention it felt isolating being the only one to bring up queer ideas in classes and when it was discussed by faculty or other peers, it created a more welcoming environment for them.

Safety was addressed by participants when discussing challenges, peer connection, and microaggressions. Participants stated they experienced safety concerns and microaggressions in

courses, on campus, and through bullying by peers. Two participants mentioned bullying or harassment within queer spaces such as not feeling "queer enough" due to being bisexual or queer peers sexually harassing them, making them feel unsafe. An important piece to belonging for all participants was having strong peer connections.

Peer connection was brought into the conversation by the participants more often than any other topic or theme. Having strong relationships with peers allowing them to feel welcome, accepted and affirmed in their identity was important to the participants' success and belonging in college. Participants noted peers, both queer peers and allies, as those who made them feel most welcome and as the primary contributors to their positive belonging in college. Participants acknowledged that peer connections were most facilitated through extracurricular activities, but also through group work and class discussions.

Cognitive Interviews and Key Findings. Cognitive interviewing is a qualitative method of understanding how the questions are perceived and interpreted by potential participants and is valuable for editing survey questions for appropriate fit (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022). The SBSC was taken by two individuals who were experts in the subject matter of LGBTQ college students, followed by a discussion of each question with the researcher. After completion of the cognitive interviews, feedback was considered, and the measure was edited accordingly.

Two students who recently graduated from master's degree programs participated in the cognitive interviews. One was as a bisexual cisgender female and the other a transgender non-binary queer person. They were similar in age although each had a significantly different experience in graduate school contributing to a different perspective on the scale items. The individuals represented closely those who would be the typical population taking the survey.

The interview experience was revealing of several wording errors and confusion and was helpful in processing the item components. There were comments made while processing some of the statements and the responses helped to clarify some of the needed atheoretical constructs, as well.

Both expert participants discussed utilizing words such as "campus" as being exclusionary for students participating in courses online or for graduate students who do not attend campus events as often as undergraduate students might. The word campus was removed from questions. The participants pointed out word choices that might be confusing and double-barreled questions which were edited for simplicity. Two items were removed, one because it was confusing and measured two constructs, while the other because it did not adequately measure the construct intended. Both participants felt the way they scored, although on opposite sides of the Likert scale, were accurate to how they experienced belonging in college. They also assisted in clarifying atheoretical constructs and identifying additional, such as age, that were added to the survey. It was suggested that making a clarifying statement to encourage respondents to consider the questions as an LGBTQ college student would be helpful along with a definition of microaggressions. The researcher added both to the final scale.

Pilot Study and Feedback. The survey and survey feedback form were sent to people who recently graduated from, or are currently in, associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral programs who openly identified as LGBTQ during their programs. Eleven people completed the survey; 1 student in their associate's program, 8 bachelor's students, and 2 doctoral students. Four were cisgender women, 1 a cisgender man, 2 transgender men, 3 non-binary people, and one person was gender fluid. Their sexual orientation was as follows: lesbian: 4, gay: 1, bisexual: 3, pansexual: 1, asexual: 1, queer: 1. Most of the participants were in the 18-25 age range with

the rest between ages 26-50. All were white. The participants closely resemble those who would be the target population for the scale outside of race and ethnicity. It is suspected that if administered to a larger population, there would be more diversity within race and ethnicity. The survey was distributed via email and text message with the data collected through Qualtrics software, copyright © 2020. The survey was anonymous and voluntary.

The feedback on the survey was positive with all participants stating the length was appropriate. They understood what the scale was attempting to measure and felt the questions were not repetitive. Comments solidified that the scale was measuring what it was intended to measure with some of the key phrases in the responses being *"belonging for LGBTQ students, connection for LGBTQ students, queer climate in colleges, being supported by college, and LGBTQ safety"*. Multiple participants noted that they wished there was a neutral option or not applicable. Eliminating a neutral option was purposeful to elicit a response from the participants. The neutral option was suggested for questions where they seemed like they could be a "yes or no" answers resulting in the wording of those questions being adjusted.

Final Scale. Utilizing feedback from the focus group, cognitive interviews, and pilot study, the finalized survey was developed. The researcher developed this scale with the goal of obtaining a better understanding of how LGBTQ students perceive their belonging and safety. The SBSC collects data through 17 statements comprised of 5 domains including faculty connection, peer connection, campus climate (affirming spaces), LGBTQ visibility, and LGBTQ safety (measured in terms of minority stress and microaggressions). Higher scores would suggest higher sense of belonging and safety or choosing *agree* or *strongly agree* more often on statements 1 through 14, and *strongly disagree* or *disagree* more often on statements 15 through 18 (LGBTQ Safety subscale is reversed scored) resulting in a benchmark mean score of 3 to

indicate positive belonging. The final version of the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students is included in Appendix D. The informed consent, demographic survey, the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale and the SBSC will be collected via Qualtrics software, copyright © 2020.

Qualitative Data Collection

Each student who participated in the qualitative component received an email stating that they were eligible to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. This email provided a reminder of the intent of the research, confidentiality measures, and asked them to provide dates and times they were available to complete a recorded Zoom interview of approximately 30-60 minutes. Once the interview was scheduled, the participant received instructions detailing the environment requested for the interview. Students were asked to complete the Zoom interview in a private and quiet location free of distractions and other people if possible. Refer to Appendix E for examples of both follow-up emails.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher again reviewed consent and the purpose of the study. The researcher addressed that they were in the role as researcher and not practicum director for this study and interview timeframe as to not blur roles. The interview was recorded with the transcription feature on, to provide further accuracy for the analysis. The transcribed recordings were saved on the researcher's password protected computer and recording software. The names and identifiers were removed from transcription and replaced with codes.

In qualitative research, an interview guide is considered necessary to organize the data and as part of the IRB process (Roberts, 2020) but should be open-ended enough to allow for flexibility and spontaneous responses from the participants (Padgett, 2017; Roberts, 2020). According to Padgett (2017), it is important to gain rapport quickly in the interview process. The

researcher began the interview with an explanation of the study explaining the purpose and asked the participants to consider their answers as an LGBTQ student. The researcher took the role of empathetic listener allowing the participants to tell their stories. Probes were sometimes necessary to elicit more in-depth responses (Roberts, 2020). The researcher planned for questions to ask each participant with potential probes, allowing for the flexibility to ask additional related questions as necessary. The researcher kept notes on any observations as necessary. It is important to have a chance for the participant to debrief at the end of the interview (Padgett, 2017). The researcher ended the interview with a debriefing question, asking the participant whether they had anything additional information to add and how they felt the interview went. The researcher also asked if the participant needed any additional resources after the interview to attend to any emotional needs.

The qualitative interview guide questions were formed with consideration of the literature and the theoretical frameworks driving the study. To better understand belonging for LGBTQ college students, specific questions were asked related to belonging, peer connection, faculty connection, and environment as these are the primary contributors to college student sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Crane et al., 2022; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). One of the theoretical frameworks to the study is Meyer's Minority Stress Theory which postulates that typical stressors, such as those experienced as an undergraduate college student, will be exacerbated by stressors related to how others treat them due to their identity (2003). To explore how minority stress may play into their experience as LGBTQ undergraduate social work students, questions about safety and challenges were included. Strayhorn (2019) discusses that belonging is innate and all people are seeking belonging and mattering. To evaluate how LGBTQ undergraduate students interpret belonging, a question regarding what belonging means to them

was added. There were also questions added to address visibility, connection, and areas for improvement to ascertain latent or expressed needs as it relates to the framework (Strayhorn, 2019). Refer to Appendix F for the Qualitative Interview Guide.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Ethics related to research studies call for a comprehensive, transparent informed consent (Padgett, 2017). The informed consent included detailed information about the study and was a crucial component in obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The consent included a description of the study; both quantitative and qualitative components, the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, details about how demographic information and participant responses were kept confidential, and a statement that the decision to participate would not affect grades, academic standing, or practicum requirements. As stated previously, the demographic information and belonging scale were embedded in the informed consent to be completed after signatures were obtained.

Students were notified that the assistant practicum coordinator would receive a list of participant names only for the purpose of providing practicum placement assistance. This was to reduce bias and keep the role of researcher and practicum director separate. Refer to Appendices G and H for copies of the informed consent and demographic questionnaire. As mentioned, the confidentiality of the research records was protected by securing the data in a password protected computer and recording software. Only the researcher knew the identifiers linking the data. The names of the participants and any other information which could directly identify them was stored separately from the data collected as part of the project**.**

Data Analysis

The results were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The researcher used IMB SPSS Statistics Software (SPSS for Mac 30.0, 2024) to analyze the quantitative data from the two belonging scales. To analyze the qualitative data, excel was utilized.

