

## LGBTQIA2S+ Well-Being within Academic Communities: The State of the Science

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### ABSTRACT

It is essential that academic communities achieve and maintain an inclusive campus climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit plus (LGBTQIA2S+) faculty, staff, and students. Campus climate can influence faculty and student attrition, self-identity development of LGBTQIA2S+ students, and exacerbate documented health disparities. Academic settings have a challenging history when examining the relationship with LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. Academicians were the originators of pathologizing identities and constructing deviant distinctions in text and publications. Campus climate sets the tone for the success of LGBTQIA2S+ members of academic communities, and research continues to emphasize the most influential factors that directly contribute to that success. Visibility of LGBTQIA2S+ faculty, staff, and students allow for both formal and informal social networks and encourages social and academic integration. Proximity to LGBTQIA2S+ faculty, staff, and students encourages both integration and visibility. Policies that protect and affirm LGBTQIA2S+ individuals are an essential component to visibility as they provide formal protection such as zero tolerance discrimination policies. Progress towards creating healthy academic communities for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals follows larger societal trends of acceptance, and progress continues today through knowledge generation and activism. Commitment to and recognition of the factors that foster healthy academic communities for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals ensures that the discovery and dissemination of knowledge will continue through a more inclusive lens.

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### INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there has been an notable increase in individuals self-identifying as a diverse sexuality, sex, or gender (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, and others [LGBTQIA2S+]; LGBT Identification Gallup Poll, 2022). This increase in societal visibility is a signal of progress; however, it is still unclear if academic communities are healthy for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. For a host of psychological and social reasons, LGBTQIA2S+ individuals have a disproportionate vulnerability for adverse academic experiences relative to their heterosexual peers (Institute of Medicine [US] Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, 2011). Most notable are the higher rates of substance use disorder (Green & Feinstein, 2012), depression (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), anxiety (Bostwick et al., 2010), and suicide (James et al., 2016), along with other issues like social isolation. These disparities highlight the importance of identifying and addressing factors within academic communities that can exacerbate such concerns. A thorough appraisal of the literature is



necessary to fully understand the current well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ members of our academic communities. This article offers a state of the science to examine the strengths of academic communities in meeting the unique needs of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals and areas for collective action to improve academic communities for all.

It is important to consider the social context when assessing the current state of the science. Academic communities and scholars were the originators of ideas on how to address the issue of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. Their theoretical development, derived from religious moral teachings, posited that homosexuality was a deviation from the norm (Drescher, 2015b). Principal guiding texts such as the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders viewed the notion of homosexuality as deviant and contagious, and LGBTQIA2S+ individuals were and continue to be pathologized (Drescher, 2015a). However, social movements within the LGBTQIA2S+ community found momentum on academic campuses with the assistance of influential grass roots movements and within society. Academic communities, with the assistance of queer theorists, psychologists, sociologists, and policy analysts, sought to better understand the variety and complexity of student domains (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender & sexuality) in an effort to improve campus climates for non-majority students (Renn, 2010). This momentum continues today even as legislative efforts threaten the discussion of LGBTQIA2S+ topics, challenge the legitimacy of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, and erode the vulnerability of members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Knowing that the overall societal acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ has trended favorably (Smith et al., 2014), this education brief seeks to identify robust examples within the literature of how academic communities have and continue to respond to the unique needs of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals.

## **Themes**

Some of the first literature emerged in the early nineties, was primarily qualitative, and often based within a single academic campus (D'Augelli, 1992; Lopez & Chism, 1993; Rhoads, 1997). These studies focused exclusively on the experiences of students in academic settings. Consistently, these studies documented themes of identity disclosure, discrimination, victimization, and overall hostile campus environments for LGBTQIA2S+ students (Sanlo et al., 2002). Another consistently presented theme was the idea of visibility. Students who participated in these studies wanted to see and interact with LGBTQIA2S+ faculty, staff, and peers. Lopez and Chism (1993) developed a list of ten recommendations, based on their qualitative analysis, for how faculty and staff could address issues innate to LGBTQIA2S+ students. Other authors considered the context of LGBTQIA2S+ specific concerns and their magnitude but fell short in addressing the implications (Evans & Wall, 1991; Tierney, 1993). These publications and burgeoning campus visibility of LGBTQIA2S+ students (e.g., student organizations) were foundational to policy development and furthering the science of healthy academic communities.

