

The Mental Health of LGBT Students Entering into Their Postsecondary Education: How Are  
They Being Supported?

Kyle R. Hamlin

Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education; San Diego State University

Dr. Mark Tucker

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### **Rationale Statement**

Being a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT+) community and working through a few mental health hurdles, I have a lot of personal ties to a topic of research that I have found to use some more research. At first look, current research has looked primarily at relationships of well-being and educational outcomes (Kosciw et. al., 2014, Sokolowski, 2020), belonging and victimization (Heck et. al., 2014), promoting resilience (Kosciw et. al., 2014, Heck, 2015), and dealing with everyday minority stress (Sokolowski, 2020). More pressing research has looked at what needs are present for LGBT+ postsecondary students in the post-COVID era, including raised depression levels (Gonzales et al., 2020). Because of this research, and my personal experience, I will be starting to explore in this document how mental health is experienced and reported by LGBT+ postsecondary students and how to improve the current climate of mental health culture in postsecondary institutions for members of the LGBT+ community by noting what resources can help and how to increase the visibility and accessibility of them.

This topic is a significant area to research because, from first-hand experience, there isn't much support or engagement on mental health in LGBT+ postsecondary students. On or near campus there is usually in-person specialized support with resources and affirming communities (Gonzales et al., 2020). With these localized and in-person support systems, there is not much virtual support for distance learners, or students located outside the general area of their institution. Virtually, there is general support for all students, but not much specialized support for different communities. An example shows that campus counseling websites lack specific LGBT+ inclusive language, as pointed out by Bouris & Hill (2017). This editorial, although short, pulls in a lot of what needs to happen with this area of research. Bouris & Hill also state

that “Even less research has examined the efficacy of on-campus mental health services, especially for [LGBT+] students” (Bouris & Hill, 2017), where they pulled information from Eisenberg et al. in 2012. And as times are changing and postsecondary institutions are becoming more and more diversified, with students that come from a wider range of backgrounds and hold a wider range of values, college counseling must adapt and be more inclusive of these backgrounds and ideas.

With the idea of exploring how mental health is experienced and reported by LGBT+ postsecondary students and how to improve the current climate of mental health culture in postsecondary institutions for members of the LGBT+ community, the different sub-topics to explore are:

- What physical and virtual resources are available to LGBT+ students
  - Looking at what resources are available can help higher education institutions determine how to best support their LGBT+ students.
- How to make counseling more accessible and more inclusive to LGBT+ students
  - Higher education institutions can use this information to work on creating statewide and nationwide policies that allow mental health counselors to better help LGBT+ students no matter where they are located.
- How mental health culture is expressed and learned about on campus and how to improve mental health education
  - If institutions help educate their students on mental health and how to properly handle mental health related issues, students, including LGBT+ students, can take better care of their mental states before things progress to a worse status.

### Research Bibliography

#### Source 1: Citation

Gonzales, G., Mola, E. L. D., Gavulic, K. A., Mckay, T., & Purcell, C. (2020). Mental Health Needs Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67(5), 645–648.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.08.006>

#### Source 1: Summary

This study went into looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students, specifically looking at students that identified within the LGBT+ community. It stated that students were sent home due to campus closures, in which case may have made mental health and possible physical health situations worse for members of this community as it may have put them in unfavorable situations, or situations where they are unwelcomed with limited access to resources needed for success. The researchers surveyed almost 500 18-25-year-old LGBT+ college students from April 24 to June 5, 2020 (After the initial lockdowns occurred and campuses shut down). Participants were reached out to in 47 states and Puerto Rico by email lists they are members of, social media advertising, and college administrators to share with their students. The data was calculated using descriptive statistics and an estimate of the prevalence of the three mental health outcomes they described which were: frequent mental distress (i.e.,  $\geq 14$  days of “not good” mental health in the past 30 days); generalized anxiety disorder using a GAD-2 criteria; and major depression based on a Patient Health Questionnaire 2-item (PHQ-2) screening instrument. The researchers then estimated regression models to identify any risk factors for reoccurring mental distress, anxiety, and depression showing up in the students. They had adjusted models that simultaneously controlled for sexual orientation, gender identity, age,