Quantitative Analysis

Data collected from the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (2002) and the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC) (Strohman, 2024) was analyzed for descriptive statistics only for the purpose of triangulation and better understanding belonging. The sample size was small due to utilizing a cohort model for recruitment. Therefore, the researcher could not assume a normal distribution of outcome variables requiring the use of descriptive statistics (Field, 2018). The researcher received 11 responses; however one was removed from the study as it was a duplicate, one was removed for being incomplete, and four participants did not respond to inquiries to schedule a qualitative interview and was therefore removed from the sample. Five participants completed the full study. See Table 1 for an overview of the data that was utilized to answer the quantitative research question.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a connected procedure of interrelated parts leading to the representation and visualization of the data. It includes organizing the data, multiple reviews of the data, coding, finding themes, and interpreting the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study used a phenomenological approach to gather data which required the researcher to review the content for emerging themes within the experiences shared by the individual participants.

The individual interviews were conducted over Zoom which provided an automated transcript for the researcher to utilize. The researcher reviewed the transcript and corrected for

errors. The researcher then reviewed the audio with the corrected transcript. During this review, the researcher reviewed each interview and analyzed for initial themes utilizing memo writing to understand initial phrases, ideas or key concepts that may be relevant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memo writing assisted the researcher to reflect on the content of the data and assisted in reflexive thinking helping the researcher to identify bias (Saldaña, 2021).

Coding in qualitative research is utilized to interpret words and phrases into a summary describing the experience (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher used inductive coding analysis through open coding allowing codes to emerge as the researcher reviews the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). Padgett (2017) describes open coding as a method to drive the researcher further into the data rather than relying on pre-conceived ideas or concepts making this ideal for better understanding a specific homogenous sample. Utilizing inductive practices contributed to the organization and interpretation of the data while allowing it to be informed by the theoretical frameworks of the study (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021).

To enhance trustworthiness of the data, the researcher returned the transcript to a random selection of two participants via email after the initial round of coding for review. Engaging in member checking allows for the participants to review the narrative and correspond with the researcher about any corrections if necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2017). Both participants did not respond and therefore it was assumed they had no questions or concerns with the data. During the second cycle of coding, the researcher employed axial coding with thematic analysis. Axial coding is described as the process of determining categories and subcategories to better explain the phenomenon of interest (Saldaña, 2021). This type of coding helped to delineate how the categories related to one another to better tell the story of the data. The researcher transcribed the data to an excel document.

The researcher employed peer debriefing to add an additional component of trustworthiness to the study by connecting with chairs and a peer debriefer about the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described peer debriefing as a method to increase credibility of a study by helping the researcher to better understand bias and meaning. McLeod (2024) notes that a peer debriefer should be someone knowledgeable about qualitative methods but not involved directly in the research. The peer debriefer utilized for this study is a colleague with a position as a qualitative researcher and extensive experience in qualitative methods. They have knowledge of LGBTQ issues and research but are not directly related to the study. The peer debriefer reviewed the coding and themes for congruence during an in-person session where interview content, themes, and subthemes were discussed and clarified. The researcher provided the coding for further review with all identifiers removed. The peer debriefer then completed an additional review of the data and the theoretical framework to provide written feedback via email. The additional feedback was utilized to better organize the themes and subthemes. The qualitative data was concurrently reviewed with the quantitative data, current literature, and the theoretical frameworks to enhance validity of findings and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Any outlying data was bracketed for future research.

Table 1

Data Analysis Table

Research Question	Sample Size	Data Collection	Analysis
How do LGBTQ social work students rate their belonging at a public university?	$n = 5$	Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC)	Descriptive Statistics

Chapter Four: Findings

The results of this chapter have been derived from the data collected via the two online belonging surveys and the qualitative interviews. All participants completed both the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (Hoffman et al., 2002) and the LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College students (Strohman, 2024) and one interview with the researcher. This chapter will provide an overview of the demographics, quantitative descriptive statistics, and the qualitative analysis and findings from individual interviews. The following three research questions were explored:

1. *How do LGBTQ undergraduate social work students rate their belonging at a public university?*

2. *What are the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

3. *What are the key factors that contribute to positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

Participant Demographics

Five participants completed all components of the study. All participants in the survey were in their third (40%) or fourth (60%) year in the BASW program and between the ages of 18-30. One was in the online program while the others were enrolled in the in-person program. One participant identified as a transgender woman, two as cisgender women, and two as non-binary, while one identified as a lesbian (20%), one queer (20%), and three bisexual (60%) when describing sexual orientation. For race, four participants were white, and one person was Black or African American. There were no students who identified as gay in this study. Therefore,

moving forward the acronym LBTQ will be utilized to describe the participants. See Table 2 for

demographic information.

Table 2

Study Participant Demographics

Demographics	Frequency (*f*) (*n* = 5)	Percent (%)
Gender Identity		
Cisgender Woman	2	40%
Transgender Woman	1	20%
Non-Binary	2	40%
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	1	20%
Bisexual	3	60%
Queer	1	20%
Modality		
In-Person	4	80%
Online	1	20%
Year in Program		
Third Year	2	40%
Fourth Year	3	60%
Age		
18-22	3	60%
23-30	2	40%
Ethnicity		
Not Hispanic or Latino	5	100%
Race		
Black or African American	1	20%
White	4	80%

Summary of Descriptive Statistics in Quantitative Measures

Research question one addressed how LBTQ students rate belonging. The sample was

too small to complete comparative analysis. However, descriptive statistics of the two belonging

scales, the Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Scale (Hoffman et al., 2002) and the LGBTQ

Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (Strohman, 2024) were analyzed to triangulate

the data through correlation of the quantitative data with the qualitative findings. For the sample

with the Hoffman Sense of Belonging (2002) scale, (*n* = 5), students had a mean overall scale

score of 3.45 (*SD* = .65) which is between *equally untrue and equally true* and *mostly true*. For

the subscales (*n* = 5), perceived peer support (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = .95), perceived classroom comfort

(*M* = 3.35, *SD* = 1.29), perceived isolation (*M* = 2.25, *SD* = 1.20), and perceived faculty support

(*M* = 3.46, *SD* = .94) were between 2.25 and 4.10 which is between *mostly untrue* and

completely true on the Likert scale (Table 3).

Table 3

Hoffman's Revised Sense of Belonging Mean Scores of Subscales and Overall Scale Score

Subscale	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceived Peer Support	5	2.75	5.00	4.10	.95
Perceived Classroom Comfort	5	1.50	5.00	3.35	1.29
Perceived Isolation	5	1.00	4.00	2.25	1.20
Perceived Faculty Support	5	2.30	4.70	3.46 .	.94
Total Scale Score	5	2.58	4.27	3.45	.65

With the LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024) sample (*n* = 5), participants had a mean

overall scale score of 2.81 (SD = .29) which is between *disagree* and *agree* on the Likert scale.

For the five subscales (*n* = 5), Peer Connection (*M* = 3.17, *SD* = .49), Campus Climate (*M* =

3.05, *SD* = .21), Faculty Connection (*M* = 2.30, *SD* = .67), LGBTQ Visibility (*M* = 2.40, *SD* =

.65), and LGBTQ Safety (*M* = 2.50, *SD* = .35), only peer connection and campus climate scored

above 3 or *agree* (Table 4).

Table 4

LGBTQ SBSC Mean Scores of Subscales and Overall Scale Score

Subscale	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation

Peer Connection	5	2.67	3.83	3.17	.49
Campus Climate	5	2.75	3.25	3.05	.21
Faculty Connection	5	1.50	3.00	2.30	.67
LGBTQ Visibility	5	1.50	3.00	2.40	.65
LGBTQ Safety	5	2.00	3.00	2.50	.35
Total Scale Score	5	2.56	3.22	2.81	.29

Qualitative Findings

Research questions two and three addressed the experiences of LBTQ social work students and what contributed to belonging for students. To answer these questions, the researcher used in depth interviews coding with thematic analysis to better understand themes related to belonging (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While coding, it became clear there were subthemes that could be best explained under implicit and explicit curriculum areas. Within each, there were areas that positively affected belonging for LBTQ students, while others that negatively affected belonging. The major themes within explicit curriculum were LGBTQ content and visibility and LGBTQ discourse. The themes within implicit curriculum were safety and comfortability, environment and campus climate, and connection. Each theme will be discussed linking the findings to overall belonging for LBTQ social work students.