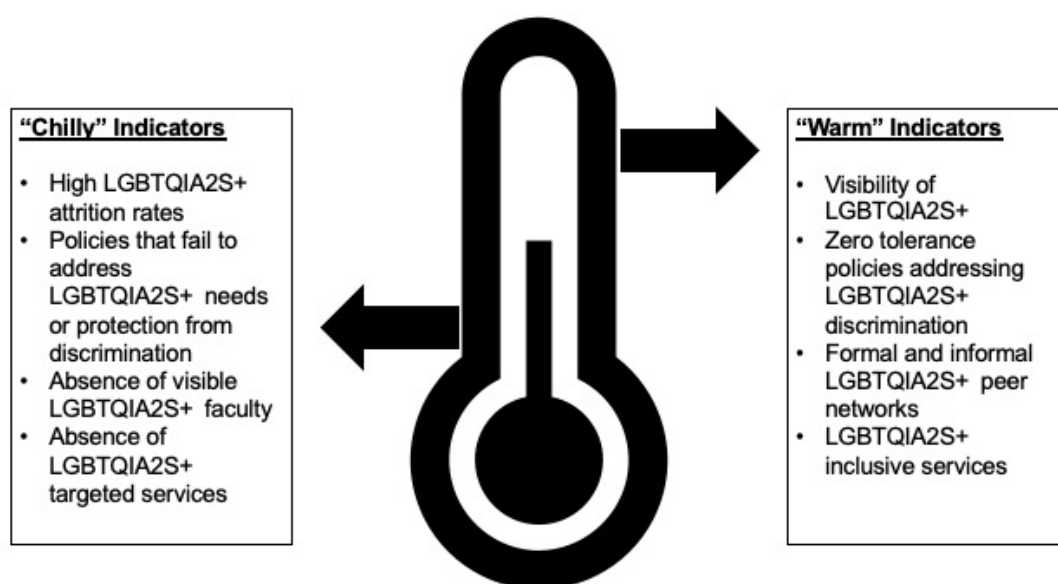
## **Campus Climate**

The discovery and dissemination of knowledge remains the primary goal of academic communities (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Fostering an environment that encourages knowledge exchange necessitates academic communities to have mechanisms of appraisal of the current campus climate. Campus climate research remains a key approach to contextualizing the experiences that enrich or erode LGBTQIA2S+ experiences, both curricular and extracurricular (Brown et al., 2004). Campus climate is complex and encompasses the behaviors, attitudes, and practices of students

and faculty, and most importantly, how these relate to inclusion and access (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Most campus climate research focuses on the perceptions of or about LGBTQIA2S+ individuals and the programs and policies intended to enhance the experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals (Renn, 2010). Research has consistently shown that LGBTQIA2S+ individuals rank campus climate lower than their heterosexual peers (Brown et al., 2004; Committee on Understanding the Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Populations et al., 2020). This is especially pertinent as hostile campus climates can exacerbate documented health disparities, influence the development of self-identity, and risk high rates of attrition among vulnerable populations such as LGBTQIA2S+ (D’Augelli, 1992; Mayo, 2007; Morgan, 2013; Rankin, 2005). Figure 1 highlights indicators of chilly and warm campus climates.

## Figure 1

### *Campus Climate Thermometer for LGBTQIA2S+ Individuals*



Adapted from: Rankin, S., & Reason, R. (2008). Transformational Tapestry Model: A comprehensive approach to transforming campus climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(4), 262–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014018>

A common theme throughout the literature is proximity (e.g., knowing a close friend or family member who is LGBTQIA2S+; Malaney et al., 1997). Research participants who knew or could identify a LGBTQIA2S+ individual within their social network were more likely to rate their acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals higher (Rankin et al., 2010; Tierney, 1993). Proximity is directly related to visibility. If LGBTQIA2S+ members of academic communities are not visible, there is, at minimum, a reduction in perceived proximity and, therefore, less acceptance. This paradox of visibility and proximity ultimately places more visible LGBTQIA2S+ members of academic communities at risk for discrimination or victimization (Rankin & Reason, 2008). The essential antecedent to LGBTQIA2S+ visibility is an inclusive campus climate. Factors such as academic and social integration (e.g., faculty and peer relationships) have been explored and were found to have influence at the individual level but were unable to moderate the effects of hostile campus climates (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Campus LGBTQIA2S+ peer networks were found to moderate the effects of heterosexist based discrimination and reduce the risk of alcohol abuse (Woodford et al., 2015). Essential services (e.g., health care) that are affirming to LGBTQIA2S+ campus members

only strengthen the campus experience as these services are highly visible and representative of the overarching goals of the academic community. Visibility of LGBTQIA2S+ members of academic communities and representative staff in support services are central to promoting the well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ students, faculty, and staff.

## DISCUSSION

Academic communities are, in essence, a microcosm of the larger society in which they are situated. More broadly, campus climate can be viewed as an extension of our larger social environments. The literature on campus climate often follows larger political, economic, and social trends. Increased acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals within academic communities was assisted by larger social movements like the APA's 1973 removal of homosexuality from the DSM II. Progress in campus climate stalled in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as academic communities grappled with the HIV/AIDS crisis and the increased stigma and discrimination that followed. Moreover, large influential social movements can have immense power over the climate trends in climate among our academic communities. True transformational change only happens within the complex social systems of academic communities when there is a thorough understanding of the science and how this science informs campus climate. Additionally, change requires commitment on all fronts (e.g., administration, faculty, students, and community) and should be attentive to the unique needs of all members of the academic community.

### Future and Beyond

The state of the science of academic communities for LGBTQIA2S+, as presented within this brief, is not without limitations. This brief sought to only summarize the major themes throughout the literature. To improve reliability, future reviews should perform the appropriate and critical appraisal of the selected literature. Understanding that not all literature is equally valid, this brief attempted to identify the foundational work on healthy academic environments for LGBTQIA2S+ and the emerging themes. Ultimately, this brief acts a starting point for future formal literature reviews and also generates broad questions. For instance, what factors are most influential to campus climate or does LGBTQIA2S+ attrition differ among racially and ethnically minoritized members of academic communities? Investigating these questions and others that may emerge will develop our understanding of influential campus climate factors, invite diverse LGBTQIA2S+ researchers to engage with the science of healthy academic communities, and position academic environments to be an exemplar of what makes a healthy academic environment healthy.

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#### Author's Note

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.