Out and About on Campus: Engagement, climate, and perceptions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning collegians

**Study Purpose:** Higher education research, and subsequently administration, has overlooked the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning (GLBQ) students (Renn, 2010) resulting in inefficient resources, services, and support for these students’ concerns (Rankin, 2003, 2006). To address this gap in research, the current study aims to expand on previous research (e.g. Brown, Clark, Gortmaker, Robinson-Keilig, 2004) by utilizing a large-scale sample of students that explores the satisfaction, engagement, quality of relationships, and perceptions of campus support that GLBQ students experience in college. Additionally, unlike prior research that looks at the negative experiences of GLBQ students (see Rankin, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012) this research attempts to take an asset-based approach to this student population by focusing on GLBQ students’ positive interactions in the campus environment.

**Research Questions:** This study aims to address the campus experiences and college engagement of GLBQ students by exploring the following questions:

1. Are GLBQ students more or less satisfied with their college experience than their heterosexual peers?
2. Do GLBQ students participate in high-impact educational practices as often as their heterosexual peers?
3. Controlling for other characteristics, are GLBQ students as engaged as their heterosexual peers?

**Data Source and Sample:** The data for this study come from the 2013 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE asks students how often they engage in various effective educational practices as well as their perceptions of their college environment and various gains while in college. The 2013 NSSE was administered to first-year and senior college students at over 610 participating four-year colleges and universities. 141 (25%) of these institutions opted to include an item in the demographics section of the survey asking students to indicate which of the following best describes the student’s sexual orientation: heterosexual, gay (G), lesbian (L), bisexual (B), questioning or unsure (Q), and prefer not to respond. The sample for this study consists of nearly 81,000 students, over 5,000 identified as GLBQ.

**Variables:** Several scales are used as variables in this study as well as a variety of individual items, student demographics, and institutional characteristics. The primary scales used in this study are NSSE’s Engagement Indicators. Various student demographics were examined including enrollment, taking online courses, major, grades, transfer status, educational aspirations, first-generation status, gender, age, international status, race/ethnicity, fraternity/sorority membership, living situation, athletic team membership, veteran status, and disability. Institutional characteristics include Carnegie classification and control.

**Results:** There was no noticeable differences in satisfaction for first-year students, but a small difference in satisfaction for seniors—heterosexual seniors evaluate their overall experience slightly more positively ($p < .001, d= .10$) and would be slightly more likely to return to the same institution ($p < .001, d= .13$). Both groups of students participate in most high-impact practices, such as learning communities and internships, at similar rates. GLBQ seniors participate in more study abroad experiences ($p < .001, d= .16$) and do more research with faculty ($p < .001, d= .18$) than their heterosexual peers. GLBQ students less often take courses that include a service-learning project ($p < .001, d= -.12$).

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Most forms of engagement were similar for both groups of students, although first-year GLBQ students had slightly smaller perceived gains in various areas \((p < .001, d=-.10)\). The only notable significant and practical difference in student engagement was on the measure for Reflective and Integrative Learning. GLBQ students, both first-years \((p < .001, d=.19)\) and seniors \((p < .001, d=.16)\) participated noticeably more often in these types of activities. Although the overall ratings of Quality of Interaction and Supportive Environment were the same for both groups, there were notable differences on items within these measures. GLBQ had noticeably lower quality interactions with other students \((FY: p < .001, d=-.17; SR: p < .001, d=-.22)\), and seniors had lesser quality interactions with administrative staff and personnel \((p < .001, d=-.11)\). For both classes of students, GLBQ students perceived less support from their institution for managing their non-academic responsibilities \((FY: p < .001, d=-.12; SR: p < .001, d=-.12)\) such as their work and family responsibilities.

**Discussion and Implications for Higher Education:** Satisfaction, perceived gains, and student engagement did not vary much for students with differing sexual orientations. This may be attributable to self-selection— institutions that opted-in to include the sexual orientation question on the NSSE survey may be more welcoming and supportive to students who are sexual minorities. Variation in experiences, perceptions, and engagement may have been found at campuses that chose to not include this demographic question. Some differences, however, did stand out. GLBQ students participated in more reflective and integrative learning in their coursework. This engagement indicator measures students’ connections between their learning and the world around them. The ability to take the perspective of others, synthesize societal problems, and draw on course content to reexamine their own beliefs proved to be a practice that GLBQ students engaged in more often than their heterosexual counterparts did.

GLBQ students reported having had lesser quality interactions with their peers and felt that their institution did not support them as strongly in their non-academic responsibilities as their heterosexual peers. This finding suggests that co-curricular engagement and high impact practices that allow students to deepen their connections to the institution, and to the peer environment, must be fostered. The facilitation of student support groups and organizations for GLBQ students may create a sense of community for sexually minoritized students. By cultivating opportunities for students to interact and engage with one another, higher education practitioners may be able to impact the experiences and perceptions of climate for GLBQ students.

Study findings led us to ask the following questions of future research and campus leaders:

1. What leads an institution to self select, or opt in to, asking the GLBQ demographic question on the NSSE survey? Is there a correlation between self-selection and overall campus climate?
2. Longitudinally, have things changed at your own campus in terms of climate for GLBQ students? What has caused the changes (e.g. socio-historical factors, policies, student activism), and what specific changes have been made, if any?
3. How can campus faculty, staff, and administrators foster curricular and co-curricular reflective and integrative learning strategies?
4. What might institutions do to augment the campus climate to be more supportive for GLBQ students?
5. How might qualitative research enhance this study? What findings might a qualitative study illuminate that this study has not?

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