Before discussing the overall findings, one of the questions posed to the participants to better understand their view of belonging was "what does belonging mean to you as an LGBTQ student?" The themes that emerged here were feeling a sense of community and connection where they could be their authentic selves. Participants wanted to feel as though they were wanted in a room and their voice mattered. The following were some of their thoughts on belonging:

> I think belonging just means that I know that there's community within the campus. Like there are options for me to feel like I am. I can be as much a part of, you know, a queer community as I want to be, or I cannot be in it at all.

Having a community. Just feeling that I fit in and being respected despite appearance or own belief. Knowing that it doesn't matter what I look like or what I say, that there are people around me that I can feel comfortable with.

I would say, being in a place where you feel understood. Your voice matters. And also, it's just kind of like a safe environment as well. Like no judgment. Everybody kind of understands like where the other person's coming from.

For me, belonging just means being comfortable enough to be myself. Finding the people that support me and love me. I deserve this love, and it helps with a lot of growth. And when you have that sense of belonging. you can find who you are because you're comfortable enough with the community that you have created to dig deep inside of yourself and figure out who you are. I was able to feel comfortable enough to understand who I am. And I wouldn't have been able to do that without the love and support of my friends. And because of that sense of belonging that they've created for me.

I think belonging means to me both feeling accepted and also wanted in a room. So not only do people, you know, accept the way that I am and accept the way that I identify, but they also like want me there in spite of, or because of, regardless, like, that aspect of my identity.

When asked if belonging had changed over time, two did not feel it had, while others said as they have grown to better understand themselves, belonging has deepened for them. They shared it had gone from being tolerated or "not hated" to wanting to be fully accepted and wanted in a room. They shared that feeling a sense of belonging has helped them grow in their understanding of their own identities.

As I've gotten older, I've really come to accept that I am part of the LGBTQ community. You either like it or you don't, but at the end of the day I'm gonna continue to be my authentic self.

Back in high school... belonging was just if you didn't hate me, I felt like I belonged. But I now know that the true sense of belonging is with the people who love and support you the most. The best sense of belonging, though, is one within yourself. If you feel that you belong. then you belong. It's taken a long time to get to that point. But when you are finally comfortable enough to live life authentically in your heart, you just know. That I belong. I belong and I deserve to live life how I want to live.

I think originally my definition of belonging had more to do with acceptance, and less to do with that like desire for people to want you there.

Explicit Curriculum

The explicit curriculum was discussed with each student through a question addressing their perception, as an LBTQ student, of course content in their social work courses. Course content was described as readings, texts, articles, videos, or assignments related to their social work courses. The themes that emerged in this area were LGBTQ content and visibility and LGBTQ discourse.

LGBTQ Content and Visibility. The type of content and whether it contained discussion around LGBTQ topics was discussed by participants. Three participants mentioned one diversity class they took in their required course progression, noting they did discuss oppression and marginalized groups, including transgender and queer people in this course. The participants shared they felt this course was a positive experience.

> I thought they were good overall. A lot of the professors made a point to make sure it (the content) was inclusive.

> I think there was a course that I did take I think it was like human diversity or something like that. So we did talk about like different identities. And I think we talked about transgender oppression as well.

Two of the participants shared when content was discussed, outdated language was used in the text or articles. When outdated language was used, there was discussion about the terms.

> I guess, I could say, I've never once felt offended as a queer student reading material. I think you know, sometimes we read things, and it might be a word or something is a little outdated, but then we talk about it in class… And professors did a really good job of making sure if something seemed outdated either correcting it or listening to students, and how they felt about the material, so that we could actually discuss about where we would go from this.

> I feel as if some of the information there seemed like a little bit outdated. I heard terms like "transgendered" and that doesn't really sit well with me.

LGBTQ Discourse. In other courses, participants mentioned that conversations led by LGBTQ faculty were more involved and "productive." Several mentioned conversations around

LGBTQ issues were primarily student-led and mostly by them or other LGBTQ students. Some

participants mentioned they wished LGBTQ topics were discussed more by professors and

postulated professors might feel uncomfortable or worried about saying the wrong thing. They

discussed the importance of, and their evolution around, self-advocacy as an LBTQ student. One

participant mentioned when there was negative discourse around LGBTQ people, it primarily

hinged on religious bias noting they felt strongly this did not align with social work values and

ethics.

Some of the participant responses about discussions are noted below:

> I find that the conversations when being led by other LGBTQ+ students or professors.
> tend to be more productive. They tend to be good conversations when there are students
> who are openly identifying as LGBTQ+ members and sharing their experiences during
> discussion boards or class discussions. However, I found that in classes where there's,
> you know, not openly identifying LGBTQ+ students, there's much less of a conversation
> again. That might be something that's, you know, a fear thing. Like sometimes I can't tell
> if it's like, people are uncomfortable talking about this or are they afraid to talk about it?

> If a conversation calls for it, I'll definitely bring that perspective in. But regarding text
> and whatnot, sometimes I do think that you know there could be more class discussion on
> LGBTQ+ issues. I just feel like it's not brought up a whole lot. Either people are scared to
> talk about it or people are, you know, intimidated. They don't want to say the wrong
> thing. And I get that. But at the same time, like I shouldn't be the only one talking about
> it. I think it should be a class-wide discussion. I feel like a lot of the time it's me and like
> one or two other people that discuss LGBTQ+ issues.

> Usually, the common denominator of what would make someone say, well, everyone's
> deserving except this group of people, it tends to be religion, and you know, as someone
> who's not religious, but used to be, I don't mind talking about religion. I really like talking
> about religion, but I also think that's not something that can affect your practice if it's
> going to be something that actively causes you to discriminate against other people.

Implicit Curriculum

Implicit curriculum was inferred through answers to questions related to the LBTQ

student experience, challenges and opportunities, environment, and peer and faculty

relationships. The major themes found were safety and comfortability, environment and campus

climate, and peer and faculty connection. Some of the areas in which students noted their belonging to be enhanced were when correct pronouns, chosen names, pronouns in email signatures, and affirming symbols were used. Participants also shared their belonging was positively impacted when they experienced positive peer and faculty connection along with LGBTQ inclusive campus clubs and events. They noted their belonging to be negatively impacted when correct pronouns were not used, they were misgendered, there was little discussion on LGBTQ topics, or when faculty failed to act during negative discussions aimed at LGBTQ people or clients. Below are some of the participant responses categorized under this theme.

Safety and Comfortability. Participants discussed safety and comfortability throughout the interviews in myriad ways. Each participant mentioned the word "comfortable" in varying contexts to describe their experience whether referring to a positive (comfortable) or negative (uncomfortable) experience. Students mentioned details related to microaggressions, the usage of correct pronouns and chosen names, and campus safety.

Positively Impacted Belonging

For a while, I wasn't aware of advocating for myself yet. Social work as a profession really helped me learn that. So, I feel like if I hadn't changed (major) to social work, I just wouldn't have as much strength to advocate for myself like I do now.

I feel like I'm surrounded by, for the most part, a lot of really like-minded people who feel very similar about the rights that are deserving of people in general, and also specifically LGBTQ+ people.

It was very focused on the ethical principles of treating humans with decency and the professors did a great job of ensuring that we all were cordial, and able to communicate with each other in an appropriate manner.

Negatively Impacted Belonging

Being like misgendered, it kind of makes me like question myself. Like am not presenting myself the right way, like, what am I doing wrong?

It does kind of impact my learning when that happens, when I'm not gendered correctly, or my name is said wrong.

All the issues that I tend to have are regarding conversations typically held in class that should, in my opinion, be stopped. Like let's talk about, does that align with our values and ethics?

I love that pronouns help people, but I think sometimes you meet people who are so one way that it's like you fit all of these characteristics, why don't you go as this? And it's like, yeah, but also sexuality and gender can be fluid or perceived differently. So, I think the most negative thing is that some people tend to you know, see certain checkpoints and go, oh, well, you're in this (type of identity).

I think a lot of the times people look at that label (trans) and they don't know how to deal with it.