race/ethnicity, ability to receive mental health if needed during the pandemic, the degree to which participants' lives were disrupted by COVID-19, concerns about COVID-19, whether the participant, family or a friend had previously tested positive for COVID-19, and the immediate family's awareness and support of the participant's LGBT+ identity. According to their results, most LGBT+ college students in the sample had described their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. The mean age of the individuals was 20.7 years, and approximately 30% of their sample was of nonwhite background. Most of the participants reported that their lives had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic by a great deal. The researchers point out that some limitations of their study include its nonprobability sampling, selection bias, small sample sizes, and limited generalizability. They also note that the study may be missing students who may be homeless, lacking internet access, or are not comfortable responding to an LGBT+-focused online survey in their homes.

The information provided in this study can lead to institutions and mental health providers exploring new and innovative ways to help reduce poor mental health effects from happening to students of a minority, more specifically students in the LGBT+ community. This study was done in part of a larger forthcoming study that includes some focus groups and qualitative analyses by the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board. The study was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, which is a peer-reviewed medical journal covering adolescent health and medicine, including biological, physiological, and social aspects. Because this publication is a peer-reviewed source, and the authors involved in this study are from health and well-being backgrounds, as well as someone from an LGBT+ background, this is credible. Additional studies can be done to determine depth of mental health effects on LGBT+ students due to COVID-19.

Source 2: Citation

Sokolowski, E. (2020). *A qualitative analysis of the experience of being LGBTQ in graduate school*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10217/211819>.

Source 2: Summary

This study, as a dissertation, went into looking at qualitative aspects of LGBT+ doctoral graduate students. As subjective as this study was, it was designed to understand the campus climate for LGBT+ doctoral students. When determining the results, a narrative analysis was used during this exploratory study to identify *when* the three LGBT+ doctoral student participants had experiences related to their LGBTQ identities, including *what* was happening during those events and *how* it was happening.

The experiences shared in this study occurred during six events (i.e., applying to graduate programs, receiving a letter of acceptance from a graduate program, visiting campus after receiving acceptance letter, choosing an advisor or a research lab, working as a graduate teaching assistant, and preparing for PhD candidacy exams) at four time periods (i.e., early general experiences in the graduate program, general graduate school experiences, general research lab experiences, and general social experiences during graduate school). This study also identified how these experiences supported or hindered LGBT+ doctoral student success. The results of this study suggested that LGBT+ doctoral students expended substantial effort to manage the harmful components of campus climate, which happened to be present across differing locations, times, and roles as a doctoral student.

The data pulled from this study can be expanded onto master's level students and undergraduate level students to help determine if there are events or specific times that influence aspects of a college student that identifies as a member of the LGBT+ community. What can be

learned from this study is learning when and where campus administrators can intervene and help the experience(s) of the students. The results from this can be used by mental health practitioners to know where they can best reach out to students needing help and learn how to best work cohesively with the people/departments the students are interacting with to make sure the students are engaging in healthy ways and getting the proper health they deserve.

Having noted that this is a published dissertation completed in the summer of 2020, and with a lot of research from credible sources, this source is a great start to apply to a more broader sample size and explore the interactions of master's level, and undergraduate level students. The other "negative" aspect to this, as mention just prior, is that the sample size is small. To get a better feel for this area and the results produced, the sample size needs to be larger. Because of this, I believe this source is a great start, but can become more specific with a broader sample size.