Environment and Campus Climate. Campus and school environment was discussed by participants in regard to access to resources, campus clubs, living/learning communities (LLCs), social work classroom environment, campus environment, and extracurricular offerings.

Positively Impacted Belonging

I started off in the pods, it was the gender inclusive pods. And honestly, they helped me figure out I was trans.

I love that [the learning management system] has "what is your preferred name?"

Knowing that there are events and resources available that has been really like reassuring and made me feel like I belong just to know that it's there.

You walk up on the social work floor and it's all about inclusivity and rainbow flags and you belong here.

It's almost like it doesn't matter that I'm queer as a good thing like there's never been anybody being singled out or like.

Negatively Impacted Belonging

It's been a bit of a struggle because you know we sometimes have protesters that come to campus. We sometimes have students or faculty members that don't understand or are rude.

I have definitely had conversations with social work professors, or like within classrooms, maybe I should say where students and the professors are disconnected. And then things are being said that simply should not be tolerated or being said but are being said and are being tolerated. And I'm not sure if it's a level of discomfort from the professor to stop the conversation, or if it's a level of unawareness. Sometimes it's difficult as a student to stop those conversations when you're expecting, you know, an adult or a professor to do that for you, and they're not.

They (negative experiences) have definitely affected the way that I viewed social work. It has made me consider the way that the staff and faculty are operating. Some of the classes that I'm having are simply frustrating on like a moral, personal level. I want to be a student. And I want to keep that separate from the personal stuff. But also, it definitely seeps into it, and it's hard to, you know, unhear or unsee things that you've noticed or heard.

Connection. Connection was described by participants as peer relationships whether within social work or outside of the major and faculty connection. These relationships with friends and peers were a contributing factor for growth for the participants. Participants described a feeling of comfort having "like-minded" peers and shared group work helped them to connect with new peers.

Peer Connection

If we looked at all the different, you know departments on campus, they probably will find the most accepting students within the social work department, and the most like-minded.

Even while we were being berated [as a group], I still felt a sense of belonging because we were a group, we were a unit. My group we could look at each other and know what the other person was thinking in that moment. It created a bond that I feel like even if we don't talk all the time, we still have this sense of protection for each other because of what we experienced together.

While there are moments where I don't experience belonging, I still feel a sense of belonging to an extent because I have people who helped me feel like I belong.

Gave me the opportunity to learn more about myself and really accept who I am and what I want to be, and be able to, just to not be ashamed of who I am. Because everybody was so inclusive and welcoming and being able to build relationships that are hopefully going to last for many years with peers.

I'm not really friends with a lot of straight people, and that's not you know, because I don't want to be friends with them. But it definitely shows that (the campus) has a very strong, queer community, and that you're comfortable to work within those groups and find those friendships pretty easily.

Especially when other people are social work majors, it's a lot easier. They're a lot easier to like, communicate with. Anytime I had an issue, I know that they were also going through the same thing as well. I felt more of like a sense of belonging through those type of groups and like getting to know them and then, feeling like accepted, like outside of classes, like being invited to go places. So, it was nice that I made connections through the social work program.

I made a lot of friends in the social work department, so it was nice.

Faculty Connection

The participants addressed faculty connection through empathetic faculty responses, course leadership, and knowledge of LGBTQ issues and resources. The participants largely voiced higher comfort with faculty who used or asked for pronouns, were out as part of the LGBTQ community, and those who apologized or checked in on students. Some of the positive experiences and feedback about faculty connection are below.

The social work department, I will say, is generally very good at you know, honoring people's preferred names and their preferred pronouns, and you know they can have those conversations in a better sense.

One time I had a professor keep misgendering me. So, I emailed them, and I said,” hey, please stop misgendering me, it's like making me uncomfortable.” And they took accountability. They apologized and they worked on it. It just shows that even if you call a professor out on something they take accountability, and they'll grow from it.

I know one open LGBTQ Professor, well, two. Which is nice to see, honestly, because, you know, growing up there are not many. There weren't many open people or open people in authority that I knew. So, seeing that in college, especially in the social work department, you know, because I was a part of that department. It was really nice to see that somebody can be open and also be professional.

You know what was nice is the professor sent a follow-up email (after a negative incident) just making sure we are okay because knowing that the professor cared enough to follow up with us and let us know that what happened wasn't okay and she's going to do what she can to help us. I felt so comfortable with her, and it made me feel better about the situation because I was like, okay, at least my professor is going to handle this.

I would say I was closest with my advisor and my club advisor. I could really just talk to them about anything, and they were also there as a resource for me

There are different professors that I can reach out to… and they were always welcoming, and they cared not just about our education, but us, as a person.

Professors have been very inclusive. I think every single one of them has signed off, you know, with their pronouns, or have asked a student's preferred pronouns.

Participants voiced there were opportunities for growth with faculty connection and the experiences within the classroom. They discussed faculty connection within social work courses and external courses offered by other departments. They referenced ideas that would help them feel more connected or safe in classes and with faculty.

So as also a dual major and just a student in general, I take a lot of different classes, and I will say that outside of my social work classes, I feel like a lot of my professors have less of a desire to get to know students on a personal level.

I've noticed in other departments there are frequent slips in name usage. There are frequent slips on pronouns. Sometimes, you know it could be thought of, as it seems intentional, because it happens repeatedly, and there are students who do correct them.

I'll say most faculty are good, but they don't know how to defend or to stop a conversation.

The professors could do a little bit better with like understanding you know that not everybody is cis. We all come from different backgrounds, and like that is a very important thing to me.

I do think that there could be more changes, and more awareness, and just kind of like realizing that more and more people are starting to kind of like question their gender. Like gender, is very complex and it's hard to explain and just kind of like knowing that it will make people feel safer to just not make assumptions or I don't know, rely on stereotypes based on like presentation alone. I'm just hoping these could be avoided or handled better in the future.

I think faculty and professors should go through a training of like here are uncomfortable conversations and here's how we handle them.

I think just maybe training staff on how, and not even just with LGBTQ plus people, if that was about race or gender or ableism, like educating professors on how to handle certain situations.

> I have had professors that would ask for pronouns and that's very appreciated. So, there are professors who were like supportive, and would ask those type of questions, and then some that would kind of make assumptions like they would assume that I was like a woman like, even though I don't identify as a woman.

Summary of Findings

The benchmark for the Hoffman (2002) Revised Sense of Belonging scale and the LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024) for this study was a score of 3 or above to indicate positive sense of belonging in all subscales and the overall scales except for the "perceived isolation" subscale which would be considered a 3 or below to indicate positive belonging as this item is not reversed scored. Descriptive statistics on the quantitative measures for the Hoffman SB scale (2002) indicated most participants had a good overall sense of belonging as they scored on the neutral or higher end of the scale and subscales, scoring between 3 and 4 on the subscales and 2 for the *perceived isolation* subscale. However, for the LGBTQ SBSC, participants scored on the lower end of the benchmark, scoring between 2 and 3 on the subscales and overall scale score. The hypothesis that LBTQ students would score lower on the belonging scales was true for the LGBTQ SBSC, but not the Hoffman SB scale.

The qualitative findings suggested subthemes best described under the themes of implicit and explicit curriculum. Students largely shared that faculty and classes tended to be inclusive overall. They mentioned having a diversity class where issues were discussed, but there could have been additional content, updated content, or discussions added related to LGBTQ issues that were not LGBTQ student led. Students shared the impact and importance of peer connection and faculty acceptance on their comfortability in the program and on campus. Being subjected to microaggressions in class or on campus negatively impacted student belonging, whereas affirming symbols and messages positively affected belonging.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications of Findings

This research study provides important perspectives on the experiences of LBTQ social work students and what positively and negatively impacts their sense of belonging. The focus was to better understand belonging to inform enhancements to implicit and explicit curriculum. This chapter connects the findings of the previous chapter to the literature and theories, explore implications for social work education, discuss study limitations and strengths, and discuss ideas for future research.

Quantitative data was used to triangulate the qualitative data to determine whether there was congruence between the scales and the qualitative findings. Students scored higher on the Hoffman (2002) SB scale than on the LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024). The lower scores on the SBSC (Strohman, 2024) correlated to the *LGBTQ safety, LGBTQ visibility*, and *faculty connection* subscales. These subscales were composed of items related to microaggressions, safety of being out, faculty understanding, and incorporation of LBGTQ identities and content in courses.

These scores correlate to the experiences shared during the qualitative interviews of the participants. Participants shared experiences of both proximal and distal stressors (Meyer, 2003) contributing to their belonging in both positive and negative ways. Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) explains how general stress can be exacerbated by stress related to prejudice and stigma (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). In relation to the lower scores on the LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024), participants shared distal stressors of not feeling welcome everywhere due to political discourse or their identities. They experienced microaggressions in courses and on campus and some had a general fear of disclosing their identities to faculty as they worried about how it would be received. One participant shared proximal stressors related to their experience of

frequent misgendering stating they internalized this to mean they were "doing something wrong" or "not presenting the right way."

Belonging

In Strayhorn's (2019) framework for belonging, he discussed sense of belonging for college students through intersectional identities and recognizing that sense of belonging is not only about finding a group that feels fitting but experiencing authentic and affirming acceptance. Many of the participants mentioned the same, supporting the framework, noting belonging for them was a feeling of community and comfortability with a group of people who love and support them for who they are. Over time they shared self-acceptance allowed them to form a deeper understanding of who they are what belonging means to them. Participants noted that belonging went from simply not being hated to feeling others really desired for them to be there and be part of the group.

Explicit Curriculum

The findings under explicit curriculum primarily detailed LGBTQ content and visibility and LGBTQ discourse. Participants noted their desire for more content and faculty-led discussions on LGBTQ issues.

LGBTQ Content and Visibility

Similar to what other studies have found (Atteberry-Ash, 2019; Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2017; Dentato et al., 2016; Fletcher, 2015; Gates, 2023; Kia et al, 2023; Wagaman et al., 2021), LBTQ participants in this study desired to see more LGBTQ visibility in curriculum content and more diverse, updated case examples. Four out of five participants mentioned the language in course content was sometimes outdated, using words such as "transgendered" to describe transgender people. This would be a potential area to explore and enhance within the

explicit curriculum. Several participants mentioned a diversity course was a positive experience but was the only type of their program, pointing to the need for additional content.

LGBTQ Discourse

In congruence with what Wagaman et al. (2021) found, LBTQ participants in this study shared they commonly discussed their personal experience in courses to bring in the LBTQ perspective and at times experienced negative comments from peers. As was noted in the literature, LBTQ students did not want to feel they must educate peers and faculty for LGBTQ content to be included or discussed (Atteberry-Ash, 2019; Budge et al., 2020; Mollet et al., 2021). Participants in this study supported these earlier findings and mentioned they wished LGBTQ material was discussed more by professors, but felt professors might not feel comfortable discussing this topic, pointing to the need for further exploration on why this topic is discussed less frequently in courses. The quantitative data from the LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024) correlated with these results with no participants scoring higher than a three on the *LGBTQ Visibility* subscale.

Implicit Curriculum

The participants primarily discussed peer and faculty connection, environment, and safety, all of which can be viewed as components of implicit curriculum. Peer connection was extremely important to the participants and their growth in understanding their identities. Participants discussed inclusive environments and seeking affirming and safe spaces.

Connection

Participants generally discussed peer relationships as a contributor to positive belonging which also correlates to the scores on the peer subscales of both quantitative measures and the literature. Participants discussed how their peers, especially in social work, were accepting and

interested in understanding their identities, which has been shown to increase belonging (Wagaman et al., 2021). Similar to what Dolan (2023) found, participants' growth was enhanced by being accepted and affirmed by their friends and peers. Two of the participants discussed peers who may not be as welcoming to them, but they found acceptance with others and still felt a sense of belonging from those positive connections, even during negative experiences.

Although most participants voiced positive faculty connections in some aspects of their experience, they also suggested areas for growth and shared experiences they perceived to negatively impact their belonging. The quantitative measures correlate to these findings, as well. Strayhorn (2019) discussed belonging as a "consequence of mattering" (p.36) and participants confirmed this alluding to wanting to feel affirmed and cared about by faculty and mirrored in those relationships. Participants shared most social work professors felt approachable and inclusive, noting they used or asked for pronouns and welcomed discussions about LGBTQ topics. They reported that professors outside of the program were not as affirming and more frequently used the wrong pronouns or names.

Supporting Wagaman et al. (2021) findings, participants often felt the burden of self-advocating, starting positive dialogue, or disrupting negative discourse around LGBTQ identities. When advocating for themselves if they were misgendered, receiving an apology and correction contributed to positive sense of belonging for participants in this study, while continuing to misgender them contributed to lower belonging. As other studies have noted (Dentato et al., 2014; Sarna et al., 202; Simpfenderfer et al., 2020), participants in this study shared the existence of LGBTQ professors helped them to feel hopeful for a successful career and increased their comfortability. Participants felt faculty could enhance their skills in

interrupting negative discourse around LGBTQ topics and increase their general understanding of gender identities.

Environment

Study participants shared that some ways the campus or classroom environment shaped their positive sense of belonging was through offering inclusive living learning communities, asking for pronouns in classes and on course shells, seeing inclusive symbols such as pride flags on the social work floor or on campus, and having LGBTQ centered events and programs on campus. Some participants mentioned LGBTQ clubs on campus and rainbow graduation as positive events contributing to feeling wanted and accepted.

In contrast, students shared microaggressions by other students and protestors on campus negatively impacted their sense of belonging. Frequently misgendering students was a concern of not only the transgender or non-binary students, but the cisgender students, as well. As the literature suggests, and this study findings support, heteronormative narratives and transphobic messaging contributes to increased minority stress and a negative sense of campus climate over time (Cohen et al., 2023; Goldberg et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003; Wagaman et al., 2021). Unfortunately, one student shared negative experiences in the class environment with peers and faculty have shaped their view of social work in a negative way contributing to an interpersonal struggle about whether it is the right fit for them.

Safety

The LGBTQ SBSC scale (Strohman, 2024) had four questions that comprised the *LGBTQ Safety* subscale relating to microaggressions, violence, identity disclosure, and discrimination. This subscale was reversed scored, meaning the benchmark remained 3. Only one student scored a 3 and the rest scored below for this subscale. The qualitative data aligned with

these findings in that LBTQ students in this study reported microaggressions in classes and on campus. In congruence with what was found in the literature (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Bernard et al., 2014; Budge et al., 2020; Byers et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2011; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Messinger et al., 2020; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017; Turner et al., 2018), LGBTQ students in social work courses were not immune to microaggressions or minority stress.

Transgender student participants in this study shared there was frequent misgendering by faculty and peers along with misuse of their chosen names which contributed to negative belonging. Additionally, cisgender participants noted using correct pronouns and chosen names as a positive contributor to belonging and some noted the use of pronouns in signatures as a symbol of inclusivity. Two students described being treated poorly by a classmate during a class, and shared this made them feel unsafe in the classroom during that interaction. Others shared instances of campus verbal microaggressions or protesters on campus negatively affecting their belonging.

Some of the protective factors that made study participants feel safe were positive peer relationships and like-minded students within social work. These participants mentioned that when content was focused on inclusivity and the ethical principles of social work, faculty facilitated cordial and communicative discussions. Positively, one student mentioned social work courses helped them to learn how to advocate for themselves. Having faculty or peers apologize for negative rhetoric or misgendering was also a positive experience for the participants.

Implications for Social Work Education

The current research contributes to the growing body of research by better understanding the experience of LBTQ undergraduate social work students and their need for affirmation,

identity formation, and gaps in implicit and explicit curriculum. The benefits for social work education and contributions to implicit and explicit curriculum are vast. LGBTQ social work students are needed in the social work profession to provide a diverse perspective and for serving LGBTQ clients in practice (Bourdon et al., 2021). Higher sense of belonging is a high predictor of student persistence rates and a protective factor for LGBTQ students' mental wellness (Beadlescomb, 2019; Museus et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2019; Wilson & Liss, 2022) making it essential for the success of the future workforce. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2021) and Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policies and Standards (2022) require social workers to operate under a lens of anti-oppression, ensuring equity in employment practices and services to clients and advocacy for equitable distributions of power.

For explicit curriculum, it would be beneficial for schools of social work to include reference to not only LGBTQ identities in practice, but also how intersectionality and individual identity relate to nuanced needs. Taking note to include discussion of intersecting identities and transgender issues can be beneficial as transgender people are more often excluded from content and research (Austin et al., 2016; Kia et al., 2023). Wagaman et al. (2021) discuss ways in which social work programs can queer their curriculum which include highlighting LGBTQ resources, understanding the inclusivity of practicum partners, incorporating LGBTQ content into curriculum, offering support and training for professional development in working with LGBTQ people, and having opportunities for community building. Moving away from heteronormative language and including more diverse and updated case examples can improve the classroom climate for LGBTQ students (Dentato et al., 2016).