Source 3: Citation

Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., & Kull, R. M. (2014). Reflecting Resiliency: Openness About Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity and Its Relationship to Well-Being and Educational Outcomes for LGBT Students. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(1-2), 167–178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9642-6>

Source 3: Summary

This study looks at how coming out and identifying their sexual orientation can be a key developmental milestone for LGBT+ youth, something that is associated with a better psychological well-being. This study explores a model of risk and resilience for “outness” among LGBT+ youth, including whether it can vary by community context. The authors tested their hypothesized model using a national dataset of almost 8,000 LGBT+ secondary school students using multigroup structural equation modeling. The results of the study were consistent with their hypotheses; that outness was related to a higher victimization but also to a higher self-esteem and lower depression. Their results also showed that greater victimization was related to negative academic outcomes both directly and indirectly via diminished well-being.

Notices and announcements of the survey used to obtain data, which were available online and in paper form, were sent through GLSEN’s, an American education organization working to end discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression and to prompt LGBT cultural inclusion and awareness in K-12 schools, email and chapter networks as well as through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBT youth. Data collection occurred between April and August of 2011. Participants were provided a written informed consent/assent briefing—the first page of both Internet and paper surveys contained information



about the nature of the study, and youth indicated whether they agreed or declined to participate in the survey before proceeding. Youth were excluded from the study if they were not in a K–12 school at some point during the 2010–2011 school year, were not in school in the United States, or identified as heterosexual (except for those who were also transgender). The final sample used, after a listwise deletion, which removes any data line that had any missing data, consisted of a total of 7,816 students between the ages of 13 and 20 from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

This study provides great insight into students entering higher education and enter their college career. Using the data from this study, higher education institutions are better able to determine how to best support their incoming LGBT+ students and look at how they can utilize their mental health services to provide the best spaces for the students' success. This provides great information for these institutions to plan and prepare for the incoming students each academic period. This data also helps mental health practitioners know where incoming students are at, mentally, and have a key insight in how to best support them through the transition and through their college career and beyond.

This study is a credible source due to the sample size, and the methods of obtaining the data and analyzing each point. The issue I have with this study is that it leads the authors to believe that being out can lead to lower levels of depression, where other studies show that members of the LGBT+ community express higher levels of depression, including a first-hand experience from myself. There might be more to learn from exploring the levels of depression as students' progress past secondary education through higher education, into their careers. A downside to this source is that all the data and results are correlational, not causal.

Source 4: Citation

Heck, N. C., Lindquist, L. M., Machek, G. R., & Cochran, B. N. (2014). *School Belonging, School Victimization, and the Mental Health of LGBT Young Adults: Implications for School Psychologists*, 8(1), 28–37.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262837227\\_School\\_Belonging\\_School\\_Victimization\\_and\\_the\\_Mental\\_Health\\_of\\_LGBT\\_Young\\_Adults\\_Implications\\_for\\_School\\_Psychologists](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262837227_School_Belonging_School_Victimization_and_the_Mental_Health_of_LGBT_Young_Adults_Implications_for_School_Psychologists)

Source 4: Summary

This study investigated the mediating role of school victimization in the relationship between LGBT+ young adults' feelings of high school belonging and current mental health (both depression and general psychological distress) outcomes. Their sample size consisted of 145 LGBT young adults, all who were recruited from college LGBT student organizations to complete an online survey that assessed their high school experiences and mental health outcomes. Bootstrapping analyses (assigning measures of accuracy to random samples) were used to test for mediation. The results indicated that school victimization mediates the relationship between high school belonging and depressive symptoms and feelings of general psychological distress in young adulthood. The results suggest in this study that school victimization is a factor that could explain why LGBT youth report lower levels of school belonging and higher levels of depression and psychological distress, relative to heterosexual youth.

This source, along with the previous source can be used in conjunction to provide higher education administrators and higher education mental health practitioners to learn how to best help their incoming students, and to make sure that they provide a welcoming, healthy, and

accepting space for the students to learn in. This study, and the previous mentioned study show results that oppose each other. This study says that higher levels of victimization increases levels of depression, and vice versa. Where the previous study showed that high levels of victimization could lead to lower levels of depression if there is high self-esteem. Both results can be valid, depending on all the aspects in play, but both studies can be used to determine how to help incoming students entering college life.