One important aspect of sense of belonging for LGBTQ students is finding community and connection (Evans et al., 2017; Parker, 2021; Sotardi et al., 2021). Some opportunities for enhancements to implicit curriculum include displaying inclusive symbols such as pride flags and pronouns or including programming on LGBTQ inclusive events. Further, social work programs can offer groups within their discipline for LGBTQ social work students and allies to come together for dialogue around important topics, plan community events, and provide critical input on policy development or curriculum changes within the school. These activities will not only create a sense of community and professional identity solidification but allow for students to become part of equitable decision-making strategies which could further their understanding of systemic challenges and make them better agents of change.

Practicum is the signature pedagogy in social work education meaning it is of equal importance to coursework (CSWE, 2022). Practicum faculty may need training to anticipate discussion on LGBTQ topics and provide insight and support to LGBTQ students (Johnson, 2014; Messinger et al, 2020). In addition, providing learning opportunities for how to navigate discrimination and bias for social workers would be beneficial. Social work programs may also consider having a mentor program for LGBTQ social work students to engage with LGBTQ social workers in practice could increase their comfortability in the field and help them navigate difficult challenges.

Another important protective factor for the profession is in the form of gatekeeping within social work education including for those social work students or faculty who challenge inclusive practice. It is pertinent to have clear policies and training in place for how to handle difficult discourse and dialogue (Atteberry-Ash et al. 2019). Allyship and LGBTQ content could be incorporated across the curriculum from the first courses (Gates, 2023) forming the

connection for students early on. If students are challenging inclusive practices, there is an opportunity for development around social work values and ethics and confronting bias. It is recommended social work programs make clear their policies and have plans in place to address challenges should a student's personal beliefs contradict those of the profession (Bernard et al., 2014; Johnson, 2014).

Implications for Higher Education

Students look to their universities to be a microcosm of the "real" world and a place where they can learn and grow in their identities. LGBTQ college students are seeking groups in their higher education environment that help to connect them with others of similar identities and ideologies (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). These inclusive program offerings can be enhanced by implementing fully staffed offices of LGBTQ inclusion or belonging with individuals who represent intersecting queer identities. These offices can increase programming around LGBTQ needs and identities along with recommendations to enhance policies, syllabi, and curriculum across disciplines.

Having clear policies, visible and understood, by all faculty and staff creates a more meaningful connection to belonging for LGBTQ students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2016). By decreasing the number of microaggressions on campus and in courses and interrupting negative discourse could have a significant impact on belonging. It has been found that although LGBTQ students report more experiences with microaggressions and discrimination than their non-LGBTQ peers, they are less likely to report these concerns (Thompson et al., 2021). Thus, having out LGBTQ faculty and staff designated as those who receive these specific complaints may encourage students to report such adverse events.

Peer and faculty mentorship for LGBTQ students has proven to be an effective protective factor for students' positive mental health and belonging (Sarna et al., 2021). Participants in this study shared a feeling of hope when seeing out faculty or staff. Universities and colleges that provide visible efforts to promote a welcoming environment for LGBTQ students from recruitment to alumni will help to foster inclusivity and develop a pool of community mentors for LGBTQ students. Fostering inclusivity can be fostered through affirming symbols such as pride flags or inclusive events across campus or clear forward-facing policies protecting LGBTQ students. Further, there are opportunities to increase out faculty and staff by committing to hiring practices that explicitly encourage those within marginalized identities to apply.

Students do not want to feel they must educate peers and faculty for LGBTQ content to be included or discussed in courses and trainings (Atteberry-Ash, 2019; Budge et al., 2020; Mollet et al., 2021). Programs that increase LGBTQ content in courses and provide opportunities for training for faculty on how to approach discussions on marginalized identities could make a big impact on belonging. Universities and colleges can invest in, and take responsibility for, change efforts, inclusive policies, and training of faculty on marginalized group dynamics and dialogue. Part of these changes efforts could be training for all faculty and staff around LGBTQ microaggressions and identities and including those students providing support such as resident assistants and student organization leaders.

Implications for Social Justice Advocacy

Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and laws are increasing across the country. It will become increasingly important for schools of social work and universities to voice their support for LGBTQ students. Both CSWE (2022) and NASW (2023) have condemned anti-LGBTQ legislation citing the need for social workers to be social justice advocates for all. The NASW

Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021) is clear that social workers must partake in social and political action to ensure equity for all people and should work to eliminate discrimination for any person or group. Because of this, a call for social work students to participate in advocacy that promotes equity, and social justice would be appropriate in any social work program.

Social workers could advocate for federal and state policy changes that will better the lives of LGBTQ people and create a more just and equitable society (Evans et al., 2017; Garvey, 2020). Universities and colleges could gather more accurate retention data on LGBTQ students to find determinants of success (Legg et al., 2020). Centers for LGBTQ belonging could better track data trends in retention, health outcomes, and needs of LGBTQ students. Universities can advocate for national surveys to collect better demographics and information specific to LGBTQ students (Garvey, 2020). Implementing these changes will require administrative and financial backing to ensure success.

Strengths, Limitations, and Areas for Future Research

There are a few limitations and strengths to consider with the results of this study. One strength of this study is despite the low sample size, there was rich information shared by the participants. The results contribute to the research on LGBTQ social work student experiences and inform enhancements to implicit and explicit curriculum which could increase belonging for students. Most of the participants shared they were driven to participate in this study because they wanted to inform changes that might be made to benefit future students, allowing them to inform practice and policy changes which is an essential skill in social work practice. They shared how it made them feel increased belonging simply to know someone was doing research on this topic in their program. Another strength of the study was sixty percent of the participants identified as transgender or non-binary which are identities largely underrepresented in most

studies. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data did correlate, suggesting increased trustworthiness of the study.

Respondent bias cannot be eliminated as a limitation of this study because all responses were self-report. The researcher worked in the institution in which the study was conducted and is a part of the LGBTQ community. The researcher attempted to remain neutral and utilized reflexivity and peer debriefing. However, there could have been some respondent bias where participants withheld responses or shared more positive responses to some questions.

Recruitment difficulties and diversity of sample are also limitations to consider with this study. It was difficult to recruit LGBTQ students to participate in the full study and due to time constraints, controlling for validity threats, and study parameters, the recruitment timeline could not be extended. This led to a smaller sample size with no students identifying as gay participating. The small sample size and limited diversity in ethnicity and race, combined with utilizing a cohort model limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the findings of this research study contained similar findings to those found in the literature which enhances the trustworthiness of the qualitative data.

The findings point to additional areas of focus for future research. A few participants alluded to the current political climate and discourse affecting their overall belonging and well-being, but due to study delimitations, this topic could not be further explored. Political impact on LGBTQ belonging could provide valuable insights, especially now during the tumultuous political climate, where rights are being taken away from LGBTQ people, especially transgender people. Another area of research would be understanding how belonging impacts retention and persistence for LGBTQ students by conducting longitudinal studies.

As stated previously, this study was conducted over one semester with a cohort model to control for some of the time constraints and validity threats. Generalizability could be enhanced by conducting both the quantitative and qualitative measures with a larger group of participants across the states or country. The LGBTQ SBSC (Strohman, 2024) is a researcher authored scale that has not undergone rigorous testing, and it would be important for future validity to complete additional, larger studies using the scale. An area for future exploration could be reviewing how mental health and well-being are affected by belonging and what the correlation might be for these factors as the literature demonstrates that mental wellness is impacted by belonging for LGBTQ students.

Additional areas for study might be exploring graduate LGBTQ social work student belonging and first year LGBTQ student sense of belonging. All of the participants in this study were undergraduate students in their third or fourth year of study. A missing component to investigate would be the experiences of first year engagement on LGBTQ student belonging as this tends to be a difficult time for college students as they acclimate to college life (Sotardi et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). Graduate LGBTQ student belonging is not as frequently studied, and this also is important to understand how additional life and minority stress as students age may complicate and impact belonging.

Conclusion

The contribution of this study to social work education can have myriad benefits to increasing the belonging and connection of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students to their identities, university, and major. Schools of social work that put the work into identifying gaps and creating a safe, welcoming environment for LGBTQ students can improve student belonging. Programs well-versed in handling discourse related to LGBTQ issues and challenges

and promoting allyship and social justice will create social workers who are better equipped to work with LGBTQ clients in the workforce (Atteberry-Ash, 2019). The study suggests that although there are many positive aspects of the program for BSW LBTQ students, improvements to the implicit and explicit curricula could have a positive impact on belonging and retention in the major. It will be beneficial for social work programs and institutions of higher education to put forth effort, leadership, and financial backing to improve outcomes for LGBTQ students by incorporating positivistic interventions and preemptively preparing their faculty and staff to address issues of microaggressions and negative discourse.

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Wilson, L. C., & Liss, M. (2022). Safety and belonging as explanations for mental health

    disparities among sexual minority college students. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and*

    Gender Diversity, *9*(1), 110–119. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000421

Appendix A

SCHOOL OF
SOCIA
L
WORK
BASW |
MSW |
DSW

Dr. ██████████
████████ Dr.

College of Education and Human
Services ████████████████

July 22, 2024

Heather Strohman, LCSW
██████████████████████
██ School of Social Work
██████████████████

Dissertation Title: Exploring the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students and their perceived sense of belonging at a public university.

Dear Ms. Strohman,

Thank you for your request to complete dissertation research within the School of Social Work. It is our understanding that the above-mentioned study will consist of the following:

- The researcher will recruit undergraduate LGBTQ social work students.
- Any students who choose to participate who are currently in practicum or actively planning for practicum at the time of data collection will work with the assistant practicum coordinator for placement planning.
- The study participants and their corresponding data will only be known to the researcher and those in the above category (in practicum or actively planning for practicum) will have their name only shared with the assistant practicum coordinator for placement assistance. Efforts to protect the identities of the research participants will be outlined in the IRB application.
- Students will be asked to complete belonging scales and participate in qualitative interviews with the researcher.
- Participation in the research is voluntary and students are free to discontinue participation at any time.
- Choosing to participate will not affect the grades, academic standing, or practicum requirements of the participants.

The School of Social Work and College of Education and Human Services supports the pursuit of doctoral education and the study mentioned above. You have been granted permission to complete this mixed-method study aimed at exploring belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students pending approval from the Institutional Review Board at █████████████

This letter of support is valid for one year. After one year, if the research has not concluded, an update on the study will be expected and additional information may be required before continuing with the research.

Sincerely,

Dr. ██████████

Chair, School of
Social Work

██████████
██████████
██████████
█████

Dr. ██████████

Dean, College of Education and Human
Services ████████████████
████████████████████████

Heather Strohman,

Your IRB Protocol no. 0892 , Exploring the Experiences of LGBTQ Undergraduate Social Work Students and their Perceived Sense of Belonging at a Public University " has been approved for one year from the date of this email. Your protocol received "Expedited :" by member of the ████████ IRB committee and was found to be minimal risk.

Revised Recruitment Protocol

Your IRB Protocol no. 1028 , Exploring the Experiences of LGBTQ Undergraduate Social Work Students and their Perceived Sense of Belonging at a Public University " has been approved for one year from the date of this email. Your protocol received "Expedited :" by member of the ████████ IRB committee and was found to be minimal risk.

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email

10/16/2024

Hello BASW Students!

I am currently a student in a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) program. As part of my dissertation research, I am working on a brief mixed methods study about the experiences of LGBTQ social work students and request your participation and your feedback. As students currently enrolled in the undergraduate social work program, I am hoping you will consider participating in the study.

The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ social work students and how these experiences affect sense of belonging in undergraduate students. The information received will help to guide program adjustments to better meet student needs.

Title of the Project: *Exploring the Experiences of LGBTQ Undergraduate Social Work Students and their Perceived Sense of Belonging at a Public University.*

In order to participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- Be a social work student over the age of 18 actively enrolled as of the fall 2024 semester.

- Enrolled in the BASW program.

- Self-identify as LGBTQ.

- Agree to voluntarily complete the belonging scales on Qualtrics.

- Voluntarily agree to participate in at least one qualitative in-depth interview about belonging.

The time commitment will consist of one demographic questionnaire with two sense of belonging scales that will take approximately 15 minutes and one 60-minute individual interview. The interview will be conducted during a mutually agreed upon time over Zoom and will be recorded for transcription purposes. Consent will be signed, and all identifying information will remain confidential.

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following Qualtrics survey providing your basic demographic information and your signature on the informed consent:

Please continue through the survey until you reach the "thank you message" on your screen.

Name and Contact of Principal Researcher: Heather Strohman, LCSW, Email:
██████████████████████████ Phone: ███████████

IRB Information: ████████████████ IRB Protocol # 0892

Thank you for considering this request!

Survey QR code also found below:

Appendix C

SENSE OF BELONGING SCALE – REVISED

Hoffman, M.B., Richmond, J.R., Morrow, J.A., & Salomone, K. (2002-2003). Investigating "sense of belonging"

in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention, 4(3)*, 227-256.

Revised Scale has 4 factors, original scale was 5 factors (Perceived faculty support was 2 factors)

Individual factors were created by adding their respective items and calculating their mean. There are no weights.

No questions are reversed scored.

Completely Untrue Mostly Untrue Equally True and Untrue Mostly True Completely True

  1   2   3   4   5

Perceived Peer Support (8 items)

1. I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam

2. If I miss class, I know students who I could get notes from

3. I discuss events which happened outside of class with my classmates

4. I have discussed personal matters with students who I met in class

5. I could contact another student from class if I had a question

6. Other students are helpful in reminding me when assignments are due or when tests are

approaching

7. I have developed personal relationships with other students in class

8. I invite people I know from class to do things socially

Perceived Classroom Comfort (4 items)

9. I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions

10. I feel comfortable asking a question in class

11. I feel comfortable volunteering ideas or opinions in class

12. Speaking in class is easy because I feel comfortable

Perceived Isolation (4 items)

13. It is difficult to meet other students in class

14. No one in my classes knows anything personal about me

15. I rarely talk to other students in my class

16. I know very few people in my class

Perceived Faculty Support (10 items)

17. I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty

18. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help if I do not understand course-related material

19. I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them

20. I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class

21. I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset

22. I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help

23. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (office hours etc.)

24. I feel comfortable seeking help from a teacher before or after class

25. I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it

26. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help with a personal problem

Appendix D

<div align="center">

LGBTQ Safety and Belonging Scale for College Students (SBSC)

Developed by

Heather Strohman, LCSW

</div>

Scale: See attached questionnaire. Questions 1-6 are Domain 2 (Peer Connection). Questions 7-10 are Domain 3 (Campus Climate). Questions 11-12 are Domain 1 (Faculty Connection). Questions 13 and 14 are Domain 4 (LGBTQ Visibility) and Questions 15-18 are Domain 5 (LGBTQ Safety). Questions 15-18 are reversed scored.

Considering your experience as an LGBTQ college student, for each of the following statements, please state the degree to which you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I have connected with other LGBTQ people who attend the university.	○	○	○	○
2. I could contact a person from my class if I needed help.	○	○	○	○
3. I have spent time socializing with peers outside of class.	○	○	○	○
4. As an LGBTQ person, I am accepted by my peers.	○	○	○	○
5. I have friends who like me for who I am as an LGBTQ person.	○	○	○	○
6. I have friends I could talk to if I were upset.	○	○	○	○

Considering your experience as an LGBTQ college student, for each of the following statements, please state the degree to which you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. I have experienced positive LGBTQ messaging from the university.	○	○	○	○
8. University resources are available to LGBTQ students.	○	○	○	○
9. My university enforces LGBTQ inclusive policies.	○	○	○	○
10. I am aware of LGBTQ events available through the university.	○	○	○	○
11. I am comfortable talking to a faculty member about an issue related to my identity.	○	○	○	○
12. Faculty accept me and my identity.	○	○	○	○
13. My classes have included LGBTQ content.	○	○	○	○
14. I have seen LGBTQ affirming symbols on university materials.	○	○	○	○

Considering your experience as an LGBTQ college student, for each of the following statements, please state the degree to which you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
15. Because of my identity, I have been discriminated against by others on campus or in classes.	○	○	○	○
16. Because of my identity, I have experienced microaggressions on campus or in classes. (Microaggressions are defined as brief and common comments or actions that express prejudice, whether intentionally or unintentionally).	○	○	○	○
17. Because of my identity, I have experienced physical aggression.	○	○	○	○
18. I hide my identity in new situations because I worry I won't be accepted.	○	○	○	○

Appendix E

Follow-up Emails

The following emails will be sent as follow-up emails after informed consent is obtained to participate in

the research and after confirmation of a date of the interview.