This study is a credible source in that the full scientific method is explored but has some issues when it comes to sample size. Although the sample size is not massive, this study is definitely a great start in learning more about how being “out” in the LGBT+ community affects mental health, especially through victimization. Another reason that could limit this study is that the results produced are correlational, not causal.

Source 5: Citation

Dunbar, M. S., Sontag-Padilla, L., Ramchand, R., Seelam, R., & Stein, B. D. (2017). Mental Health Service Utilization Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning or Queer College Students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 61*(3), 294–301.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.03.008>

Source 5: Summary

This study looked at how college students are at high risk for mental health problems, yet many do not receive treatment even when services are available. It is also noted that treatment needs may be even higher among LGBT+ students, but little is known about how these students differ from their heterosexual peers in terms of mental health needs and service utilization. In this study, a total of 33,220 California college students completed an online survey on mental health needs (e.g., current serious psychological distress and mental health-related academic impairment) and service utilization. The authors used logistic regressions, examining differences in student characteristics, mental health service use, and perceived barriers to using on-campus services by LGBT+ status. It was found that approximately 7% of students self-identified as being in the LGBT+ community. Compared with other heterosexual students, LGBT+ students endorsed higher rates of psychological distress and mental health-related academic impairment but were 1.87 times more likely to use any mental health services. LGBT+ students were also more likely to report using off-campus services and to endorse barriers to on-campus service use (e.g., embarrassed to use services and uncertainty over eligibility for services). The authors found that LGBT+ individuals represent a sizeable minority of college students; these students use mental health services at higher rates than their heterosexual peers but have high rates of unmet treatment needs. According to the authors of this study, some efforts to address commonly

reported barriers to on-campus service use, foster LGBT+ affirming campus environments, and promote awareness of campus services may help reduce unmet treatment needs in this population.

This study is relevant to both my main topic, as well as my current standing. I am attending a California State University (CSU), which is one of the three systems used to obtain data for this study. Knowing that I am in the same spot as students that have responded to this survey, helps put this topic as a more prevalent topic to study. This study is also credible because it uses a large sample size, is published in a peer-reviewed journal, The Journal of Adolescent Health, and uses proper scientific statistical data analysis to determine results from the study. The researchers are from different areas of the states to provide a better geographical scope, but because of limiting the scope of the study to only the school systems in California, the results may not be transferrable or applicable in other states, institutions, or settings.

**Integrative Summary of Notable Trends of Agreement or Disagreement among Authors**

When looking at all the studies I have explored so far, some of them agree with each other, as well as some disagree with others. When I looked at each of these, I decided to look at what the limitations were for each study. Some similar limitations were that there were small sample sizes (Gonzales et al., 2020, and Sokolowski, 2020), or selection bias (Gonzales et al., 2020, and Dunbar et al., 2017), or missing students from the community based on several factors (Gonzales et al., 2020, Sokolowski, 2020, Kosciw et al., 2014, and Dunbar et al., 2017). With the studies provided, there were some differences. Such that in one study they reported having a small sample size (Gonzales et al., 2020), where another reported having a large sample size (Dunbar et al., 2017). Another study found that mental health levels decreased (i.e., depression and anxiety levels increased) (Heck et al., 2014), where other studies showed depression and anxiety levels decreased (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Seeing as how there were more similarities, than differences or disagreements, a combination of these studies can be used to help determine better ways to help LGBT+ students, both incoming undergraduate level, and post-graduate level. The information pulled from these five studies above is a great starting place to expand upon. Three of these can be easily repeated multiple times to find if the results are consistent, where the other two having to work around COVID-19 can also be repeated but look at the differences between initial shutdowns and current closures. There is still much to be discovered and to learn from when it comes to the mental health of LGBT+ college students and youth, and how to best support these students.

### Resources

- Bouris, A., & Hill, B. J. (2017). Out on Campus: Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Sexual and Gender Minority College Students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 61*(3), 271–272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.002>
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- Sokolowski, E. (2020). *A qualitative analysis of the experience of being LGBTQ in graduate school*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10217/211819>.