Date:

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. Your responses will help to better understand belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students.

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview. As a reminder of the consent you have signed, the interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will discuss your experience as an LGBTQ undergraduate social work student and how your experience relates to your belonging. All identifying information will be known only by the researcher. The assistant practicum coordinator will receive names only of those needing assistance with practicum and no other data will be shared with her.

If you are still interested in participating, please review the Calendly options below. The interview will take place over Zoom with transcription on. All information will be saved in a password protected device coded by number or pseudonym with no identifying information shared.

Calendar Link:

Please know these dates/times can be flexible. If they do not work for you, I am happy to coordinate a different time that is agreeable to your schedule which could include additional evening or weekend options.

Thank you!

___

Dear ,

Thank you so much for scheduling your interview date! As a reminder you are scheduled for a Zoom interview on (Date) at (time). Please be sure that you are in a private, quiet, and comfortable location for the interview free from distractions or other people so that your information may remain confidential.

Please log on a few minutes before our scheduled time together if you can and expect the interview to last approximately 45-60 minutes. Remember to charge your device. You have been provided a unique login for your session and must use the Zoom login below. The calendar event is private, and I have removed your full name to protect confidentiality.

Please reach out with any questions!

Thank you!

Appendix F

Qualitative Interview Guide

Research Questions for Study

1. *What are the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*
2. *What are the key factors that contribute to positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ undergraduate social work students at a public university?*

I am conducting a qualitative research study for my doctoral dissertation to better understand sense of belonging in undergraduate LGBTQ social work students. For example, what contributes to belonging, and how this impacts your experience. I am looking to understand your perspective as if I am walking in your shoes. As you answer, please consider your experience as an LGBTQ college student and provide as much detail as possible. For some questions, I may ask you to explain in more detail.

1. I would like to hear more about your experience as an LGBTQ college student. Can you share a bit about yourself and how you have experienced college so far?

2. I would like to hear about your experience as an LGBTQ social work student.

3. Can you talk to me about what belonging means to you now as an LGBTQ student?
   Probe: Has this changed over time at all?
   Probe: Describe your interactions or experiences with faculty and staff outside of courses within SSW.
   Probe: Were there any particular challenges or opportunities that you experienced?

4. Describe the environment within the school of social work.
   Probe: Was there anything that made you feel safe and/or unsafe?

5. Considering your classroom experience, can you describe your experience within the School of Social Work as a LGBTQ college student?
   Probe: Describe your perception of course material which includes your textbooks, readings, videos, discussions, etc.
   Probe: Talk about your experience with professors.
   Probe: Talk about your experience with peers.

6. What has been the experience that has most positively affected your sense of belonging as an LGBTQ student?

7. What has been the experience that has most negatively affected your sense of belonging as an LGBTQ student?

8. What recommendations would you have for the SSW to foster a positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ students?

9. Is there anything more you would like to add or any comments about how the interview went today?

Appendix G

<div align="center">Participant Informed Consent</div>

<div align="center">Consent to be Part of a Research Study</div>

Title of the Project: Experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students and how their experience affects sense of belonging.

Principal Researcher: Heather Strohman, LCSW, ██████████████

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Laura Granruth, Dissertation Committee Co- Chair,

████████████████████████ Dr. Karen Rice, Dissertation Committee Co-Chair,

████████████████████

<div align="center">**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**</div>

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an undergraduate social work student who self identifies as LGBTQ at ████████████████ in the School of Social Work and be over the age of 18. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

<div align="center">**Important Information about the Research Study**</div>

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of LGBTQ undergraduate social work students and how this affects sense of belonging.

- Your participation in the research study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete two belonging scales, demographic questionnaire, and participate in a 60-minute individual recorded interview.

- There are no known risks from this research.

- The study will provide a better understanding of belonging for LGBTQ social work students at the university.

- Choosing to take part in this study will not affect your grades, academic standing, or practicum requirements.

- There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ social work students at one university and how their experience affects sense of belonging. This information is important to understanding the unique needs of undergraduate LGBTQ social work students and whether there are gaps in supports.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in completing a survey on Qualtrics to include demographic information and two sense of belonging scales. You will also be asked to participate in a recorded interview with the researcher about your

experience as an undergraduate LGBTQ social work student. The surveys will take

approximately 10-15 minutes each and the interview approximately 45-60 minutes.

Information collected will be linked to a personal code or pseudonym. Only the researcher

will have access to the codes. You may be asked to review your transcription for accuracy

at a later date. To protect you as a participant, if you agree to participate in the study, you

will work with the assistant practicum coordinator on matters related to practicum moving

forward.

How could you benefit from this study?

You might benefit from being in this study as the results may increase availability of

resources and supports through the school or institution. Further, results from this study

may help inform supports provided to students in the future.

What risks might result from being in this study?

There are no known risks associated with this study outside of what you would incur on a

daily basis. If you are uncomfortable at any time, you may refuse to answer a question or

remove yourself from the study.

How will we protect your information?

This study will be used as part of a dissertation research project to meet degree

requirements of a doctoral program. I intend to publish and present the findings of this

study but no information that is included will directly identify you.

I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by securing the data in a password

protected cloud and recording software. Only the researcher will know the code identifiers

and no personal information will be shared.

Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately

from the data collected as part of the project. If you tell me something that makes me

believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, I may report that

information to the appropriate agencies.

It is possible that other people may need to see the information I collect about you. These

people work for ███████████████ and government offices that are responsible for

making sure the research is done safely. The assistant practicum coordinator will receive a

list of names only for practicum planning purposes. No other information will be shared.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

I will keep your research data to use for future research. Your name and other information

that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research

data collected as part of the project.

I may share your research data with other investigators without asking for your consent

again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. The data collected

will be safely stored for a minimum of three years.

I may reach out to you after the study to obtain additional information. Your participation in

a request to do so is completely voluntary.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study (surveys and interview) is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, your data will be destroyed.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Heather Strohman,**

█████████████████████████████████ **or Dr. Karen Rice,**

███████████████████ **, or Dr. Laura Granruth,** ██████████████████

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

████████████████

Institutional Review Board

Office of Grants and Special Programs

Lyle Hall

717-871-4146

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing that you have read and understand the aim of

the study and you are over the age of 18. You are agreeing to be in this study. You will

receive a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy with the study records.

If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact

the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I am

over the age of 18 and I agree to take part in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature   Date

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded.

YES___   NO___

Signature   Date

Consent to Use Data for Future Research

I agree that my information may be shared with other researchers for future research

studies that may be similar to this study or may be completely different. The information

shared with other researchers will not include any information that can directly identify me.

Researchers will not contact me for additional permission to use this information.

YES___   NO___

Signature   Date

Consent to Contact for Future Data Collection

I agree to be contacted should further data need collecting or for a future research study

related to the data collection. I understand that responding to such request is voluntary.

YES___   NO____

Signature   Date

Appendix H

Demographic Questionnaire

Please select the program in which you are enrolled.

o   BASW In-person Program
o   BASW Online Program
o   Other program: Specify

Please select the year in which you are enrolled in the program.

o   1st year BASW student
o   2nd year BASW student
o   3rd year BASW student
o   4th year BASW student
o   5+ year BASW student
o   Not currently enrolled as a BASW student

With which gender do you most identify?

o   Cisgender Woman
o   Cisgender Man
o   Transgender Woman
o   Transgender Man
o   Gender Fluid
o   Non-Binary
o   If none of the above resonate with you, please specify
       _____

Which of the following best represents your sexual orientation?

o   Lesbian
o   Gay
o   Bisexual
o   Pansexual
o   Asexual
o   Queer
o   Heterosexual or Straight
o   If none of the above resonate with you, please
     specify_____

Please choose your age range.

o   Under 18
o   18-22
o   23-30
o   31-40
o   41-50
o   51-60
o   61 or older

What is your Race?

o   American Indian or Alaska Native
o   Asian
o   Black or African American
o   Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
o   White
o   Please Specify _____

What is your ethnicity?

o   Hispanic or Latino/a
o   Not Hispanic or Latino/a
o   Please Specify___